



House of Monsters

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Description: It's been ten years since my family was murdered right in front of me by someone we were supposed to trust. I was only eighteen at the time and barely survived myself, and I've spent the last decade running from my past. I still remember every single detail like it all happened yesterday. The screams, the blood, the way my mother's body just... hung there.

The nightmares keep me awake at night, and the whispers taunt me for it.

After the sudden death of my only aunt, I suddenly found myself the owner of that wretched place, and now I have no choice but to go back and face my demons. But what I didn't expect was for those demons to be...literal monsters. Monsters who feed off of pain and human suffering. They're alluring and seductive...terrifying, utterly inhuman, and slowly but surely, they're drawing me into their dark, twisted world.

I'm torn between wanting to give into my fantasy of burning this place to the ground with me inside of it, ending it once and for all, and wanting to live for these monster men who need me just as much as I might need them. To feed them...to give them what they so desperately crave.

I don't know what's going to happen to me, but I can't deny that I'm strangely drawn to these deadly creatures that seem to have crawled out of the dark depths of my nightmares. Some people say this house is cursed, and maybe they're right, because as much as I try to fight it, I can feel myself being pulled further and further into the dark...and you know what..?

I might just dive right in.

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I tried not to stare at the black stain at the bottom of the landing, the one that my mom made as she hung from her neck, her stomach slashed open and pouring out all over the floor beneath her. I wasn't even sure anybody ever tried to clean it up and had often wondered how long the cops had allowed her body to hang there while her blood soaked into the floorboards. Exactly how much of my family had been left behind in this damn place?

I took the stairs slowly, dragging my hand along the banister, trying to breathe evenly. In and out. In and out. It was useless. I couldn't quite catch my breath. My heart beat so hard that I could feel the thumping in my ears.

I paused halfway up the blood stained staircase as a thump echoed to my right. The framed photo of my parents on their wedding day shook, settling again slightly crooked. I stared at the wall, trying to figure out if there was something behind it to explain the thump, but I was pretty sure it was just an empty crawl space. The smile on my mom's face caught my eye, and I had to swallow the lump in my throat.

They looked so fucking happy that day, her belly already starting to swell with me inside it. My dad was staring at the side of my mom's smiling face, his eyes shining with nothing but worship and adoration. He had always been the hopeless romantic when it came to her. Magnolia and I used to make fun of them for being so openly head over heels for each other. Nowadays, I'd give just about anything to hear my mom giggling again while my dad chased her around the kitchen.

It was hard to tear my eyes away from the photo, but I managed it, peering up the staircase to the darkness above me. There was a lightswitch at the top, and I was tempted to run the rest of the way up and flip it on. I huffed a laugh at myself. I was

being an idiot. I'd already seen the horrors this house had to offer, unless Kaz was right and there really were more monsters lurking in the darkness around here.

Monsters... Fucking monsters. As if the ones lurking in my head weren't enough to drive me insane, add in some real ones who seemed to want to fuck me more than eat me. What did that say about me? That I enticed the creatures of the darkness this way? That they craved my sadness and rage so deeply that they wanted to savor it, to coax it out of me, sipping it bit by bit until they drained me of it?

I should have run. I should have left this place far behind me, but again, I'd never been levelheaded or logical. If these creatures were willing to drain me of my misery, then I was going to fucking let them. With any luck, I'd soon be a dried up husk, lying on the floor of this house next to my mom's bloodstain.

I was on borrowed time here, and I knew it. Sooner or later, they would get tired of playing with their food and consume the rest of me. Their sharp teeth and claws were meant for slashing through supple flesh and meaty bone. I just hoped I was long dead before they decided it was time to clean up the scraps of me.

I'd almost reached the second landing when the walls moved—literally moved. Several framed photos clattered to the floor, tumbling down the staircase I'd just ascended. The old floral wallpaper stretched, undulating as if suddenly the plaster and wood beneath it had turned to water. I grabbed the banister, trying to steady myself and keep from tumbling over it and plummeting to my death. I looked over my shoulder, again spotting the black bloodstain at the bottom. Such a long fall...

The wall stretched and moved in such a way that it looked like dozens of human faces were pressing forward, with mouths agape in silent screams, as they tried to escape. My eyes widened in horror, but then came the hands, grabbing for me, stretching the wallpaper until I was sure it was about to tear. My heart thundered as I let go of the banister and dashed up the remaining stairs, all while the tips of those grabbing

fingers brushed my arm and pulled at my hair.

The top of the landing was in view, only about five more steps...

I didn't make it.

Just as I was about to lunge, taking them two at a time, a hand gripped my wrist and tugged me towards the wall. I stumbled, my feet twisting around each other in my attempt to run. I screamed as more hands gripped me, holding my arms, my legs, and my hair. I could feel the fingers and faces rubbing against my back as I pressed into the wall. Their hold on me was so tight that I couldn't move, could barely even breathe.

I screamed and screamed, but nobody could hear me. Cyn and Cilas were off somewhere, hunting who knew what, and Kaz was probably underwater, recuperating from being out of it for so long last night. Why else wouldn't he have responded to my screams?

I fought against the hands, trying to bite at them, thrashing every which way, but it was no use. There were too many of them. My body was being pulled so hard against the wall that I was pretty sure that any second, I would disappear into it, to be forever trapped inside the walls of this cursed house. Still, I fought against them. The open, gaping mouths released noises that sounded like the moans of the undead. They groaned and wailed, their voices low and cracking, as if they weren't really voices at all, but rather the wood, metal, plaster, and the very foundations of the house were yawning, stretching, and growing.

The pressure on my body hurt, to the point that I felt like my skin was being stretched, my hair yanked out of my scalp by twisting fingers. Nothing I did made any bit of difference.

Then the darkness descended—not the darkness of the hallway, nor the emptiness that stretched out before me at the top of the stairs. This darkness was full, heavy, and alive. It undulated like smoke and reached for me, tendrils of it wrapping around my wrists and pulling them out of the wall’s grasp. One by one, the hands released me, the darkness chasing away those screaming faces.

I still writhed, feeling like my skin was overrun with millions of tiny spiders as sensation slowly rushed back into my limbs. Already, I knew I was bruised and scratched, probably bleeding in some places.

A voice spoke in a language I’d never heard before. Actually, it was two voices speaking as one. I could hear them both distinctly, yet their words wrapped around one another. It reminded me of those old religious songs spoken in tongues. The words were guttural and made no sense, but the moment they were spoken, the wall began to smooth out again, returning to the way it was supposed to look—solid and faceless.

It took seconds for everything to return to normal. I fell forward off of the wall, but the shadows caught me. I was wrapped up in a pair of strong, smoke-like arms, and when I looked up, I met a pair of burning white eyes peering down at me with unfathomable need...

Iris

Fingers tightened in my hair, holding me in place as the stranger slammed into me from behind. I didn’t know his name, and I didn’t care to, as long as he fucked me hard enough to make my brain shut off for a while.

My eyes rolled back as he hit that special spot deep inside me over and over again. His cock was comically thick and long, almost to the point of pain, but again, I didn’t care. I wanted the pain. I wanted to cry, to bleed, and to scream. Whoever he was, he

was happy to oblige, because his pace quickened and his thrusts pushed my face into the headboard. I didn't know if this was his bedroom, or if he even lived in this bar with the other bikers.

Music from the party drifted beneath the closed door, along with a bright light that barely filtered into the dark bedroom. Needles littered the floor, there was spilled weed on the nightstand, and a leaking bottle of tequila was staining the carpet. It wasn't my finest hour, to say the least.

Through the haze of drugs and fucking, there was a voice in the back of my head, screaming at me to stop, but I ignored her. I always ignored her.

Pressure built in my lower stomach, and a tingling sensation traveled up my thighs as my pussy clenched around the stranger's cock. He cursed under his breath, yanking back on my hair again. I cried out in pain but moaned as I came around him. I felt him follow me over the edge, hot cum filling me up and spilling down my inner thighs. His hips twitched against my ass, and his fingernails dug into my skin.

Underneath my screams, the room was relatively quiet, save for the whispering. There was always that damn whispering. Voices seemed to follow me wherever I went, forcing me to seek out new and dangerous ways to drown them out.

When my orgasm subsided, irritation set in immediately. Suddenly, I wanted his nasty hands off of me and to get as far away from this bedroom as I could. Reaching back behind me, I pushed him and he toppled onto the bed, clutching his softening cock. "What the fuck is your problem, bitch?"

I ignored him, not even looking his way as I hopped off the bed and fumbled for my clothes. My thighs were sopping wet with cum, so I used the rumpled bed sheet to wipe myself clean before shoving myself into my jeans and T-shirt.

The stranger laughed bitterly. “They told me you were a whore, but I guess I didn’t believe them. Jokes on me, huh?” In my peripheral, he sat up, just a shadow passing in front of the illuminated window with the blinds drawn. “At least make yourself useful and pass me a bump.” He gestured to the nightstand.

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I glanced at it, noting the little sandwich baggie of white powder. Fully dressed, I swiped it and shoved it into my pocket, flitting my eyes to the man. “Thanks for reminding me.” My tone was dry and unbothered, even as he sputtered curses and tried to climb off the mattress after me. I headed for the door, shrugging on my jacket, then pulled the door open, flooding the room with light and sound. Cringing, I peered back over my shoulder. “Oh, and thanks for the dick. I really needed that.”

The last thing I saw before slamming the door behind me was his bewildered, passably handsome face that I’d forget the moment I left this disgusting, run-down bar.

* * *

The cool nightair whipped my pale hair around my face as I hurried down the street with my hands securely in my jacket pockets. I only lived a few blocks from the biker bar and club scene, so I’d stupidly decided to walk tonight.

My regret was stark as I stumbled into a bush, trying to catch my balance but failing, and toppled over into someone’s front yard like a fucking idiot. I sincerely hoped nobody was watching this spectacle. On the bright side, at least I was in jeans and not some skimpy dress that would ride up and show my ass. That was just what I needed tonight—a ticket for indecent exposure.

I fought back a wave of nausea and rolled onto my back in the scratchy bush, staring up at the starry night sky. The world swam around me, and I was sure I was about to throw up, bile creeping up my throat and everything. Ughh, I hated throwing up.

The whispers in my head grew louder, as if the trees, the stars, and the grass beneath me were gossiping. They told me how much of a coward I was, how much of a fucking failure I'd turned out to be.

“Get the fuck out of my head!” I shouted at nothing at all. It was in my mind, I was aware of that, but it didn't make the whispers any less annoying.

I tried to sit up, grappling with the branches of the bush I'd fallen in. It took a few minutes of cursing and trying not to gag to stumble to my feet again. I managed it, but barely. It would take a miracle to get home in one piece. Maybe I should have waited until I got home to shoot up. It was just hard to say no when it was being offered for free. Heroin wasn't something I used all the time. I didn't like the way it made me feel when I came down from a high, but sometimes, when things got really bad, I would cave. Tomorrow was going to suck, and I was already dreading it.

I walked for what felt like hours, when in reality, it couldn't have taken more than ten minutes before I was stumbling into my shitty apartment and kicking the door shut behind me. The first thing I did was strip all of my clothes off and head for the shower, turning the water up as hot as I could stand it without burning my skin off. Actually, that might have been preferable than smelling that guy's cum all over me.

He wasn't the only one I'd fucked tonight. Before I stumbled into that room, I'd already gotten railed in the dirty bar bathroom by some guy named Buck. He had a huge dick though, so I couldn't say I regretted it.

Still, I was going to be sore in the morning, on top of hungover. This was my life now. How fucking proud my parents would be...

I spent the next hour sitting on the shower floor with a razor blade to my wrist, contemplating if this would finally be the night. My skin was decorated in a mural of slashing scars that I never bothered to cover up or hide, but at least they matched the

deeper one that slashed across my once pretty face.

Every time I looked in the mirror, I was reminded of the worst night of my life, so I avoided it as much as possible. Instead, I added more scars to the ever growing collection. It was a morbid mural, but I'd earned them all.

I stared at the water dripping over the raised scar tissue, imagining it turning red, my life force swirling down the drain with the rest of my future. I could have done it a thousand different times, and yet here I was...a fucking coward, just like the whispers said. Still, the razor dragged across my wrist, splitting the skin and leaving a burning ecstasy in its wake. I groaned in pleasure, letting my head fall back against the tile wall. Fire raced up my arm as every single one of my nerve endings lit up at once.

But the pain no longer felt like pain anymore. In fact, I needed it, craved it even. Without it, I was nothing, just a shell of a person who couldn't feel a thing unless I was getting fucked or making myself bleed. Even the drugs were starting to lose their bite these days.

Watching my blood trickle down my arm had me remembering, always fucking remembering, the way my sister's screams had echoed down the hallway that night, how my name on her lips sounded so strangled. I heard her voice in my head as crisply as if she'd been standing next to me. The metallic scent was familiar, so familiar, that I could taste it in my mouth, feel it squelch under my bare feet, as if I were still running for my life down that staircase, heavy boot steps echoing behind me as he got closer.

My mother's lifeless brown eyes stared at me as she swung from the banister, while a steady drip, drip, drip of blood dropped from her body to pool beneath her on the wooden floorboards. Somewhere in the distance, my father was screaming...

My phone rang and rang, mixing with my father's screams as I woke up, still sitting

on the floor of my shower. The water had long gone cold, and my blood had stopped flowing. Shame.

It rang again and again, and I cursed while grappling at the wall to hoist myself off the ground, cringing at the aching twinge in my back and neck. The phone vibrated on the top of my closed toilet seat lid, and I grabbed it before it went to voicemail again.

“What the fuck do you want?” My voice was gravelly and felt like I’d chewed on cotton all night.

“Iris Cooper?” the voice on the other end asked. I didn’t recognize it. Pulling the phone away, I stared at the screen. An unknown number.

“Look, lady, I don’t want whatever you’re selling, so fuck off.” Hanging up as she started to speak, I got out of the shower finally and hobbled out into the hall to my room.

The phone rang again.

“Listen, I’m not interested, so stop—”

“Iris Cooper, this is Ashley L Morris from Morris & Bradley,” she said, cutting me off before I had the chance to hang up again. “If I could just have a moment of your time? I’ll try to make this as quick and painless as possible.” Her tone was stern but not unkind, and I did, in fact, recognize the name.

Morris & Bradley was the law firm my parents had hired back home to handle their affairs. My stomach sank into a dark, swirling pit. What the hell did she want with me?

“I’m not interested in the money, Ashley. I told your partner before, and I really don’t like repeating myself.” Truth be told, the money could have really come in handy these past ten years, but I just couldn’t use it. That shit was cursed.

“Miss Cooper, I’ve been made aware of your requests, however, we have received news that your aunt Sara passed this last Tuesday.”

A bitter taste flooded my mouth. I hadn’t seen Sara since the...incident, but I knew she’d been suffering from some kind of cancer for the better part of a decade.

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“How is that my problem?” The words came out a bit snippier than I’d intended as I held my phone between my cheek and shoulder so I could hop into a pair of yoga pants, cringing at the way they stuck to my still damp legs.

There was a beat of stunned silence on the other end. After the stink I’d put up the last time I’d been contacted, Ashley was probably cursing her shit ass luck at having to be the one to break the news to me in the first place.

“Your aunt had no children of her own and recently divorced her third husband a few years back. She had a prenup in place, therefore her estate and all of her financial and liquid assets have been placed into your name. We will need you to come down to the office as soon as you can to go over all of the necessary paperwork.”

I blinked at my torn wallpaper several times as her words sunk in. Somewhere in the back of my head, a voice that sounded suspiciously like my own cackled. It laughed at me, making me itch to gouge the nearest object into my ears just to make it stop.

Ashley was still speaking, her words a jumbled mess of incoherent rambling until I tuned back in. “We will leave the decision up to you ultimately, but given the state of the property...”

“Hold on,” I said, shaking my head to clear away the mocking laughter. “What are you talking about? What property?”

She sounded irritated as she answered. “The Cooper estate. It’s been sitting empty since your aunt took over its care. There hasn’t been a groundskeeper on staff in years, but I’m afraid even one man just isn’t enough to manage such a large property,

and unfortunately, it might have to be condemned soon.”

My ears were ringing, and chills raced up my spine, gripping my throat like icy fingers that wanted to choke the life out of me. The sound of my sister’s screams were back.

The Cooper estate—my family’s home since before I was born, since before my father’s father was born. I could see it in my mind’s eye clearly, every hallway of the fifteen-room mansion, every painting on the walls, every creaking floorboard. I could smell the dusty books from my mother’s library and the drying paint in my dad’s art studio.

I tried not to think about that fucking house, and yet it followed me. No matter how far or how fast I ran, it would always be right there, living, breathing, and waiting for me to come back to it.

What did that say about me? Was I really that much of a coward? Peter was dead, long dead, and I was safe, right? So why did the thought of returning to that house have my blood running cold?

“Miss Cooper, I do have to stress that if you do not claim the property, it will revert back to the state...” The words just kept coming, drowned out by the laughter erupting inside of my head.

So many voices...

So many fucking voices...

Iris

I hadn’t been to the deep South in over a decade—so long that I’d almost forgotten

how fucking hot it was. Or maybe I was just sweating because I was nursing a massive hangover. Regret wasn't a strong enough word for how I felt about chugging two bottles of wine before napping for eight straight hours.

Here I was, though, twenty-four hours later, standing in front of a set of wrought iron gates that I never wanted to see again, holding a key in my hands as my car idled next to me. Fog rolled over the mossy driveway that used to be cleanly paved, and a heavy chain kept the two sides of the gate locked closed.

I looked back at my car as I approached the gate, wondering if I should say fuck it and drive away, leaving this fucking house and all of its memories behind me forever.

Hadn't I already done that, though?

It had been ten years—ten whole years since I'd stepped foot on this overgrown, swampy property. I could see the house up ahead, shrouded by moss covered cypress trees. It was one of those old plantation houses in the deep South that should have been demolished years ago.

My family had only owned it since the 1930's, but its history was...not something my parents had been proud of after taking it over. They'd tried their hardest to make up for the atrocities that the previous owners had been a part of, but all the kindness and generosity in the world couldn't erase the cold dread that slithered down my spine as I unlocked the chain and let it drop to the ground. This place had a history for sure, and plenty of that history was...well, it was evil, as was most of America's old South.

A heavy wind rustled the trees, blowing leaves every which way, as if unlocking that gate had breathed new life into a dying monster.

Getting back into my car, I slowly drove up the long driveway that curved into a

roundabout around a stone statue of an angel weeping into her palms with her wings spread out wide behind her. That fountain used to flow freely, and my sister and I would toss pennies into it for wishes. The stone was cracked and chipped now, the fountain overflowing with weeds and sticks, and the tip of her right wing was missing completely.

The house wasn't in much better shape. It was still massive and opulent, but you could tell no one had been taking care of it for a long time now. The four white columns that spanned the front of the house were dirty and had vines creeping up around them, spilling onto the balconies overhead.

I glanced at the passenger seat, eyeing the red plastic containers I'd brought with me, wondering if I should just get this over with instead of wasting my time poking around the source of all of my nightmares. The smell of gasoline filled the car, and I was starting to get queasy. I had three more cans in the trunk, and I planned to soak this entire house with them and light it all on fire, preferably with my body still inside it.

I was going to die in this place, just like my family did so many years ago. I was going to rest where they took their last breaths, and then I'd join them...wherever they'd ended up.

But not today.

Today, I was going to be a big girl and face this house that haunted my every sleeping moment, the house I used endless substances to scrub from my brain, failing every time. It whispered to me, even now, as I swung open the double front doors, the hinges squeaking obnoxiously. Musty, hot air hit me in the face, a gust of it wafting my hair over my shoulders, as if the house itself was letting out a breath.

Softness swished around my ankles, and I smiled, though I knew it didn't reach my

eyes or my heart. I shook my head as my two naked cats brushed up against me, meowing loudly because they'd been cooped up in the car with me for hours. Kevin and Kyle were the only two bright spots I had left in my life, and I'd had no choice but to bring them with me. When I inevitably killed myself and this damn house, I would have to make sure to find them a good home.

“Go explore or something. I'll feed you when I get shit settled,” I told Kyle, who blinked up at me with bright blue eyes. I made a shooing motion, and he and his brother took off in separate directions, their little paws rapping against the hardwood.

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I'd brought only one bag with me, and it was hoisted over my shoulder, so I lugged it into the family room, which was just off to the right of the main foyer. I purposely avoided looking at the deep black stain that remained on the floor below the landing. It wasn't time to think about that yet.

Every piece of furniture was covered in white sheets that had been collecting dust for a decade. Aunt Sara had never touched the place, and for obvious reasons, we didn't keep a groundskeeper or maid. A chill went down my spine as I set my bag on the floor by the giant fireplace. Inside was a pile of rotten wood and old dusty ashes.

It felt like a tomb, collecting nothing but dust, spiders, and shadows. I'd have to start a fire, because there was no way in hell I was going down to the boiler tonight.

I decided to explore, instead of standing around like an idiot staring at peeling wallpaper, so I headed back the way I'd come. As I neared the front door, I glanced up to where Kyle stood atop the banister, staring down at me. His eyes glowed in the dark, unblinking. Kevin joined him, meowing once as I opened the door to a gust of cooling night air.

Leaving the house behind, I took the long path, which used to be a carefully laid mosaic of stone but was now just a long bed of soft moss, leading toward the gazebo and boathouse. Fog undulated around my ankles, rolling and tumbling, mixing with the chilly breaths I puffed out between chattering teeth. It was unseasonably cold tonight—colder than the South had any right to be.

The gazebo used to be beautiful. It was once a pristine white, with iron railings that twisted like leafy vines rimmed with lattice that used to bloom with jasmine. Now, it

had chipped paint revealing the rotting wood underneath it, a hole in one of the three steps up, and Spanish moss dangling from the crumbling roof. I supposed it could still be considered beautiful, as all dead things were if you knew how to appreciate them.

The gazebo backed up to the edge of the swamp, where another set of stairs would take me to a small dock that my dad and I used to sit on while he painted in the evenings. We'd sit out there for hours, until the lightning bugs sparkled out over the glassy water and the stars twinkled overhead. Mom and Magnolia would sit under the gazebo drinking sweet tea, talking about boys, town gossip, and whatever upcoming social events they were excited about.

I leaned over the railing, bracing myself on my forearms as I stared out over that same glassy dark water, and suddenly, I had the strangest urge to fling myself over it and see what happened. I wouldn't though. That would be too fucking easy.

Instead, I kicked off my shoes and braced a hand on the rotting wooden beam beside me and hoisted myself up until I was standing on the wrought iron railing. The cold wind whipped through my long white hair as I pulled a joint from my pocket and a lighter from the other, lighting it up as I balanced along the railing. Back and forth, I paced, sucking down the burning embers of smoke that made my head feel fuzzy—the way I liked it.

The water rippled, and I staggered at the noise. I caught myself on the beam as I teetered to the side, a laugh slipping past my lips as I dropped the rest of my weed into the swamp water.

“That one's on the house...” I muttered at the ripple of water. I had more where that came from, so I hoped the fish enjoyed getting high as much as I did these days. I giggled to myself again as I continued to pace.

The water rippled again, louder this time. I paused, squinting into the darkness, just in

case a gator decided to wander over, curious about the stranger who'd invaded its peaceful night. I didn't see a gator though. I didn't see anything really, and that was what sent a shiver down my spine.

It took a few seconds for me to realize what was wrong—there were no more lightning bugs, and the crickets had stopped chirping. Aside from the ripple in the black water, the swamp was utterly still and silent. Even the tree branches had stopped swaying.

Taste you...

I froze, blinking into the darkness, as a whispery voice wrapped around me. It was deeper than the usual voice in my head, the one that enjoyed telling me how worthless I was. No, this once was different.

More, more, more...

It was begging, its voice deep, rumbling, and desperate. I scanned the swamp, feeling a sense of dread race through my blood, but found nothing there except branches that were too still for the windy night. Still, the bugs were silent.

“Who's there?!” I called out, my words raspy. I cleared my throat as I clutched the beam tighter, my nails chipping off the flaking paint. When no one answered, I called out again, because I just knew that the voice hadn't been in my head. No, this one was something else. “I said who the fuck is there? Come out, cocksucker! If you think you can squat on my property then—Oof!” My foot slipped, and down I went. I hit the tepid water before I knew what was happening, getting a mouthful of it.

When my head crested the dark water, I sucked in a breath of air as low laughter carried towards me through dead air. The laughter was more of a chuckle, rolling and growly, as if the source had never created such a noise before. I looked around

frantically. If someone was watching me, some vagrant squatting on my property, I was going to call 911 and get their asses...

Smells good too... I think I'll have a bite...

The water rippled around me, splashing me in the face, and I yelped. This time, there was no doubt about it. There was someone in the water with me...or something? It'd finally happened—I was losing my fuking mind.

I clawed at the bank of the water, gripping a soggy log to hoist myself out. Something slimy swiped the sole of my foot, and I yelped again, jerking away from it. I cursed as I threw myself onto the mossy ground, falling backward as I crawled away from the water. Through the darkness, I could see movement just beneath the surface.

Could it be a gator? There were plenty of those around, especially after the house had fallen vacant for the last decade. I crawled to my knees, peering over the water to get a better look, knowing this was probably a stupid ass idea. Whatever had touched my foot hadn't felt like the scaly skin of a gator...not that I had much experience.

There... I sucked in a hissed breath as a dark shape rose out of the water. I blinked at the long, twisting...tentacle? What the fuck was happening?

It was sleek, black, and shiny, nearly blending in with the water's surface, but it was undeniably a tentacle, and it was fucking massive. I fell backwards again when it moved and another tentacle joined it, undulating in the water like some kind of giant octopus. But that was nuts, right? There were no octopuses...octopi...in the swamps, right? What the hell was I thinking, of course there weren't.

It took exactly two more seconds for another tentacle to rise out of the water, rapidly heading my way, before I scrambled to my feet and ran. There was no way I was about to become octopus food. That strange deep laughter rumbled behind me, so I

ran faster. Maybe that weed had gone bad, or maybe some asshat had laced it with an extra something special, but whatever it was, I was getting the fuck away from it.

So I ran. I ran until I couldn't breathe, until that dark swamp was yards behind me, until the crickets resumed their song and the wind washed away the laughter that followed me all the way to the front door of my house.

* * *

That thing in the water

The pale hair was what caught my eye in the darkness. It flowed down her equally pale shoulders of smooth supple skin, shining as if the moonlight had been ensnared in the strands. I licked my lips as I drew closer, letting the reeds and low hanging branches hide me.

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She danced along the railing of the human structure that was slowly falling apart. It was a beautiful ruin that I sometimes enjoyed lazing about on, enjoying the moonlight and the quiet of my domain. The woman was unsteady on her feet as oddly smelling smoke puffed from her supple lips, but she only laughed at herself as she caught her balance once more.

Despite the laughter falling from her lips, there was sadness rolling off of her. I could taste it thickly in the air, so I let myself sip it little by little, rolling it around in my mouth until I was sated, but I quickly realized that just one small taste could never satisfy me.

I moved closer, hoping that the shadows would continue to conceal me. Most of my long body was hidden beneath the dark water, and I moved along the bottom with ease, noiselessly avoiding obstacles. I knew this swamp inside and out. The waters bent to my will, and the creatures bowed in my presence.

I wondered... Would this girl bow as well? Or would I be forced to crush her until she bent the knee? The thought had me salivating and moving even closer, until I could clearly make out the whites of her gray eyes as they glinted in the moonlight. She was a beautiful human, which I found rather rare. Humans were dull creatures physically. They were fragile, careless, and afraid of their own shadows.

This one was sad, impossibly so. With my tongue tasting the air, I collected her scents, realizing that no, she wasn't just sad, she was broken, completely and utterly broken, with barely a shred of life left in her. She raged inside. Hatred boiled her blood, and regret clouded her busy mind.

I decided to test the waters, letting my presence be known to the creatures around us. The crickets quieted, and the very wind stilled around us, letting the woman's silvery tendrils fall into her face. She stared out over my waters, eyes searching, but for what? She had no idea, not yet. Not until I was ready.

I whispered to her, letting the melodic sound of my voice wrap around her, caressing her skin and kissing the nape of her neck. She visibly shivered, making me chuckle to myself. She must have heard me, because every cell of her luscious human body went taut.

Delicious... Fucking delectable...

Soon, that fear would belong to me. That pain, that sadness, that vile regret, I would drink it from her veins after I tasted her flesh. I would savor each morsel of her until there was nothing left but the echoes of her screams.

But not tonight. Tonight, I was content to wait and watch, letting my laughter trail behind her as she fled from my waters.

Iris

After hosing myself down behind the house, freezing my fucking ass off in the process, I sat in front of the fireplace in my underwear for the next three hours. I still wasn't ready to head upstairs for a shower just yet. Maybe tomorrow. Luckily, my dad had a massive stack of old wood still in place so I didn't have to forage for wood outside with the swamptopus. Instead, I just sat there, staring into the flames, while Kevin and Kyle lounged on the floor next to me.

