



Primal Hunger

Author: *Harper A. Brooks, R.K. Pierce*

Category: Fantasy

Description: Something sinister lurks in these woods, and my curiosity might just get me killed.

When I moved out east last year, I'd heard rumors about what hides in the trees. Don't go looking for it, and it won't come looking for you.

Unfortunately for me, that's not always the case.

One long stare into the darkness was enough to summon a creature from my worst nightmare: a skull-faced monster with horns, claws, and a hunger for human flesh.

But that isn't all he's hungry for.

Bloodthirsty and determined to claim me as his own, he steals me away to be his prisoner. I'm his to control, to use, to devour.

He has me in his clutches, and I'm not sure I want him to let me go.

The bestselling author Harper A. Brooks and monster romance extraordinaire R.K. Pierce are at it again with a new super steamy, monster-loving series!

Primal Hunger is book one in the Love Lore series.

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Chapter

One

Erin

“ Y ou should call your newest piece Cornholed by the Cryptid ,” Tyler says, and I shoot him a dirty look. “It has a nice ring to it.”

This is why college kids are the worst.

Prime example, right here.

I shudder. “Ew. No.”

He lets out a groan as we continue through the woods, weaving between tree trunks and carefully avoiding above-ground roots. “Why not?”

“Because what I’m doing doesn’t involve cornholing,” I reply tartly.

There’s no way I’m including cornholed anything in my paranormal blog unless it involves haunted bean bags, and even then the chances are low. Besides, it’s not a spoof website.

I write about real paranormal activity that makes people afraid to go to sleep without the light on and has them checking over their shoulder if they’re caught outside late at night. The kind that chills your bones and makes your blood run cold. The kind that

turns your dreams into nightmares.

Not getting railed by the creature that haunts these woods and terrorizes the townspeople.

Tyler has clearly missed the point of the assignment.

“You asked for my help.” He runs his fingers through his wavy blond hair, exasperated. “I’m just trying to do what you said.”

“Remind me not to ask next time,” I grumble. Stopping by one of the thinner tree trunks nearby, I drop to my knees to unpack a night vision camera from my bag.

It’s just a camouflage hunting camera used for capturing deer and other wildlife, but I’ve caught some incredible things on it in the past. Back before I moved to the east coast, I was hunting Bigfoot on the other side of the country and got some fairly distinct images of it before it disappeared.

Well, mostly distinct.

You could make out an arm and a torso, but there weren’t any footprints to back up my findings the next day. I didn’t care though. To me, the images spoke volumes.

Unfortunately, the Bigfoot piece that I’d dedicated several years of my life to didn’t take off the way I thought it would, but that’s neither here nor there. I’ve long since abandoned my quest to find Bigfoot in exchange for something much rarer and more terrifying: the Grim .

The lore surrounding the beast is scant but fascinating, setting every nerve in my body alight with curiosity. Supposedly, the Grim is seven feet tall and blends into the shadows, appearing twice a year to snatch prey from the woods.

However, it's been hard to find anyone willing to talk about it.

The locals don't even speak its name for fear it'll show up on their doorstep and drag them back to whatever hell it comes from, so getting information about it has been tricky.

Tyler was the only local person to answer the questions I had.

My fingers fumble with the camera and I brush a thumb over the lens to clean it.

As a college student who's a bit of an adrenaline junky, he didn't mind explaining the Grim and the myths surrounding it to an outsider—after all, I'd just moved here and didn't know much about the place. He thought the truth might dissuade me from going after it, but when he saw it only fueled my determination to find the monster, he joined my endeavor.

Now I can't seem to get rid of him.

Besides, he's the only one willing to speak to me, so maybe I shouldn't look a gift horse in the mouth. That's a real saying, right?

"Grab this and bring it around," I say, handing Tyler the end of a long velcro strap.

He happily obliges, and we secure the camera to the tree. I check the angle several times before I'm satisfied and we move on to the second one.

They should be evenly placed along this stretch of woodland, where most of the stories place the location of the Grim every solstice. I want to make sure we cover the area properly.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Tyler asks as I scope out an ideal location for the

other camera.

“I’m positive.”

In fact, I’ve never been so sure of anything in my entire life. If I’m able to capture this thing on film, to expose it for the world to see, mine will be a household name in the world of cryptid hunting. You won’t be able to look up paranormal things without seeing Erin Roberts plastered everywhere.

The thought makes my heart flutter and my fingertips tingle with excitement. Yes . I can nearly taste the fame, and we only have one more day until the solstice when it all comes true.

I’m one of the lucky ones, with the financial stability to follow my dreams.

Most people aren’t so lucky.

Sadly, it was a trade-off. I got the money when my father died and left me a hefty inheritance, but I lost the one person I loved more than anything else in the world.

Sorry, Pop. Running my own business was better than college .

A lot of people don’t get the opportunities I do. Which is why I have to make this count.

The money won’t last forever.

I clear my throat, guilt sinking in my stomach, and flash a look at Tyler.

“I missed the last solstice because I was in bed dying with the flu,” I recall out loud, still pissed that I was forced to skip my first chance to find this thing. “I can’t wait

another six months for my next shot at capturing photographic proof. I have to make a move, and it has to be tomorrow.”

I set my jaw and wait for him to argue with me.

This story needs to go right, and take off. If Tyler isn’t willing to do what I need him to do...then he needs to at least stop arguing. Or leave.

“Okay, okay,” he says, throwing up his hands. He rolls exasperated eyes at me. “I was just asking. Talking about it and actually trying to find it are very different. This is going to be really dangerous, especially if you’re outside to scope it out—”

“If you don’t want to come, it’s fine,” I snap, cutting him off. I blow a few silver strands of hair out of my face that have fallen free from my ponytail and wipe the back of my hand across my sweaty forehead.

I’d prefer if he took off.

I should have come out here earlier to avoid the harsh heatwave of midday, but Tyler had classes until lunchtime and he wanted to tag along.

“You’ve been more than enough help. I can handle tomorrow night alone,” I add.

He chuckles once and shakes his head in my direction. “Nice try, but I’m coming. You’ll stand a better chance if there’s someone with you.”

“A better chance of what?” We stop by another tree several yards from the first, and I unpack the second camera. I hand him the strap like before, and we secure it in place.

“Of not getting taken.”

There it is. The real reason everyone in town is terrified of the Grim.

If it were merely rumored sightings or eerie sounds coming from the trees in this part of the deep woods, people might not be so afraid. They might not bar their doors and windows at night this time of year or avoid being out when sunlight isn't bathing the area. They might say the name of the monster out loud, instead of whispering in hushed tones about anything regarding the solstice.

But there have been more than just sounds and rumors of glowing red eyes in the darkness.

Every solstice when the Grim shows up, someone disappears without a trace. No blood, no evidence of a struggle, and no proof that it was the Grim that took them. Only second-hand tales of terror from people who might have seen something.

It makes the whole thing more bone-chilling to know that disappearances correlate to the night when this thing supposedly makes its appearance, and it ups the ante for me.

So much hinges on tomorrow night, and the possibilities make my heart thrum faster.

Become a well-renowned paranormal investigator, solve a mystery plaguing the nearby town, and find out what happened to all the people who disappeared. Pay off bills and make a name for myself so I never have to worry about the business going under again...

It's all around a win for me.

During the last solstice, the one when I was too sick to get out of bed and set up my equipment, a boy was taken. A well-liked high school senior named Brandon Reese. There was even a modest search party to find him the next day, but very little information about the search was released.

All we knew was that he was gone. The central consensus: he was taken by the Grim.

Two solstices ago, it was an old woman named Ruth. The time before that, a girl named Amanda.

Whatever is happening, it doesn't discriminate. No one is safe from the solstice, and all we can do is follow the rules of the woods: don't stare into the trees, don't go into them at night, and most importantly, never go looking for the Grim.

It's always this area, too; a clear, arrow-straight path through thick woods, off trail.

"I'm not going to get taken," I finally answer when my thoughts stop spiraling. "I just wish we knew more about what they found last time. Did they notice anything out of the ordinary? Surely someone saw something."

I'm pressing him for more when he clearly doesn't know any better than I do.

"Good luck," Tyler scoffs and crosses his arms over his chest. "You'd have better luck getting information out of the secret service."

I frown. Surely not. If they know we're searching for the Grim so we can potentially stop it from taking more people, I hope they'd be willing to help. At least give us a tiny bit of information that could aid in our search. Right?

"I say we try to talk to them," I say defiantly, knowing he'll go along with anything I decide if I'm adamant enough. "What's the worst that can happen?"

"We've been over this already, Erin. They don't want to be bothered. They've been through enough."

"They might be willing to talk to us since we're close to the solstice," I argue, my

desperation for information buzzing through my veins.

I want—no, need—to know more. Anything at all that will give us an edge and help increase our chances of snapping a photo of this thing.

I have one shot, tomorrow night, to get this right.

I can't wait six more months for another opportunity...

Tyler glares at me, his mouth working back and forth and making his whisper of a blonde mustache wiggle. "Fine. But don't say I didn't tell you so."

"I won't."

A voice in the back of my mind says that Tyler is right, that this is a terrible idea and a waste of time, but I'm too hopeful to relent. I want answers, and if this is the only way I have a chance at getting them, then I have to try.

It's in my nature, and what makes me one hell of a good paranormal investigator. I never stop delving for answers, even when things seem unlikely.

And I'm going to solve the mystery of the Grim.

No matter what.

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Chapter

Two

Erin

The drive through town is short.

Once we pull out of the gravel parking lot edging the woods, it's a clear shot from one end of downtown to the other, the way peppered with old houses full of character.

Nothing is ever more than a few minutes away, which is something I both love and despise about being in a small town. The convenience is unmatched—no half hour to forty-five minute drives just to get groceries like the last place I lived—but being so close to everyone is a little suffocating.

Everybody knows everybody else, and if you have any secrets, the entire town is liable to know about them. It seems like the only thing they don't gossip about are the monsters that hide in the woods.

They'd rather take that information to their graves.

Tyler grudgingly directs me straight to the Reese's house, and I pull up in front of the curb at the end of a perfectly-kept yard. It's a small, cabin-style home with colorful bushes beneath the front windows and a floral wreath welcome sign on the front door. The type of home you'd expect a nice, approachable couple to live in, which soothes

my bubbling nerves enough for me to kill the engine and step out into a warm afternoon breeze.

“It’s nice,” I blurt out.

He’s back to the eye rolling. “What did you expect? Something like the Addams family?”

To be honest, I’m not sure what I expected.

As I head up the walkway to the front porch, Tyler follows quietly on my heels, the soles of his boots scuffling along the stone behind me. I pause on the welcome mat, trying to work out exactly what I’m going to say, but Tyler reaches around me and jams his thumb into the doorbell.

I glare at him as it echoes through the house, followed by the yipping of small dogs.

Sometimes, those kinds of pets are worse than anything you find in the woods at night or under the bed. Real life land sharks ready to nip at your ankles for breathing in their direction.

I reserve judgment.

“Coming,” a man’s voice calls seconds before the door opens a crack, and a pair of dark brown eyes peer out. When they meet mine, the glare in them eases, and the door opens wide enough for the man’s form to fill it. “Hi. Can I help you?”

“Are you Mr. Reese?” I ask, still working through how I plan to approach his son’s disappearance. I don’t want to risk him running us off the premises before I’ve even properly introduced myself.

“Yes. And you are?”

I clear my throat. “I’m Erin Roberts, owner of the Hooked on Spooks paranormal blog. I was wondering if I could ask you a couple of questions about the myths circulating the town and specifically how they connect to what happened to your son, Brandon.”

What I expect is a careful consideration of my interest and possible questions about the blog, but the way his face immediately darkens surprises me. His brows furrow together, and his mouth hardens into a thin line. “I’m not interested in answering questions.”

As he goes to shut the door in my face, I panic and reach for the knob. “Mr. Reese, please. Is there any comment you would make to a foreigner looking to travel to your town? Any words of advice? Places to stay away from this time of year?”

He hesitates for a brief second, just long enough to make me think he’s actually going to talk, before answering. “Yeah. Stay out of the fucking trees.”

And then the door slams closed in my face.

I stand there for a stunned second, wondering what the hell I’m supposed to do. I could knock again and make a better plight for information; insist that I’m trying to help the town with my research. But I deflate a few seconds later, my confidence disappearing. There’s no sense in getting the cops called on me for harassment, no matter how badly I want answers.

Damn it.

With a sigh, Tyler and I turn and head back to the car. He touches my elbow like he’s looking for permission to comfort me, and I shrug him off.

“Well, that was fucking useless,” I grumble.

He looks smug, his hands now shoved in his pockets and his chin uplifted. “I told—”

“Say it and you can walk home. I’m not kidding.” I cut him off and glare in his direction.

He falls silent, but I can still see the whisper of a smile on his lips. Yeah, coming here was a waste of time, just like he said it would be, but we had to try.

There are always more townspeople we could interview, although Tyler has told me everything he knows about the Grim lore. Maybe someone’s grandmother has seen something else? Heard something?

So far, I’ve been hesitant to pry only because the locals seem distrusting of an outsider.

It’s been hard to research on my own, and making friends outside of Tyler has been almost as impossible as finding the Grim.

If I can even call Tyler a friend... He’s more like a pain in the ass little brother who insists on tagging along constantly. At the very least, he’s proved to be useful once or twice.

I grumble, wracking my brain for an alternative plan and coming up empty. Any extra shred of information would be greatly appreciated as we go into the solstice with the vaguest idea of what will happen.

“We just have to wing it, I guess,” I say, my disappointment evident in the sigh that follows.