"I'm telling you, it was a tentacle," I told Kyle, who blinked his bright blue eyes at me as if to say, Mother, please spare us your craziness for just one day. Running my fingers through my now very tangled hair, I let out a long, tired sigh. "Fuck this

place, man...”

Kevin let out a creaky meow in response without opening his eyes as he stretched out, warming his naked skin in the heat of the fire. I didn't blame either of them. They were my only companions in this whole world, and they were probably sick and tired of hearing me scream at the voices in my head. Now, we had a monster in the swamp? Fuck, I was losing it.

The wind picked up outside, knocking tree branches against the side of the house. When I was little, the noises used to scare me, so I'd sneak into bed with Magnolia, who was always the more logical and levelheaded of the two of us. She would explain every creak and crack of the old house, telling me about how when it was hot, wood expands, and when it was cold, it contracts, and that was why it sounded like the walls themselves were coming alive.

Mags wasn't here to talk me out of my head anymore, though. No, all that remained of her was the blood still dried to the wood floor upstairs and the scratches her nails made in the walls.

I looked up at the high ceiling. Her room was directly over my head, mine about ten more feet to the left, while my parents' room was all the way on the other side of the landing and up one floor. I lay back on my makeshift bed of dusty couch pillows and the one sleeping bag I'd brought with me, still staring at the dark ceiling, watching the shadows of the trees from the slightly open curtains dance in front of the moonlight.

My eyes were heavy as I blinked, trying not to doze off. In the back of my head, all I could hear was the sound of that laughter, while the image of the dark, slimy tentacles played on repeat in my head. I shivered, despite the fire's warmth, as I drifted off to sleep.

* * *

I woke up to the sound of my own moan.

My thighs were parted as I arched my back at the feel of a textured tongue running up the slit of my pussy. It was hot and wet, applying pressure once it reached my very swollen clit. Hips rocking, I groaned again, my hands coming up automatically to cup my breasts, pinching my nipples that were already hard and sensitive.

Fuck, that feels good... Wait a second, what feels good? Nothing should feel like anything...

My eyes flew open after a few seconds of ecstasy, once realization began to dawn on me. Darkness hovered overhead—pitch blackness where the roof of the old house should have been. If I didn't know any better I would have said my eyelids were still closed. I blinked several times as I tried to get my bearings. Still, the tongue laved at me, devouring my wet, contracting pussy until my thighs were quivering.

What a normal person would have done in this situation was get up and leave, maybe even kick out a foot at whomever broke into their house to eat them out. Except I'd never claimed to be a normal person, and to be honest...this wasn't exactly my weirdest Saturday night.

After blinking the sleep from my eyes, the blackness that hovered over me deepened. It became somewhat solid, like a living mass of...something. Or was it...someone? I raised my head, trying to see down my body, which I assumed was still laid out in front of the fireplace that had long gone out. A heavy weight pressed me right back down to the sleeping bag and held me still. I couldn't move.

Fuck, fuck, fuck...

With my heart in my throat, my breathing became labored. “What the hell is this?” My words were strangled as my clit throbbed with every wet swipe. The torment was building like a smoldering flame just under my belly button, traveling down and down until I could feel it deep in my core. “Who’s there...?” I gritted out, the words again strangled and halfway moaned, which I wasn’t proud of, but whatever was licking and sucking me was doing a far better job than about ninety percent of the partners I’d had.

As I attempted to fight back, my hands were batted away by...shadows? That was what it looked like at least. Forced to my sides, my arms were locked in place, but all I felt was a warmth covering every inch of my skin. It was like I was blind and paralyzed, save for every nerve ending firing at once.

I’d felt like this before. Well, aside from the licking. There was a name for it too—sleep paralysis. The logical part of my brain said this was just a dream, like so many fuckhead psychiatrists had tried to tell me, but it felt so damn real.

Above me, there was a sudden noise, like the creaking and cracking of steps on centuries-old hardwood flooring, as if there were someone up there, walking around in what used to be Magnolia’s room. My heart thudded against my rib cage painfully as I tried to fight the pressure holding me in place, but the pleasure was growing so intense that any moment, my brain would be mush.

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Sleep paralysis was somewhat common, and over the years, I'd experienced it once or twice after a bad binge, but it never felt like this, nor had anyone in my grippy sock group a few years ago described it this way. Usually, I saw shadows out of the corner of my eyes or a mass of dark shapes in the crack of my closet door. This...this was something else.

It licked and sucked until I was a shivering, quivering mess, moaning as tears leaked from my eyes and down my cheeks. Slowly, the shadow began to take shape as my eyes adjusted to the dark room.

I came hard. It hit me like a fucking brick to the face. My whole body locked up, thighs shaking, pussy clenching, clit throbbing, and liquid squirting. Yeah, I was a fucking squirter, and it felt amazing. It was like an unbearable pressure had been released, leaving nothing but warmth and emptiness behind.

I screamed, physically unable to keep it in anymore. Wave after wave of molten pleasure rolled over me until I was a sweating, trembling mess.

I'd always been a fighter, even on the worst day of my life, but for some reason, all I wanted to do was lay prone on the floor and let this...thingtouch me again and again and again. There was still a good chance that all of this was just happening in my mind. If so, maybe I didn't mind it so much. Maybe my drug addled brain had found a way to entice me into keeping it alive for a while longer.

Was I really as sick and twisted as everybody told me I was?

The shadow overhead started to recede, and I thought it would disappear altogether

when suddenly, it was shifting to the right, undulating like some sort of liquid blackness, as if the darkness was staring right back at me, waiting for my next move. I didn't know where to focus my eyes, nor could I move my body to defend myself. Even if I wanted to run, there was no way I could make my limbs move.

“What the fuck are you?” I asked it. I felt like an idiot talking to shadows, but I just knew that something was there. I wasn't alone in this house, even if I was dreaming. Something told me that I was the real intruder here and whatever this was, it was alive and curious.

Again, a noise from above, like the creaking and stretching of old wood, made me look up, even though I could barely see the ceiling. Something was walking up there, heading towards the staircase near the foyer, and the sound was way too heavy to be the cats.

“Is your flesh as sweet as your nectar?” came a deep, rumbling voice that had my entire body going still. It was low enough that I could barely make out what it was saying. I couldn't place the exact accent, but it sounded...wrong.

The voice sent chills down my spine and a coldness flowing through my veins. There was a rough edge to it that promised pain, madness, and hunger. It was as if it were anticipating my fear, hoping for it.

I was halfway tempted to let it have me, to let whatever this was consume me whole until I was no longer myself anymore. I'd had enough of being myself, of looking at the same old tired eyes in the mirror day after day, knowing that in the end, my life had been worthless.

Maybe that was why I wasn't trying harder to run.

Something that felt oddly like fingers tipped in long claws flexed around my biceps

as another deep rumbling sound filled the room. I got the distinct impression that whatever this was, it was male, and whatever it wanted from me was purely carnal. It was hungry for me. I could feel it, hear it, but was it hungry for my...nectar? Or was it salivating for my flesh?

“Your pain is delicious, sad one.” The words were a little more clear this time. “Give me more of it...” it said, nearly begging.

My hips thrust again, seemingly the only part of my body that I could move on my own, and I wondered if that was purposeful. The thing trembled again, and I felt something pressing into my core that was hard and pulsing. There was a thick mass between my thighs, spreading them wider, the way a man’s body might spread them as he filled me up. I allowed my thighs to fall open, welcoming the shadow into me.

The creaking from above stopped, replaced by footsteps behind me. They were heavy and purposeful, as it was used to slinking around in silence but was letting me know that it was here. Then came a voice, not as deep as the last, but more jovial, maybe even sinister and wicked. It spoke from behind me, where I couldn't turn to see.

“Spread out like a feast. Brother, you’ve outdone yourself.”

Brother?

The deeper voice chuckled in response to his...brother, dragging the tips of its claws down my thighs until I could feel the sting of my skin splitting. A hot puff of breath hit my core, and a small sound of surprise left my lips. “Come for us, sad one. Let me lick it up and savor it.”

Sad one...Why were they calling me sad one? Was it some kind of fucked-up endearment? I blinked, then blinked again, narrowing my eyes to try and peer past the darkness. My heart pounded with excitement and adrenaline, proving to myself

exactly how fucked in the head I really was. Was I actually enjoying this? Would I really sink so far into insanity that I would fuck a literal shadow? A little voice in the back of my head said why not?

It wasn't the usual voice that nagged at me—the voice that taunted me and urged me to end it all. It wasn't the laughter that constantly echoed behind my every thought. It was a voice I'd buried a long time ago, and it told me to take, take, take...

I believed in monsters, demons, and ghosts. I believed in the existence of evil. In the decade after losing everything that I loved, I'd felt haunted by evil, by monsters and ghosts. I'd felt stalked and taunted, like they were watching me, waiting for me to succumb to the voices. Maybe they were finally here to collect the debt I owed. I was never meant to live that night, and maybe now, I could set things right.

I moaned as the weight between my thighs shifted, something hard and bulging dragging across my clit. Coming once wasn't enough. I didn't consider myself sated until I was throbbing, soaking wet, and ready to pass out. The decision to let this happen was already made, whether it was a dream or not. I'd come here to die anyway, so I might as well go out moaning.

I wanted these creatures to touch me. I wanted them to make me feel unspeakably dirty, to do awful things to me, if only to make me feel something for once in my goddamn life.

There were footsteps behind me creaking on the floorboards, and I stiffened. The second creature came towards me, stopping right behind my head, as if they were kneeling there. Long fingers sifted through my hair, running claws over the strands and my scalp until I closed my eyes in ecstasy, tipped back my head, and let out a long moan.

The thing on top of me slashed a burning line along my inner thigh, and I felt the

warmth of my blood trickling over my skin and pooling on the floor. The pain felt amazing and nearly had my eyes rolling back. The creature smeared its palm in the blood before dragging it through my pussy lips, rubbing it around my swollen clit as if using my own blood as lube. My eyes flew open in shock, my lips parting in another moan that I couldn't seem to control, while I met the eyes of what I could only describe as a living shadow.

It had the body of a man, tall, strong and lean. Yet it had no distinguishable features, other than undulating shadows that dissipated into the air around it as if a man were trapped inside a thick layer of smoke. It stared at me with glowing bright white eyes that didn't blink. Its face was so dark that it almost didn't have any features, but if I looked past the shadows for long enough, I could just barely make out the shape of a strong jaw, a defined nose, and wide, grinning lips. The longer I stared, the wider it grinned, until those lips parted, revealing rows of needle-like teeth.

Clawed talons in place of fingers looked sharp enough to slash me in half as easily as a knife through warm butter. I swallowed thickly, running my eyes up and down the...thing, and wondered if he was only playing with his food tonight.

My eyes widened when not one, but two pairs of arms reached for me from behind, the hands of one set cupping my breasts, while the second pair anchored me to the floor by my shoulders. I tried to picture the same shadow man I could see kneeling between my legs, only with four arms like some kind of insect, and I shivered, thinking of all the things one could do with that many limbs at their disposal.

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The part of me that was long dead thought of screaming or calling out for help from anybody who might hear. But who would hear me out here, so far away from the nearest neighbor? Our property was vast enough that I could walk a mile and not see another soul. Nobody heard my family when they screamed for their lives, nobody heard my sister begging for hers, nobody heard my father pleading for...him to take his life instead. Nobody heard us, and nobody saved us. So why would they save me now?

Did I even want to be saved? Maybe these shadow monsters would make this entire situation even easier. For years, I'd tried and failed to kill myself, to rid myself of these incessant voices in my head that never seemed to shut the fuck up, but I'd never been able to do it because I was a fucking coward down to my core. I was a goddamn fucking coward.

So maybe they would do it for me. Maybe they would have their fill of ravishing my body before devouring it whole and ripping me to shreds, leaving nothing behind but blood and bones the way that the universe intended before I managed to cheat death the first time.

"Bleed for me, Iris. I need to taste it...to sip it from your pretty veins." His long claws dug into my arms from overhead, anchoring me in place as his brother's tongue slithered over my clit again, flicking and laving back and forth.

Every muscle in my body quivered, my eyes rolling back as heat pooled between my thighs. I ached to rub myself against his shadowy face, to find relief from this agony.

"I crave your suffering," the one behind me said. I tilted my head back and peered up

at him. His eyes glowed white against the void of his smokey black body. "Cut deeper for me."

Cut...? What was he talking...

I looked down, suddenly staring at the straight razor I clutched in my hand. Only seconds before, my arms had been locked in place. I didn't remember moving, nor had I taken my razor out of my overnight bag. That didn't change the fact that I was holding it...pressing it to my other wrist now. When had I moved? What was going on? Time didn't make sense, and my mind was scattered. Still, the shadow man only urged me on with the nod of his head.

I pressed the razor edge into my arm, relishing the feel of hot blood pouring down my elbow, dripping onto the floor. The burn of it was ecstasy, and I closed my eyes, letting a moan slip past my lips.

"Lick it from her vein, Cyn," the shadow man between my thighs said. I opened my eyes to see him staring at his brother, my blood still dripping from his lips.

Cyn...His name is Cyn.

I felt a tight grip on my wrist as he raised it to his lips, letting his long tongue lap at the blood. His tongue was forked, and he could move each point individually. My arm stung badly, but I could still feel the tickle down to my bones. I squirmed, rolling my hips as Cyn licked my arm, drinking my blood down greedily until my head started to feel too heavy.

"Make her scream, Cilas," Cyn said, his voice strained and heavy with hunger and anticipation. "Her heart is racing, but not fast enough..."

I looked down at the shadow man between my thighs—Cilas. His white eyes watched

as his brother lapped up the blood dripping down my arm, and again, I felt something hard shift against my core. I couldn't help but grind against it.

Then I felt it. The thick head of what was unmistakably a heavy, pulsating cock pushed at my entrance. A breath caught in my throat as my entire body stiffened. Was this really happening? Could I even stop this if I wanted to? Something told me the choice was out of my hands. Instead of shoving inside of me, Cilas angled his hips upwards, letting the underside of his shadowy cock slide along my wet pussy. I groaned again, my back arching into him as Cyn played with my nipples.

There were so many hands...so many fingers, cocks, and tongues. I was lost, and I didn't want to be found.

The ticking of a grandfather clock in the far corner of the room raced in time with my slowing heartbeats, counting down the seconds until my life was drained away, leaving behind a grinning husk of a body, sated in every way. I was feeling too much, needing too much, and soon, they would take everything. Maybe they'd even consume me once my last breath left me. Maybe they'd tear me to pieces, while I watched from some distant, lonely plane.

Or maybe...I'd consume them instead.

Cilas thrust into me, and I screamed at the intrusion. I hadn't realized how large he was before, but fuck... I stretched around him painfully, knowing damn well that if I lived through this night, I was going to bleed.

“That's it, sad one, take me in. Let me break you until you're screaming in pain. Cyn will drink it up before you notice it's gone...” He pulled out and thrust into me again, his claws on my thighs holding me in place while Cyn licked my nipples. “Scream for me, Iris...”

I did. I screamed, shutting my eyes tightly as he picked up his pace, fucking me hard and forcing my back into the floorboards painfully. He was so large in every way, and I imagined he could swallow me up into his shadows if he wanted to and I'd never find my way back out.

Through the pain, I felt pleasure so immense that it made me cry. Tears saturated my cheeks, dripping into my tangled hair, but Cyn was there to lick them up. He groaned deep in his chest, rumbling and vibrating behind me like a cat. Then his tongue returned to my breasts, flicking at my hard, sore nipples until they felt raw and abused.

I'd dropped the razor at some point, and briefly, I considered searching for it to use as a weapon, but a weapon for what? To defend myself from these shadows? Something told me a razor would be useless and would only infuriate them. Then there was the question of if I even wanted to fight back. As soon as the thought entered my mind, I knew the answer—I didn't. I wanted to be fucked, absolutely ravished and destroyed. I needed it like I needed my next breath.

His cock battered me, reaching so deeply that I could feel my lower stomach bulging with it. I'd never been stretched so wide, and I loved it. I loved the tearing stretch of him, the warmth and tickle of his shadows. There was an odd texture to him too, something like fine ridges along the underside of his cock that did something incredible to my nerve endings.

He fucked me hard and fast, his big hands wrapping around my waist as if I were nothing but a slip of a woman for him to toss around. The noises he began to make were guttural, nearly growling. It only spurred me on more, wanting to coax more of those noises out of him.

I moved my hips along with his thrusts, undulating and swirling, causing his pelvis to rub against my clit. I gasped as strikes of pleasure shot through my body at the

friction, and the creature behind me noticed. Removing one hand from my breast, he reached down between my thighs as his brother fucked me relentlessly. I sucked in a breath as his fingertip swirled around my clit, faster and faster, matching Cilas' pace.

“That’s a good girl,” Cyn whispered as he rubbed me in circles. My eyes were rolling back as a pressure built between my thighs. I was so close...so fucking close. “Come for me, Iris...” It was a command, not a suggestion.

Cilas bottomed out one last time as I screamed out my release, wetness once again squirting out of me in streams, probably coating Cilas in it, if that were even possible. At this point, I had no idea what was possible or what was even real.

Then I felt it—hot cum filled me up as his cock pulsed inside of me. Whatever Cilas and Cyn were made of, they were still males. It dripped out of me, running down my ass and onto the floor, but he had yet to pull out. Cyn removed his finger from my clit and began running his hands through my hair almost reverently.

I lay there, blinking in the darkness, my body humming with satisfaction. The world was spinning as my head swam. Cyn caressed the side of my face, hovering over me as his mouth stretched wide. His teeth were so sharp, they could shred my face off, and there were so many of them...too many.

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I just lay there, staring into the abyss of his mouth, waiting for the moment when he would strike, but that moment never came.

Instead, he took a long, slow breath in, and I felt something inside of me tug upwards. Cilas was licking me clean, his tongue running all over my inner thighs, but he was still holding me in place, anchoring me to the floor, not that I had the energy to get up anyway.

The tugging continued, as if Cyn had reached out an invisible hand and was yanking on something deep inside me that I didn't realize was even there. I arched my back as he breathed in harder, his white eyes glowing brighter and brighter.

Then I saw it—a hazy white mist-like substance rising up from my body. It curled in the air, like steam or fog, and flowed right into Cyn's mouth. The more he took from me, the lighter I felt, as if a weight were physically lifting off of my body. My head was getting lighter and my vision was getting fuzzy, but the feeling was amazing and I craved more of it.

"Feed him, sad one," Cilas whispered between licks. His voice was melodic and seductive. "You have so much to give, don't you? All that hatred you've buried for so long, let us feast on it. We can take it all away..."

I blinked, shaking my head as I took in his words. They were meant to soothe me, to keep me complacent while Cyn sipped something vital from my body. He spoke of my grief and hatred almost like they were tangible things that pooled and festered inside of me, and they were hungry for it.

Putting two and two together, a panic welled up in my chest at the thought of them taking my pain. How could I possibly surrender it, when my pain had been the only thing grounding me to this earth for a decade? Pain, grief, and hatred were the only emotions I let myself feel these days, and without them, I was an empty shell.

I tried to wiggle free with my heart in my throat, kicking out my foot and slamming it into Cilas' chest. Anticipating it, he caught me by the ankle and slammed my foot back on the floor, anchoring me in place.

"Don't fight it, Iris," he said, a clear warning in his deep voice. "You've already welcomed us in. It's too late to back out now."

"Don't take it," I said with ragged breaths, struggling against his hold. "Please..." I begged.

"And why shouldn't we?" He cocked his head to the side, pretending to consider.

"It's all I have left. You don't understand, I can't—"

"Oh, but you already are," he said, cutting me off. "The moment you walked into this house, you belonged to us. I've never tasted such exquisite misery." I arched my back higher as Cyn continued to suck that mist out of me. I was getting weaker by the second, my vision darkening until all I could see was a single water stain in the ceiling above me.

"Sleep, sad one," Cilas said softly. "We won't take it all tonight. I prefer to savor my meals. Sleep, you'll feel better in the light of day."

I could do nothing but obey. I didn't have any energy left in me to fight, so I didn't. I stilled, letting my body fall slack, and Cilas crawled up and over me until I could peer directly into his eyes. The last thing I saw before succumbing was his wide mouth

opening up, sharp teeth gleaming back at me.

* * *

That thing in the shadows

Even as she slept, I wanted to taste her—her soft, fragile flesh, the blood that still coated her inner thighs, and the liquid that had seeped from her cunt as she rode her pleasure to its peak.

The woman, Iris, was a broken thing of beauty. Her naked form was sprawled out before me, vulnerable and weak. All it would take was a single swipe of my claw across that swan-like neck, and her life would seep from her veins in seconds. I'd be there to lap it up greedily.

This house was a refuge, where my brother and I sought peace in the long nights, when monotony nearly had us at each other's throats. It was a place of pain and terror, filled to the roof with remnants of tragedy and disgraceful acts of horror. In other words, it was perfect.

Cyn hovered over the woman, tracing his claws over her long silky hair. I could feel everything he did through the bond of our shadows, as if we were one soul divided into two bodies. My twin and I had never once been apart, and we preferred it that way. Through his senses, I could feel those moonlight strands on my own fingers and smell her nightmare filled dreams, in which she relived every horror she'd ever faced. Her body twitched in sleep, as if she were running or fighting for her life.

Perhaps that was exactly what Iris Cooper was doing in this place. What was she running from, and why? Or maybe she was running towards something—something she'd left behind, trapped inside these walls. Her pain felt familiar, I realized. I could taste it in the air around me, as if she'd left a signature behind long ago.

Cyn peered up at me, his white eyes bright with anticipation against the blackness of his shadowy skin. That was what they called the two of us, at least as far back as I could remember. Shadows. No more, no less. We were the things that stalked the corners of every room, the sounds in the attic while you slept. We were the scraping of talons on floorboards that crept down the halls at night.

I grinned back at my twin. He'd been able to feel her through me, revelling in the tightness of her slick cunt as she writhed on my cock when I fucked her in the mortal way. She was the first human woman I'd ever touched as a lover, and I didn't regret a single second of it. There was a force that pulled me towards this mortal. It made me crave to be inside of her, not just in her mind, but under her flesh.

Cyn and I survived off of two things—blood and pain. Both would sate us equally, and it'd been a long while since we'd had a meal. She was ripe for the taking, her agony bleeding through her skin like acid. I couldn't help but sample it for myself, slurping it up greedily until it filled me. In my mind's eye, I could see snippets of her pain, flashes of faces, images, and moments in time, but they were all jumbled together and made no sense.

Not yet. Soon, I would know it all. I would figure out what made the sad one hurt so deeply. Soon, my twin and I would eat our fill of this woman. Soon, she would belong to us wholly and completely. Soon, Iris Cooper would finally know the true meaning of pain and terror.

Iris

Rain soaked me from head to toe as I ran. My bare feet squelched in the mud and moss, and my long night shirt was stuck to my skin.

I'd woken to a thunderstorm the likes of which I hadn't seen since I was a little girl. It was still hot and muggy outside, but the skies had opened up, pouring everything it

had on us. The thunder was what woke me, still sprawled out on the ground in front of the long dead fireplace.

Last night rushed back immediately, not in waves, but a tsunami. Every touch, lick, bite, scratch, and growl, I could feel, see, and hear it all, more clearly than any dream or nightmare I'd ever had. I shot up off the floor the second I woke up to find Kevin and Kyle sitting there, staring at me like they knew a secret but weren't judging me for it, only curious.

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So it hadn't been a dream. It hadn't been one of my fucked-up, twisted fantasies, which meant both of those shadow creatures were real. They called one another Cilas and Cyn, and they'd called themselves brothers, but what were they? Monsters? Demons?

I ran toward the gazebo, needing to distance myself from that damn house. One night, and it was already playing with me. Instead of taking the steps towards the gazebo, I veered left and ran down the side of the embankment, heading for the small wooden dock below. I stopped abruptly at the very end, teetering forward, and it was a miracle I didn't fall right in.

The swamp was a frenzy of raindrops, creating ripples along the murky surface. In the light of day, even as dark as it was under the cloud cover, I tried to imagine the giant black tentacles. I laughed, running my fingers through my soaking wet hair.

Laughter echoed right back at me, this time in my head, as usual. It was my own voice, only darker and more sinister—the part of me I'd kept buried since that night. It laughed at me, enjoying the way my hair tore at my scalp and the way my knees bruised as they hit the wooden dock.

Leaning forward, my fingers left my hair, gripping the edge of the dock as I peered down into the water. I could barely make out my own reflection with all the raindrops muddying it. I squinted, trying my hardest to see past the darkness, but there was nothing.

I should burn it all down...

The thought came again for the hundredth time since arriving. The cans of gasoline were sitting in my car, just waiting to be spread out over this wretched place, fuel for the fire that would burn it all to ashes, but in this rain, I couldn't be sure it would do the job. I had to be sure. If any part of this house lived, then so did...he.

I couldn't say his name, much less think it. I'd shoved the memory of him down so far, I could scarcely remember his face...the face I used to dream about at night, the one with the dimples and...

Fuck...

I dry heaved as a flash of his face entered my mind. It was impossible to see him the way he used to be, before he'd been soaked in the blood of everyone I loved.

When I was done heaving, my empty stomach providing nothing to purge, I just stared out at the water, thinking that maybe I should just go back to the house, drink myself into a stupor, and light one last joint before setting it all ablaze.

"Are you here to poison my waters some more, sad one?" a voice called out to me, causing me to leap so violently, I nearly fell into the water. The voice chuckled as I frantically searched for the source.

The water rippled, and out of the cover of moss and reeds, came the head and shoulders of a...man. Or something that looked like a man. I scrambled back a bit, yet didn't make a move to run away. His eyes pinned me in place as he moved closer. They were completely black with a small ring of green around the center, set in a face with skin that was dark and greenish, covered in patches of scales that glimmered in the light. He might otherwise have been called beautiful if he weren't so terrifying. His skin shimmered too, like the light reflecting off the bottom of a pool.

"What the fuck?" I whispered, eyes wide as I took in the size of him. "What the hell

are you?" I managed to choke out, too intrigued to run but too afraid to move.

The...man swam closer, his muscled arms pulling him through the water. Attached to the backs of them were sharp, shiny black fins that helped him slice through the water cleanly.

He was grinning, his black eyes pinned on me. Every feature was vicious and striking, slender and yet cutting. Long onyx hair flowed out on either side of him, plastered to the sides of his head with water, and two pointed, fin-like ears stuck out from between the strands.

"Don't tell me I frighten you," he said, his voice low, teasing, and charming. My heart thundered as he came closer to the dock. "After the sounds I heard coming from that house last night, perhaps I should be the one afraid of you." He cocked his head to the side, dark eyes twinkling with mischief.

Despite my better judgment, I leaned forward, crawling toward the edge of the dock, my curiosity getting the better of me. He was handsome, scarily so, in a way I'd never seen before. He reminded me of the sirens of old sailor tales, lurking in the depths of the sea for unsuspecting lonely victims to happen by them.

"You're a monster," I said, cocking my own head to the side as I studied him. Some kind of...swamp creature? A demon? A merman? I didn't know what the fuck he was, but I knew he wasn't human, and neither were those shadows last night.

His long, webbed fingers curled around the top of the dock, sharp black nails scraping the wood as he floated only inches away from me. "Am I now..." he mused, not a question but more of a taunt. "But how can I be the monster, when I'm the one who's lived in this swamp for centuries? Maybe you're the monster here, sad one."

He might have had a point, but centuries? There was just no fucking way. I was fully

convinced I was hallucinating all of this. The house had finally broken me after all these years, and I was going to waste away in the recesses of my own fucked-up mind with these creatures I'd conjured up.

"Why did you call me sad one?" I'd heard the shadows call me the same thing, and even though it did fit, it was a strange endearment, if that was what it was.

The swamp man grinned widely, showcasing a mouthful of incredibly sharp teeth, like white needles ready to shred flesh to the bone. "Are you not? I can taste it on you...sweet and salty, like tears, blood, and honey. It's quite delicious." He licked his lips, and I saw that his long tongue was forked like a snake. I blinked at him, wondering if I was in more danger than I thought. Did I really care?

No. No I didn't.

"Then what are you exactly?" I asked, peering over the side of the dock. The movement brought me closer to his face. I caught a whiff of moss, rain, and something bitter on his skin, and found that I actually liked the scent. "If you're not a siren or a demon, does that make you a mermaid?" I almost laughed, looking him up and down, picturing a shiny green tail flapping around beneath him.

His teeth gleamed at me, sending an excited thrill through my whole body. "Who says I'm not a siren?" Flattening his webbed palms on the dock, he used his considerable strength to raise himself upwards until I could see glittering onyx scales that crawled up his lean torso, gradually blending in with his greenish skin. Our faces were inches apart, his long dark hair brushing the tops of my bent knees. "If I sang you a lullaby, would you follow me into my depths?"