We climb into the car and I start the engine, staring blankly ahead at the dashboard as my mind spirals with unnerving thoughts.

It isn't the first time I've dived headfirst into a situation with nothing more than a whisper of information, although the stakes weren't very high in the past. A few haunted hotels with rumors of voices and footsteps. A graveyard where people saw lights and felt lightheaded, and an abandoned hospital where gurneys rolled down the hallways on their own. Nothing overtly dangerous, nothing evil.

Nothing like the terrifying stories plaguing the town of Great Oaks.

This will be a jackpot if I manage to capture irrefutable proof of the Grim's existence.

A life-changing, destiny-altering jackpot.

"It's not like you're planning to be in the woods tomorrow night," Tyler says, clicking his seatbelt into place and waiting for me to drive away. "We've got the cameras set up and we can watch them from your house. It's going to be fine. Dark spooky forest adjacent."

I chew the inside of my cheek, wondering if I should break the bad news to him now or when I drop him off at his house. I might not have said it out loud, but the woods are exactly where I plan to be when the sun goes down tomorrow. Either among the trees, or hiding along the tree line.

I'm not making the same mistake I did with Bigfoot.

If my cameras are able to catch anything, I plan to be close enough to see it with my own two eyes.

"Right," I say, drawing out the word as I put the car in drive. "About that."

“What about it?” His gaze burns a hole in the side of my face as we roll out of the tiny neighborhood. “Erin, please tell me you don’t plan to be outside when all this goes down. What are you planning? Answer me .”

“Of course I am, Tyler. How else am I going to see it firsthand?” I keep my eyes focused on the road and don’t bother glancing in his direction. “What if the cameras aren’t in the right spot? What if it takes someone and I can be there to stop it? There’s too much riding on this. There’s no way I’m staying home. We’re going to be much closer than adjacent.”

He groans. “Are you trying to get kidnapped? Is that what you want?”

“No.” That’s not on my to-do list at the moment.

Making my blog go viral? Yes.

Solving the mystery of the Grim? Yes.

Being kidnapped in the dead of night? Definitely not.

Without knowing many details of the mythology surrounding the Grim, we’re firing in the dark; lucky for me, I’m a professional. I know how to handle myself. Tyler? Not so much. Which is why I’ve told him several times to keep his distance, only for him to keep insisting on being there.

“You’re trying to kill me,” he mutters, rubbing his temples in my peripheral vision. “At least tell me you have a plan to stay out of sight. Not that it’ll do much good—the thing can probably smell you from a mile away.”

It depends on what the thing actually is.

“Uhhh...” Apparently my plan of hiding among some bushes isn’t good enough, and I already know by his attitude that he’ll shoot it down. “We can wait in the car. That way, if things get crazy, we can outrun it.”

He groans again.

“I told you that you could sit this one out if you’re scared,” I repeat with a shrug. “You’ll still be able to watch the live camera footage on the website, and I can text you updates if anything happens.”

Mental fingers crossed he takes my advice this time.

“And be called a coward for letting you do this shit alone? Nope. Not happening.” He crosses his arms again and slumps down in his seat, obviously annoyed. “You’re stuck with me, and whatever happens tomorrow night, happens.”

The corner of my mouth lifts in a half-hearted smile.

As serious as I was about doing this alone, I’m grateful for Tyler’s assistance. His company helps soothe some of the nerves eating at my insides like acid, and knowing I won’t be completely alone tomorrow night is comforting. It gives me the tiniest boost of courage and cements my resolve.

Whatever happened, he’s been a decent companion, even if he grates on my nerves sometimes.

I’m going to see this beast tomorrow night, one way or another, and it’s going to change everything. Life as I know it will never be the same, because I’m going to discover what thousands have been too afraid to chase after and what the world has never seen before.

I'm going to find the Grim .

And it doesn't matter what happens to me .

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Chapter

Three

Erin

Despite this moment occupying my every waking thought for the past twenty-four hours, and even bleeding into my distorted dreams, nothing could have prepared me for it.

The moment when the sun dips behind the tops of the trees, chasing the horizon, and a navy blanket sweeps across the sky, tucking the town in for the night...it's magic.

One by one, the lights in the distance blink out of existence, turning the closest buildings into smudges on the dark landscape, barely illuminated by the glow of a full moon. The gravel lot where we've parked is situated higher on a slope and gives us the perfect vantage point.

Tyler and I are huddled in my car, equipped with snacks, blankets, pillows, and emergency supplies. I also have my laptop with its own wi-fi that allows me to stream a live-action view from both night vision cameras to my blog, and we've blacked out all the glass except the driver's side window as an extra precaution.

Now, the only thing to do is wait for something to happen.

My heart slams steadily in my chest, assaulting my ribs, and I'm glad I decided to stay in the car rather than hiding in some bushes somewhere. Every creepy crawly in

the woods would hear how hard my heart is hammering—as it is, the blood in my ears beats way too loud, drowning out Tyler’s nervous breathing.

Excitement and adrenaline tangle together inside of me and I drum my hands on the steering wheel with nervous energy.

This is it .

This is what I’ve spent six months waiting for, impatiently begging the minutes and hours to slip by faster so I can have my shot at capturing images of the Grim. Or better yet, so I can see him in the flesh.

I need this win. I need to know the money left from my inheritance was put to good use, the right way.

Vindication for my past failures will erase the guilt scabbed over my heart.

A chill crawls across my skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake, and I take a slow, deep breath.

We’re several yards away from the woods, positioned just right so we have a clear view of the trees through my window, even without the binoculars packed in my bag. A halo of moonlight frames the tops of the trees, frosting the limbs and leaves up high, but it doesn’t penetrate past the first row of tree trunks.

Everything inside the woods is drenched in darkness. The utterly impregnable blackness of true wilderness.

“Spooky,” Tyler whispers, barely audible. “Isn’t it?”

Even though we’re far enough away to be out of earshot, and locked safely inside the

car, any noise or sudden movement seems too risky. Adrenaline kicks up in my veins, and my eyes fall to the laptop sitting between us on the console to check the cameras. There's nothing there but trees and underbrush, and I find myself wishing my savings was a little more hearty to buy a few more cameras.

What if we didn't space them out enough? What if they're in the wrong spot entirely?

A notification on the laptop screen proclaims there are now over a hundred live viewers watching the camera stream—nothing record breaking, but a decent turnout—and comments from them appear in a little pop-up in the corner.

My attention catches on a few of the comments as they whiz by.

MnsterFker001: What do you want to bet the Grim is bangable?

EatMyShorts: Waste of timeeee. Cryptids aren't real.

LolliPOP: Find something safe to do...

MnsterFker001: 10/10 would smash

"Relax, Erin," Tyler says, snapping my attention away from the live chat. He leans his seat back a little further. "You've done everything you can. There's nothing left to do but wait."

I force an unconvincing smile, my eyes darting outside toward the tree line. I stare a hole through the darkness until my eyes blur and burn.

"I hope so," I mumble. Otherwise I'll be waiting another six months to try again .

Who knows what else will change in six months.

Minutes turn into hours without so much as a hint of anything paranormal, and to break up the suffocating silence, I grab the small battery-powered radio I carry everywhere and flip it to our favorite AM talk show, the Paramorning, turning the volume down low.

While it's only a repeat of this morning's show, the show hosts' hushed voices are comforting, reassuring in the gloom. Maybe when this is all over, they'll want to interview me for my monumental strides in the paranormal world.

I smirk at the thought.

It would be the cherry on top of my accomplishments.

"This evening, we're joined by paranormal investigator and psychic medium, River Scott, who just finished up their tour of Blackstone Cemetery," the host states in a low, smokey tone. "They've brought some audio clips we're going to share with you, really exciting stuff. Tell us, how are you, River?"

My thoughts haze over as the talk show continues, the voices bouncing around inside my head without me paying much attention. At least it's better than the silence.

My eyes flit between the tree line outside to the laptop and back again, and my thoughts begin to wander. What will it be like to finally lay eyes on the Grim?

Although descriptions vary, and there is no concrete way to tell if any of them are accurate, the Grim is said to be a large, looming figure with glowing red eyes.

Supposedly, no one has ever seen the Grim up close and personal and lived to tell about it, but the rumors came from somewhere. I've never been able to validate the stories I've heard from supposed "survivors," let alone find an actual person to interview regarding their experience.

“Firsthand” accounts exist for nearly every cryptid. In this case, maybe someone a long time ago had a really close call and the information has been passed down ever since.

Or maybe it’s a load of crap and the Grim is nothing like anyone has imagined.

Or maybe—just maybe—he doesn’t exist.

No. I refuse to believe that. My stomach twists into knots, and I squeeze the steering wheel until my knuckles go white.

He’s real, out there somewhere, and I’m going to find him. I just have to be patient a little while longer. Although patience has never really been my thing. Probably a bad quality for a paranormal investigator.

As the minutes tick by, each one longer than the last, my eyelids grow heavy. They sag, despite my efforts to hold them open, and one long blink is all it takes for me to slip into unconsciousness.

Images fade in and out of my dreams. The Grim, Bigfoot, being interviewed by every TV station about my work. Tyler chastising me for never being cautious enough, and the look on everyone’s faces that doubted me when I change the world forever. I’ll make my father proud. Make this crazy endeavor worthwhile.

And then it all fades abruptly when a loud thud jolts me awake.

I shoot upright, nostrils flaring and searching frantically for the source of the sound. The radio has faded to white noise at some time during my ill-timed nap, and Tyler is snoring softly in the passenger seat, his baseball cap pulled low over his face to shield it from view.

I check the night vision cameras, searching the screens for anything unusual, but all I see are the same tree trunks and slowly swaying underbrush as before. Nothing new.

Next, I scan the tree line, scouring the darkness for any sign of movement. I mentally trace each trunk, my gaze lingering on the gaps between them, but again, there's nothing.

So what the fuck was that noise?

Maybe Tyler's phone slid out of his lap and hit the floorboard. That's probably what it was.

The whole situation has me spooked, and I'm just desperate to blame it on something unseen without any proof, but it seems like it was nothing. I might have dreamed the noise for all I know.

I settle back in my seat, heart racing like I'm sprinting toward a finish line, and take a few calming breaths. It's almost midnight—meaning I slept a lot longer than just the few minutes I thought I had—and the moon is shining high and bright against the dark backdrop overhead.

Everything is still and quiet, unnervingly peaceful.

As my gaze creeps back toward the woods, a spark of glimmering white light snags my attention, making my breath hitch in my chest. A sliver of illumination nestled into the pitch black landscape, flickering and shimmering, mostly obscured by the trees in front of it.

Okay, there is definitely something out there.

With a sharp inhale, I grab for my camera on the dashboard and fumble with the on

switch, fingers trembling as my pulse picks up speed.

I hurry, not wanting the light to disappear before I'm able to get a picture of it, but it doesn't wane. However, even zooming in as much as possible, the image isn't very clear. We're too far away for me to get a decent view.

What's the source of the light? Where is it coming from and why is it stationary? Even an ATV traipsing through the woods would distinctively move.

"Tyler," I hiss, slapping him on the thigh to wake him up.

He jumps, knocking his baseball cap off, and it takes a second for him to get his bearings. "What? What is it?"

"Look, quick." I lean back for him to get a glimpse through the window, and his eyes grow wide.

"Oh, shit. What is that?"

"I don't know." I keep my voice low. "But I can't get a clear picture of it."

He glances down at the computer between us. "And it's not showing up on the cameras. It's probably too far north. Have you seen anything else?"

I shake my head. "Nothing. I was thinking about getting closer—"

"No." Tyler interjects, eyes widening even more. "Erin, that wasn't part of the plan. We're supposed to stay in the car, not go looking for it. Don't go outside."

I huff out a sigh and look back at the tree line, my gaze drawn toward the flickering light. It could be something set up by a local to ward off the monster, or it could be

from the Grim to lure its next victim into the woods.

Either way, I'm desperate to get close enough to find out.

The fine hairs on my forearms prickle with awareness.

"You can stay in the car then," I say, looping the neck strap of my camera over my head. "I won't go far. I just want to know what it is, and there's no way to find out by hiding here."

"It's a trap, Erin," Tyler whispers harshly, pointing out the window toward the woods. "That's probably bait, and you're the prey walking right into the monster's den."

He's panicked, his chest rising and falling harshly.

"I won't go too far into the woods," I assure him, not entirely sure if I believe the words I'm saying.

So far, there's been no sign of the Grim, nothing to make me believe I'm in imminent danger.

Besides, the car won't be far away. I can always run back if I see anything, but I won't forgive myself if I don't take this chance. If I don't get out of the car and get close enough to photograph whatever the light source is.

"Erin," Tyler says sharply as I reach for the door handle. "Don't do it. Please. I'm begging you."

But I'm not listening.

An invisible hook has caught behind my belly button, drawing me toward the trees. My curiosity is too potent to shake. This is a paranormal investigator's dream come true, and I'm not going to miss out because I'm too afraid to get closer.

There are numerous stories about ghost lights in the woods, those strange floating orbs of light in the middle of wilderness with no source. Could this be one of those?

The stories come from all over the world and people from vastly different cultures. They all tell the tale of lights that are said to be evil or mischievous, luring unsuspecting people toward their doom.

My stomach settles, and my gut tells me this isn't a typical ghost light.

"I'll be right back," I say, and before he can continue arguing, I push open the door and step out into the night.

Tyler doesn't reach out to pull me back.

Despite being the middle of summer, there's a chill clinging to the air that makes my skin crawl with goosebumps as I pause beside the car and scope out the area. There's nothing amiss, no movement nearby, and no noise other than the racing pulse pounding in my ears.