His voice grew soft and melodic again, not quite a whisper or a song, but more of a croon or a gentle coaxing. I didn't even have to think of my answer, because I already knew that I would follow that voice anywhere.

“How about we start with a name then, if you won’t give me a real answer? I’ve already met your friends Cilas and Cyn. They were way more welcoming than you.” I felt my lips rising on one side, and he met my grin with dancing eyes.

“Ah yes, my...friends. I had a feeling they’d get to you first.” His eyes bounced over my shoulder, narrowing briefly at the house in the distance. “You can call me Kaz, if it pleases you. Your human tongue won’t be able to pronounce my real name, so we won’t bother.”

"But you already know mine," I said. It was a statement, not a question.

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"I know a lot of things about you. Does that bother you?"

I shrugged. Did it bother me? I'd be a liar if I said this entire situation wasn't balls to the wall insane, but then again, was I surprised? Not really. This was pretty on par for my life.

I relaxed and sat back on my ass, hanging my arms over bent knees. "Actually, it's kind of a relief. I'm shit with the whole small talk thing, and then there's the whole...swamp creature, merman thing too." I waved a hand in his general direction. "After last night, nothing really surprises me."

He chuckled. "You're taking this very well for a human. Usually, your kind takes one look at me and alerts the authorities."

"Don't tell me you're the Loch Ness Monster too," I said with a teasing laugh.

He shook his head, his dark eyes sparkling with humor. "I'll let Nessie know that's your theory. She'll get a good laugh out of it."

I blinked at him, trying to figure out if he was being serious or not, but he gave nothing away.

I cleared my throat. The rain still drizzled down on me, soaking me until my hair stuck to my face and arms. My clothes would be itchy when I trudged back to the house, and I'd need to start another fire soon.

"So how many monsters live in my house?" I asked. If there were three, there had to

be more, right? "And why haven't I ever seen any of you before? You know, I was born in this place." I didn't know if he knew that, but if he'd been here for centuries, then I didn't put it past him.

He let go of the dock and floated, letting his muscular arms keep him in place. My eyes dipped, watching as a swirling black mass moved just under the water. At any moment, his tentacles could shoot out of the water and grab me. He could drag me under before I had the chance to even think about running away.

"You truly have no idea, do you? Don't tell me my friends kept you in the dark last night." I gave him a deadpan stare. Of course they'd kept me in the dark. They were the dark. He sighed. "I figured as much. Naughty, naughty shadows, those two."

"Is that what they are? Shadows?" There was no real way to describe them aside from that.

"I suppose." He shrugged, and it was such an odd, humanlike movement on him. I wondered if it was a ruse, something to get me complacent around him. "Humans have all sorts of names for the creatures they fear—shadows, demons, ghosts, nightmares... Take your pick."

I preferred shadows myself. There were stories about shadow people floating around the internet, shapes and movement in the corner of your eye, the feeling of something watching you in a dark room. I always chalked it up to paranoia, but now I wasn't so sure.

"To answer your question, " he said after a quiet minute. "No, we're not the only monsters here with you."

I perked up, my shoulders stiffening as my eyes flitted around the foggy swamp. I

didn't know what I was searching for. I'd been down here a million times, and I'd never seen anything suspicious. Well, until Kaz the swamptopus swam up and interrupted my dramatic brooding.

"I can see the wheels in your mind turning, but trust me, you won't see them unless they want to be seen."

I huffed, shaking my head as I stood up slowly, trying not to slip on the wet dock. It was time to get inside and make a fire and probably eat something, since I was going on two days on nothing but coffee and weed.

He watched me curiously, studying me, his dark eyes sparkling, the green ring in them glowing as the light from the water bounced off of them. They dragged up the length of my legs, lingering on my thighs before slowly perusing my chest, neck, and then my lips. He paused there.

"Does that mean you wanted me to see you?" I asked, a bit of flirtation seeping into my voice. What the fuck was I doing? He was sexy in a forbidden cryptid sort of way, but damn, this wasn't smart.

His eyes dipped along my neck and collarbone again as he licked his lips with that strange tongue. "I want you to do more than just see me, Iris. My...friendsmade that pretty clear last night, wouldn't you say?"

Iris

Islept in the guest bedroom on the first level of the house that night after staring at the spot on the floor where I'd given my body to two shadow demon creatures without an ounce of remorse. I couldn't bring myself to tempt fate again so soon, even though the thought of their touch made my toes curl.

What the fuck was I doing? I was fucking monsters now? What happened to that girl from ten years ago, who spent her days in the studio painting with her dad?

That girl died with him.

From the window, I could see clear out to the gazebo. The rain had tapered down to a drizzle, and the full moon was peeking out from behind the clouds, bouncing off of the fog that rolled over the mossy ground. It was an eerie sight, but not an unfamiliar one.

Aunt Sarah used to stay in this room when she visited, but it was clear from the layer of dust that I painstakingly swept from the floor that she hadn't been here in as many years as me. Maybe she felt the same way I did about this place. Maybe there were one too many ghosts that lingered here for her comfort.

After changing out the bedding, I settled under the sheets, Kevin and Kyle both lying on the floor in a patch of moonlight. I searched my music app for the brown noise I usually lulled myself to sleep with. It was the only way I could occupy my mind before the nightmares eventually descended.

When I was a little girl, I used to collect antique music boxes. Every single Christmas or birthday from the day I was born, my dad would buy me a brand-new one, and I would play its tune every night before bed until the next one came, watching as the little figures made of glass and metal danced in circles endlessly. He found them at estate sales and thrift shops, but they never had a broken song—that was the important part.

As I lay in bed with my phone's brown noise, I thought about the room upstairs with a shelf full of those music boxes, and how easy it would be for me to retrieve one. Only I didn't move to get up. I couldn't get myself to take those steps yet.

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I'd never have a birthday like that again. I'd never light up at the sight of a small wrapped box with my dad's scribbled scrawl across the card he'd written me. The tradition had ended just as violently as everything else in my life.

It was hard not to think about that night. For the first few years, I'd managed to block it out, but sometimes, it came creeping back in...the way it was right now. There were noises in this house that made my skin crawl, and the emptiness only amplified it. Every shutter that slammed or floorboard that creaked brought that night rushing back.

I could still remember what I was wearing—my long white prom dress that I was so proud of. It was a rainy night, kind of like this one. The squelch of...his steps down the hallway was something I'd never burn from my mind.

Say his name...

The voice in my head was loud tonight. It laughed as I turned over in bed and faced the wall, as if I could shut it out.

You fucking coward, just say it... You used to moan it, didn't you, you little slut? When you touched yourself at night, you wanted it to be him...

I shut my eyes tightly and tried to pretend I couldn't hear. I wouldn't say his name. I wouldn't give life back to the man who murdered my whole family—the man I made the mistake of loving when I knew it was wrong.

Say it, say it, say it!

Flipping back over, I pressed my hands over my ears and shook my head. "Get out of my head!" The voice only laughed, enjoying my torment and the fact that I could never escape it.

Leaping from the bed, I ran out of the room, laughter echoing in the back of my head. I couldn't take it anymore. Reaching the family room, I tore open my overnight bag, grabbing the small metal flask I kept buried in there. It was my dad's, one of the only items I requested from the police, aside from a couple of Magnolia's photos.

My back hit the wall as I slid down, unscrewing the cap and instantly chugging the bitter liquid. It burned all the way down, warming my stomach and instantly flooding me with buzzing calmness.

That's right, drink it all up, whore. It's all you're good for—fucking, drinking and running...

"Fuck you!" I screamed at the taunting voice, rocking back and forth with my eyes shut tight. "Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you!" My words were slurred now as I drank and drank. It was the only way to silence my own head.

The laughter tapered off, so I stood on wobbly legs, using the wall as a support before stumbling back towards the guest room. My shoulders hit the wall at every corner, and I stumbled into a table holding an old vase. It tumbled off, shattering around my feet. I stopped to guzzle down more bitter liquid, not caring about the vase that was worth more than my car. The burn was amazing, and I craved more and more.

I managed to empty my dad's flask. Letting it fall from my fingertips, I threw myself back on the bed. The world spun in circles, and I fought the nausea that crawled up my throat. I was too tired to care anymore, too tired to move or think or even sleep, so I just lay there.

It took five long hours to fall asleep, and every one of those hours was spent replaying my weird conversation with Kaz, wondering if he'd been real or just some odd figment of my imagination. Through my drunken haze, I pictured his full, wide lips that hid those sharp teeth. I thought about what those teeth might feel like nipping at my thigh.

It wasn't the first time in the last decade that I'd hallucinated, so there was always a chance that my craziness had finally peaked. Two years ago, I'd even checked myself into a psych ward after walking into traffic one day, convinced I'd seen Magnolia across the street.

It obviously hadn't been her, but my brain saw her there, staring at me with half of her beautiful face completely missing, sliced right down the center, just like the last time I'd seen her.

I woke up slowly, blinking my eyes against the moonlight that had shifted to shine directly on my face. I couldn't move a single muscle. I couldn't even remember falling asleep, it had been so sudden. I tried to twitch my fingers, but nothing—no movement, no feeling.

I immediately thought of Cyn and Cilas and wondered if this was some kind of game they liked to play. I didn't sense them in the room with me, though, and as I thought of it, I didn't sense Kyle and Kevin either. I knew without a single doubt that I was completely alone but unable to move. I was paralyzed...again.

The only part of my body I had any control over were my eyes, and I flitted them around the room, searching for anything to grasp onto, anything to focus on. I'd had sleep paralysis before, and usually, I just had to calm myself down and focus as hard as I could on one object in the room. Eventually, my toes would tingle, and it would travel up and up until my fingers moved and I was free.

It wasn't working. I strained as hard as I could, trying to move just one single finger or toe...but nothing.

Then the door creaked.

I frowned at the closed door, having sworn I'd left it open for the cats to come and go. I never slept with the door closed, always needing some kind of escape route. I tried to open my mouth to call out to Kevin and Kyle, but my lips wouldn't budge, and even as I tried to scream inside my throat, there was no sound.

I had to be dreaming, right?

I watched with wide eyes as the handle of the bedroom door turned. My heart thumped so hard that I could feel it pulsing all the way in my ears. Outside the window, the rain had stopped completely, leaving everything silent and still. It had to be somewhere around three in the morning, but I couldn't be sure.

The bedroom door creaked open slowly, the rusty hinges squeaking and cracking. I tried to scream again the wider it opened, if only to get my mouth to start working. If I could only get one part of my body to obey, then I could break free from this...

To my own surprise, I tried to scream for Cilas and Cyn. If they were here, surely they could hear me. If they were actually real, that was. Which, I still wasn't completely sure they were. Even if they were real, what made me think they would help me? They'd gotten what they wanted out of me already.

The door yawned open, letting more darkness in, along with a cold gust of stale air from the hallway. My eyes were locked on that darkness, trying to see through it to whatever lurked there.

Movement had my body jerking, as if the need to run was greater than the force

holding me in place, and yet I still couldn't leave this bed. All I could do was stare at the doorway as a pale white, too long hand tipped in long clawed nails curled around the top of the doorframe. My breathing was ragged, my chest heaving painfully fast as another hand, then another and another, curled around the frame too.

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The click of its nails and the scrape against the wood was jarring in the silence, accompanied only by the sound of my frantic heart. Then a face was peeking in, hanging upside down off of the frame. It had no eyes, its skin was as pale as a corpse's, and its bald head was elongated, with a gaping, smiling mouth of blackened teeth that were too large to fit in its face.

I tried again to scream. I tried to thrash, but all I managed to do was blink my eyes rapidly, tears beginning to stream down the sides of my face. The creature moved slowly, entering the room upside down, one spindly arm that was bent the wrong way after the next. Claws sunk into the plaster as it scaled the wall, heading for the tall ceiling. All I could do was follow it with my eyes.

It looked like a pale humanoid spider, with eight legs and a humanlike body that was skinny and hairless, its rib cage violently poking through the skin in places. Its head seemed to turn every which way, completely defying logic, bending all the way backwards as if it needed to keep its eyes on me at all times, which was odd, since it didn't have any eyes.

I was sure it could see me just fine, because as it clawed its way towards me, its gaping mouth spread impossibly wide, rows of needle-like teeth glaring at me in the moonlight. It clicked its jaws together rapidly as it made its way up and over me to the wall behind the bed.

The sound the creature made was a sort of clicking, setting my teeth on edge. In seconds, it was hanging over my prone body, its head parallel with my own as it somehow managed to anchor itself to the wall, holding itself aloft.

I tried to scream for the upteenth time as its wide mouth full of teeth clicked only inches from my face. Instead of hot, foul breath, it was icy cold and smelled of dust and moss.

I screamed and screamed, but nothing came out of my mouth. The thing appeared to smile widely too, as if it knew I was trying to scream but couldn't.

One of its long arms arched over me, its claw the first thing to touch my skin as the very tip of it dragged down the side of my face. I wanted to vomit. I could see black spindly veins beneath the surface of its milky, sickly skin that was torn near the ribs, exposing bare bone. This creature wasn't like Cilas and Cyn. There was a distinct lack of...thought in the way it watched me. Something about the way it moved seemed more animal than anything.

The clawed finger poked at my face, tracing a line down the silvery scar I already had, the one given to me on the last night I spent in this house with my family. Coldness filled my whole body as the creature cocked its head. A long, slimy black tongue crept past its teeth, descending towards my face, and licked over that silvery scar that slashed diagonally across my face, leaving a wet trail behind it. Tears fell harder now, pooling in my hair and my pillow.

Then its mouth opened wider, then wider and wider still, until its jaw stretched and unhinged, revealing rows of needle sharp teeth that descended down its entire throat. I stared into that chasm, screaming inside of my head but unable to make a single sound, until the moment its mouth grew so wide that it covered my entire face.

A tearing feeling in my throat gave way to a scream. It burst from me so violently that the creature recoiled for a moment, as if it wasn't expecting me to break through its hold on me. My scream filled the halls and rooms of the old house, bouncing off of the high ceilings, traveling through the glass paned windows. I screamed until my throat was bloody, still unable to move my body. The monster reared back and shook

its head at the high-pitched sound.

Then glass shattered, raining down onto the floor in tiny little glittering shards, as something massive and black as the night sky burst through. The pale creature shrieked, the sound guttural and broken as a shiny black tentacle wrapped around its body. Another tentacle joined the first, and then another, until the creature was held in place, suspended in the air above the bed.

My body was released from paralysis immediately, and I was able to scramble up the bed, my back slamming into the wooden headboard. Suddenly, Kaz was there, tearing the creature in half by pulling his long tentacles in opposite directions. Blood and gore rained down onto the floor, smelling rancid and bitter. Saliva filled my mouth, and I had to look away.

The creature shrieked and fought against Kaz, but ultimately, it fell silent, its guttural burble tapering into silence.

I turned back around in time to watch it drop to the floor in a fleshy heap as Kaz released it, his dark tentacles uncoiling. I met the swamp creature's dark eyes and found him grinning back at me.

Iris

“You always have to have the last word, don't you, Kazimir?” came a voice from the shadows.

Cyn appeared in the corner of the room in the form of glowing white eyes that slowly turned corporeal, just a writhing mass of smoke in the shape of a man.

My eyes bounced between the two creatures, and then to the nasty, fleshy heap on the floor. Its tongue lolled out of its mouth, black saliva pooling around it. Kaz nudged

the thing with his tentacle...which I was just now seeing for the first time in all its glory.

I drank in the sight of the eerie cryptid. He had the torso of a man, his smokey greenish blue skin spotted with shining scales and black fins that ran down the length of his spine and under his forearms. His ears were webbed fins, and there were gills slashing through the sides of his neck.

My eyes traveled lower to the bottom half of his body. A surprised chuckle fell from my lips that had both of them looking at me strangely. I couldn't help it though, because my brain immediately thought of Ursula, the sea witch. Kazimir's body was that of a giant octopus or a squid.

He was onyx black with a dark green sheen, and he had scales that shimmered in the moonlight. There were eight massive tentacles that he stood on, as if they were legs, making him at least eight feet tall and much too large for this guest room. His black hair was more damp than wet, hanging down to his waist like a silky curtain.

"You killed my dog again," came another familiar voice, tearing my attention from the swamptopus. Beside Cyn now stood Cilas, his long shadowy hair undulating like smoke around his broad shoulders. He stared down at the monster on the floor.

I choked, and all of the...men looked at me. "That thing isn't a fucking dog."

Kaz's lips tilted upwards as the two shadow creatures parted, each slowly moving through the room until each of them was on a different side of the bed. I was surrounded by monsters now, and yet the only one I feared was the one broken in half at Kaz's feet...I mean tentacles.

"You're lucky he's still down, or you'd hurt his feelings. He has a temper when he feels disrespected," Cilas said, running a shadowy finger down the side of my face. I

sucked in a sharp breath at the touch, recalling many other things those hands were capable of. Then his words dawned on me.

“What do you mean still down?” I peered up and over the edge of the bed as they watched me. The creature wasn’t moving, and its black sludgy blood was congealing beneath it. “Looks pretty fucking dead to me...”

Cyn sighed. “He’ll be back. Kaz only likes to piss him off, but it doesn't last long.”

I grimaced at the thought of that thing coming back to life. I was sure it had been seconds away from biting my face clean off.

“Maybe keep him on a tighter leash next time,” Kaz drawled. The strange lilt to his words drew out every syllable, like a snake speaking around a forked tongue. He looked at me again. “They call it Chaos, and that’s exactly what the big bastard is.” He cut his eyes at Cilas. “If I hadn’t heard her screams, she would have been depleted by now.”

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“Depleted?” My back pressed into the headboard harder. “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Cilas gave me a wry look, and I realized that I could almost make out distinct features, even though technically, he was still made of undulating shadows. His face was angular and severe but not unattractive, with bright, glowing white eyes that stared back at me hungrily.

“What he means is had he not intervened, Chaos might have drained you.” He moved in closer, placing one claw tipped finger beneath my chin and raising my face up slightly. “Your pain is our sustenance, and he nearly took it all for himself like a rabid animal. I’ll have to punish him for that. Or maybe I’ll punish you instead for giving it over so willingly.”

I blinked at the shadow man, processing his words. Your pain is our sustenance... So they fed off of, what, my emotions? My fear? My anger? I was food to them. Their words from last night came back to me... spread out like a feast. In more ways than one, apparently.

“And you?” I asked, looking at Kaz. He wasn’t a shadow creature, but more of a...swamp monster. Did he feed off of me too? Was I food for his hunger?

He nodded, his forked tongue gliding over his lips. My body flushed with heat as he came closer, hearing the squish and slide of his tentacles in place of footsteps. There was only a sheet draped over my legs, and the edge of it lifted as what was unmistakably one of his...appendages slithered beneath it. I held my breath when the slippery, rubbery tentacle touched my ankle. It was warmer than I thought it would

be, and softer.

“You’re afraid of me,” he said softly, the tentacle gently caressing my calf, then wrapping around it like a boa constrictor. “I can taste it on my tongue, like the sweetest wine.” It reached my thigh now, completely wound around my leg. Each suction cup latched onto my skin, like little licking tongues, feeling and tasting. “Good. You should fear me, because I’m just as hungry as the shadows.”

I looked at each of them as they moved in closer and closer, caging me in on every side. “So if I’m your food, then why did you fuck me?” My words were for Cilas, since technically, he’d been the only one to take things that far. “Do you play with your food often?”

“We have other hungers too, sad one,” said Cilas. At his words, Kaz’s tentacle reached my core, brushing over the thin layer of my panties. Chills covered my skin, even though the room grew warmer by the second. “Your pleasure walks hand in hand with your pain, which makes you a delicacy to savor for as long as possible. I fucked you because I crave your flesh just as much as your misery, and I plan on sampling it again.”

My face heated, and as Kaz’s tentacle pushed against my soaking panties, I had to resist the urge to rub against it.

His words rang true, but how did he know that? Pain did bring me pleasure. I’d learned to relish the feeling of pain and anguish over the years. So many of my emotions had withered and died that I latched onto the only ones that remained.

Every time I cut myself or snorted enough drugs to make my brain melt or drank myself into a stupor, it was only because I could feel it, while everything else was a dull, empty nothingness.

“Are you going to kill me?” I asked finally, voicing the question that had been stuck in the back of my throat since last night. I wasn’t sure if I even cared about the answer, but I was morbidly curious. It wasn’t like I planned on walking out of this house alive, even if it had to be by my own hand.

“Yes,” Cyn said with finality. He sat down on the bed, running his fingers through the loose strands of my hair and pushing them back over my bare shoulder. I held my breath as his face inched towards mine, his sharp teeth close enough to rip out my throat. “I’m going to kill you, sad one, that I can promise, but not today. Not until I drink up every last drop of agony inside of you first.”

The room fell silent as I stared into the paleness of Cyn’s eyes. He continued to stroke his fingers along my hair as if he were petting me. He’d said it with such conviction that I knew he was telling the truth. I could sense the evil inside of him, from each of them, actually. Maybe it wasn’t evil exactly, but something dark and sinister. I wasn’t dealing with human men with a human conscience. I was dealing with monsters.

Instead of running for my life or bursting into tears like any regular person would have, I heaved a long, tired sigh and nodded. “Well if that’s the case, I guess I’d better fuck shit up while I still can.”

There was a pause of confusion as the three monsters glanced at one another, then back at me. I slid out from under the sheet, letting Kaz’s tentacle fall back to the floor. I immediately missed the warmth of his tingling touch. I caught his eyes as I made my way towards the door, Cyn stepping aside for me to pass. Kaz’s eyes dipped, scanning my bare legs and exposed midriff. I wore an old ratty band crop top and panties that said *suck it across the ass*.

They followed as I hurried out of the guest room and stepped over the splattered gore on the ground, still cringing at the thought of Chaos waking up. I didn’t care what the

shadow brothers said, that fucker was not a dog, and I could happily rip it in half myself if it came at me again. The first scare was a freebie, but he wouldn't catch me with my pants around my ankles again.

I felt them behind me as I practically skipped down the hall, swiping my keys off of the entry table and heading out the front door. I went straight to my car and popped the trunk, knowing the three of them were waiting for me just inside the entryway. I could feel their curiosity and amusement and grinned again. If they were planning on killing me, then it only made my job here easier. I could still get my own revenge and have some fun doing it.

Shutting the trunk, I headed back to the house, hauling a heavy, rusted old sledgehammer with me. The head of it dragged in the mud behind me, its metallic ringing sound filling the early hours of the morning. I walked right past the three cryptids, not even glancing at them as I made it to the living room, set my phone down on the table, and pressed play.

“Tiptoe Through the Tulips” began to play, echoing off of the empty walls, flooding the house with noise. I smiled even wider as I faced Kazimir, Cyn, and Cilas, who remained in the entryway.

Kaz's massive tentacles were spread out over the hardwood, and he seemed to be perpetually dripping water, because he left a massive puddle everywhere he went. Idly, I wondered how long he could remain out of the water before having to return back to the swamp.

“Now, what are you going to do with that, sad one?” Cyn asked innocently, as if he hadn't already figured it out. He was crossing his arms over his shadowy chest, leaning against the wall.

I preened under his gaze, heaving the sledgehammer up into a batter position. “Like I

said, I'm here to fuck shit up."

I didn't wait for them to respond before I took my first swing. The sledgehammer hit the wall with a thundering force, shaking the entire room as dust rained down on me from overhead. I laughed at the hole it made in the aging plaster, expertly wallpapered at least a hundred years before I was born. I had to brace one foot on the wall to get the leverage to pull the hammer back out of the hole, and as I did it, more plaster ripped off and crumbled to the floor.

"Fuck, that felt good..." I shook out my hair, dust creating a cloud around me.

I wasn't done. Wall by wall, I beat the hell out of the living room. I slammed the hammer into picture frames, sconces, tapestries, and shelves full of trinkets. I even smashed the glass tea table over in the far corner, as well as the TV on the wall.

Everything was in shambles, crumbling, splintering, and completely unsalvageable, but it felt fucking amazing. Even through the haze of dust, I felt like for the first time since coming back, I could breathe again.

My arms were hurting as I moved through the house, my music shuffling as I went, from Tiny Tim to Johnny Cash, all the way to Taylor Swift by the time I made it to the dining room.

"So much rage," Kaz murmured, presumably to the shadow twins. I didn't bother acknowledging him. "How did she taste?"

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I could feel their eyes on me as I dragged the hammer, and it made me feel daring.

"Like ecstasy," Cyn answered a moment later. "I've never had anything like her." They spoke of me like I was some rare delicacy. It should have scared me, but it only sent a fire raging through me.

I hadn't been in the dining room yet since my arrival, but everything was exactly the way I remembered it, from the long wooden table we used to have Thanksgiving meals at, to the drink cart in the corner that my dad bought at an old estate sale and just had to put on display.

I moved to climb up onto the table, but before I knew what was happening, I felt a weight wrap around my waist, then I was being lifted off of my feet. I yelped in shock until I realized it was a tentacle wrapped around me.

Looking over my shoulder, I saw Kaz in the doorway with a smirk on his otherworldly face. His eyes were sparkling with mischief, and I smiled back as he set my feet down on the tabletop.

One by one, I smashed the chairs to pieces. Maybe I'd even use them as firewood tonight, if I was feeling adventurous. The chandelier came down easily too, glass shattering all over the table, the crystals and wrought iron rolling onto the floor. Some of the glass shards pricked at my bare feet, but I didn't care too much.

I stopped for a second with the head of the hammer resting on the tabletop as I caught my breath, my chest heaving up and down. I coughed several times as I cleared my lungs of plaster and what was probably seventy years of lead paint and asbestos.

“Looks like the sad one has gone and tired herself out,” said Cilas from across the table.

I was beginning to tell their low, eerie voices apart now. His long hair brushed his shoulders like undulating smoke, and his lips, from what I could barely see, were tilted up.

“Maybe we should relieve her of some of that rage. What do you say, brother?” Cyn replied.

I felt a cold rush of air wash over my back and knew Cilas was behind me. “I think you’re right,” he whispered into my ear as he scooped my hair over my shoulder and placed a kiss along my neck. My eyes fell closed as I tipped my head back. His lips even felt smokey, like they were constantly in motion, yet they were soft too. “What do you say, Iris? Can we eat that rage inside of you?” He nipped at the shell of my ear, and I shivered from head to toe.

Opening my eyes, I met Cilas’ gaze and chuckled wickedly. “Only if you promise to finish your meal.”

I didn’t know what the fuck I was getting myself into exactly, but it was like I couldn’t physically stop the words from coming out of my mouth.

Cilas hissed hungrily, showcasing rows of needle sharp teeth. “I can assure you, I have an appetite.” His words were low, smooth, and melodic—the same tone Kaz had used with me yesterday. Maybe it was some sort of hunting tactic, but whatever it was, it was obviously working. That voice alone could get me to do many bad things I shouldn’t want to do.

I tilted my head to the side, giving him room. “Why do I want this so badly?” Cilas’ hands traveled down my arms to circle my wrists. “I should be running from you, but

all I can think about is having you inside of me again. That's not natural..."

It was a question I felt needed to be asked. They'd already come out and said they were planning on killing me, maybe not tonight, but eventually.

So why did my entire body tingle at the thought of being touched by these monsters? Why did I salivate at the image in my head, picturing them ravishing me on every surface in this cursed house?

There was a wet squelching sound as Kaz's massive dark form came into view. He moved across the floor with ease, using his strong and powerful tentacles as legs, each moving independently. His skin shone in the light of the slowly rising sun through the window, and his long black hair dripped, even though there was no water around.

"Because your rage can sense when a predator is near, and it wants to be consumed," Kaz said. He thrust the remains of a half broken chair out of his way, smashing it against the wall as he came closer. Cilas' hands locked around my wrist, holding me in place. Kaz was tall enough that as I stood on the tabletop, our eyes were now level. "Do you want to be consumed, Iris?"

I was immobile as one massive tentacle shot out, wrapping itself around my torso again, coiling there like a snake. I had seconds to answer his question, but it was already on the tip of my tongue. I was sure he could see it in my eyes.

What they didn't realize yet was that none of them frightened me. Thrilled me? Yes, absolutely. But frightened? No. I'd looked directly into the face of death and gave it the middle finger. There wasn't much left that could scare me.

Except for Chaos. That motherfucker was gross.

“Take it,” I said. A dare. A gift. “There’s more than enough to go around, boys.” I winked at them, heat curling inside me and spreading through my limbs, as another tentacle locked around my ankle.

This was fucking risky, but then again, weren't the drugs risky too? Wasn't slashing my wrists in the shower risky? Or how about fucking random men every night in seedy clubs and bars? My life was one big fucked-up risk. At least this time, I could say I was surrounded by darkness instead of filled with it. Or maybe I would be filled with it...

Kaz moved before I could realize what was happening. Both of my legs were swept out from beneath me, making my back hit the table hard. Luckily, my head was cushioned from the fall as another tentacle wrapped gently around my neck, barely squeezing it. I couldn't move my limbs, so he moved them for me, spreading out each arm and leg until I was splayed out on the table.

A feast, just like they wanted me to be.

My shirt was riding up, exposing my bare back to the shards of broken glass on the table, and I could feel them cutting into my skin. The sting felt amazing, as did the tightening of Kaz's hold on my wrists and ankles. My hips were already moving as an ache filled me. Suddenly, I was too empty. I needed something to stretch me until I couldn't take it anymore.

Sensing my sudden urgency, shadows moved in on either side of me, Cyn on the right and Cilas on the left. The fact that I could tell the two of them apart now made me a little bit smug inside. By now, I'd come to realize that none of this was happening in my head. These monsters were real, maybe more real than the voices in my head ever were. For once in a long, long while, the voices were silent, and the reprieve was delicious.

“You look like you’re ready to be devoured, sad one,” said Cyn. He ran a claw tipped finger down the middle of my body, starting from the base of my throat and trailing his way down to my navel, until he reached the waistband of my panties. “You're wet already, aren't you? What a good girl. You obey so well for a mortal.”

“This one’s different,” said Cilas. Lazily, I rolled my eyes up to meet his, grinning like a kid on Christmas morning. He clicked his tongue. “So ready to see what comes next, and yet you’ve barely even lived.”

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My heart lurched and nervous tingles spread through me. Or maybe I was just losing circulation due to the tentacles that were squeezing me, pinning me to the table.

Were they going to kill me tonight? I hoped so. It would be so easy—just a snap of the neck or the slash of my throat. Would it be fast and painless, or slow and agonizing?

“Not yet,” Kaz said with a laugh. I peered up at him upside down to find him raising a dark brow at me. “We haven't had enough time to savor you yet. A delicacy like you shouldn't be gorged on, but rather sipped reverently.” His hands ran through my hair, and I closed my eyes, reveling in every touch, losing count of the points of contact. “You have more grief and rage bottled up inside you than any mortal I've come across, Iris. Tell us what did this to you.”

At his words, I went utterly still.

What did this to you?

Whatdid this?

What, notwho

Silence fell heavy around us as I tried to tame my heavy breathing. I still couldn't bring myself to say the man's name, not in this fucking house. His name deserved to be buried and forgotten.

"A monster," I said after a moment. "One of flesh, blood, and bone, like me, with

pretty eyes and an infectious smile. He was the worst kind of monster, one who knew exactly how to trap someone like me. He took everything I loved and made me watch."

"So it's revenge you want," said Cyn. His palm ran up my inner thigh slowly. "Whoever this monster is, you wish to return the favor? We can help you there, sad one. Just say the word."

Kaz's tentacle reached my core, grazing lightly over my swollen clit that pulsed under the thin material of my panties. I rolled my hips as pain lanced my chest at the memories.

"Not revenge," I said, shaking my head. Closing my eyes, I moaned as the tentacle slipped under the fabric, running its smooth surface along my heat. "It's too late for that now. All I want is for the memories to disappear. I just want it all to be over."

Back and forth, Kaz rubbed my clit, working me in small circles until my breath sped up and a sheen of sweat built on my brow. "Tell me why you rage inside, Iris," he cooed gently. "Tell me so I can make it all disappear."

Iris

Knock, knock, knock.

We all froze. Kaz had my panties halfway down my thighs, and Cy's tongue was busy working my nipples while I squirmed in anticipation. For a second, I thought maybe I'd imagined it, but another set of knocks echoed through the house. I groaned as Kaz loosened his grip on me. Cyn and Cilas were backing away, the shadows behind them seemingly reaching towards them.

"I've seen this one here before," Kaz said with an edge of irritation in his voice. He

was glaring towards the front of the house, where the person knocked again, clearly impatient.

Sliding off the table, I fixed my underwear back in place and ran my fingers through my hair. “Who is it?” I asked him. I didn’t know anyone out here anymore, and I couldn’t imagine the neighbors working up enough courage to pay me a visit.

“Someone I’d very much like to drain,” Cilas hissed. He was halfway in the shadows now, his white eyes glowing and his teeth glimmering as he licked his lips.

“You’d better attend to your guest before he does,” Kaz suggested.

I sighed as I shook out my limbs, trying to get the feeling back into them after being effectively strapped down to the table. “What’s the point of having a big ass scary gate, if people are just going to waltz through it...”

Grumbling something about lady blue balls as deep monster chuckles followed me, I stalked back through the house, skirting around the mess I’d made. Plaster, dust, and shards of wood and glass were scattered all over the floor, and the holes in the wall were still crumbling off in pieces. Good. I hoped the whole thing rotted.

Throwing open the front door, I glared at the unfamiliar face on the other side, taking one guess at who this was. I wanted to be surprised to see her here, but I wasn’t. She’d probably been expecting me to show up in town by now. “You rang?” I deadpanned.

The blonde woman in her late thirties looked taken aback by my ruffled and undressed state. A man stood beside her, young, handsome, and smirking, as he ran his eyes over me slowly, pausing for way too long on my boobs. I didn’t like the way he was sizing me up, and somewhere from the deep recesses of the darkened house came a low, menacing growl. A thrill ran through me, knowing that my monsters

were watching me even now.

My monsters...I liked the sound of that.

“Iris Cooper?” the woman asked, glancing down at her phone. I followed her gaze and saw a picture of my eighteen-year-old self on her phone, smiling brightly at the camera. I cringed. It’d been a long time since I’d felt that happy and content.

“Depends who’s asking.” I shrugged. “If you’re from the IRS, the police department, or Rent-A-Center, there’s no Iris Cooper here.” The man with her snorted, but the woman cut him a glare, shutting him down fast.

“Ashley Morris,” she said, sticking her hand out for me to shake. I stared at her hand, blinking at it as if I didn’t know what she expected me to do with it. Ashley dropped her hand, her cheeks heating. “We spoke on the phone a few days ago...about the deed to the estate?”

I snapped my fingers, pretending to recall. “Oh yeah, you’re the lawyer chick.” I narrowed my eyes on the man next. “And who’s this, your boyfriend?” Her cheeks heated again, this time a bright red that crept all the way down her neck.

The man puffed up his chest, looking like a doofus in his ill fitting suit. “Chris Caldwell. I’m new to the firm, so I’ve been shadowing Miss Morris.” He didn’t bother trying to shake my hand. Instead, he let out a low, appreciative whistle. “Nice house you got here. You must be old money then.”

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Ashley Morris elbowed her partner in his ribs. “You promised to let me handle this...”

I cleared my throat, trying not to smirk at the way her voice shook, and leaned against the doorframe, still completely aware that I was in nothing but a half shirt, panties, and no bra on. “So like...do you wanna come in or something?”

Ashley faced me again, pasting the fakest smile on her face she could muster. I nearly rolled my eyes but refrained. I was trying to be cordial here, but there was only so much I could fake.

You don’t belong with them anymore...

The voice in my head was back, and it was laughing at me. I ignored it as I stepped aside, holding the front door open for the lawyers. I didn’t want them in my house, and a part of me regretted even opening the door. It was my own fault though. The first thing I should have done after getting back into town was stop by the damn office to sign those papers. I didn’t actually care about straightening out any of the details. It didn’t matter what happened to the house, because pretty soon, it would be gone, just like me.

Before I closed the door, I paused as movement in the distance caught my eye. I could have sworn I saw something move through the trees that backed up to the edge of the property. I narrowed my eyes on a tree towards the front, where a shadow seemed to flicker with the sunlight starting to peek out behind it.

It moved again, and I stepped forward, eyes locked on something large, dark,

and...shaped like a bipedal creature. Was this some kind of monster? Something else drawn towards this house, wanting to gobble me up?

Whatever it was stepped sideways, revealing the full shape of it. My heart shot to my throat as I realized how tall it was. Even from here, I could tell it was at least eight or nine feet tall, made even larger by what looked like massive antlers crowning its head. All I could see was the silhouette of it, but the sight alone had my mind and heart racing.

In the South, we had names for creatures like this—names people didn't like to speak out loud, just in case they accidentally invited such things in. I blinked at the creature, wondering if I was seeing it right, or maybe the shadows were just messing with me after my abrupt wakeup call.

It moved again, its long leg taking a single step closer. My hand tightened on the edge of the door to keep myself from reacting too fast. From the stories I'd heard as a kid, mainly around campfires and on the playground, if you were stupid enough to acknowledge these creatures in any way, you were fucked. They would come for you eventually, so the best course of action was to ignore it entirely and pretend it didn't exist.

So that was exactly what I did.

"I, um, like what you've done with the place," Chris said as I took them through the living room, pretending like I wasn't completely shaken. Both of them stopped in their tracks, mouths agape as they looked around in horror at the damage I'd done.

"Just a bit of light remodeling." I waved them off casually as I stepped over a giant sheet of broken plaster that was very clearly demolished with a hammer. "Follow me, we'll be more comfortable in the dining room." I snorted under my breath.

They did, but slowly. Ashley clutched her little leather bound binder to her chest, as if the house itself was about to reach out and get her. I supposed that wasn't exactly impossible, given what I knew about this place now. I tried not to laugh as I led them into the dining room, especially when I heard the sharp intake of breath from Ashley as she stopped at the threshold. Broken chairs lay scattered all over the floor, the chandelier had been tossed in the corner, and glass covered pretty much every surface of the room.

I glanced at the spot on the table where Kaz had previously held me down, noting the little imprint of my bare ass that couldn't be missed.

"I'm afraid I've run out of chairs," I said, swiping a pile of glass shards off of the table. The sound of it raining to the floor was loud in the pregnant silence. "But I'm sure this won't take too long, right, Ash?" Tilting my head, I blinked innocent eyes at her, almost daring her to say something else. Please, please point out the butt print...

The wind chose that exact moment to gust by, and the shutters of the dining room window slammed against it, causing the woman to yelp as she leapt a whole foot to the side. Her eyes were wide, and her face was pale. She cleared her throat nervously. "Right, uh, let's just..." Fumbling with her binder, she set it down on the table and frantically leafed through it, pulling out several pieces of paper. Chris poked around in his inner jacket pocket, procuring a fancy pen, and handed it to Ashley. "We just need your signature on these three documents, then the estate will officially be yours. It's a good thing you were able to come so quickly, as the state was ready to auction it off within the month."

I kept my face neutral, but inside, my gut twisted. As much as I hated this place, the thought of the state coming in and gutting my family's things and selling it to greedy rich assholes didn't sit well with me. I knew the Cooper estate was a local spectacle these days, due to the tale of the infamous family who was brutally murdered by the son of their beloved groundskeeper. The bare bones of the story was enough to spark

all kinds of rumors, especially when the only survivor was refusing to provide details.

I stood on the opposite end of the table, waiting for Ashley to pass me the papers. She awkwardly shuffled them before sliding them across the dusty surface, looking incredibly uncomfortable as she stretched her arm across to place the pen on top. I just smiled blandly at her. Maybe I was being a huge bitch right now, playing with the woman's emotions like this, but I couldn't bring myself to stop. Every second she was in my house, I could feel her judgment and her pity. It was the pity that pissed me off the most.

Meanwhile, Chris couldn't seem to keep his eyes off of my boobs. It was a bit chilly in the room, so I knew my nipples were probably poking through the thin fabric, but the heat in his glassy eyes was unnecessary and had my teeth grinding in irritation. Again, I heard a growl, too low and quiet for the lawyers to hear, but it made my lips twitch upwards. I refrained from searching the room for a pair of glowing eyes in the shadows, knowing they were probably fixated on Chris.

Why did the thought of their jealousy make my thighs clench together? They planned on killing me in what was probably going to be an incredibly painful and brutal manner, so why the possessiveness? In any case, it was amusing and satisfying.

I read over the forms, once, twice, and then a third time, stretching this out for way longer than was necessary. Okay, so maybe I was being a tad sadistic, knowing how uncomfortable sweet Ashley was growing by the second. The wind continued to batter the house, making the shutters repeatedly slam loudly against the windows. The room was dark, lit only by the faint light of the cloud covered sun, causing the trees that surrounded the house to cast shadows along the walls.

Then I felt it...something warm crawling up my leg. I tried to keep my face neutral as I leaned to the side. The table was high enough that it hit me right above my belly button, so the lawyers thankfully wouldn't be able to see the two shadow men that

had suddenly appeared at my feet. My whole body flushed as I tried my best to concentrate on reading the contracts. Shadowy hands skimmed upwards, caressing my inner thighs.

Claws hooked in the crotch of my panties and pulled the fabric to the side. I held my breath, my thighs clenching with need. I tried to act natural as I adjusted my stance, spreading my legs wider as a pair of hands pushed them apart. A moan was caught in my throat when I felt a tongue flick over my core.

Fuck...

It felt so fucking good, my knees wanted to buckle. I fought the urge to grind my pussy into his face as he licked me over and over again. I didn't know which of the shadow men it was, but one of them held me still while the other ate his fill.

I glanced up at the lawyers and realized Ashley wasn't even looking at me. She was mindlessly scrolling on her phone, probably pretending to keep herself busy, but Chris was watching me closely, his eyes bouncing between my eyes and my lips.

"You new here, Chris?" I asked as I grabbed the pen, clicking the end of it loudly.

His blue eyes were heated, and I could have sworn his nostrils flared slightly. Could he smell the sex in the room? I was dripping wet all over the shadowy face of a monster under the table, and little by little, the temperature in the room rose. Or maybe I was the only one feeling it.

"Just got into town last month," he said, rolling back his shoulders and standing straighter, probably trying to make himself look larger than he was. Compared to my monsters, he was nothing but a puny little boy pretending to be a man.

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“So you don’t know the rumors then. You know, the ones about this house?”

It wasn’t often I allowed myself to be so candid about what happened, but I was feeling unusually bold at the moment. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that a long forked tongue was currently dipping into my pussy, stretching me wider as another tongue lapped at my sensitive clit. I wanted to moan at the sensation of both Cyn and Cilas working together, their tongues caressing, saliva dripping, and my wetness coating their sharp teeth.

Ashley looked up from her phone, frowning at me, but Chris just kept staring at me, probably thinking we were having a moment. My face was probably flushed, but it wasn’t because of Chris and his tacky suit. It was because there was a shadow monster under the table eating my pussy like it was the last meal he’d ever have.

I leaned forward, trying to keep my knees from buckling, biting the inside of my cheek so hard, I could taste blood. Every time one of their tongues dipped into my heat, the other would press on my clit. They worked in tandem perfectly, and all I could think about was ordering these two idiots to leave so that I could demand they finish me off.

“Are you feeling all right, Iris? You look pale,” Chris said.

Pulling my eyes away from the paper I’d read over at least five times now, I gave him a bland smile. “Never been better actually.” The moment the words were out, lips closed around my clit and sucked, while a long tongue reached so far up into me that I was sure they could taste my cervix. A small moan slipped past my lips, but I covered it with a cough.

I was done pretending to read, so I signed each form. The logistics wouldn't matter in the long run, but at least the house would legally belong to me. Maybe then, I'd finally be left alone to rot with the memory of my family. That was all I wanted—to be left here to just exist in the last place on earth where I ever felt any happiness.

“That should do it,” I said, pushing the forms back to Ashley. As she looked them over, I curled my fingers around the edge of the table, feeling pressure building inside of me, ready to be released. I needed to come hard, but I wasn't sure I could keep silent.

My chest heaved as I held Chris' penetrating stare. I could see blatant lust there, and it made my mouth dry up. This man had no idea who and what he was dealing with. I'd fucked all kinds of men, women, and everything in-between, but no one had ever come close to making me feel the way these monsters did in just three short days.

“Everything looks good,” Ashley said with a feigned smile that didn't reach her eyes. “We'll head back to the office and get this finalized. You should be receiving a letter in the mail within the week, but other than that, you are now the official owner of the Cooper estate and its assets.”

“Assets?” I had no idea what she was talking about. I wasn't aware my family had anything else in their name. I'd never thought to ask about it when everything happened. All I'd been interested in doing was running away as fast as I could and never looking back.

“It's all listed here, did you read it?” She waved the forms clutched between her pink painted fingers. “Your aunt left you her vacation cabin in Reno, an AirBnB property in Florida, as well as several vehicles, and then there's the boat sitting in your family's boathouse. All of it belongs to you now.”

I blinked at her. “That's like...”

“Five million dollars give or take,” she finished for me with a wink. “You, Iris Cooper, are a very wealthy woman now.”

Something in my stomach curdled at the thought, but before I could digest the information, one of the shadow twins sucked on my clit again, causing my fingers to dig into the wooden table as I shut my eyes tight, my thighs shaking as waves of pleasure rolled through my body. I knew I probably looked like I was fucking possessed right now, but fuck...

“Are you okay?” Ashley asked, sounding concerned. When I opened my eyes, I watched as she took a hesitant step towards me.

I held up a hand, stopping her in her tracks as I tried to catch my breath. “Just a little...overwhelmed, you know? That’s a lot of money.” I kicked out my foot, feeling resistance as claws skimmed over my calf. A dark chuckle drifted up from under the table as fingers slid my panties back into place.

“We’ll, uh, let you get back to...redecorating,” she said with a visible cringe as she glanced around the room again, eyeing the broken glass and shattered chairs.

Letting out a long breath, I ran my fingers through my sweaty hair and faked a smile as I rounded the table. My legs were slightly wobbly. Chris’ eyes dipped, no doubt to the very visible wet spot on the front of my panties. He smirked, his eyes heating again as he not so subtly attempted to adjust himself in his slacks. I screwed up my nose in disgust but smoothed my features out before he glanced back up.

I walked Ashley and Chris to the door, following them out into the cool air and down several steps to make sure they were finally leaving. It wasn’t that I was feeling protective over this house or anything, but it just didn’t feel right having them in there. This place didn’t belong to the living anymore.

We said our goodbyes, and I waved as they stepped into the car. Wind whipped my hair off my shoulders and dried the sweat on my brow, taking the flush in my cheeks. Then the car stopped before it even rounded the fountain. The passenger door opened, and Chris hopped out just as I was getting ready to head back inside. My stomach tightened, and I narrowed my eyes as he jogged up the steps.

“I forgot my phone inside,” he said with what he probably thought was a charming smirk. I didn’t know what it was about men like him thinking they had the world in their palms. The confidence radiating off of him was laughable, because I knew without a doubt that he wouldn’t be able to back it up.

I sighed, my shoulders falling as I waved a hand towards the door, following him back inside. Sure enough, there was his phone sitting right there on the dining room table. He swiped it and shoved it into his pocket, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly.

“I hope this doesn’t come off too forward, but I was kinda wondering if maybe you’d want to go out with me sometime?” His question caught me off guard.

I blinked at him for a moment in stunned silence. Was he really asking me out right now? Me, the crazy woman standing in my half demolished living room wearing underwear and a ratty old T-shirt? Me, the woman whose family was murdered in the very house we stood in? Me, who hadn’t been welcoming to either of the lawyers in the slightest? Men really did have nothing but fucking audacity.

I opened my mouth to tell him to get fucked, but he must have seen the rejection in my eyes because he stepped closer. He was crowding me against the wall and way too close for comfort. I could smell the pungent cologne wafting off of him, making my eyes sting.

“You need to back off,” I warned. I was immediately on alert. He was too fucking

close, and everything in my body rebelled against it. “Now. Take your shit, leave my house, and don’t come back.”

A low growl sounded from the next room—a familiar growl. Even Chris heard it this time and glanced at the entryway with a confused frown. “Do you have a dog?”

“Yeah, a big ass mean fucker who likes to eat little shits like you for dinner.” I thought of the fleshy pile of Chaos lying in the guest bedroom, sort of wishing Kaz hadn’t torn him in half. All it would take was one look at him, and Chris would shit his pants and probably end up a babbling mess in a straitjacket.

Chris gave me a lopsided smile. “Come on, Iris. I know you felt something between us back there.” He nodded at the dining room. “Just one dinner is all I’m asking for. What’s the harm in that?”

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I hadn't felt a goddamned thing, save for my pussy being eaten by two deadly shadow monsters, so I laughed in his face and his smile dropped immediately. "You just want to fuck me, you dork ass loser." His eyes hardened, his nostrils flaring in anger. "I've met a million guys like you who can fuck better and don't talk too much. I'm not interested, Chris. You need to leave." I was getting tired of this back and forth, and clearly, he wasn't getting it.

He stepped even closer, crowding me against the wall, flexing his narrow jaw as if it would scare me or something. My eyes flitted to the other room, where my mallet lay on the floor. All I wanted to do was bash him over the head with it.

"Don't be a prude. I'm probably the only good guy in this town who's willing to show his face in public with your crazy ass." Our bodies were nearly flush together now. He tilted his head and tried to brush my hair back, but I batted his touch away. "If you wanna fuck, I'm down for that too, but I was trying to be a gentleman."

"You have five seconds to get out of my face and kick rocks," I gritted through clenched teeth. Behind Chris was a mass of building shadows creeping closer and closer. Two pairs of glowing white eyes were locked on the back of his head, and I knew all it would take was one wrong move, and they would make him disappear.

There was a small part of me that felt a little thrill at the prospect of watching Cyn and Cilas tear this guy apart. I had a feeling that this world probably wouldn't miss someone like him anyway. Maybe it was deranged of me, but the only real reason I didn't give them the nod of approval was because of Ashley sitting outside, waiting for him. She had my paperwork, and if I was going to get ownership of the property, then I needed her to make it back to the office, preferably with her little lawyer

shadow intact.

He took a step back. “This is why nice guys never get the girl. Sluts like you aren’t smart enough to see a good thing when it’s standing right in front of you.”

Placing a hand on his chest, I shoved him back several steps with surprising ease. His back hit the wall of shadow behind him, and he immediately yelped, hopping forward before he spun around. “What the fuck...?” He rubbed the back of his head, looking around at nothing but darkness, no doubt feeling the coolness of my monsters and the unnatural chill they sent down his spine. The glowing eyes were nowhere to be found, but I knew it was them, waiting to pounce.

“Your boss is waiting for you,” I said, brushing past him and heading for the front door. I let my fingers gently glide through the shadows, feeling only a slight resistance as I caressed them. I yanked open the front door, not bothering to walk him out. I only stood there at the threshold and tapped my bare foot impatiently. “You’ll be lucky if I don’t call the firm and report you for sexual harassment.”

He followed me to the door, still rubbing the back of his head, but as he passed, he shot me a scathing glare. “And why would anyone believe the word of the resident psychopath over the town’s newest lawyer?” He crooked a finger under my chin, but I knocked his hand away. “Call me if you want to know what a real man feels like, yeah? I’ll give you the ride of your fucking life. Only if you apologize though.”

“Fuck off, creep,” I spat, as I shoved him the rest of the way out, slamming the door on his heels. The second it closed, I heard the sound of a fist hitting the outside. Fucking man baby...

I flipped him off behind the door, listening to the sound of his car door slam, then the tires on moss and dirt as they rolled down the drive. Behind me, I could feel coldness growing, and the feeling of being watched intensified. I knew without looking that

Cyn and Cilas were there. They'd never actually left, and I wasn't sure how that made me feel, knowing they were always somewhere nearby.

Finally, when the car was long gone, I turned to face the shadow men with my arms crossed tight over my chest and a small smirk on my face. "That was risky, but I won't pretend I didn't like it." They appeared out of the shadows as humanoid shapes, both of them grinning, all those sharp teeth bright against the blackness of their smokey bodies. "Next time that fucker shows his face here, feel free to rip him apart, dick first."

Iris

Tonight was the night—I was finally going upstairs. Still, it took a bottle of Jack and a couple of pills to give me the edge I needed to get my ass up and go to the base of the stairs.

I'd told myself that I was never going up there again, that I would burn this entire goddamn house down before I took one step on that staircase, and yet here I was, taking the first, second, and third steps. It took me twenty minutes to convince myself this was a good idea, and to just rip the band-aid off while I was feeling confident.

I tried not to stare at the black stain at the bottom of the landing, the one that my mom made as she hung from her neck, her stomach slashed open and pouring out all over the floor beneath her. I wasn't even sure anybody ever tried to clean it up and had often wondered how long the cops had allowed her body to hang there while her blood soaked into the floorboards. Exactly how much of my family had been left behind in this damn place?

My footsteps echoed throughout the house. I hadn't seen my shadow monsters since yesterday, but I also couldn't sense them anywhere either. It made me wonder where they went when they weren't stalking me. Surely I wasn't the only mortal they were

haunting.

I took the stairs slowly, dragging my hand along the banister, trying to breathe evenly. In and out. In and out. It was useless. I couldn't quite catch my breath. My heart beat so hard that I could feel the thumping in my ears.

I paused halfway up the blood stained staircase as a thump echoed to my right. The framed photo of my parents on their wedding day shook, settling again slightly crooked. I stared at the wall, trying to figure out if there was something behind it to explain the thump, but I was pretty sure it was just an empty crawl space. The smile on my mom's face caught my eye, and I had to swallow the lump in my throat.

They looked so fucking happy that day, her belly already starting to swell with me inside it. My dad was staring at the side of my mom's smiling face, his eyes shining with nothing but worship and adoration. He had always been the hopeless romantic when it came to her. Magnolia and I used to make fun of them for being so openly head over heels for each other. Nowadays, I'd give just about anything to hear my mom giggling again while my dad chased her around the kitchen.

It was hard to tear my eyes away from the photo, but I managed it, peering up the staircase to the darkness above me. There was a lightswitch at the top, and I was tempted to run the rest of the way up and flip it on. I huffed a laugh at myself. I was being an idiot. I'd already seen the horrors this house had to offer, unless Kaz was right and there really were more monsters lurking in the darkness around here.

Monsters... Fucking monsters. As if the ones lurking in my head weren't enough to drive me insane, add in some real ones who seemed to want to fuck me more than eat me. What did that say about me? That I enticed the creatures of the darkness this way? That they craved my sadness and rage so deeply that they wanted to savor it, to coax it out of me, sipping it bit by bit until they drained me of it?

I should have run. I should have left this place far behind me, but again, I'd never been levelheaded or logical. If these creatures were willing to drain me of my misery, then I was going to fucking let them. With any luck, I'd soon be a dried up husk, lying on the floor of this house next to my mom's bloodstain.

It didn't hurt that these particular monsters were good in the sack. My thighs still ached pleasantly, reminding me of the way Kaz's tentacles had felt slithering over my skin, or how Cilas' cock filled me up, fucking me so good that it had brought tears to my eyes. I could still feel how deeply he'd reached—so deep that I'd felt the movement in my lower belly.

I was on borrowed time here, and I knew it. Sooner or later, they would get tired of playing with their food and consume the rest of me. Their sharp teeth and claws were meant for slashing through supple flesh and meaty bone. I just hoped I was long dead before they decided it was time to clean up the scraps of me.

I'd almost reached the second landing when the walls moved—literally moved. Several framed photos clattered to the floor, tumbling down the staircase I'd just ascended. The old floral wallpaper stretched, undulating as if suddenly the plaster and wood beneath it had turned to water. I grabbed the banister, trying to steady myself and keep from tumbling over it and plummeting to my death. I looked over my shoulder, again spotting the black bloodstain at the bottom. Such a long fall...

The wall stretched and moved in such a way that it looked like dozens of human faces were pressing forward, with mouths agape in silent screams, as they tried to escape. My eyes widened in horror, but then came the hands, grabbing for me, stretching the wallpaper until I was sure it was about to tear. My heart thundered as I let go of the banister and dashed up the remaining stairs, all while the tips of those grabbing fingers brushed my arm and pulled at my hair.

The top of the landing was in view, only about five more steps...

I didn't make it.

Just as I was about to lunge, taking them two at a time, a hand gripped my wrist and tugged me towards the wall. I stumbled, my feet twisting around each other in my attempt to run. I screamed as more hands gripped me, holding my arms, my legs, and my hair. I could feel the fingers and faces rubbing against my back as I pressed into the wall. Their hold on me was so tight that I couldn't move, could barely even breathe.

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I screamed and screamed, but nobody could hear me. Cyn and Cilas were off probably torturing some poor souls in town or something, and Kaz was probably underwater, recuperating from being out of it for so long last night. Why else wouldn't he have responded to my screams? Unless his rescue was a one-off, a fluke to keep Chaos from hogging all of me for himself.

I fought against the hands, trying to bite at them, thrashing every which way, but it was no use. There were too many of them. My body was being pulled so hard against the wall that I was pretty sure that any second, I would disappear into it, to be forever trapped inside the walls of this cursed house. Still, I fought against them. The open, gaping mouths released noises that sounded like the moans of the undead. They groaned and wailed, their voices low and cracking, as if they weren't really voices at all, but rather the wood, metal, plaster, and the very foundations of the house were yawning, stretching, and growing.