I glance at Tyler a final time through the window, noting the conflicting look of disapproval and fear on his face, before turning toward the woods. A whisper of regret snakes through me, curling up my back, but I ignore it and slowly head toward the trees.

My hands shake, despite clinging to the camera around my neck, and my breaths stutter as I move quickly and quietly to the woods. I keep my eyes peeled, scouring the still landscape for anything suspicious, and my nerves calm the slightest bit when

I again find nothing out of the ordinary.

I chew the corner of my mouth, thoughts spiraling as my feet move on autopilot.

Is there any merit to these rumors about the Grim?

Because so far, it seems like a lot of hype with nothing to show for it.

Aside from a flicker of light, which becomes clearer with every step I take, I haven't seen or heard anything unusual. It's just a quiet, peaceful night in the wilderness, with the town laying sleepily behind me.

If this were a typical will-o-the-wisp, it would move.

Feeling a little braver, I pick up my steps, my eyes glued to the slice of piercing light coming from the woods.

The closer I get, the more I can tell it's farther in than I initially thought—at least fifteen yards or so. The light stretches and lengthens, until I'm able to make out an almost complete circle of white.

A ring, or what looks eerily like a portal.

Oh, my god. My heart skips a beat and I fumble with my camera, snapping several pictures and holding my breath. It's beautiful, mesmerizing. Unlike anything I've ever seen before.

I can already imagine posting these pictures to Hooked on Spooks in the morning and the feral reactions they'll get from the paranormal community. The clarity is startling, the proof irrefutable.

I've struck gold just by getting to this point, but I want more. I want to get just a little closer, to get a picture of this thing without all the tree trunks blocking portions of it. The night air is still and silent—there's not even a hint of movement within the woods.

It can't hurt to take a few more steps.

After all, I've come this far and nothing has happened. What's a bit further?

With a deep, anxious breath, I take a step forward, a twig snapping beneath my tennis shoe as I enter the woods. I pause, waiting for something to jump out at me, but nothing does. After several seconds of my heart racing frantically, I take another step. Then another.

When I'm a couple of yards from the ring of light, I stop to marvel at it.

The white glow flickers silently, shifting like a candle flame but burning nothing around it. Inside the hole is more darkness, but I realize instantly that it doesn't match the woods around it. Everything is a deeper, darker black, the trees through it twisted and gnarled. The ground looks sharper, sticking up at odd angles.

It's a portal . It has to be. A gateway or an entrance from this world to another one.

I snap several pictures, not daring to get any closer. I've already risked so much by coming this far—I don't want to disturb whatever force has caused this portal to open. I'm curious, but not greedy, and I'll take what I can get in terms of evidence. I have at least fifty pictures; that will be more than enough for my subscribers.

"Holy shit," I whisper, the sound barely audible to my own ears.

A prickle of nerves dances along the back of my neck, making my hairs stand on end,

and warning bells sound in my head.

You've seen it, Erin. Now it's time to go.

The voice in my head is adamant and logical. I need to head back to the car. I need to show Tyler these photos.

He isn't going to believe that we found a real-life fucking portal. This has just rocked everything I thought I knew, and I've seen a lot of interesting shit over the last few years.

My hand curls around the strap of the camera and I tremble.

This is earth-shattering, and it's my discovery. The discovery of a lifetime, the jackpot I've been waiting for.

And it's mine .

Despite my curiosity reeling, I turn on my heel as my skin begins to crawl; the sudden need to get away shoots through me, and I focus on a clear path out of the trees. Despite the limited lighting, I can see a small piece of my car through the tree trunks, and Tyler's ball cap peeking out over the top of it as he waits for me to return.

But I only make it a few steps before something shifts ahead of me.

Stepping out from a tree trunk on two legs, morphing itself from the darkness, is a looming figure, at least eight feet tall. Taller than the stories .

The words in my head flicker into existence with terrible clarity before disappearing behind a wall of sheer terror.

I swallow hard, breath stuttering, my senses struggling to catch up to my brain.

Icy chills seize my muscles, sinking down to my bones.

The figure is wide, a solid wall of charred skin and fur, with gangly, muscular limbs and long fingers tipped with sharp claws.

I stagger back a step, forcing my gaze to climb higher to where the thing's face should be.

Instead of fur or skin, there's an elongated white animal skull with sharp teeth and horns spiraling out to the sides. A set of glowing red eyes laser in on me, lighting my insides with fear and making the alarm bells in my head scream at an all time high.

It's a beast, a demon straight from the depths of hell, and it's staring at me like I'm its next meal.

"Oh shit." The words are ripped from my lips before I can stop them.

A deep, rumbling growl rolls in the monster's chest, the sound shooting straight through my chest like an arrow. Reality slaps me harshly in the face.

This is the Grim that everyone has been terrified of, that they feared would come for them on the solstice. The embodiment of the horror stories that plague the town of Great Oaks, death incarnate.

And I've offered myself up to it willingly.

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Chapter

Four

Syros

One breath has my senses drowning in a minty, floral scent that clings to the mortal's pale skin, and another allows me to push past it to her sweaty, gamey aroma.

She smells fucking delicious, and I bet she'll taste even better.

The rush of her blood over my tongue, the intoxicating sensation of dragging my claws across her skin and watching it split open...

My growl rumbles through every part of my body.

I've waited for this moment.

For exactly six months, I've waited. The humans always come—no matter how terrified they are, they congregate in the woods like animals with no sense for their own safety.

I never have to venture far in order to find my prey.

Some years, I stumble upon a campsite and gorge myself on them, all lined up in neat rows around a fire like the light will somehow protect them from things that should scare them out in the darkness.

Other years, I have to trek much farther than the nearby, familiar path to find what I'm after. Yet every time the solstice rolls around, it is the same. They see me, they scream, and they run.

I hunt. Then, my stomach is filled, and I am satiated for another six months.

They do not all smell the same, however, and at times my prey has tasted nearly as foul as their smell. Fear can be the most delightful addition to the blood if the rest of the package is put together well, but like animals, humans are not made equal.

This one, however...

I draw in another breath, and my gut flips in anticipation.

She's short, even by human standards, and petite, with a strange, mechanical device hanging around her neck like a large pendant. Silver hair spills around her shoulders, standing out vibrantly against her black clothes, and her jagged breaths are the only sound that breaks the silence.

We stare each other down without blinking.

I've never particularly cared for human appearances, but I'd venture to say this one is attractive. Surely a sight for the male species on this planet, like a rare flower.

What a shame, since I'm seconds away from tearing out her petals.

I'm sure they gawk at her with the same sense of desire coursing through me, yet for an entirely different reason.

A fire ignites in my veins that heats my skin, and the desire to sink my teeth into her flesh tears another needy, desperate growl from my chest. It's been a long time,

countless nights, since I've indulged in the rich, delectable taste of a human.

And it's time to sate my hunger.

There is nothing finer, and this one, my senses tell me, will be especially tasty.

I can sense her heart racing as she stares up at me, flitting wildly in her chest as her bright eyes climb my body, meeting mine at last. Her fear is potent and seeps out of her pores to flame the fire burning within me, sending a ripple of arousal through me. Straight to my cock.

Bloodlust and desire are one and the same.

My instincts urge me to lunge at her, to sink my claws into her and drag her through the portal, back to my dying realm, but they're overpowered by my desire to hunt her down.

To give her a false sense of hope that she can escape me, only to rip it away at the last second.

To hear her screams as she fights to get away and then silence them with my claws around her throat.

There is something primal about the hunt and the eventual victory. It lights a fire in me more than any taste of flesh.

I can already imagine running my tongue across the wounds I'll make, tasting her blood and chewing on her delicate flesh. My mouth waters, and beads of saliva drip from my maw.

Oh, how I'm going to enjoy every second of this.

Pretty little thing. How still she stands there, rooted in place by her terror. Overwhelmed, yet drawn to the portal as any moth would be to a flame. Whatever is going on in her mind, she stares at me, mystified.

The brief moment of eye contact between us seems to stretch on forever before she turns and bolts deeper into the woods, her vibrant hair flowing like a beacon behind her. My muscles tense, eager to chase after her, but I hesitate.

I want to give her a head start, just enough to make her believe she has a shot at escaping.

A false sense of confidence will make catching her that much sweeter.

They always run. And they never make it far.

Either their fear trips them, or they allow it to turn them in circles in an unfamiliar landscape. Not to mention how delicate humans are—they break down with the slightest provocation.

Physically, mentally, or emotionally.

I shake out my arms, throwing my shoulders back and lifting my face to the sky overhead. This world has such wonders, and too many humans to ensure their longevity.

They will meet the same fate as my world, inevitably, where their kind overpopulates and their resources grow thin.

As such, I'm doing them a favor by culling the herd.

I wait several tense seconds until the girl's shimmering hair is a pinprick in the

distance, and then I take off after her. Weaving my way through tree trunks and crushing through bushes and vines and dense shrubs, I close the distance between us. Her scent grows stronger with her added perspiration, drenching the air and driving me wild as I pursue her.

She makes a left, and then a right, as though it'll throw me off course despite not knowing her way. Her confusion is as evident as her anxiety.

Little does she know she's only making my blood boil hotter as the chase sets fire to every part of me. She's quick—I'll give the little human that much.

Quick and desperate to survive.

And lighter on her feet than I may have given her initial credit for. This time, the growl purrs along the back of my throat, equal parts desire and glee. Ah, this is part of the fun. And more fun than I've had in years. There is something about this woman that pricks my curiosity.

Dropping to all fours, I pick up the pace, hunger gripping and twisting my insides. I catch sight of her and roar. The sound is loud enough to rustle the leaves overhead and a flurry of them scatter to the ground like they've been caught in an invisible breeze.

I run my tongue along my teeth, my gaze zeroing in as my instincts fight to cloud my judgment.

She'll be so easy to ruin.

Once I catch her, it will be a small matter to tear her apart and devour. The joy of it, the sheer and unadulterated joy of this place with its endless pleasures designed to satiate me...

It would only take a few more seconds to reach her. To grab her and throw her against the damp ground, pinning her there. But I'm not done playing with her. Not yet.

It will spoil the mood to end this too early.

No, I'm going to draw this out as long as I can for both of us, until I can't resist anymore. Until I'm panting, limbs aching from being denied what I want so badly, and I'll enjoy every torturous second of it.

Then I'll get to claim what's mine.

I dive to the right, slipping off the path the girl is blazing through the woods and hunch lower, picking up speed. I keep my steps nimble and light as I race ahead, passing her by a long shot, and then curving back around. I step behind a wide tree trunk, large enough to conceal me entirely, and wait for her to catch up.

Every second that crawls by is torturous, making my mouth water more.

Her crashing footsteps through the underbrush give her away, growing louder and more careless as exhaustion slows her down.

I chuckle. Too easy.

It always is.

These humans are no match for my speed or strength, which makes these rare ventures to their planet so much more fun. They have no idea what monsters really wait for them, existing in the shadows.

They're helpless, defenseless, and for some reason, always wandering into the woods

alone. Clearly they're not very smart either. If they were, they'd at least come prepared to fight. Instead, they practically offer themselves up to me every solstice.

I almost feel sorry for them.

Until I'm gnawing on their bones and draining the marrow from them, and then I don't feel so bad.

The human's footsteps grow louder as her feet struggle to find their way through the tangled underbrush, and a deep breath has her sweaty, floral scent filling my nostrils again, coating every nook and cranny of my senses. It's all I can do to remain hidden, resisting the urge to tear after her, but I manage to keep my hiding spot and suppress the rumble of pleasure rolling in my chest.

I'm too hungry to be careless, practically starved since the last solstice. Capturing this prey will be perfect and surpassed only by how incredible she'll taste on my tongue. My mouth waters and saliva drips, coating the patchy fur on my chest.

When she's mere feet away, I step out from behind the tree, straight into her path, and her momentum drives her right into my chest. With a shrill squeak, she bounces off and tumbles to the ground, landing on her backside.

So predictable.

I take a step forward, swiping my tongue along my teeth again, her scent crashing into me in a seductive cloud. It smells and feels so good.

Need to taste.

Need to devour.

She frantically crawls backward in a futile attempt to get away. When it becomes apparent she has no chance of escaping, her eyes pop open wide and she reaches for her necklace, her shaky fingers pressing at it frantically.

What is this little mortal doing?

Nothing is going to save her at this point. We've come too far and I'm starving. I will never let her go, no matter what tricks she attempts to pull out of her pocket. It would take a miracle for her to escape me.

She isn't begging, either. Normally at this point, once they've gone down, they are frantic and pleading for me to show them mercy. There is never any to be found, though. There is something delightful in watching the hope die in their eyes before I steal their dying breath for my own.

But this one has her lips pressed into a thin line and her jaw clenched as her fingers find whatever they sought before.

What does she think will happen?

Curiosity makes me hesitate before a bright flash of light erupts from the device. It's blinding, bathing us in white, and for a brief moment the woods disappear. There is only the light blotting out every single other thing around us.

Magic?

Colorful spots flash before my eyes, and I shake my head in an attempt to clear my vision, roaring in frustration when it takes several seconds for the sensation to fade.

I scrub the back of my hand across my eye sockets to clear them.

It isn't pain, exactly, but the sensation is less than pleasant.

When the darkness of the woods returns to me and I'm able to see clearly, it's just in time to see the girl's silver hair disappearing in the distance once again, and my chest shakes with a single chuckle.

Clever girl, isn't she?

I don't know what momentary magic her device casted over me, but clearly, this human wants to play games too.