The pressure on my body hurt, to the point that I felt like my skin was being stretched, my hair yanked out of my scalp but twisting fingers. Nothing I did made any bit of difference.

Then the darkness descended—not the darkness of the hallway, nor the emptiness that stretched out before me at the top of the stairs. This darkness was full, heavy, and alive. It undulated like smoke and reached for me, tendrils of it wrapping around my wrists and pulling them out of the wall's grasp. One by one, the hands released me, the darkness chasing away those screaming faces.

I still writhed, feeling like my skin was overrun with millions of tiny spiders as sensation slowly rushed back into my limbs. Already, I knew I was bruised and

scratched, probably bleeding in some places.

A voice spoke in a language I'd never heard before. Actually, it was two voices speaking as one—Cyn and Cilas. I could hear them both distinctly, yet their words wrapped around one another. It reminded me of those old religious songs spoken in tongues. The words were guttural and made no sense, but the moment they were spoken, the wall began to smooth out again, returning to the way it was supposed to look—solid and faceless.

It took seconds for everything to return to normal. I fell forward off of the wall, but the shadows caught me. I was wrapped up in a pair of strong shadowy arms, and when I looked up, I met a pair of burning white eyes peering down at me from an impossibly terrifying, yet alluring face.

Cyn. I could see him better now, as his features were sharp and pronounced. He had a strong jaw, a straight nose, and high cheekbones. He was still made of shadow, but appeared corporeal now. His hands slid up my back beneath my shirt, nails scratching my sensitive skin.

“What have you gotten yourself into now?” he asked, a smile in his sinister voice. “You humans are too curious for your own good.”

I was still breathing hard, and I had no doubt that he could feel my heart thumping against him. “The walls, they...” I peered over my shoulder to find a smooth normal wall. “It was trying to fucking eat me...” I blinked at the flat wallpaper. There wasn't a single trace of what had just happened, nothing torn or ripped or even slightly out of place, just regular floral paper over hard wooden paneling.

“The house was only curious, but I don't blame it,” Cilas said, becoming somewhat solid next to his brother. It was as if he stepped out of his own shadows. “You're practically begging to be played with.”

I frowned at him in confusion. The house was curious? “The house isn’t alive,” I said, my voice deadpan. I was born in this godforsaken place and knew for a fact that it was just a house. Terrible things had happened here, yes, but it was still just a house.

The brothers glanced at each other and both grinned wryly before Cilas said, “Don’t be too sure about that, sad one. When horrific things happen in a place, it leaves a mark, if you will.”

“A stain,” Cyn said with an eager nod. “Something that lingers, even when all else is abandoned. What happened here must have been beyond unimaginable horror, and in its wake is a living, breathing beast that wants to consume.”

He let me go, allowing me to take a step back. I rubbed my arms and peered around at my dark surroundings. “So that’s why you’re here then. You were drawn here, just like all the rest of these creatures?” They both nodded in tandem, fanning out as they began to slowly walk in circles around me. “Where were you before...” I paused as my voice trembled on the words. Before my family was slaughtered because of my mistake...

They moved as one, yet opposite. It was like everything they did was together, like they were two parts of just one entity. They weren’t so much brothers as twins. Their movements were smooth and graceful, floaty and wispy, and yet there was weight to them, as if the shadows could build and retract, making them solid one instant, and nothing more than smoke the next.

“Here and there, I suppose, Cilas said conversationally.

“There and here,” Cyn added immediately after, his voice songlike and teasing. “But that night, we felt a pull that couldn’t be ignored.” He inhaled deeply, his burning white eyes closing as if he was enjoying my confusion and residual terror immensely. “This place radiates pain. It’s so fucking delicious, I can’t help but lap it up.” His

forked tongue swiped over his lips as he grinned, flashing me his teeth. “And you...”

Hands latched onto my upper arms from behind, and cold air washed over the shell of my ear. “You’re the most delicious of them all,” whispered Cilas. His hands skimmed down my arms slowly, snaking over the curves of my hips, making their way to the front of my abdomen. “Do you know how badly I want to eat you up?”

I swallowed thickly again, but this time, it wasn’t out of fear. I knew they wanted me to be afraid, but I couldn’t conjure it up. Instead, I felt excitement flutter in my stomach at the prospect of those teeth and tongues near my skin. Cyn paused in front of me, probably sensing the shift in me, and I grinned wickedly.

I glanced down at his hold on my waist. “I thought you ate your fill of me yesterday? Don’t tell me you’re too full to lick the bowl.” They could lick me anywhere they wanted, and I’d thank them for it.

Fingers sunk into my hair, gripping the back of my head tightly as Cyn yanked my head back. I was peering up into his eyes as he stared down at me. “Don’t tempt us too much now. The only thing keeping us from devouring your flesh and bone is the fact that fucking you amuses us. Sooner or later, it will stop amusing us, and we’ll take what we need.”

“We’ll bathe in the heat of your blood for days on end, sipping it from your arteries like a tap, while you writhe beneath our touch,” Cilas hissed as he closed the gap between us, trapping me between him and Cyn. Running a claw down the side of my face, he leaned in, placing a small kiss on my lips that was too soft for the teeth he hid just under his own. “The feel of your fragile human cunt on my cock will keep me sated for now, so enjoy it while it lasts.”

I shivered, nearly moaning. Yeah, there was something really fucking wrong with me. I wanted to spend the rest of my short life on this earth being ravaged by these

shadows. I wanted to be consumed wholly, taken to a new plane of existence by way of tongues, tentacles, cocks, and teeth. I didn't just want it, I needed it.

"I have yet to sample said cunt," Cyn said, running a claw down my navel slowly. His two extra limbs were out again, and they held me in place as the top pair stroked me. "Tell me, brother, did it squeeze your cock? Did it drip for you as you filled her up?"

The memory of it overwhelmed me, so much so that I nearly forgot about the fact that my house just tried to eat me alive.

"Like fingers tightening around a throat," Cilas answered him. "Ripe and juicy, like the peaches that grow in the orchard. I can still feel her pulsing as she begged me to fuck her. Brother, you must try it for yourself."

They continued to circle me, bearing down on me as their fingers ran through my long hair or caressed the back of my neck. My breathing was ragged, though not out of fear, but anticipation.

"What is it that makes you rage?" Cilas asked as he came to a stop in front of me. Cyn remained at my back, closing me in against his twin and caging me with his four strong arms. Cilas ran a claw down the side of my face, and for a moment, I couldn't help but lean into the touch. My eyes closed in bliss at the sting his touch left behind. "What makes you want to burn it all down, Iris? Tell us..."

I opened my eyes and met his fiery white stare, searching them for any shred of genuine kindness, but I couldn't find any. I was staring into the eyes of pure evil, pure hunger, pure need.

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What did I really have to lose here? I already knew I wasn't going to leave this place alive, so why shouldn't I revisit the root of all of my rage? They wanted a meal? Well, I'd give them a feast.

"Follow me if you're hungry," I said, heaving out a long, tired breath. It took everything in me to pull away from their touch and take the next few stairs upwards now that I was free from the house's grasp.

They kept pace behind me, creating a coldness that washed over my back, raising the hairs on my arms. I stood unmoving at the top of the stairs, where I could see all the way down the darkened hallway, remembering the last time I stood in this exact spot, staring into the eyes of the man who took everything from me. I remembered the way his eyes had followed me as I shook uncontrollably, as if he couldn't wait to get his hands on me.

I could still hear the echoing screams of my father's voice, even after all these years. They were guttural and so terrified, and it sent chills down my spine, even after the monsters I'd faced. He'd screamed for so long that I heard him as I fled the house. I heard him as I ran down the desolate country road through the fog, searching for someone to help me. I'd run for two hours, stumbling, bloody, and exhausted, still hearing his voice in my head.

"They all died here," I said to the shadows who flanked me on either side. Their forms were almost fully corporeal now, and if it weren't for the fact that their coloring was unnatural, I might have even believed they were human. Then there were those glowing white eyes, like gazing into starlight. They stared back at me, waiting for more. I walked down the hall, letting my fingers graze the wall. "My

mom went first. She was hung by the neck from the banister while the bastard let her guts drain out onto the foyer. I slipped in them on my way out that night..." My stomach lurched at the memory. "Then it was Magnolia, my younger sister. He took an ax to her face..." I choked for a moment before clearing my throat. "He dragged her body down this hallway while I begged him to take me, and then he laughed as he mutilated her in front of me. My dad was last, and the police never told me how exactly it happened but it...wasn't fast, and I heard his screams."

"Who...?" Cyn asked, his low voice barely more than a whisper.

"Tell us who," Cilas added, echoing his twin perfectly. The two of them really did exist in tandem, like two parts of one soul.

The ornate narrow carpet through the hallway was stained with bloody footsteps, and along the walls were the remnants of blood, where my hands had dragged, leaving dark smears on the wallpaper. There were scratches in the plaster, and I remembered how it splintered under my fingernails that night.

"I thought we were star-crossed lovers," I said, my lips twisting into a bitter smile. "He was older by ten years, and I should have known better. His dad was the groundskeeper here since I was five. Henry was like a grandfather to us for so long, but it wasn't until his son returned from the army one summer that everything changed."

There were voices now, whispering to me in the back of my head, telling me that I should have died that night too. My stupidity and naïvety was to blame. The voices told me that Magnolia should have been the one to make it out, that the world would have been better off with her bright spirit instead of mine. What did I ever contribute to this fucked-up world but misery?

Magnolia would have made something of herself. She probably would have had

bucketloads of children who loved her and could have made this world a brighter place. If it were up to me, I would go back to that night and beg him to spare Mags and take me instead, but I already knew what his answer would have been.

Cilas and Cyn kept pace with me as I walked, stopping every few feet to admire the portraits on the walls. My family smiled back at me from behind cracked and dusty picture frames.

“I spent the summer fucking Peter whenever we could steal moments together, thinking we were in love. I was almost eighteen, so I thought it would be okay. I was almost an adult, and soon, Peter and I could run away to the city and start our lives for real.” I huffed out a bitter laugh, shaking my head. “I should have seen the signs when he started hitting me or showing up to my school randomly. He would fly into jealous rages when I wanted to hang out with my school friends, or when I was invited to homecoming the next year. At the time, I just thought he was being romantic and I blamed the violence on his PTSD from the military.”

I knew it didn't excuse the fact that Peter had been a predator, but at the time, I couldn't see it. All I knew was that I was falling head over heels for a mature man with eyes that I could drown in, who kissed me like I was a grown woman and not the teenager I was. That man should have been in prison long before he came after my family.

“This man...” Cilas said as I paused in front of our school photos, arranged in a sort of collage. I peered up at the shadow creature. “He killed your family but spared you?” His clawed fingers gently brushed along my long hair in soothing strokes.

I shrugged. “Weird, right? Something tells me he wanted me to suffer, and he knew that killing me would have been a mercy.” In fact, I knew that was why he let me get away. He knew I would blame myself for all of it, and that I would have to live the rest of my life with the guilt. That was what Peter loved—pain.

“Where can we find this Peter?” Cyn hissed. There was a scraping sound, and I looked over my shoulder to find him scratching a deep line down the glass in front of a photo of the property from the 1800’s. The glass splintered under his nail. Turning to face me, he grinned wide. “I’d very much like to have a chat with him.”

Cilas chuckled in response. “How about we make a game of it, brother? We haven’t had a satisfying hunt in years.” My eyes bounced between them as tendrils of smoke began to leech off of them, creating a black undulating fog around the hallway. They looked way too eager to find Peter and tear him apart.

I shook my head. “I appreciate the enthusiasm, but Peter’s dead. The coward shot himself and his dad before the police arrived. Trust me, if he’d lived, I would have fixed that mistake a long time ago and would have happily rotted in prison for the rest of my life for it, but I guess I took too long to get help.”

That was another thing I’d regretted for years and years following the worst day of my life. I’d been wounded and disoriented, so much so that I’d run in the wrong direction, heading farther away from town instead of finding my way to the nearest neighbor. I’d been so delirious, terrified, and suffering from too much blood loss, that directions had made no sense.

“They found me on the side of the road hours later, and it was just luck that one of the officers who responded was a good friend of my dad’s. He recognized me and sent backup to the house immediately, but by then, it was too late. Peter killed them all, one by fucking one. He made sure they suffered too, so that I would suffer.”

I tried for so long to black out the events of that night, sinking further into drugs, sex, and drinking that for a while there, I almost forgot what my sister’s face actually looked like. It scared me. The betrayal that I felt from Peter was nothing compared to the scars those sights, sounds, and smells had left on my soul.

The way Magnolia screamed for me to run echoed in my head as I continued farther down the hallway, following my own bloody footprints. The emptiness in my mom's brown eyes as she swung from her neck on the banister flashed through my memory. My dad's pleading as he begged Peter to spare his girls haunted me.

Mine was the first room on the right across from the first of the guest bathrooms. Magnolia and I had pretty much this whole floor to ourselves, while our parents had the top floor. My door was shut, but from underneath, I could see a slight glow shining in through the windows, peeking under the door.

The police had offered to take me back to my bedroom to retrieve some of my personal belongings, but I'd told them that I never wanted to see anything from that house ever again. Everything was tainted now.

I wasn't ready to go in there yet, so I bypassed my room, as well as Magnolia's. Now that was one room in the house I didn't think I'd ever be able to face again. I did stop in front of the closed door, however, placing my palm on the cold splintered wood and imagined all the times I used to burst into her room to borrow clothes, makeup, or just to bug the shit out of my sister for no reason.

How many times had I slept in my sister's bed, telling ghost stories or talking about boys? How many times had I dreamt of standing exactly here, pushing open that door and facing the demons that waited for me?

Instead, I kept going, following the hall around the corner to the far end of the house, past my mom's craft room, several guest rooms, and my dad's office. On my left was the nursery that was never used. The door was still open, and inside, I spotted the half painted yellow walls and old dusty paintcans that had long dried up next to drop cloths, rollers, and brushes.

The room was dark inside, the curtains still drawn, but something in the darkness

moved right next to the old wooden crib. I squinted as I poked my head in the room and flinched as a pair of flashing eyes blinked at me. Something had made a home in the old nursery, and it raised the hairs on my arms. I swallowed the lump in my throat and walked faster without investigating.

There was a smaller staircase just off of the main corridor that used to lead to a butler's room back in the day. Dad converted it when he and Mom bought the house, turning it into his hideaway studio. This door was already open too, so I let myself in, taking a deep breath before stepping inside. Even though every piece of furniture in the room was still covered in a dusty white sheet, I could still smell the distinct scent of oil on canvas, lacquer, and wooden brushes. A sense of homesickness came over me, festering deep in my belly as I looked around the familiar space.

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Every wall was covered in old paintings of every style that my dad had tried to master. He was a lover of any and all kinds of art, whether it be oil on canvas, charcoal sketches, clay sculpting, watercolor, or mosaics. He did it all in this room as a testament to his talents. As I shut the door behind me, watching as both of my shadows slipped right through the wooden door as if it weren't there at all, I had to swallow the thick lump in my throat, remembering all the hours that I would sit in this room, painting with my dad and listening to his dad rock music or horror podcasts.

I didn't have an eye for painting like he did, or an ear for music like my mom, but I still showed up every weekend to paint with him because it was our thing, something that only the two of us enjoyed with no one around to bother us. Tears welled up in my eyes as the memories flooded back—laughing over spilled paint brushes, debating about color choices for hours on end. Then one day, he was gone. No warning, no goodbye, just...gone.

“Sometimes, humans do surprise me,” Cilas said from across the room. Blinking out of my nostalgic daydream, I watched him make his way around the studio, inspecting each and every piece of art on the walls, tendrils of black smoke trailing behind him.

“How so?” I joined him next to the tall bay window that I used to nap on. I sat on the old dusty cushion with my back to the wall.

He cocked his head at one of the largest canvasses. This one was a simple white canvas splattered with grays and blacks until it formed the shape of an abstract face. The mouth was open in a silent scream. “This one's my favorite, I think.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “Of course it is. My dad went through a small depressive episode after grandpa passed away when I was twelve. He painted that on the day of the funeral. Mom never liked it and told him he should have put it away in the attic, but he wouldn't listen.”

“Good. He was right to be proud of it. A masterpiece like this deserves to be seen.” Cyn joined his brother, both of them admiring the painting.

My heart sank again, and I sighed, leaning back against the window. “Not much good it'll do now. Nobody ever comes here anymore, so who's going to see it, ghosts?”

Both of them chuckled as they turned, coming towards me with their movements totally in sync with each other. “Ghosts aren't real, silly girl.” Cyn crawled up the wall like he was a freaking spider, using all four of his arms to creep up slowly as I followed him with my eyes.

I frowned. “What the fuck do you mean ghosts aren't real? I live in a house full of monsters...” If any house in the world was going to be haunted, it was definitely this one, so obviously, he was wrong. Only I probably would have preferred for it to be haunted by the ghosts of the ones who'd actually died here.

Cilas placed a finger under my chin and guided my eyes up to his as he knelt before me. “We're not ghosts though, are we? We might be shadows, but we have flesh and bone. I'm alive as much as you are.”

“I thought you were some kind of demon or something.” My cheeks heated. I didn't even know if I actually believed in demons, not in the biblical sense anyway. I wasn't religious, not in the slightest, so I supposed I'd never really thought about it.

He shrugged, which was so human-like. “Not quite, but you're not far off. We are what we are, I suppose. You're a mortal human because you were born to another

mortal human. Kazimir is a creature of the waters because that is how he was created. Cyn and I are the same, two souls bound forever as one, who wander the world in search of sustenance, but it doesn't make us any less real, does it?"

After crawling off of the wall, Cyn scooted in behind me until he was sinking down to the cushion and pulling me into his lap. Sneaky bastard. I shook my head with a small smile. The tickle of his shadows felt nice on my skin, but there was warmth there under the touch of his palms as he skimmed them up and down my arms. He was as solid as I was.

"So no ghosts, huh?" I was surprised, honestly. "I wish I could say it was a relief, but it just made me realize how much danger I'm actually in right now."

"Oh, but you like danger, don't you?" Cyn asked. He ran his claws through my hair gently, brushing out my tangled strands. When he touched me this softly, it definitely gave me some mixed emotions. For a creature that was one hundred percent going to kill me in the near future, he was very careful with me.

I grinned to myself, and when I looked up, I found Cilas' eyes drinking me in as he, too, lounged against the wall of the bay windows. The position was such a casual humanlike thing to do that I wanted to laugh at the absurdity.

"Sometimes, danger is the only thing that gets me going." I sighed deeply, letting my eyes fall closed at the feel of his nails scratching lightly down my skull. "It's why I came back here after all these years. When I got the call that my aunt Sarah was dead and the house was mine, I got the craziest urge to come back and fucking destroy it."

"We noticed," Cyn murmured into my hair with a small laugh. "You've done a marvelous job on the sitting room already. I think your human friends agreed."

I snorted, my cheeks heating at the memory. "That was shitty of me. I mean, I'd do it

again in a fucking heartbeat, but still, poor Ashley probably went back to the office, gossiping to the whole town about the crazy lady in the Cooper house.”

“We could have eaten her and saved you the trouble,” Cilas suggested casually.

I glanced at him with a raised brow, knowing full well he was completely serious. “And then have a murder investigation at my doorstep? Yeah, no thanks.”

“We could eat the townspeople too. It wouldn’t be any trouble,” said Cyn, just as serious as his brother. In fact, Cilas’ eyes were wide with excitement at the prospect, and he licked his lips slowly. My eyes dipped to his tongue, and something in my belly flipped.

He leaned forward and cupped my cheek. My breath caught in my throat as his lips pressed to mine so sensually that I groaned. “Let me take your suffering, sad one. I won’t take it all, but I promise you’ll feel much better in the morning.”

I blinked at him, my gaze bouncing between his eyes and his lips, wanting more and more. I wanted to pounce on him and beg him to fuck me. I wanted him to make me hurt so that I could forget about the pain of this room and the memories it held.

“Don’t think about it, just let us take it,” said Cilas. They both converged on me, Cyn wrapping his four arms around me and pulling me against his chest until I was nestled comfortably against his shadows.

Cilas was on his knees now, crawling over the top of me until I was staring directly into his eyes. He cupped my face again, running a claw down my cheek. “Close those eyes, sad one. It’ll be over soon.”

Something wet hit my cheek a second later, and I realized that I was crying again. Shame swept through me—shame and embarrassment. So instead of arguing, I did

what he said and closed my eyes, just as his mouth full of sharp teeth began to open wide, and a tendril of undulating white mist began to flow from me to him.

* * *

My eyes were heavy as I tried to blink away the sleep from them. It was odd, because I didn't remember falling asleep. The last thing I could recall was sitting on the window seat in the studio while Cyn ran his fingers through my hair.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:07 am

But I wasn't in the studio anymore. I wasn't even in the house. Surrounding me were dense trees with moonlight shining through them, creating undulating shadows over the mossy ground. Strangely enough, I couldn't hear any crickets chirping, nor could I see or hear any signs of life nearby. Usually, the woods were full of little animals scurrying around, but everything was silent, eerily so.

I got to my feet, dressed in the exact same clothing I'd had on back in the studio, just a light T-shirt and sleep shorts. I was barefoot, which honestly was pretty normal for me, but I just couldn't shake the weird feeling I had as I took a good look around. I felt like I shouldn't be out here, and that something was incredibly wrong with this situation. It didn't even feel like a dream. In fact, I was pretty positive I wasn't dreaming. Everything was too crisp and clear and didn't have that hazy, dreamlike feel to it.

"Iris!" I froze, and dread crept through me like icy tendrils. "Iris, where are you?"

I couldn't move, could barely even breathe as Magnolia's unmistakable voice called out to me.

"Iris?!" She sounded panicked now, but her voice seemed to be moving farther away, as if she was running through the woods, searching for me.

I took off into the trees, screaming her name at the top of my lungs. Everything was so dark, I could barely see three feet in front of me. Several times, I tripped and caught myself on the ground, scraping my palm on fallen branches, but nothing slowed me down.

“Magnolia!” I shouted, my voice breaking as I tried to keep the sobs at bay. It’d been so long since I’d heard my sister’s voice. “I’m here, Mags!”

In the back of my head, I realized how wrong this was. How could my sister really be out in these woods? It’d been ten long years and she was dead and gone, her bones rotting deep in the ground at the town’s cemetery. Except the other part of my brain told me that stranger things had happened. I was living in a house entirely occupied by living, breathing nightmares that haunted me for sport, so the prospect of Magnolia being trapped here wasn’t exactly impossible.

At least that was what I told myself as I shouted her name. Over and over, I called out to her, and a few times, she called back.

“Iris!” My name echoed around me. She sounded closer now—so close that I strained my eyes into the darkness ahead, desperately searching for her blonde mane of hair.

A stick cracked to the left of me, and I stumbled, catching myself on the trunk of a gnarled cypress tree. My feet squelched in the mud, and little bits of Spanish moss were stuck in my tangled hair. I was a mess, but that was the least of my worries.

“Mags, is that you?” I asked the darkness. I waited, but there was no reply. “You don’t have to be afraid, it’s just me...” Tears streamed down my cheeks again as desperation clawed at me. All I wanted was to see her familiar brown eyes, for her to smile at me just one more time and tell me that she was okay, even if I knew it wasn’t true.

I hadn’t let myself think about Magnolia in a long time. Every time I slipped up, it only brought me more pain. She was my best friend for seventeen years, my partner in crime, and my closest companion. We weren’t like normal sisters who argued and fought. From an early age, we’d developed such a strong bond that most people assumed we were twins. As many differences as we had, we were so much alike. I

missed her like the stars missed the moon on a cloudy night.

Another branch cracked under the foot of something heavy, and I stilled, listening to the quiet woods, my heart thundering in my chest. Peering through the dark, I finally spied movement. It was very slight, but I saw it clearly. Something incredibly tall and oddly shaped was peeking out from behind a tree. I swallowed thickly and continued to stare at the shadow, knowing in my heart that this wasn't my sister.

Realization slammed into me, and my whole body was instantly filled with icy cold fear. True fear wasn't something I'd experienced in a long time. For the most part, I'd managed to bury my terror down deep, and it only surfaced once in a blue moon. Right now, as I realized what a colossal mistake I'd just made, the fear that I felt was stark and very, very real.

Growing up in the deep South, I knew the legends. When we were kids, they were just spooky stories our parents told us to get us to stay away from strangers and to keep us from wandering off into the woods at night. I'd never really believed in any of it, but right now, I was second-guessing every little thing I'd ever been told about the creatures that supposedly stalked through the trees out here.

It was almost taboo to speak it out loud, because doing so would only attract them to you. They went by many different names, depending on which culture was telling the tale, but around here, they called them skinwalkers. Even thinking it in my head felt like I was tempting fate, and it sent a shiver right down the length of my spine.

The shape of the creature became clearer as it stepped closer, so light and silent on its feet that I knew the cracking branch before had been on purpose. It wanted me to know it was here, otherwise it could have easily come up on me without my suspecting a thing. These things were created for stealth and hunting. They stalked their prey long before said prey even knew they were being stalked. Once you heard or saw them, it was already too late for you.

I was about to make a run for it when an image flashed in my mind that I recognized as unnatural. It was in black and white like an old movie, and parts of it were choppy and missing. I stilled again, frozen in place as I watched myself from the vantage point of the creature that stalked me. It was like I was seeing through its eyes as he came closer.

Then the vision switched to one of me standing on the doorstep of my house, staring off into the distance as I held the front door open. Ashley's car was parked out front, and the wind whipped my hair around my face as I peered out across the property into the tree line.

I realized what I was seeing—it was a memory. The thing I'd seen peeking at me from the trees wasn't just my imagination. It'd been stalking me for days now from a distance.

"Iris..." My sister's voice called out to me again, so close now that it sounded like she was standing right in front of me. I flinched and stumbled back a step.

"You're not my sister!" I spat at the creature. Its shape was clear now as it left the shadows and slowly stepped into the moonlight.

"Iris, please..." the voice said, this time much smaller, as if Mags were about to break down into tears.

I shook my head, shutting my eyes as images flashed in my head of myself as I ran through the rain, as I walked along the railing of the gazebo or as I sat on the edge of the dock, looking down at the water. They were all memories, and they flickered in my head like an old film.

I should have known better than to follow her voice. Part of the lore that surrounded skinwalkers—or wendigos or demons, whatever the fuck this thing was—was that

they loved to mimic the voices of people you loved and trusted. They lured you into their woods, promising you safety or answers, only to snatch you up when you finally came too close. I'd fallen for its tricks so easily, and I cursed myself for it.

When it finally appeared, every drop of blood in my body turned to ice. It was larger than I'd originally thought, maybe even larger than Kazimir. His body was shaped like a man, only...his muscled, toned limbs were elongated dramatically and his legs appeared to bend in the wrong direction.

It was definitely a he, given the fact that between those muscled thighs swung a massive cock that looked heavy and hard enough to use as a baseball bat. My eyes traveled upwards, scanning him in horror, noting the rib bones on one side that poked right through his leathery-looking skin. He was the color of the shadows, with a slight sheen of silver that the moonlight highlighted. Attached to his massive hands were long sharp claws that looked like they were made for shredding through bone.

That wasn't what had me shaking where I stood, too petrified to move a single muscle. It was the fact that his face was nothing more than an elongated skull, like a deer or an elk, only the bone was a deep onyx color, with empty eye sockets and a mouth full of long sharp teeth. Massive antlers rose from his head, creating the illusion that he stood over eleven feet tall, when in reality, the top of his head was at most eight feet, but still, he was too large and too powerful to run from. With those long limbs, he could catch me in seconds if I tried to run.

"What's your name?" I asked for a lack of better options. I felt like a fucking idiot, trying to have a conversation with this thing, but if Cilas, Cyn, and Kaz had taught me anything, it was that I should never assume the impossible wasn't possible. My voice was shaky, but I asked again, "You do have a name, right? Let's see..." I tapped my chin and tilted my head, pretending I wasn't ready to piss myself. "Is it George?" I shook my head immediately. "No, definitely not George. What about Michael? Or Liam?"

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Holy shit what was I doing? My eyes flitted to the sides, but not for long.

A growl rumbled towards me, deep and menacing, but once again, I was too frozen in place to do the smart thing and run. Instead, I kept rattling off different names like I was reading from a list. Maybe I was just hoping to buy myself some time until I could figure out if I was really screwed or not.

The thing stepped forward, the sound of its footstep so loud and heavy that it vibrated the trees around us. My heart shot up into my throat, and I gulped thickly. Yeah, I was seriously gonna piss myself. Apparently, skinwalkers were a hard limit for me, because fuck...

Before he could come any closer, something moved in the trees. We both snapped our heads in that direction and watched as a pale white figure appeared through the brush, moving fast and low to the ground. The skinwalker pivoted, facing the approaching shape, stepping in front of me. I frowned at his admittedly very muscled back in confusion. Was he protecting me? I nearly snorted at the thought. He was probably just saving me for himself and making sure I wasn't snatched away by some other ghost or ghoul in these woods.