Unluckily for her, I never lose.

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Chapter

Five

Erin

S hit. Shit. Shit.

Holy fucking shit, the Grim is going to eat me.

My heart slams into my throat, and there's a kink in my side from running, but I force my feet to move faster as I try to put as much space between me and the monster as possible.

Every muscle tweaks and aches from exertion.

His roar in the distance makes my heart stutter, and I know I only have a few seconds before he catches up. He's insanely fast and can move in silence through the trees in a way that makes me envious. I understand now why people fall prey to him so easily, and I scold myself for being such an idiot.

At least, I think it's a he . There's no way to tell through all the fur. The height gives me the impression of masculinity, but what do I know?

A horrified chuckle burns my throat on its way past my lips. Why did I ever think going into the woods was a good idea? My stupid ego got me right into the center of this mess.

The camera flash bought me a few seconds, but not enough. I might have even managed to get him in the frame, but I'm too terrified to worry about it. Too afraid for my life. I'm flirting with death every second I remain in the woods, and the realization that I might not make it out alive is quickly sinking in.

The light from the portal is nowhere in sight, and there's no way for me to orient myself in the darkness.

There's nothing but trees in any direction, with moonlight patchwork trickling down from the canopy overhead.

It feels pointless to keep running, knowing very well that I might just be heading deeper into the tangle of woods where no one will hear me scream, but I sprint anyway, trying to stay a few steps ahead of the beast on my heels.

Leaves rustle behind me and the sound of snapping twigs grows louder as the Grim closes in. My heart leaps into my throat. It doesn't look like I'll be getting out of this alive.

All my work will be for nothing if I'm not able to share my undeniable proof of the Grim's existence with the world. I have to get these pictures out there somehow. I have to leave them for Tyler to find.

If I'm captured, or dragged through the portal, the least I can do is leave my camera behind.

Tyler will have the photos to share on the website, and everyone will see once and for all what lurks in these woods, what appears during the solstice. It's more proof than anyone else has ever gotten and still a huge accomplishment in my book.

Even if I won't be alive to celebrate it.

Grimacing, I slip the camera strap off over my head and toss it to the side. Even if the lens shatters, the memory card inside is safe. The proof will live on no matter what happens to me.

I pump my arms harder and leap over a knotted root, running for my life.

The Grim is closing in, the rustling getting louder behind me until I can almost feel his breath on my neck, and I scream. It's not a cry for help, because I know there's no one around to hear me.

Even if they did, they're not liable to come looking for me knowing what day it is, knowing the Grim has come to claim another victim. It's all the nerves and fear mounted in my body, finally escaping in a single cry before a pair of solid, muscular arms wrap around me and the ground disappears from beneath my feet.

I've made a mistake.

Hard muscles like unforgiving boulders press against my back, and I kick, trying my best to make contact with any part of this monster. One of my heels hits his thigh, but if it hurts him, he doesn't let on.

In fact, he doesn't react at all, but his warm breath rolls over my skin, sending a chill down my spine. It joins my mounting fear and makes my blood run cold.

"Let me go," I demand, thrashing against his hold to no avail.

His clawed hands squeeze me with bruising strength, my arms pinned firmly at my sides. I twist and turn, fighting with everything I have, trying to claw at his skin or break his iron-clad grip, but it's no use.

"Why would I do that, little human?" he hisses in my ear, and I still suddenly. I

hadn't expected him to speak, much less be so articulate, to sound so incredibly human.

His voice takes me off guard just as much as seeing him in the woods in the first place.

I guess I assumed he would grunt and growl like a regular animal. He looks like a monster, but he speaks like a man.

And this... this is nothing like I imagined.

The Grim turns on the spot, still holding me with my back against his chest, and I thrash half-heartedly in his hold. Running for so long wore me out, and I'm exhausted, but I don't want to give up. Giving up means accepting my fate, and I'm not ready to be killed by a beast.

My mind races, frantically trying to think my way out of this, trying to figure out how to get away. Maybe I'll have a chance to escape when he puts me down. It's probably wise to save my energy just in case.

I still in his arms, struggling against his steel hold for every breath, but not willing to expend any more precious energy. It's clear that fighting is pointless.

He grunts like I've made the right choice.

As we move in near silence, I wonder what he plans to do with me. Would he tell me the truth if I asked, or do I really want to know? Will death come swifter if I'm not dreading every agonizing second beforehand?

My gut says the latter.

He carries me like I'm nothing, and I can't help but admire his strength. He's a powerhouse, a force to be reckoned with, and rightly nicknamed the Grim. Anyone who crosses him is certain to meet a Grim fate.

I doubt anyone would stand a chance against him if they didn't come brandishing an assault rifle. And for some reason, I wonder if even that would be enough. He could easily rip me apart now if he wanted to, and knowing he possesses that amount of restrained power tickles something inside me.

It's a strange feeling that I might have balked at moments ago, but now that I'm pressed against a solid wall of brute strength and he's carrying me through the forest like I'm nothing, it stirs something in me.

Curiosity, unexplainable and burning.

I should be terrified, but the desperate want for knowledge quickly overtakes my thoughts. I wonder what else this beast is capable of, what he might show me before snapping my spine and devouring my corpse.

He could easily toss me around or pin me to a tree...

My pussy clenches, making the blood drain from my face and my thighs clamp together. There's no way I'm aroused right now. Absolutely no way. What kind of person does it make me if I get turned on by being caught by a creature like this?

I almost refuse to believe it until the Grim seems to notice. He sucks in a deep breath and chuckles, a dark, gravelly noise in his throat, then stops walking. For a long second, he just stands in the middle of the silent woods with me still clutched firmly in his arms. Nothing but the sound of our breathing falls around us.

"Your pheromones deceive you, little human," his voice rumbles against my skin, the

hard angle of his jaw bone brushing against my shoulder. “You should be terrified.”

I shiver, fear piercing through me like an icy needle. So what if I am a tiny bit aroused? What’s this thing going to do? Fuck me? Christ, yeah right.

The thought has my head spinning, and my pussy clenches against my will again.

Damn it . Clearly my body is determined to betray me, as much as I try to hide it. This entire situation is bizarre enough to begin with. Why not throw in an out of whack libido?

“You wish,” I scoff, rolling my eyes toward the sky even though he can’t see it. Maybe he can sense the disdain in my voice. “As if I’d fuck a monster.”

He laughs, his chest shaking with the noise. “As if you could stop me.”

Without warning, he throws me to the ground and I barely have time to splay my hands out in front of me before I land hard among grass and tree roots. A branch scratches my cheek, and I worry about it drawing blood, but before I can even scramble to my feet, the Grim is on top of me, pressing me further into the earth.

His hard form is against me, trapping me in place and taking my breath away, and for a second I wonder what exactly he has planned.

Is this a scare tactic, designed to make me admit I’d fuck him if it were on the table?

Or is he really planning to rip through my clothes and take me right here?