I peeked around his massive frame and sucked in a breath as none other than Chaos himself stepped into the light. I shivered in complete revulsion at the sight of all his spidery limbs, paper-thin pale skin, and the gaping mouth filled with black drool and rotting teeth.

“Not this guy again.” I groaned, and the skinwalker stiffened in front of me, as if he wanted to turn around at the sound of my voice, but he just kept his eyes on Chaos. “I

liked this one a lot better as a gooey pile of flesh on my bedroom floor...”

The skinwalker snorted, and I stilled. Was that a laugh? Or maybe it was a warning. Either way, it was the first sound he'd actually made since showing himself. As I peered around him, I realized that Chaos wasn't at all interested in anything we were doing. No, he was way too busy...playing like a fucking dog. He had something round in shape that he kicked and nudged at, rolling it across the mossy ground. Then he would leap into the air and catch it in his mouth before tossing it away again and running after it.

I literally scratched my head in bewilderment, watching this monster created from the deepest darkest depths of my nightmares playing like a happy little puppy through the trees without a care in the world. Cyn's words echoed in my ear. “You killed my dog!”

I couldn't help but laugh for real now, nearly doubling over with it. That was, until Chaos decided to kick the round ball thing towards me. It rolled to a stop at my feet, and as I peered down at it, I cursed, jumping away from the decapitated head that stared at me with blank, dead eyes.

My eyes bounced between Chaos and the head he'd been playing with like a toy ball. The worst part was that I immediately recognized the head. There was no mistaking that passably handsome, yet boring face that had smirked cockily at me from the other end of my dining room table. It was Chris the jackass lawyer guy, the smarmy smile wiped clean off of his face and replaced with a mouth that gaped in horror at whatever he'd seen in his last moments.

I must have lost my damn mind because the second I realized who it was, I nearly broke my toe as I kicked it back towards Chaos. The monster leapt into the air and caught the head in his mouth before shaking it back and forth violently, then running back into the dark tree line.

I stood there gaping at the spot he'd occupied, my mind spinning in all different directions. The skinwalker chose that moment to turn and face me again, and I couldn't shake the feeling that he was making a decision. I looked up at him, and if I'd been wearing boots, I would definitely have been shaking in them. What was it about this thing that set me so on edge? If he was going to kill me, then he needed to do it right now, before I made myself look like an even bigger idiot.

* * *

That thing in the trees

The scent of her fear was overwhelming—so sharp and stark, it filled my nostrils and slithered through my body, urging me to go to her.

She was afraid of me, as she should be. I wanted her to be afraid. If she were smart, she would run for her life. I wanted to devour her, both flesh and soul. I wanted to peel back the layers of her to discover what hid beneath.

I'd been following the human for days, stalking her closely and learning her habits. She was an odd one, I'd admit—not like other mortals I'd come across, who were boisterous, loud, and insufferable. This one was content in her quiet melancholy, simmering in a cloud of rage that had been building for years.

Her light gray eyes were the color of the clouds overhead, and they widened at the sight of me as I stepped into the light. I didn't often show myself to the humans I hunted, but tonight, I wanted this one to see me. I wanted her to know that I'd come for her, and to see the face of the one who would end her life.

It was clear that she didn't like Chaos much. After his impromptu interruption as he kicked around the severed human head, the woman looked a little green. I recognized the head as I was sure she had too. I'd followed the shadows last night as they made

their way into town, tracking the scent of the human they hunted. They'd known I was there too, but hadn't bothered to ask why I was sticking so close.

I didn't know what the human had done to incur such wrath on this particular night, but it had taken hours for them to finish him off before they tossed his carcass to Chaos to play with. The human's remains were scattered throughout my woods now, and I just hoped Chaos would be quick about cleaning it up before it started to rot and attract the humans.

"You still haven't told me your name yet," she said, pulling my attention to the fact that she now stared up at me, her gray eyes shining in the silvery moonlight. She was beautiful for a human, and that surprised me, as I normally didn't care for such things while I hunted. "If you can't speak with words, can you at least nod your head?"

I found myself nodding once, unsure why I was going along with this strange interaction. What I should have done was pounce and devour her. Her life was now on borrowed time, but I couldn't explain what stayed my hand, other than the fact that I found her amusing.

She tilted her head, and even though the gesture was meant to make me think she was calm and at ease, I knew she was anything but. Her heart was fluttering in her chest, and her hands were shaking in terror. "Do you even have a name?" she asked.

Did I have a name? Had anyone ever asked me that before? I shook my head no, and something in her eyes lit up at my coherent response, proving to her that I was more than some mindless monster.

She began to back away slowly, as if I wouldn't notice, but I did. I could detect every single small movement she made with perfect precision, and if I wanted to, I could even predict what her next move would be. I'd been hunting her kind for centuries, and there was nowhere she could run that I couldn't find and catch her.

Still, I allowed her to back up, inching away from me, but she just kept talking, babbling really. She was nearly twenty feet away from me now, but I didn't bother to close the gap. I was curious about this human, and I wasn't ready to end her life just yet. Perhaps I'd pay a visit to Kazimir and coax some information out of him.

"I'm going to give you a name then," she said, and my ears immediately perked up. It was my turn to cock my head. She cleared her throat and squared her shoulders, as if she was suddenly feeling brave. It made me want to chuckle, but I knew that the sound that would have come from my mouth wouldn't seem like a chuckle to her ears. She backed away faster and faster, until I could barely see the glow of her white hair through the trees. Then, her soft voice echoed as it traveled towards me, a new name rolling off her lips. "I think I'm going to call you Creature."

Creature... I liked the sound of it, oddly enough. Creature was me, and I was Creature. When I looked back up, the human was gone, the scent of her fading into the darkness.

Iris

There was a voice on the wind that called to me. It was so fucking beautiful that it brought tears to my eyes. I immediately wiped them away before sitting up in the dead of night, staring at the window while rain battered the shutters.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:07 am

Kevin was awake and sitting on the ledge of the window, his blue eyes glowing and winking in the darkness at me. He turned away from me to gaze back out into the night, as if the song was calling him too. Idly, I wondered what my boys thought of my new monster friends, and whether or not they could feel the looming threat that hung over me.

The voice steadily grew louder, until I couldn't even hear the creaking and cracking of this old house anymore. It was humming, low and melodic. The haunting tune made my skin feel warm, and my eyes drooped heavily until I couldn't tell if I were awake or still dreaming.

My mind was suddenly filled with images of dark trees, falling water, rolling clouds, and bright lights buzzing over the water's surface. I could see it as clearly as if I were standing right in front of it. I glanced at the nightstand, where I'd laid out some random supplies I'd taken from the studio after I hightailed my ass back to the house. Cyn and Cilas were long gone when I got back, but I was relieved because all I'd wanted to do was take a long shower and think about what the fuck I'd just seen out there in the woods. It was a skinwalker, of all things, and somehow, I was still alive and breathing.

I didn't waste a second throwing off the covers and slipping into some shorts and a loose tank top. I kissed Kevin on the head before grabbing the bundle of supplies and leaving the room, trying not to disturb Kyle, who was curled up on the end of the guest bed. I still couldn't bring myself to explore my old bedroom, so this would have to do for now, especially since I'd destroyed the living room, which I still wasn't sorry about. Something about seeing this house slowly fall to pieces made me feel all warm inside.

Before I made it outside, I snatched a half empty bottle of tequila off the mantle and took it with me. I fucking hated the stuff, but I needed to numb my mind right now and this would do.

The rain wasn't nearly as bad as it had sounded from inside the house. There, it was thunderous, like the skies had opened up and decided to empty out on my house specifically. Instead, there was only a slight drizzle, if you could even call it that, and in some spots, starlight even poked through the clouds.

I was barefoot, but the moss under my soles felt soft and warm, as did the muggy night air. I'd always loved the warm rains of the South. The smells of rotting moss, dead leaves, and ripening fruit from the orchards filled the air, making me crave some juicy peaches. Maybe tomorrow, I'd go for a walk and collect some, since I was running low on gas station food to tide me over.

I took the familiar path through the dead little garden my sister had left behind, cutting through the gazebo before descending down the steps that lead to the little dock. The swamp was a riot of movement tonight, rippling with raindrops, while lightning bugs danced over the surface. Crickets chirped in the background, and although the music was beautiful, it made me remember the reason I'd come out here to begin with.

Where was that haunting voice I'd heard, the song that woke me up and coaxed me out of bed at this ungodly hour? All I could hear was the rustling of branches, the tapping of rain on the water, and the dance of the crickets.

I sat on the dock and unrolled the supplies, setting up the tiny easel in front of me, hoping I wouldn't knock it over into the water, since it wasn't weighted down. I spread out my old wooden palette, knives, and two brushes to my right, before filling up a small plastic cup with swamp water.

My movements were pure muscle memory, and something inside me twisted uncomfortably as memories rushed back in. How many hours had I spent in this exact spot with my dad, watching him paint masterpieces while I attempted to create something that wasn't complete trash?

Taking a long swig from the bottle of tequila, I grimaced as I swallowed before gulping down another. My blood was starting to buzz pleasantly, and soon, everything would start to seem a bit more bearable.

I was never an artist, but I didn't suck either. My paintings were good enough that I'd won a couple of art competitions back in high school, and I was even featured in the town's newspaper once too, but it was nothing compared to my dad. Still, I had to admit it felt good to hold a paintbrush in my hands again, feeling the chipped wood of the handles, running my thumb over the coarse bristles.

I dipped the brush in the swamp water before coating it in a beautiful deep green watercolor that reminded me of Spanish moss on a dark night.

Instead of thinking too hard about what I was doing, I decided to just say fuck it, putting brush to canvas and painting. Green splashed everywhere, dark, light, messy, and clean. My brush strokes were all over the place, but it felt right. I mixed the green with black, then added some blue here and there for depth.

I painted sweeping shapes over a background of deep green and black. Spindly tree limbs twisted through the shadows of the moonlight I added coming from behind. I was pretty sure this whole painting would look like a fucking mess in the light of day, but out here, with the slow but steady raindrops mixing with my thick brush strokes, it looked like something dad would have painted. Something about it was magical tonight.

Licking my lips, I tasted salt and paused, dropping the brush into my lap, bringing my

fingers up to my face in surprise. I could feel wetness that wasn't the rain on my cheeks and realized I was crying. My dad's face flashed through my mind—his gray eyes that looked so much like mine, white blond hair that both Magnolia and I had inherited, and the laugh lines around his kind eyes that always made me feel safe and cherished. He'd been a really good fucking dad, and it was my fault he didn't exist anymore.

I cried harder as the rain picked up. It battered the swamp surface like a steady drum, accompanying the chorus of crickets. My sobs were loud and a little bit obnoxious as I choked on my grief. It hurt so damn bad when I let the floodgates open, and they were wide open right now, so there was no stopping it until I was empty. After several more long gulps, the bottle was empty, and I tossed it with a curse into the swamp. I teetered to the side for a moment, nearly falling in, but managed to catch myself just in time.

It'd been a long time since I'd allowed myself the freedom to cry like this. Sure, there were times when an idle tear would spring forward unannounced, but normally, my brain was in such a haze from the drugs and alcohol that I was numb to the memories. Being back here, though...it was doing something to me that I didn't expect. It was like I was reliving those last moments over and over again, smelling the same smells, hearing familiar sounds. I was smothered with the memory of the life I used to have.

I stared at the canvas as I picked it up off of the easel, running my eyes over the hard brushstrokes. Somehow, I'd managed to depict details I might not have noticed before, like the sway of the leaves, the reflection of the moon on the water, and the glow of the fireflies. This right here was what the song had made me feel.

Then I spotted something else—something I didn't remember painting. Towards the bottom of the canvas, nearly off the edge completely, was a pair of glowing eyes. They were green like dark marbles against a backdrop of swamp water, and they were watching me. My heart leapt into my throat, and I quickly lowered the canvas.

I yelped, dropping my picture into the water as I came face-to-face with Kazimir. He rose up out of the dark water with his hands gripping the front of the dock. Water weighed down his thick, long black hair and glistened off of his deep hued skin. His lips were wide with a sinister smile. “I was hoping you'd visit me again.”

I blinked at him, my heart still racing. How the hell had he moved so silently that I hadn't noticed his approach? Maybe it was the fact that the rain had grown louder, picking up pace even now, and had disguised the sound of his massive appendages sloshing through the water.

“It was you,” I said, crawling forward until I was on my knees in front of him. The position brought us eye to eye. “Your voice...” I was one-hundred-percent positive it was him who'd called me out here. Suddenly, it made sense.

His smile grew. “Did you like my lullaby? I sang it just for you.”

“It was beautiful,” I answered honestly. “Kind of hypnotic, actually.” It was as if something in the song was irresistible, like a pull on the center of my chest that had to be followed no matter what. I ran my eyes over his scaled body, marveling at the deep blues and greens that matched his swamp. “Are you some kind of siren?” I'd never heard of a swamp siren before.

He shrugged, which was such a humanlike gesture. “Not a siren, but you're close. Humans have plenty of names for me, but none of them are quite right.”

That was extremely vague. I mentally flipped through what I knew of modern folklore, but it wasn't much. He wasn't a merman, because he didn't have a tail, and he also wasn't a selkie for obvious reasons. He also wasn't Nessie, which he'd confirmed the other day...so that pretty much left sirens or water sprites, if those were even a thing. At this point, I wasn't ruling anything out.

“I’ve been calling you a swamptopus,” I said, heat building in my cheeks. Saying it out loud sounded psychotic.

He laughed, this time deep and bellowing in his whole chest. “Hundreds of years on this earth, and I don’t believe I’ve ever been called a...swamptopus. Should I be insulted?”

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:08 am

I cracked a smile. His deep laugh filled my whole body with buzzing fireflies. “Depends, should I be offended when you call me sad one?”

His dark eyes glimmered. “Oh, but are you sad, aren't you? So deeply devastated that I can't imagine a more perfect name for my new pet...” He rose up farther on the dock, bringing our faces close together. We were nose to nose, and I could see my reflection in his marble-like black eyes. His fingers sunk into my hair as he cupped the side of my head. The webbing felt odd, but not unpleasant, as did the slight scratch of his claws. “I saw you that night, you know.”

I blinked at him. What did he just say? My gaze flitted between his eyes as I frowned in confusion, then I shook my head. What night? Was he talking about my first night back, when I'd come down to his swamp and saw that black tentacle rising out of the water? Of course he saw me. I was pretty sure he'd seen me long before I saw him. He'd probably been stalking me from the moment my feet touched the gazebo.

He shook his head at my confusion. “No. I mean I saw you, ten years ago, as you fled towards the gates, covered in blood and screaming for your life.” I sucked in a sharp breath as I flinched. The memory of that night hit me, knocking me off kilter. Kaz caught me in his strong arms. “Your screams were so beautiful, and your fear kept me full for months after you were gone.” He licked his lips with that forked tongue as my eyes glazed over in memory. “It was thick and sweet, tinged with rage, guilt, and regret. I haven't tasted something that completely satisfying since.”

My heart was in my throat. He'd been there...during the worst moments of my life, lapping up my pain like it was his favorite meal. He'd enjoyed my suffering, wanted more of it, like he did now. It made me wonder if he'd had the opportunity to change

things, the same way he stopped Chaos from ripping my face off the other night. Had he heard my parent's screams and chosen to ignore it, or had he eaten their fear too? The thought made my stomach revolt.

"I can read you like a book," he said, interrupting my racing thoughts. I tried to pull away from him, but his arms just tightened around me as he started to push away from the dock. "You think I let them die on purpose..." Shaking his head, he waded farther out into the swamp. Even if I could get away now, I'd have to race him back to the bank and I'd never make it. He chuckled as if I'd just told the funniest joke he'd ever heard. "You humans and your suspicions and assumptions." Despite my struggle, clawed fingers raked through my hair again, like he was petting me, trying to console me. "Unfortunately, I missed out on the buffet your family provided so freely." Peering into my eyes, he didn't show a single ounce of remorse for his biting words. "Had I been there, I would have feasted, just like I'll feast on you soon."

I narrowed my eyes on him as I stilled in his arms. My hands were on his bare chest, and I could feel the roughness of the scales under my fingers. The skin that wasn't scaled felt similar to human skin, maybe a little slicker and quite a bit tougher. There was no question that I was completely at this creature's mercy. He could slice me into pieces right now if he decided not to draw this out any longer.

I heaved out a long sigh, my shoulders dropping in defeat and exhaustion. In another life, I might have fought against him or begged him to spare me or taken my chances with the stagnant waters, but I had no interest in living this life anymore.

"Will it hurt when you do it?" I asked not that it mattered. I lived with pain as a constant in my life and inflicted it on myself every day. Every time my eyes opened and I realized I was stuck in this same monotonous life, I was in fucking pain.

His lips stretched into a smile, and a chill ran over my skin as his sharp teeth gleamed at me. "Yes, sad one. It's going to hurt a lot, but you don't have to worry. I'll make it

as quick as I can manage, though I can't make promises on behalf of my...friends."

I paused, looking at him skeptically. "That's the second time you said it like that. How do you know Cyn and Cilas anyway? Don't tell me there's some kind of monster support group held in the back of the old shed every Wednesday." I was already laughing at the absurdity of that mental image. "Cilas made it seem like you've had run-ins with Chaos before too." I shivered again, picturing that horrible creature, wondering where the hell he'd ended up.

"I know every creature that passes through here," he said, his eyes scanning our dark surroundings before settling on me again. "This is my domain, and I choose who stays and who goes. Those two showed up not long after your left, drawn in by the darkness that hovers over this place, like so many others. It's busier than ever these days, actually. Cyn and Cilas have been useful in weeding out the gluttons from the simply curious."

"Aren't you all gluttons though?" We waded farther into the swamp waters, and I was now soaked all the way up to my chest. I could feel his tentacles moving below the water as I wrapped my thighs around his waist to hold myself steady. His arms did the rest of the work.

He grinned wickedly. "Oh, I'm definitely a glutton, but even I know my limits. It would be so easy for us to devour every morsel of suffering inside of you, to drink you dry before feasting on your soft flesh until there was nothing left but bones to throw to the lesser creatures. In fact, I considered it the moment you approached my waters, reeking of dread."

His awful words should have had me screaming. I knew my reactions weren't normal, and I was probably officially insane at this point, because all I did was relax into his hold and listen. He could have killed me ten years ago too, when my fear and pain was fresh, but he didn't. He let me leave, and I felt like there was a reason for

that.

“But you didn’t,” I said, fishing for answers. “If it was so easy, then why hold back? What’s the point of all this?” I gestured to the way he held me in his arms. I didn’t understand.

He cradled the back of my head, his eyes flickering with excitement in the moonlight. “Because I have other cravings too, Iris. I might be a monster, but I am still a male, and with that comes very male needs. There are so many ways to savor you, and I plan on making the most of it.” Flicking his forked tongue out, he skimmed it along the seam of my lips until I opened for him. It took a moment, but I complied. Leaning in, Kaz placed a small kiss on my lips, and my eyes fell shut, savoring the unusual softness of them. “Would you like me to fuck you the way the shadows did?”

My eyes flew open as I felt something harden against my core as he pulled me tighter to his muscular body. I moved my hips against it, and need flared in his eyes. He licked his lips again, and there was a slight tremor in his grip, as if he was barely holding himself back.

“And what do I get out of this?” I asked, my voice breathless. Maybe I was the one holding myself back.

That hardness moved again, pressing harder against my slick core, and I glanced down between my spread thighs but could barely see through the dark water. Noting this, he rose up until our waists broke the surface. I sucked in a breath as a flush of heat traveled through me.

His cock was unlike anything I’d ever seen, even in the deepest, darkest recesses of porn sites. It was massive, to the point that I wasn’t even sure it would fit inside of me, but it was also covered in dark green and black scales with a long ridge that ran up the underside of it. The ridge was bumpy and looked hard, as if it was some kind

of cartilage just underneath the scales. He was full and hard, and I could see a slight pulsing, letting me know that all I had to do was say the word and he'd plunge that thing inside of me.

I met his eyes again, my whole body responding to the feel of his growing cock that was now lying against my abdomen. I dragged my palms down the front of his chest, feeling my way towards his arms and down farther, until I reached the first of the many tentacles that protruded from his sides.

Two of them immediately moved through the water, wrapping around me, holding me in a viselike grip until I couldn't move, but he left my arms free to wander. I moved my hips again, rubbing my sensitive core along the ridges of his cock. Shocks of pleasure rolled through me at the strange feel of his skin.

"If you let me take what I need, I promise to have you writhing in pleasure so great, you'll be begging for death." His words were whispered, but firm and full of very real promises that I knew he would keep. "In an instant, I'll erase every human cock you've ever had inside you, until you're screaming out in exquisite agony. If you let me have you, I'll show you what it feels like to be consumed in every way that you crave."

I wanted that. I wanted to feel everything he described, everything he promised, and more. If the way I'd been handled by Cyn and Cilas before was any indication of what monsters were capable of making me feel, then I'd be an idiot to refuse him.

My fingers flexed at his sides, the tips inching over the top pair of tentacles, and I almost pulled my hand away in surprise as Kaz sucked in a sharp breath. Our eyes met as I explored him, while his face seemed to transform. He looked suddenly feral, the angles of his face appearing sharper, and his onyx eyes were so dark, it only intensified the glowing green ring in the middle. Everything about Kazimir was otherworldly and menacing. He was a monster in its purest form, and he was hungry

for me.

He groaned as I ran my hand along his tentacle, feeling the rough ridges and dips against a plane of silky smooth scales. There was texture to it, but it was still soft and malleable, and it seemed to contract under my touch like a muscle. Arms tightened around me, and his cock pulsed again, telling me it was now or never.

With my mind made up, I wrapped my hand around the tentacle and guided it to my lips, running the very tip over them sensually, then slipping out my tongue and tasting him for the first time. A low growl built in his chest as I licked him while swiveling my hips.

“Show me what it’s like to be with you,” I whispered, letting my tongue trail up the tentacle until I reached the very tip, where I flicked it gently, eliciting another groan of pleasure from Kaz. “Make me forget the human men. I want to know what a monster can really do to a poor little mortal like me.”

His lips tilted upwards. “Are you sure you know what you're asking for?” It was probably the only warning I’d get.

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I matched his grin with my own as I pressed closer to his chest. I leaned in, placing a gentle kiss on the hollow of his throat, right next to those slitted gills. “Don’t make me ask you twice...”

The way his whole body went taut had me holding my breath in anticipation. My heart was racing, and my body was a live wire of buzzing nerve endings, begging to be stroked. I needed him to touch me, to take me, to fuck me into oblivion until all there was left was him and me. I wanted him to make me forget the outside world. I didn’t belong there anymore. Maybe I never really did in the first place.

Kazimir

I gave Iris a chance to change her mind, and she was lucky I’d extended her even that small amount of consideration. The truth was I didn’t owe this human a thing, but I was feeling unusually generous.

I could feel the need coming off of this woman in waves, and the scent of it, mixed with all of that delicious agony, was utterly intoxicating. I’d never experienced anything like it before, which was why Iris was still breathing instead of rotting at the bottom of my waters. Many a human had passed through in the years I’d called this place my domain. Some of them had tried to bargain for their lives, tempting me but ultimately falling short.

I’d never encountered a mortal who possessed something that I wanted more than their pain, something that would satisfy me to the same degree. In the end, it was always the same, and my depths were filled with the bones of the ones who’d failed to run from me.

Iris Cooper was the first to stall my wrath for as long as she had, and that intrigued me. She intrigued me. At first, it was irksome that a weak mortal woman could possibly affect me so intensely. I'd contemplated ending her pathetic little life before I could find out why, perhaps out of spite alone. Now I was glad I'd chosen to stick this out and discover exactly who Iris was and what she was doing here after all these years.

I hadn't recognized her at first, not until the moment I heard her screams through the window of the bedroom downstairs. It was a sound I couldn't forget even if I tried, even after all these years. The pieces fell into place quickly, and I could remember that night as if it'd only happened yesterday. The young girl she used to be was clear in my mind, though there was something so different about her, something integral that had changed in the depth of her soul. Maybe that was why I hadn't connected it before.

Families had come and gone over the centuries, and eventually, they all began to blur together, but I did have vague recollections of the Coopers. The family had called this place home for maybe four generations before Iris was born. If I recalled correctly, she'd had a younger sister, a mother, and a father, but their names escaped me. I didn't normally keep track of the finer details, only observing them from afar.

The night Iris' family was slaughtered, I'd followed the sound of her screams as she fled the house covered in blood, both her own and someone else's. Her pale hair had been matted to her pretty face, and a deep slash marred her skin, cutting her from ear to chin. She'd run for her life, cutting through dense trees, slipping in the mud from the week's rainstorms. Barefoot and in a long silky white dress, she wasn't much more than a vulnerable little mouse begging to be hunted and devoured.

Yet I spared her that night. For reasons I never quite understood, I'd let her run from me and watched as that pale hair had disappeared through the fog down that long country road until the scent of her fear tapered off, leaving only whispers behind for

me to feed on.

She was a woman now, and so far removed from the person she was a decade ago. Her eyes were the saddest gray I'd ever seen, but the depth of her agony only highlighted a certain haunting beauty that was incredibly rare for a mortal. She was beautiful in many different ways, and I was still a male who could appreciate such beauty.

She made my cock hard and my mouth salivate to taste her in all kinds of ways that I'd only experienced during fleeting moments of time. I wanted Iris Cooper carnally, in the way a man craved a woman, both flesh and soul. I found myself wanting to hear the sound of her voice as she moaned my name, even the human version of my name I'd given her.

I paused as I breathed in her delicate scent, my senses on alert. I could feel another presence in the woods on the edge of my waters, a creature I hadn't seen in many, many years. His eyes were following every movement Iris made. I could see him far off in the distance as she leaned in to place a soft kiss on the hollow of my throat. I smiled at the creature through the trees, but he had no ability to smile back. This creature had no name and could not speak with human words or otherwise, but he was cunning and intelligent enough.

I let him watch without alerting Iris to his presence, knowing that if I did, she might lose interest in letting me consume her. Humans spooked easily, and I wouldn't risk letting her go so quickly. So I let the creature watch as I pulled her closer, raked my claws through her thick pale hair, and twined my tentacles around her curvy body.

Her skin was silky soft, even the spots she'd decorated herself in deep silvery slashes. This woman craved pain, and I would give her more of it gladly.

Creature

There was pain in the air tonight. P—a pain so thick that it suffocated the cool night and had me searching through the thick trees. I normally kept away from the human dwellings, but the scent was just too tempting not to follow.

The woman was staying in the old house that had been shrouded in darkness for the last decade. She was alone and vulnerable, and she smelled delicious. I hadn't been close to a human in years, unless it was to devour them. I kept to my woods, preying on wayward hikers or lost souls who answered my calls.

I'd followed her from the tree line for three days, watching her come and go from the old house. Sometimes she was crying, while other times she was screaming or laughing. Last night, I'd lured her out into my woods with every intention of devouring her, only...I'd hesitated.

She hadn't run from me like so many others. She hadn't screamed or tried to fight me off. She'd simply stared at me, intrigued enough to ask me questions. Humans didn't ask the likes of me questions. I'd been so taken aback by her strange response to me, I decided to spare her, if only because I wanted to know more about her.

She'd given me a name, something I'd never considered nor craved, yet when she gave it to me, there had been a moment between us that solidified something inside of me. There was a need that grew by the hour, the need to own this human and possess her in every way. She'd claimed ownership of me with this name, and I wanted to return the favor.

Tonight, she'd been running through the soaking rain, with her moonlight hair plastered to her face as she carried a bundle of fabric under her arm.

Humans were odd creatures, and I'd never really understood what motivated them. I chose to study this human from afar, never letting her see me, save for that one time. I'd tempted my own restraint that day, and I'd felt her fear wash over me, drinking it

in like the sweetest nectar. It only made me crave it more.

Kazimir had her in his arms now, the moonlight shining off of their skin, his deep green and blue next to her pearly paleness. She was wrapped in his various appendages and seemed to be enjoying it, which was an odd reaction for a human. I'd watched Kazimir devour countless mortals over the years, and never once did he hesitate. Still, the way he cradled this woman in his arms was something akin to worship.

I watched as they began to writhe against each other, both rubbing and feeling, as if they couldn't get enough. The woman, who Kazimir referred to as Iris, moaned loudly, letting her head fall backwards as she closed her eyes in pleasure. For the first time in many centuries, I felt my own cock stir.

Looking down, I watched in fascination as it hardened, hanging heavily between my legs as I peered through the trees. I reached for my length and gripped it in my clawed fingers, giving it a rough stroke. Pleasure coursed through me, making me groan as my strokes became more intense. The sound must have alerted Kazimir, because when I glanced back towards the couple, his glowing green eyes were locked directly on me. His lips were tilted into a smile, as if he knew exactly what I was craving and why.

Iris reveled in the feeling of his tentacles sliding over her lush body. I'd never witnessed a mortal give themselves so completely to their needs. The fear and grief that had saturated the air and pulled me here was fading, quickly being replaced by heavy, thick lust and want. It was a desperate sort of need coming off of her, as if she were seconds from going feral herself.

I decided to stay and see how far she let Kazimir take this, fisting my throbbing cock tightly as she rubbed her cunt against him. I could smell her arousal from here, and it was intoxicating—so intoxicating, I could feel other creatures closing in on Kazimir's

swamp, salivating for just one taste of her. This begged the question, would he fuck the tiny human woman before devouring her? Or would he drink her pleasure as well as her pain?

Iris

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He ripped off my panties like they were made of nothing at all, exposing my wet pussy to the night air, and his growl at the scent of my arousal had me nearly preening. The sensation of his eyes running along every curve of my body was like a fucking drug, and I needed more.

Choosing to help this along, I anchored my hands behind his neck and lifted my hips, angling myself right over his cock. I moved slowly, letting my wetness trail along his ridged hardness, shivering at the strangely textured skin. I'd never felt anything like it. Even my vibrators paled in comparison to this, and I'd purchased some doozies in my day.

His hold on me tightened, while the suction cups under the shaft of his dark tentacles felt along my skin like tiny tongues. My eyes were already rolling as I swiveled my entrance over the head of his cock, then back down again ever so slowly. His nails dug into my skin as I ground on him.

A little voice in my head warned me to be careful, but I drowned it out with pleasure. The voice told me he was too big to fit, that he'd tear me in half and fuck my corpse until he was sated. To that, I said, Finally...

With a deep, impatient growl, he thrust his hips forward, impaling me wholly until I could practically feel him in my throat.

I screamed, my voice reverberating off of every tree that surrounded us, skipping over the glassy surface of the swamp. A flock of birds startled into the air, soaring overhead. I noticed belatedly that the crickets had stopped chirping, and even the fireflies had dimmed to barely there lights in the distance, keeping far away from the

two of us.

That was when the song began again. The voice I'd heard on the wind, the one that had lured me out here in the rain, was singing to me again, emanating from Kazimir's chest as he sunk deep into me. It was a melodic hum that sounded like multiple voices at once. The voice wrapped around my whole body, caressing every part of me. I peered up into his eyes, noting the way they seemed to glow even brighter now, the emerald green ring shining against an endless black void.

Desperation clawed at me, begging me to move, and so I did. With my legs wrapped around his hips, I ground myself down on his cock, tears leaking out of the corner of my eyes at the pain of the impossible stretch. He groaned deeply, and all the while, that song never paused. It was definitely coming from Kaz, but I couldn't understand how he was doing it.

The thick tentacles tightened before gently raising me up. His cock dragged through my wetness, nearly coming out entirely by the time I was lifted off of his hips. I whimpered, feeling too empty and needing him to fill me again before I lost my mind. As if he read my thoughts, he grinned and slammed me back down until I was fully seated again. My eyes rolled back as he fucked me faster now, moving my body for me as I hung there limp in his grasp. He used my body like I was a puppet, as if I were as light as a feather, a tool for his pleasure.

A hand snaked upwards between my breasts, skimming along my skin in near reverence. He hooked a claw in the hem of my night shirt and shredded it right down the center, letting the fabric fall away into the dark water. His tongue was on me immediately, licking my hardened nipples until I moaned in exquisite agony. Every touch felt like fire, and every lick was ecstasy.

I rolled my hips as he slammed me down into his length, seeking out the ridges of his cock. Each bump and scale dragged against my contracting walls, creating friction

that built slowly into a punishing heat. He was so large that every time I bottomed out, my clit would rub against his scales, causing my thighs to shake with pleasure.

“Oh god...” I groaned, my head lolling to the side as my eyes rolled back. His thrusts became faster and shorter, hitting a spot inside of me that had me seeing stars. “Oh shit...oh god!” My moans were breathy and choked, and I could barely get a word out.

“I’m your god now, sad one,” he rumbled as his hand moved from my bare breasts to my throat, closing around it just tight enough that it was painful but still allowing me to breathe. Bringing our faces closer, Kaz showed his sharp teeth, his nostrils flaring as he breathed me in, his thrusts never once stopping or slowing down. “When your soul cries out for absolution, I will be the one that answers. Your god, your master, your undoing...”

At his words, my body came alive. A declaration like that should have terrified me, but I wanted it. I wanted Kazimir to be my god. I’d worship at his altar for an eternity if he’d fuck me like this. Then he finally kissed me. We were a tangle of limbs and lips, and I let him devour me, his forked tongue slipping into my mouth like a serpent. I drank the taste of him down greedily, knowing I needed more.

The water rippled around us, and my eyes flew open. Long, dark shapes rose out of the water, moonlight glinting off of their shiny surface. While two of his tentacles held me aloft, the six others created a tangle around us, one twining through the long strands of my hair to hold my head back, exposing my neck, while two others swirled around my puckered breasts, their suction cups plucking at my nipples while I squirmed.

He kept up his pace relentlessly, slamming his cock up into my tight pussy that contracted and spasmed around it. His teeth were gritted tightly now as his face grew sharper and feral. I was coming hard in seconds as my nipples were stroked and his

hand tightened around my throat painfully. It came in waves of unyielding pleasure, and my moans grew louder, even as his fingers tightened, making me choke.

I began to squirt, releasing the pressure inside of me, and it spurted out onto Kazimir's abdomen, coating his already slick scales with my wetness. At this, I felt him throb inside me, a wet heat beginning to fill me up as he came.

A pressure nudged at my ass, and my eyes locked onto Kaz, wide and shocked. His cock was still thrusting in and out of me while a rogue tentacle pushed at my back entrance, begging for me to welcome him inside. I was no stranger to anal, but it was very rare that I'd encountered a man that knew what he was doing. Still, I had zero worries that Kaz would be a fumbling idiot about it. In fact, his tentacle was already swirling around in our combined wetness, slicking itself through his dripping cum as it leaked out of me.

Then he brushed it against my ass again at the same time he ran his tongue up the side of my throat and tickled the shell of my ear. "Let me in, sad one, and I'll make you feel things you've never imagined were possible. I'll have you begging for relief before tonight is over."

I let my body relax, and that spurred Kaz on as he slipped that tentacle into my ass, already coated with my juices. I moaned as he stretched my hole, grinding down on his cock with need growing steadily inside of me. I wanted more...needed more right this second. The tentacle sunk in deeply, the little suction cups tickling my walls as he began to thrust. I'd never felt sensations like this, and soon, I was a shaking, writhing mess. My eyes rolled back in my head as he fucked me, both with his cock in my pussy and his tentacle in my ass.

He kissed me again, silencing my moans, his forked tongue slipping into my mouth as I greedily kissed him back, sinking my hands into the long curtain of his wet black hair. His skin was slippery and soft like a snake, and I couldn't help but want to rub

myself all over him. We devoured each other greedily as we fucked hard. The slaps of our skin echoed through the trees, and soon, the sound of whispers filled the night. I didn't open my eyes but could swear that I felt hundreds of eyes on me, salivating over my every moan.

When I finally came, it was violent. My whole body shook, utterly racked with insane pleasure that filled my body like liquid fire. I screamed into Kazimir's mouth, and he groaned back as his cock pulsed inside my pussy, hot jets of cum coating my insides and leaking out of me into the water.

He ripped his mouth from mine and pulled my head backwards with a fist full of my hair. My eyes were already hazing over as the aftershocks of my orgasms hit me. I moaned as his mouth opened wide and that hauntingly beautiful song once again emanated from deep inside of him, lulling me into a strange state of calmness, slowing down the beating of my heart. Suddenly, all I wanted to do was sleep for a long, long time.

"I have a secret," he whispered. I blinked at him, not understanding. His eyes sparkled with both mischief and pride as he lowered his lips to my ear. "Peter didn't kill himself that night, but his suffering...was exquisite."

With his mouth open wide, Kazimir held my face between his fingers as he stared into my eyes, that green ring glowing so bright, it was all I could focus on. Then he sucked in deep breath after deep breath, and that familiar pull in the center of my chest stretched towards him.

My mouth opened as my head tilted back, and those tendrils of ghostly white mist flowed from me to him. It took less than ten seconds for my eyes to flutter shut as his lullaby sang me to sleep.

Iris

I crunched my way through dead leaves that littered the ground, holding my sweater tightly to myself as the wind picked up. I was exhausted and my whole body ached after what I'd done last night, but it was a good kind of ache, one that brought a small smile to my lips when I daydreamed about every touch, every kiss, and every thrust.

I'd slept like the dead today, and the sun was already setting behind the trees. The first thing I did after waking up was scour the dusty old kitchen for a coffee maker. I found my mom's old Keurig and fired that bad boy up. Luckily, I never left for a trip without bringing my coffee with me. Sure, I'd spiked the coffee with whiskey, but it still counted as my morning pick-me-up, right? I'd just needed a little boost, and it worked. I'd drunk three cups before I began to feel human again, then decided it was time pay a visit to a place I'd been avoiding since coming back to this fucking house.

The old groundskeeper's cottage was nestled at the back of the property, not far away from the boathouse. It backed up against seven rows of trees that made up the orchard that blended into the wooded swamp. It was a small two-bedroom cottage with an old tin roof, a stone chimney, and an arched wooden front door painted bright crimson red.

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My steps grew heavy as I approached the cottage, the voice inside my head nothing but echoing laughter that wouldn't stop. I hated that voice and had tried so many times to silence it, with no fucking luck.

Movement caught my eye just to the left-hand side of the cottage, where a little stone footpath led down towards the boathouse. The trees rustled, but it could have been the wind. Still, I narrowed my eyes towards the darkness, searching for a pair of tall, spindly antlers. There was nothing but shadows, as far as I could tell.

The smart thing to do was to leave it be and forget the skinwalker I'd encountered in those trees. He hadn't spoken, but there was no doubt in my mind that he'd been intelligent, and it was because of him that I now knew Cyn and Cilas' little secret. I still needed to find them and demand answers, but they'd been suspiciously absent when I got back to the house.

Ignoring the urge to go into the trees in search of Creature, I took a deep breath in and approached the front door of the cottage. The door was unlocked, so I let myself in. A gust of dusty air blew my hair back as I stepped inside, shutting the door behind me. It was dark, save for the patches of the setting sun peeking in through the windows, casting ominous shadows along the walls.

It was the same as I remembered—just an outdated cottage, with old wooden flooring, dusty couches, a bearskin rug, and animal busts hanging on the walls. Henry, the old groundskeeper, had been an avid hunter, and had even taken my dad out with him a few times to track some hogs. Their taxidermied beady black eyes watched me as I crept through the living room.

The last time I'd seen the inside of this cottage, I was eighteen years old, sneaking into Peter's room, while Henry was passed out in front of the TV with a beer in his hand. I'd done it a million times, and I was pretty sure Henry had never suspected a thing was going on between his twenty-something son and his employer's teenage daughter.

I took my time exploring the cottage, noting the crumbling ceiling, the torn wallpaper, and an odd stain on the floor that looked suspiciously like blood. I thought back to what Kaz had confessed last night and shivered at the mental image. Had he been telling the truth? For ten years, I had been under the impression that Peter shot himself like a fucking coward instead of facing what he'd done to my family. That was the story every news outlet in the country went with, and that was what the detectives had told me.

Did they all lie to me? Why? What was the harm in telling me exactly how it'd happened? If it was to spare me the gory details, then they were all idiots. I'd always thought that he'd gotten away too cleanly for my liking, and if he hadn't killed himself, I would have returned to finish the job for him.

Standing in the long hallway at the back of the cottage, I stared at the closed door to his bedroom. How many times had I crossed that threshold, giggling and starry-eyed, having absolutely no idea what I was getting myself into?

Regret was so fucking heavy in my chest as I pushed open the bedroom door, letting wave after wave of memories wash over me. That last night was burned into my brain like a fucking brand...

* * *

I stumbled to a stop, catching myself on the doorframe of Peter's bedroom, giggling as I covered my mouth with my hand. Henry was asleep on the couch, but I was

shocked he hadn't woken up at the sound of my clumsy footsteps as I clicked through the house on my sky-high heels.

Prom night was everything I'd hoped it would be and more, and even better was that I got to spend it in a dress I'd saved up for for months, working at the local bookshop in town. It was long, white, and gauzy, and it swished around my ankles, reminding me of a bridal gown. My long pale hair was in loose curls around my shoulders, and I'd fixed my meticulously painted on makeup in the backseat of the car before I was dropped off—that way, my boyfriend could see the full effect.

I was bummed out that he couldn't go to prom on my arm, but people in town would most definitely frown at a thirty-year-old man escorting around a high school senior. Except I was eighteen, so I didn't see what the big fucking deal was. I was old enough to make decisions for myself, and if I wanted to be with Peter, then I would and they'd all just have to accept that. He always told me how mature I was for my age, and he was right—I was an old soul, even according to my mom.

I knocked on Peter's bedroom door, still giggling, and it swung open before the second knock, surprising me enough that I stumbled backwards on heels that I wasn't used to wearing. I thought I was going to crash into the wall, but Peter caught my wrist just in time, hauling me forward.

“Get the fuck in here...” he hissed at me, yanking on my wrist so hard that I stumbled forward into his dark room that smelled like weed. “Fucking shit, Iris. You're gonna wake up the old man.”

My wrist burned where his fingers gripped it, and I knew it was going to leave a bruise—one of many I was sporting these days. Peter had some issues with PTSD ever since getting back from overseas, so I tried not to hold it against him. Sometimes, I just said the wrong thing or moved too quickly, and it triggered something inside of him. I needed to start being more mindful of his triggers, because

it wasn't fair to him. I knew how guilty he felt every time he hit me by accident, or when he couldn't help but scream and yell. I apologized for my behavior until I was blue in the face, but I still felt like shit for it.

"Take off those damn hooker shoes, would ya?" he grumbled, locking the door behind him. He shoved me towards his bed, and once again, I lost my footing and stumbled. "Where the fuck have you been? I've been calling you for four hours."

He was looming over me, tall and broad, with his blue eyes shot through with red veins as if he'd stayed up for hours on end without sleep. His drinking was getting worse, I knew that, but I hadn't realized it was this bad already. There were dark purple bags under his eyes, and his normally tanned skin was pale and gaunt.

"Pete, you know where I was. I told you like a million times that I was going to prom." Not that he ever really listened to me when I talked about school or my art or anything I was interested in, outside of sex.

His eyes narrowed, and his nostrils flared in rage. "I told you not to go to that damn party, but you went anyway, didn't you? You little fucking slut, whoring around with your little friends in those skimpy dresses for all your boyfriends to cum in their pants for." Looking me up and down, his eyes burned with disgust.

Tears were already welling in my eyes. I shook my head frantically. "I told you I had to go, Pete. I'm on the committee, I had to be there. And Mags won prom queen this year, isn't that great?" I crawled backwards in the bed, my heart racing as I fought the urge to vomit the four cups of spiked punch all over the place. I softened my voice as much as I could. "Baby, I wore this dress for you... I wanted you to see me like this. Like a woman..."

"Yeah you look like a fucking woman," he spat as he reached for me, crawling up and over me until his knees pinned my arms to the mattress. "You probably let all

those boys take turns fucking you, right?” My breathing turned ragged as his fingers gripped the front of my throat, squeezing just enough to be a very real threat. “You want me to show you what a real man feels like, sweetheart? I’ll fuck this tight little ass until you bleed, whore.”

“Peter, stop! You don’t know what you’re saying—” The words were almost all the way out, but before I could beg some more, his fist came down on my face.

My head whipped to the side, and I saw stars, my vision blurring as bile crept up my throat. I tried to wiggle free, but he was so much heavier and stronger than I was, and he held me down easily. My arms were already going numb beneath his knees, so scratching at him wouldn’t do a damn thing.

He grabbed my chin, squeezing his fingers tight enough to bruise my face, forcing me to look into his eyes as he leaned down close. I could smell the liquor on his hot breath. “Don’t you ever tell me what to do, bitch. I’ve put up with your bratty ass for too damn long, and this is what I get? I fuck you like a queen, girl. I deserve some fucking respect!”

I nodded my head again frantically. “I’ll do whatever you want baby, I swear it. Just let go, and it’ll be okay. We can forget all of this.” I was just trying to appease him enough to let me go, because the moment I was free, I was getting out of here and going straight to Dad. He’d know what to do. He was friends with a cop in town, and they’d deal with Peter.

Before I knew what was happening, Peter’s mouth was slamming into mine in a violent, painful kiss. His teeth knocked against mine with an audible clack. His breath tasted the way it smelled, and another bout of nausea rolled through me.

When his lips tore away from mine, I tried to scream, but it was cut off by his hand covering my mouth as he fumbled with his belt. “I said shut the fuck up...” His

words were slurred through his gritted teeth. “I’m gonna fuck you raw before I wring this pretty neck. Yer gonna think twice before fuckin’ around on me.” The promises were in his eyes as well as his words. I knew without a doubt that Peter was going to kill me tonight.

Panic ruled my every thought as I did the only thing I could think of and slammed my knee upwards, connecting as hard as I could with his balls. He let out a curse, squeezing his eyes shut tight as he recoiled. I used his surprise to shove him off of me, and being the drunken mess that he was, he rolled right off the bed, thumping loudly to the floor.

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I couldn't waste any time, so I ran. I made it out his bedroom door, knowing I didn't have much time until he was after me. Henry shot up off the couch, his bleary eyes wide as he took me in, noting the blood smeared across my face and my tangled, disheveled hair.

"Iris, whatcha doin here so late?" He scratched his head in confusion. There was a loud thump from the other room, followed by a curse, and Henry's eyes darkened in understanding. He stood from the couch slowly. "You go on, girl. Wake up yer dad and tell him to come see me, you hear me? Don't you worry about him." He nodded towards the hallway.

I didn't waste any time. Turning on my heel, I fled the groundskeeper's cottage and ran as fast as my feet could take me, heading straight for the house, straight towards safety. I was in such a rush that I didn't see a massive branch that had fallen across the pathway, tripping me up and sending me hurtling towards the ground.

I rolled until I was able to sit up and made quick work of unbuckling my heels, knowing I was likely to break an ankle out here. I had the last one undone and was in the process of climbing to my feet when I heard the gunshot. The sound echoed through the night, sending a flock of nearby birds fleeing into the sky. Mouth agape, I stared in horror at the cottage, hoping and praying it had been Henry that pulled the trigger, not the other way around.

The lights in my house up the path turned on, telling me my parents had heard the gunshot. When I was on my feet, ready to run for it, I was stupid enough to glance back at the cottage, foolishly hoping that Henry would come out here and tell me it was all right and that the cops were on their way to take a wounded Peter in.

Only it wasn't Henry that stepped into the light of the open front door. It was Peter. He held a shotgun in his right hand, his once handsome face splattered with dripping blood. His lips twisted into the most vile smile I'd ever seen, then he took a single step towards me, cocking the shotgun as he began to whistle.

* * *

I made it to the bathroom just in time, losing the contents of my stomach into the old dusty sink. My stomach heaved over and over again as memories slammed into me in waves.

Peter's bathroom was connected to his bedroom, and as I stood there at the sink, I placed my hands on the vanity to hold myself up, meeting my own eyes in the mirror. Behind me loomed the dark bedroom that still smelled just like him, even after a decade. My legs shook, making the rest of me shake too.

It's your fault, whore...

I shook my head, trying to rid myself of the voice that never left me alone. I knew it was my own voice, the other part of me that I failed to shut away. It was the voice of who I used to be, judging me for everything I'd failed to do.

I glared into the mirror, meeting my own haunted gray eyes. "You're not fucking real..." The voice only laughed. "You're not real, you're not real, you're not fucking real!" It was a chant that fell on deaf ears.

Oh, I'm as real as you are, bitch, and if you wanna get rid of me, you'll have to blow your own head off... Her laughter just grew, getting louder and louder—so loud that I clamped my hands over my ears, knowing it wouldn't do any good. I couldn't even hear my frantic heartbeat anymore.

I looked back up at the mirror, and my stomach shot to my throat at the smiling face staring back at me. With white blonde hair, gray eyes, and a long jagged silver scar across her face...she was me, and I was her. Her smile was too wide in an unnatural way, and she wasn't blinking. I backed away from the mirror slowly while she moved forward.

"You're not real!" I screamed at her again. My voice was guttural and broken and hurt my throat coming out.

You've tried to keep me out, but I'm stronger now. The more you give yourself to the darkness, the closer I come to the surface.

Her voice was in my head, but her lips...mylips didn't move. She just stared back at me, that smile growing wider and wider, until the sides of her mouth began to crack. The skin looked like porcelain, the fissures traveling out towards her ears and slowly down her neck, all the while her eyes widened with delight and anticipation.

Her laughter echoed in my head, and the sound had me gritting my teeth, rage building up inside of me. She was the reason I was like this, the reason my whole life had fallen to pieces and everything my parents had hoped for my future turned to fucking dust. I hated her. She needed to go. She needed to know the pain that I felt every fucking day of my life.

It's you and me forever, Iris... Just you and me, isn't that what you want? You wanted to run away with him, Iris. Now look at what you've done.

Her smile was so wide now, that it looked like her head was about to split in half, and her eyes were feral and bloodshot. Her skin began to turn gray, little black veins snaking under the surface as her hair fell to the floor in clumps, and still, she laughed.

With a scream of all-consuming rage, I slammed my fist into the mirror. Her image

splintered as the glass shattered, raining down over me, leaving deep cuts and gashes all over my arms and hands. The image of her rotting face was gone in an instant, but I could still hear her words. She repeated the same thing over and over again.

It's you and me forever, Iris.

It's you and me forever, Iris.

It's you and me forever, Iris.

I was covered in blood. It dripped down my hands to my arms, spilling onto the bathroom tile in small puddles. I was pretty sure I hadn't hit an artery, which was kind of a bummer. How poetic would that have been, dying on the floor of Peter's bathroom after ten years of running?

I dropped to my knees, clutching my right hand to my chest. A deep gash split the skin across my palm, and burning pain pulsed through me. Closing my eyes, I relished that pain, savoring it as I rocked back and forth slowly. The image of my own rotting, crumbling face flashed in my head, and the sound of her laughter continued to echo around me.

She was right though. As much as I didn't want to admit it, she was right—it was her and me forever, and there was no escaping it. No amount of therapy, drugs, fucking, or running would ever chase her away. She was a part of me like a cancer, so I was left with only one option in the end.

* * *

I had no idea how long I sat on the floor of Peter's bathroom, but eventually, I decided to climb back to my feet. Every cut on my skin burned with the movement, and blood crusted my skin where it'd started clotting and drying.

I stared at the doorway to the dark bedroom with my heart in my throat. My mouth was as dry as a fucking desert. Why the fuck was I so afraid of this? I could face monsters that literally wanted to eat me and drink my pain like it was wine, yet it was the memory of my past that I wanted to run away from?

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I stumbled into the bedroom, my eyes already adjusted to the darkness, and the smell of it hit me like a brick. Must, mold, filthy, and rotten—that was what this place smelled like. The first thing I noticed were the stains on the walls. They used to be white once upon a time, but now they were decorated in massive black splatters, streaks, handprints, and holes, as if there was a struggle as well as a slaughter.

This wasn't the result of a gunshot wound to the head. I wasn't a police officer, but it didn't take a genius to conclude that something horrific had happened in his room. Maybe that was why they'd kept the truth out of the media. I couldn't imagine what kind of crazy story they would have had to spin in order to explain how Peter had died so messily. Hell, I was pretty sure even the police hadn't known the real truth. How could they?

The same bed Peter had trapped me on the night of prom was in shreds, lying against the far wall, the covers ripped up and the pillows nowhere to be found. The closet door was hanging in pieces off its hinges, and every trinket, poster, or small item placed onto the shelves above where the bed used to be were scattered all over the place, utterly torn apart.

It was an effort to lift my jaw up off the floor. I didn't know what I'd been imagining exactly when Kaz confessed to what he'd done, but this... Something about this seemed personal. I could only imagine the carnage that the police had walked in on. Still, it was nothing compared to the destruction Peter had left behind in my house. He deserved every scream of torture that was brought his way.

The question remained though... Why? Why did Kaz do this?

As I stared around the ruined bedroom, I was slowly overcome by fury. It built and built as I turned in place, trying to imaging the scene in my mind. A part of me wished I had been there to watch him get torn limb from limb...

My vision went dark. Not wholly dark, but the colors were gone, leaving me with black, white, and gray images chopped together in pieces to make a picture. I could still feel my body as I stood immobile, afraid to move, but the vision blinded me.

I knew instantly that it was Creature. He was somewhere nearby, probably stalking me. I wasn't sure how I felt about that, but the feeling wasn't unpleasant. I was still pissed at him for tricking me by using Magnolia's voice, but he'd made up for it by not eating me on the spot.

I watched the scene he was sending me play out.

* * *

It was a dark night, and I was peering through dense branches. There was no sound in these visions, but I could already tell what was happening. It was the night of the murders, and Creature was watching Kaz leave the swamp, his tentacles guiding him along as he stepped onto the banks with his humanlike legs.

Seeing Kazimir like this was breathtaking. So utterly inhuman and otherworldly, he was beautiful in such a grotesque way, and the sight of those tentacles made my whole body tingle, now that I knew what they could do.

The scene glitched, and now Kaz was standing to the left of the gazebo, shrouded in darkness as a man ran from the front porch of my house. The lights were all on in the windows, and he'd left the front door hanging wide open. Kaz stood utterly still as Peter ran along the pathway, holding an axe. He stopped at the edge of the swamp and hurtled the axe out into the water, where it immediately sank to the bottom.

Peter was saturated from head to toe in blood and gore. I couldn't even make out the features of his familiar face. I wanted to vomit, knowing exactly whose blood he was covered in. The vision moved along as Peter ran back to the cottage, throwing open the front door and making it slam against the wall of the porch. Kaz moved once Peter was out of sight, and there was a sinister kind of smile stretching his lips.

Through Creature's eyes, I followed Kaz, watching as the claws that tipped his fingers lengthened, something I didn't even know he could do on command. The scales that decorated his body, snaking down his back on either side of the sharp fins down his spine, sparkled in the moonlight. As monstrous as he was, there was a sort of ethereal quality to the way he moved, as if every part of him was calculated, as if he belonged in this place more than I ever had.

Kaz disappeared into the cottage, ducking his massive form under the doorway. Creature sped up, the vision flickering again until we were standing on the other side of the cottage, peering through the window of Peter's bedroom. What I saw through the dusty panes of glass would be seared into my memory forever.

Peter was screaming, but there was no sound. All I could do was watch as Kazimir ripped him limb from limb. It was like something out of a movie, the way Kaz's tentacles held Peter up in the air, spread out wide like a starfish, and slowly peeled his limbs off of his body. It took no effort on Kaz's part, and his expression was utterly bored as he did it.

I wanted to press my face up against the glass, but I couldn't move, because I was looking through Creature's memory. It didn't take long for Peter to die, but I knew it had been agonizing. His blood saturated the walls, and his bedroom was nothing but a mess of broken furniture and gore.

By now, little bits of Peter were scattered around the room. Kaz still had a hold on his torso, but from the bottom of him, where his legs used to be, there was only a gaping

hole, and from it, dripped out all of his organs. They fell into a pile on the ground, still steaming hot in the cold night.

Then the shadows descended. They came from everywhere and nowhere, hundreds of grabbing hands made of shadow and smoke. There were little red eyes in that smoke, and sharp flashing teeth that I only caught glimpses of. Kazimir stood in the middle of it all like some kind of dark prince, watching with a grin on his beautiful face while the shadows began to consume Peter's remains with ravenous fury.

* * *

I snapped back into my own body and had to catch myself on the wall to keep from falling. The colors of the world rushed back in, making my head spin. When I got my bearings, I remembered that I was still in Peter's room, but now I was looking at everything with brand-new eyes.

I felt something bubbling up in my chest as I stared at the white walls covered in black bloodstains, remembering how they'd dripped when they were fresh. Then I was laughing. It burst out of me hysterically until tears were springing to my eyes. I spun around slowly, doubling over as I was utterly overcome with giggles that wouldn't let up.

I must have finally hit my true breaking point. I couldn't stop laughing, even if I tried. And I did try, but it only made it worse. All I could picture was Peter's pile of guts on the ground as the monsters descended into a frenzy. Gunshot to the head, my fucking ass.

For the first time in ten years, I felt a warmth in my belly, and it quickly spread to my chest. It took me a minute to realize what it was, because it was so foreign these days—joy. I was feeling...happiness, unbridled elation. I was smiling uncontrollably, and I never wanted it to go away.

Iris

An idea occurred to me, and my laughter tapered off, though it didn't stop the broad grin that stretched my lips. My eyes were wide, and excitement made my breathing speed up, my heart racing. I probably looked the same as my reflection had back in Peter's bathroom, but I was okay with that.

Without hesitation, I rushed through the cottage, flinging myself out the door. I ran through the trees and up the winding mossy pathway that would lead me towards my house. A shape was rising out of the water as I passed the edge of the swamp, and briefly, I spotted a pair of glowing green eyes.

Ignoring Kaz, knowing he was probably going to follow me, I practically flew towards the house, but instead of heading through the front door, I stopped at my shitty car parked just out front. The doors were still unlocked because I couldn't be bothered to lock them, so I dipped inside the passenger seat and began pulling out the canisters of gasoline one by one.

"What on earth is she up to, brother?" I looked up, still smiling wickedly as I spotted Cyn and Cilas in the doorway. They watched me with their arms crossed over their chests, shadowy tendrils leaking off of them.

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“It appears she’s in the mood for more destruction, Cilas.” They were both grinning back at me. “I love a woman who knows what she wants...” His burning white eyes licked me from head to toe, and I shivered pleasantly.

“You could make yourselves useful and give me a hand...or six.” I nodded pointedly at Cyn’s four arms crossed over his chest.

Cyn placed a palm on his pec and glanced at Cilas. “Is this what we’ve been reduced to, brother—whipping boys for weak little mortal women?”

Straightening up with the canisters around my feet, I glared at the shadow man. “This weak mortal woman knows your secret now.” I raised a brow at both of them as their smiles grew wide, showing their sharp teeth. I shook my head. “I hope you hid the rest of Chris somewhere far away from my property.”

Cilas laughed deeply. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that, sad one. There’s not much of him left to find, and what there is, I’m sure Chaos is having a blast gnawing it to dust.” He left the doorway, moving like undulating smoke through the darkness until he reached me, leaning in and brushing my hair off my shoulder. “Did it please you to see his bones scattered to the wind?”

“His screams were beautiful. I only wish you could have heard him beg for his pathetic life,” Cyn added, suddenly appearing on my other side, his lips close to the shell of my ear. “He should have known better than to touch what belongs to us.” His tongue licked the shell of my ear, and I shivered from head to toe.

“Since when do I belong to anyone?” I asked breathlessly. They were distracting me,

and I had a feeling they knew that. “You should know by now that I don't belong anywhere anymore. I don't even belong to myself, and after tonight...”

We were interrupted by tiny meows coming from the open front door. I looked up to see Kevin and Kyle sitting at the top of the steps, staring down at me, their blue eyes glowing brightly in the darkness. My heart sank for a moment. What was I going to do about them? I couldn't just abandon them here alone.

“Don't you worry about them,” Cyn whispered to me, using a claw tipped finger to turn my head until we were face-to-face. My eyes bounced between his white glowing eyes and his shadowy lips. “The house has a way of providing for its own. I promise.” Closing the gap, he tilted his head and pressed his icy lips to mine. I groaned into the kiss and let my eyes fall closed, relishing the slide of his forked tongue as it brushed my bottom lip.

“You're trying to distract me,” I said with a smirk. Backing away from the shadow men, I gestured to the canisters. “Grab 'em and march.” I even snapped my fingers a few times for emphasis, but both of them stared at me like I'd officially lost my head.

“You know, we've disemboweled others for lesser insults. You should really be nicer in the presence of your betters, mortal.” Cyn stepped towards me, the shadows stretching around him, tendrils reaching towards me as if they couldn't wait to wrap me up and drag me inside.

I sighed and waved him off. “Yeah, yeah, I get it. Can the disemboweling wait like, an hour? I've got something super important to do, but I need some help.” My death was inevitable, but I needed this moment. I needed my monsters to enjoy it with me, and then they could do whatever they wanted with me, because my time here was over. This house had nothing more it could offer me but pain.

For a moment, they just blinked at me. I stood with my arms crossed, waiting for

them to move, because I was pretty sure it was about to start raining and then my plan would be foiled until the next day. This wasn't something I was willing to put off, not after everything I'd seen.

To my shock, Cyn and Cilas scooped up the gas canisters, not leaving any behind for me to have to carry myself. Cyn had four of them himself, one for each arm. He grinned at me with all teeth. "Lead the way then."

I took off back towards the cottage, ready to do this fucking thing. I made it halfway to the gazebo when I paused. Something told me that I needed to take just one last look at the house I'd hated for so many years. This time, it wasn't even the voice in my head that urged me to do it. It was all me.

Every light in the house was suddenly on, even though there were still rooms I hadn't gone into. I hadn't even bothered to revisit my old bedroom, unwilling to open up that part of my life again. I wasn't that same girl. Nothing in that room belonged to me anymore, so I'd only be robbing the dead. That was what I was now—a walking, talking, eating, and breathing corpse.

For a moment, it felt like the house was watching me back, knowing that this was it. Through the glowing windows, I began to see dark shapes moving within the house. Shadows passed in front of the glass, some of them humanoid in shape, while others were more like spiders or animals. Some of them scraped their claws against the glass, while others pressed their face to it, following me with their eyes from high above.

How many of them were there? Where had they been hiding? I shivered again, realizing that Kazimir had been telling the truth. Monsters only showed themselves when they wanted to be seen, and they all wanted to be seen now. As I turned away from my childhood home, I continued down the path to the cottage. Shapes moved in my peripheral vision, eyes blinking at me from the tree line, and the sounds of

hissing, slithering, and scraping echoed through the night.

Creatures appeared on all sides, flashing teeth, wings, talons, tails, and tentacles. There were faces popping up from the swamp water, teeth grinning through the branches of the trees. All around me, I heard whispers as they gossiped about the human girl who radiated rage, but the strangest thing of all was that I welcomed them. I didn't feel a single ounce of fear in the presence of such evil. In fact, I suddenly felt more at home amongst monsters than I had with humans in all my life.

When we reached the cottage, two figures were already waiting for us. Kazimir and Creature stood side by side, watching me approach. Kaz wore a wicked grin on his sensual lips, and as I got closer, he reached for me with his tentacles. I let him pull me against his chest. His lips pressed into my hair as he ran his clawed hands down the length of my back. "You seem determined."

I pulled back and stared into his black eyes. "This is all I've wanted since the moment I was told I had to come back here. It's time to stop dragging this out and do what I came here to do." I was sick of wallowing in my regret and shame, and I was ready to put it all behind me.

I looked to my right, where Creature stood, towering over the rest of us. Leaving Kaz's embrace, I approached the skinwalker. His presence still made my skin crawl, but not necessarily in a bad way. Everything about him was alluring to me, even though I knew that with any normal human being, their first instinct would be to run.

"Thank you for showing it to me, Creature," I said. Moving closer, I watched as his body seemed to stiffen at my nearness. He wasn't afraid of me obviously, but I didn't think he knew how to react to a human like me. Reaching out, I laid a palm on his massive bicep, feeling the rough hardness of his leathery skin. "I needed to see it more than I knew. They let me believe he'd gone out too easily, and it never sat right with me. So thank you."

Creature couldn't speak with human words, so he nodded. I found myself aching to hear his voice, and not just the voices he was able to mimic. I was about to step away when my vision went hazy, and a black and white image flickered in my head.

I sucked in a quick breath as I stared at the forest floor, watching myself spread out on the damp, mossy ground, naked and splayed out while Creature loomed over me. I was breathing heavily, my bare breasts pebbled, but not from the chill of the night.

The vision flashed again, and I was on my knees before him, running my tongue up the length of his massive cock. His skull head was tipped backwards in pleasure as I gripped him in one hand and opened my mouth as wide as I could manage, sinking down onto him until he filled my throat. His hips began to pump, and tears fell freely from the corners of my eyes. He was so fucking big that it almost looked like my jaw was dislocating just to accommodate him.

It was the strangest feeling, watching myself from outside of my body. I looked so pale in the moonlight, my long hair a tangle of twigs and moss. I reached between my legs as I knelt before him, rubbing my clit with the palm of my hand as I sucked harder and faster.

In my real body, I began to tingle, my cheeks heating and my nipples hardening. I rubbed my thighs together to alleviate the need to grind against something...or someone. I was so fucking turned on that it almost hurt. I also wanted to throw my head back and laugh. Was I really fantasizing about fucking a literal skinwalker, a creature I'd been taught all my life to fear? Oh, but wait... It wasn't me who was fantasizing, was it? No, it was Creature who had sent this vision straight to my head.

There was no sound in the vision, but I could almost imagine the growl that was coming from Creature's mouth as his whole body began to tremble. With his head thrown back, he thrust his hips into my mouth rougher and faster now as I held on for dear life. My hand was moving faster against my clit, and I saw the exact moment my

orgasm hit me, as my eyes rolled back in my head and my whole body locked up.

At that exact moment, Creature emptied himself into my mouth, coming hard enough that I started to choke as hot ropes of it dripped out the sides of my mouth. My throat was working to swallow around him, even as I grew weaker from the aftershocks of pleasure as my hand began to slow.

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The vision dissipated, and I once again rocked on my feet, ready to topple over, but there was a strong grip on my shoulders that held me in place. As I came to, I looked up over my shoulder to see Cilas holding me still. He was staring down at me, his white eyes burning with something a little more feral than usual.

I blinked the darkness from my eyes and looked around, my thighs still pressed together after what I saw. I was surrounded on every side by my monsters, and they were all gazing down at me like I was a fucking meal.

“I take it you all saw that, huh?” I was assuming, of course, but from the lust and need rippling off of every single one of them, I knew that something had happened to them as well. Kaz nodded, his black eyes full of hunger as he moved closer to me, and my body flushed from head to toe. “Then let’s do this thing so we can pick up where Creature left off.”

Kaz glanced at Creature with a raised brow. “Creature?” he asked skeptically. Creature faced him and shrugged one shoulder in a terrifyingly human manner. Kaz chuckled. “He says you took it upon yourself to name him. Clever girl.”

My mouth dropped open. “He talks to you?!” I glared at Creature. “Have you been holding out on me or just lying?” I wanted to hear him speak more than anything, but I honestly didn’t see how that was possible, since his face was nothing more than a skull.

Kaz laughed, shaking his head at me, and I felt the shadows rumble at my back as they chuckled at my naïvety. “He speaks to me the same way he speaks to you, with images and feelings, only I’ve known him for centuries, so I’ve learned a thing or

two.”

I wanted to pout, but I had other things on my mind. I was letting them distract me, and I could feel the rain in the air already—my window of time was rapidly closing. Bending down, I hoisted a gas canister into my hands and took the cap off. I gave my monsters a sweet smile before shoving them aside, surprised at my ability to do so, given the fact that they were all unreasonably massive.

I began at the front of the house by the front door and started pouring, coating everything I could with it. I’d always loved the smell of gasoline. It was a weird little quirk of mine that Magnolia had never shared. The smell of it permeated the air, and soon, the canister was empty. Before I could turn back to fetch another, one was being passed to me. Creature had it dangling off one long talon, and I imagined that if he could, he would have been grinning.

One by one, I was passed canister after canister, and the tiny cottage was saturated in gasoline in no time. By the time I’d circled the entire house, I was just emptying out the very last one, needing to use every single drop of it if this was going to work.

Thunder crashed in the far-off distance, heralding the oncoming storm. It was now or never. I glanced back at the four monsters that flanked me and smiled widely. “Are you ready for your meal, boys?”

One by one, they stepped closer, both Cyn and Cilas licking their lips in tandem, while Kaz’s eyes began to glow bright green in that sea of blackness. Creature’s claws were extending, and he seemed to be growing even taller if that were possible, looming over me so high that I had to crane my neck to see his antlers or meet the voids he called eyes.

I could feel them urging me on, begging me to finish this. Not a single one of them really cared about me, I knew that. I wasn’t deluding myself into thinking that they

wouldn't tear me apart piece by piece without a second thought. To my surprise, I realized I was okay with that. I hadn't come to this place to change it. I didn't want to sway these creatures into becoming anything lesser than what they were born to be. All I wanted was for this place, for them, and for all the darkness inside me to consume me.

I pulled my lighter from my pocket and flicked open the lid, sparking the flame that flickered in the darkness. With a deep breath, and one last glance back at the house that loomed behind us down the mossy path, I tossed the lighter at the steps of the cottage and watched as it all went up in flames.

* * *

I ran before anyone could stop me, crashing right through the door of the burning cottage. The entire house was on fire, flames licking up the walls as the roof began to collapse in on itself. Heat hit my skin, and smoke filled my lungs immediately.

I coughed as I stood in the very center of the living room, staring at the front window, where the glass was beginning to crack. On the other side in the light of the fire, there were my monsters, watching me as the fire spread across the floor, as my clothes began to smolder and my hair began to singe. It wasn't like the movies, where the main character could run through a burning building, and as long as they got out fast enough, they came out unscathed. Fire didn't care about those things. All it wanted to do was consume so it could grow.

The flame on my skin hurt, but I welcomed the pain. This was what I'd come here to do. This was how my life would end. I would die in the place that started it all, in the house where I'd made all of my mistakes, and hope to whatever god was out there that my family knew what had happened tonight. I was making this right for them.

I screamed as fire climbed my legs, singeing the skin and muscle. My hair was

catching, and I could hear the sizzle of it like the crackling of static. Already, my clothes were burning away, falling to the floor in piles of smoking ash, and soon, I was left naked with flames approaching on all sides.

You think you can just burn me away and you'll be free?

The voice laughed at me as I was engulfed. I opened my mouth and screamed as my skin melted slowly, charring and cracking until I was nearly unrecognizable. I screamed and I screamed as the voice cackled in the back of my head.

It's just you and me, Iris.

It's just you and me, Iris.

Blackness hovered around the edges of my vision, and the pain began to lessen. I knew that meant it was nearly over, because my nerves were burned away, leaving behind a husk of a body that couldn't feel a damn thing anymore. Her laughter got quieter and quieter, and a spark of hope lit up inside of me. It took seconds for that laughter to taper off entirely and fade away, leaving behind nothing but the melodic roar of the fire.

I laughed as I burned—laughed so hysterically and so maniacally that I hoped it could be heard for miles around. I hoped it echoed in the ears of the officers who'd lied to me. I wanted it to follow the townspeople who gossiped, and I wanted it to haunt that house for the rest of its miserable existence.

I smiled through the flames, closing my eyes softly. "I'm on my way, Mags..."

Then the shadows converged. My vision went black in an instant, and a coldness washed over me, as if I'd been plunged into the void of space. I was still laughing, unable to stop myself for even a moment. I laughed as shapes began to appear in the

blackness and voices murmured to one another. I was floating in a sea of nothingness, and there wasn't anything that could hurt me ever again.

It took a matter of seconds for my voice to stop working. Coldness slipped down my throat, as if I'd taken a drink of ice-cold water. It filled my veins until I was nearly frozen, and yet I couldn't move. I felt a flat surface beneath me and realized I was lying down on something solid, but still, everything was just blackness.

Those shapes in the distance began to take form, and strangely enough, they were more of a gray color while the rest of the world was a black void. They were blurry at first, and for a second, I wondered if my shadow men had lied to me and I was seeing ghosts for the first time. There were four shapes, and as they approached me, they grew larger and larger until they towered over me, the one on the right so tall that it might as well have been a giant.

Then I felt hands on me, groping my arms and legs, their touch warm and soft and alive. I didn't understand. I was supposed to be dead, right? I shouldn't have been able to feel anything.

Those blurry gray shapes began to solidify, and in seconds, I realized I was surrounded by my monsters. Cilas, Cyn, Creature, and Kazimir peered down at me with eyes as black as the void we were trapped in. Their teeth were elongated, and their faces were more angular and severe than I remembered. Drool was dropping from Creature's sharp teeth, and his claws had tripled in length.

Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:08 am

In a move so swift, I never could have seen it coming, Kaz sent his tentacles forward, curling them around my body so fast that the breath whooshed out of me. Still, I felt no pain. He lifted me off of the ground until I was dangling in the air, every one of my limbs held up by a tentacle so that I was spread wide. I had a vague memory of Peter flash through my head. He'd been held in a similar position only moments before Kaz ripped him into pieces.

I tilted my head to the side, letting it lie on my shoulder as I met Cilas' eyes. Darkness was pouring off of him, feeding into the cloud of cold shadow that was surrounding us. Things were locking into place, and I realized it was them who were controlling it all.

It took a moment for me to realize that something wasn't right. It wasn't that I couldn't feel any pain, but rather, there was no pain to be felt. I wiggled my fingers and saw nothing but pale skin, following it down the length of my arm where there should have been nothing but black char. Looking at my other arm, stretched out in the same manner, I found myself once again completely unharmed. All at once, my senses returned to me, and I could feel the tickle of my long hair as it flowed down my back. I was still naked, but where there should have been blistered, cooked, and melted skin, there was nothing but smoothness.

"Am I dead?" I found myself asking. My voice was back, my vocal chords no longer fried to a crisp. I looked into Kazimir's eyes as I asked again. "Tell me..." It was what I'd come here to do, and I was going to be pissed if they somehow ruined that for me. I didn't want to be saved. I wanted to be free of this prison of a body.

"Almost, sad one," Kaz said, his voice little more than a growl. "Only a few minutes

now, and you'll get your wish." He reached out with his hand and brushed a wayward strand of hair from in front of my eyes. "But first, you have a promise to keep."

I blinked at him, my mouth falling open as his tentacle tightened around my wrist, pulling my limbs taut. I groaned as my muscles stretched, but I didn't fight against him. Hands descended in a frenzy from behind. I recognized the cool touch of my shadow men, and I shivered as they wandered. Breath kissed the shell of my ears as another pair of lips placed small kisses along my neck and shoulder.

I groaned, letting my head tilt backwards as one of them licked the side of my neck, tasting my freshly healed skin, leaving a trail of wetness behind as he traveled down towards my waist, tasting every single inch of me. Claws raked over my skin, stinging and cutting, leaving bloody trails in their wake that slowly dripped down my torso. It wasn't long before tongues were lapping up that blood, groaning in pleasure at the taste of me.

"Are you ready to be consumed?" Kazimir asked as he stepped closer to me. Hands pinched my nipples from behind, and I moaned but nodded frantically. His eyes darkened with need and hunger as he reached out a hand and extended a long claw, slowly letting it drag down the center of me from breastbone to pelvis. "This won't be quick, and it's going to hurt," he warned.

I only smiled back at him, my breathing ragged as I fought the agonizing urge to clench my thighs together. "Good. Make me scream, Kaz."

And scream I did.

With my legs spread wide, I was entered from behind. I screamed as I was stretched so suddenly and without warning. Kaz's tentacles hoisted me higher into the air, pulling my thighs wider apart to accommodate what I suspected was Creature's massive cock. I groaned in both pleasure and pain as his talons wrapped around my

hips, digging into my skin as he began to thrust.

Kaz opened his mouth, bringing his face close to mine as he breathed in deeply, his nostrils flaring and that glowing green ring in his eyes getting steadily brighter. Something in my chest began to reach for him, pulling out of my body as it flowed towards him, and all I could do was watch helplessly. That same silvery mist that had fed the shadows before was now funneling directly into Kazimir's mouth, and as he swallowed it, he began to tremble.

He was eating my pain, devouring my rage, and consuming my grief. I could feel it leaving me, depleting my body little by little as he feasted. Creature's cock thrust into me over and over again, and pleasure so deep and raw filled my entire body. I moaned as he fucked me, his talons spilling blood down my hips and legs while the shadow twins lapped up. Then I felt them biting me, little bites here and there, up and down my legs, drawing out even more blood. They lapped that up too, groaning in pleasure as they drank me down.

I was screaming in ecstasy as Creature's cock started to throb. Hot cum spurted out of him in ropes, coating me from the inside as he continued to fuck me. Then I felt his teeth sinking into the flesh of my neck and shoulder, making hot blood pour down my breast and arms. I was hit with an orgasm so powerful that it had tears streaming down my face. My whole body shook with the force of it, until I didn't think I could physically take much more.

Only these monsters weren't sated, and I was powerless here. Creature pulled his cock out of me, and cum rained down from my gaping pussy. I was aching and sore and probably bleeding. Kazimir stepped even closer and lowered me slightly, releasing a small amount of tension on my wrists, but he still held me aloft, utterly at their mercy. Then he was shoving himself inside of me, filling the emptiness that Creature had left behind.

He was relentless as he began to move. He fucked my raw pussy hard and fast, lowering us to the ground until my body was above him. He moved me the way he wanted me as if I were a marionette being controlled by strings and he was the puppetmaster. He slammed me down on his thick cock over and over again as I screamed and moaned, my eyes rolling back in my head.

Shadows moved on either side of me, and then both Cilas and Cyn were kneeling before me. Their eyes were burning bright, as if trapped inside the void of their shadow-like bodies were millions of stars fighting to be free. With gaping mouths full of bloody teeth, they descended on me.

They sucked, licked, and bit every single inch of my skin before lapping up the blood. I could feel myself being drained slowly, growing sleepy and lightheaded as my vision began to blur. Kazimir fucked me faster, taking his own pleasure, while Creature still gripped my hips, his cock rubbing up against my ass.

Then I felt a tickle on my ass, followed by the sensation of dozens of little tongues licking at me. It didn't take long for me to realize that it was a tentacle. Kaz was spreading my ass cheeks, holding me open as Creature settled behind me, lining up the head of his cock with my hole. I was already wet with his cum and ready for him, but I still bit down hard on my bottom lip as he pressed into me, stretching me impossibly wide. I screamed again, tears streaming down my face.

My shadow men stood from their crouched position, towering over me as they converged into one singular being. I gaped at them, my heart racing and thudding painfully against my ribs. Before me stood a shadow man, larger than Creature, with hair that flowed around his shoulders and three arms on either side of his body. He grinned down at me, his too wide mouth filled with rows and rows of sharp teeth. His bright white eyes were the most terrifying, otherworldly thing I'd ever seen.

The shadow being gripped his cock with one hand and cupped my face with the other.

I looked down, noting the fact that his feet seemingly disappeared right through Kaz's body, as if he were made of smoke. Before I could do or say anything, he was shoving his shadow cock in my mouth and I was forced to gulp him down through tears.

I choked on him, feeling tendrils of black smoke slipping down my throat and tickling the inside of my mouth. I closed my eyes tight as I began to suck him, using my tongue to lick up the underside of his cock, hollowing my cheeks as I reached the swollen head, and rolling my tongue over it like it was my favorite lollipop. He groaned as he shoved himself back into my mouth, his hands holding my head on either side, guiding my mouth the way he wanted.

I was filled in every hole from all sides as they took their pleasure. I couldn't even scream with my mouth stuffed with shadow cock, but I tried anyway, squealing around it as it was forced down my throat. I'd never felt anything like this before...like I was so full and ready to burst. My thighs shook as I came over and over again, and the sensation of two massive cocks filling my holes in tandem, rubbing up against one another and threatening to rip me in half, was nearly too much.

Then there was a shift inside of me, a pull that felt like it was coming from the very depths of my soul, if that was what I even possessed. With my mouth still full and abused as Cyn and Cilas took their pleasure, I raised my gaze to theirs and found the shadow creature's mouth gaping wide open. White mist traveled up towards them, funneling into their mouth as they drank it down. They drank and they drank, and so did Kaz beneath me. His head was tilted back as he slammed his cock up into me harder than before, his thighs beginning to shake with the need to come.

Once again, darkness crept in around me, tendrils of it reaching out to me like grabbing hands. My body felt light as a feather as the mist began to thin, and I knew instantly that I was almost depleted. The pulling sensation had lessened, but they

fucked me harder, moving in perfect rhythm with one another. I was nothing more than a doll at this point, unable to move, speak, scream, or fight back, nor did I have the desire to.

As the last of my pain was sucked out of my body, I shuddered while a deep and all-consuming pleasure rolled through my body in wave after wave of pure ecstasy. Roars filled the darkness, and cum flooded me as my monsters pulsed inside of me, using me, consuming me, devouring me. As the shadows pulled out of my mouth, I finally screamed, and the very last tendrils of white mist flowed from me to them on one final stream of light.

I was empty now, all dried up with nothing left in my head but sated pleasure and not an ounce of regret. It was time to go now, I knew that. I could feel my body finally giving in and succumbing to the darkness that beckoned to me.

A hand cupped my cheek, and my eyes fluttered, wanting to close so badly that I had to fight against it just to focus. The shadow creature knelt before me, running his thumb along my skin softly, a smile pulling at his familiar lips that were an exact mixture of both Cilas and Cyn. Shadows converged around us, blocking out everything else in the world until I was being swallowed up into a deep black void. “Close those eyes, sad one. It’s all over now.”

It’s all over now...

It’s all over now...

It's all over now, sad one.

One final breath left my lungs in a hiss of air as my heart gave one final thump in my hollow chest. It was only me now in this sea of blackness that called to me. So I lay there in the silence with a smile on my face, my eyes finally closing one last time.

“Finally...”

Creature

The old gate squeaked open as a car rumbled down the drive. We watched from the shadows as the tiny little sedan, followed by a moving truck, circled the roundabout and parked in front of the entryway.

Out of the car stepped a slender woman with long brown hair, maybe in her late twenties. She had a bright smile on her face and sunglasses perched atop her head. A young man around the same age got out of the moving truck, smiling at the woman as they met between their vehicles, embracing one another in a passionate kiss. Their voices were hushed as they held one another's hands and peered up at the looming house that waited for them.

After they broke apart, the woman made her way up the stairs towards the front door, while the man turned on his heel and headed for the small decrepit flower garden and pulled out the for sale sign, tossing it aside with a grin on his face.

The new owners appeared to be newlyweds, judging by the bright white ribbon dangling off of the trunk of the sedan and the way that the two young humans gazed

at one another with stars in their eyes. They were so young and happy, so utterly unaware of the danger that lurked around them.

Hundreds of hungry eyes peered at them from the tree line, from the windows of the house, from the darkness of the glassy swamp water, and even from high overhead as they circled the skies, their monstrous shadows blotting out the moon. This was not a safe place for these fragile humans.

As of now, there wasn't a single trace of fear in the air, though the creatures sipped and savored every drop of nervousness that the woman radiated as she turned the key and let the front door creak open on its aging hinges. We waited ever so patiently. In time, they would come to know what fear could truly feel like.

Glowing green eyes met mine from across the mossy walkway where Kazimir crouched, lying in wait half submerged in his dark waters. He nodded in my direction before gazing up at the windows of the old house. I followed his gaze and had to stifle a chuckle at the sight of two figures hovering in front of the large bay window on the third floor. Their glowing white eyes were homed in on the young man, who was unloading moving boxes from the back of the truck, using a flashlight to guide him. Cilas and Cyn smiled widely in unison. The game was on.

Idly, I wondered how far the humans had traveled to find such a steal. The house had been condemned two years ago after the last of the Cooper line had mysteriously vanished into thin air. The authorities had searched for Iris for weeks with no success. Finally, the state had given in and snatched the property back, selling it for cheap at auction. These lucky newlyweds must have jumped on the chance to own such a vast fixer-upper.

The man stood at the base of the stairs, looking up at his new house with a grin on his face, utterly satisfied and ready to tackle everything this place had to offer them. Little did he know that this house had been lying in wait, hungry for its next meal.

The sound of rippling water echoed through the windy night at the same time as a crack of thunder rumbled through the sky. Lightning lit up the overgrown property as the man ascended the steps to his brand-new home, but I wasn't watching the doomed humans now. My eyes were fixated on the shadow that rose from the surface of the dark, murky swamp.

Tendrils of smoke swirled around her, coating her once pale as moonlight skin so that she perfectly blended in with the night. Her eyes were nothing but pale white glowing orbs, as if the stars themselves had fallen from the sky just for her.

Long and lean, her shadowy limbs moved through the water as if they were made of it. She was graceful and slow, sensuous but violent. Everything about Iris Cooper was lethal, because we'd made her that way.

Spindly antlers crested her head like a dark crown fit for royalty, and it made my chest rumble with pleasure at the sight. Her claw tipped hands were webbed, and if she moved in just the right way with just the perfect amount of moonlight, shining iridescent scales peeked out beneath her shadows.

My whole body responded, as if she were calling out to me in her sweet voice that I could listen to for hours on end as we ravished each other until sated. Her midnight hair brushed her naked thighs as she swayed, stepping onto the bank of the swamp with Kazimir behind her, his eyes fixated on our queen.

The woods went utterly still and silent as she swayed across the property, her long hair flowing in the breeze. Her song trailed behind her, a haunting lullaby that was both devastating and terrifying at once. Her voice was like that of an avenging angel, and a swelling of pride and obsession overcame me. I could see the same reflected in Kazimir's eyes as he watched her lead us towards our next meal.

She was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen, and I looked forward to witnessing the havoc she was about to bring down on these unsuspecting mortals. It was what

she deserved. It was her right, her prize, her victory, and we would walk the shadows of the earth beside her for the rest of our days.

The End.