He’s more human than I initially assumed, but that doesn’t make him fucking material. He eats people.

My stomach cartwheels when I realize he was right. I wouldn't be able to stop him. He's too big, too powerful for me to stand a chance against him, despite my unwavering determination.

And as crazy as it might sound, I'm not entirely sure I'd put up much of a fight. Not when the heartbeat between my thighs rivals the one in my chest.

"I've never fucked a human before," he growls, the sound vibrating through me like a jolt of electricity, goosebumps quickly following after. He drags the edge of his jaw across my shoulder blades, his long tongue flicking out to tease the exposed skin of my neck, and I shudder. "You would be the first for me, if you choose to play this game."

I open my mouth to snap something back at him, but he flexes his hips and presses a hard cock firmly between my legs. I gasp at the contact and forget how to breathe as he rubs himself harder against my leggings, searching for my entrance.

Holy fuck. He's huge. In all ways, if you know what I mean.

"Is this what you had in mind?" he asks.

My muscles seize, and I'm not sure what to do, even though I know what I should be doing. I should be screaming, fighting to get away from this beast. I should be panicking and definitely not enjoying the pressure against the thin material of my pants.

But am I really that surprised? A little voice at the back of my mind teases me.

I've devoted the last several years of my life to tracking down things that normally have people running for the hills. I've always been fascinated by things that live in the shadows, been drawn to stuff that goes bump in the night.

There's always been a part of me that longed for darkness, like I belonged there more than anywhere else. It called to me, the way home calls when you've been away too long.

Now that I'm finally faced with a monster, a true beast in the flesh, my curiosity is multiplied tenfold. Something about the Grim calls to me, yearning burning deep in my marrow, and terrified as I am, the fear only seems to increase the desire.

Fuck.

I'm arching my back against the beast before I can talk myself out of it, tempting him, egging him on. Daring him to do something other than threaten.

He growls again loudly, the sound ricocheting through me like a ping pong ball, and he grabs the back of my neck with one of his hands, hardly gentle.

"You were saying," he adds, pressing himself between my thighs again and sending a wave of heat exploding through my middle.

I should not be enjoying this, I repeat over and over, but denying it doesn't change the fact that my panties are soaked and I want him to pick up the pace. This has to be some sort of twisted fever dream, because my body wouldn't normally react this way to being kidnapped by a monster.

Would it?

My thoughts haze over with lust as I do my best to press back against him, but he has a firm hold on me and isn't giving me an inch. All I can do is squeeze my thighs together as he grinds against me again, increasing the friction against his swollen cock, and try not to envision what it might look like as he groans in my ear.

“You want me to fuck you, little human?” he growls, picking up his pace. With the increased friction, it’s just enough of a shift for my clit to get attention with every stroke, and I fight the urge to moan along with him. “You reek of lust and desire. Is this what you truly want? An interesting turn of events.”

He draws in another deep breath.

Urges be damned, but I’m not going to let him know just how much I’m enjoying this.

“No,” I grind out with a clenched jaw as his teeth graze my shoulder, sharp enough to draw blood. I wince, knowing without seeing that crimson is beading on my skin, but the pain is gone the second he laps his tongue over the wound.

“Liar,” he snaps, driving himself harder and stretching the damp material of my leggings to its breaking point. If he keeps on much longer, he’s liable to tear through them and sink his cock into my pussy that’s ready and waiting for him, and I hate how much I like the thought of it.

This is so fucking wrong .

Tension builds in my core as he works his cock back and forth between my thighs. With how wet I am, he glides across the thin fabric with ease, creating the right amount of friction against my sensitive clit to have me chasing an orgasm.

I want to tell him to stop.

I should do something to make him stop, but instead, I squeeze my eyes shut as my thoughts get away from me. Thoughts of this monster filling and stretching me, despite how wrong it is. Him slamming into me until I whimper from the pain.

His claws rake over my skin, setting it ablaze before his tongue trails behind to soothe the burn.

I wonder what else he can do with that tongue.

As I reach my peak, desperate to fall over the edge into the strangest climax I've ever had in my life, the Grim roars low and deep, picking up his frantic pace until he clenches against me. His cock throbs, spilling a pool of warm cum against me and soaking the crotch of my leggings.

The sensation is enough to finally send me over the edge, and my pussy throbs, aching for something to grab onto as it pulses through my climax. I bite down on my bottom lip, refusing to give this monster more pleasure than he's already taken from me, and tremble as the orgasm rolls through my middle and makes my legs weak.

When the sensation passes and my muscles stop convulsing, heat scorches my cheeks. I can hardly believe what just happened, but the undeniable proof is between my thighs. A mix of both our fluids drench my clothes, and as desperate as I am to strip them off, I'm entirely at the mercy of the Grim.

He gets to his feet and draws in a deep, shaky breath through the holes on his bony face that are sorta like nostrils. As his chin tilts down, his red-eyed gaze glowing a little brighter in the darkness, I realize he's smelling... me. The sex-heavy scent in the air.

My heartbeat skips. I don't know why it's so hot—him looking at me like he wants to devour me—but it is.

I'm halfway tempted to try and run again, but my legs are jello from all the running and fighting I've done, plus the orgasm. I'm drained, entirely spent of any extra energy, so when he lifts me off the ground and tosses me over his shoulder like a sack

of potatoes, I don't even have the strength to resist.

"A-Are you going to kill me now?" I ask, my breathing still ragged from adrenaline. I wonder if I should start counting down the minutes until my soul leaves my body. I wonder if I'll get to come back as a ghost. Maybe I can haunt my paranormal investigator friends and scare the shit out of them.

Or if he's taking me to his realm, maybe there aren't such things as ghosts.

"Not yet," he grunts before falling silent again.

He doesn't seem to be a beast of many words, but this slow, silent trek through the woods is agonizing.

The light from the portal eventually comes into view, glistening in the darkness like a demonic halo. I try to spin and twist on his shoulder to get a view of my car through the trees, but I don't see it anywhere. Tyler must have driven it back home when I was taken, high-tailing it from the scene.

Will he spread the word in the morning? Run around town telling people there's been another abduction? Will they even look for me?

I look around a final time, knowing deep in my gut that this will be the last glimpse I see of my world. Whatever awaits me on the other side of the portal is horrifying and potentially deadly. An unknown world, potentially crawling with Grims, all eager to sink their teeth into me.

I grow queasy at the thought.

Maybe my death will be quick and painless. Or at least not be drawn out and torturous. Surely he'd spare me a prolonged, painful death.

My thoughts are still spinning as he gets close to the portal, but the second he steps through, energy crashes down on me. My eyes roll back in my head and everything goes black.

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Chapter

Six

Erin

Regaining consciousness is kinda painful.

No one tells you that part.

My body aches as feeling returns to my limbs, pain throbbing steadily in my temples, and for a moment I wonder if the Grim has already started gnawing on me in my sleep. Pins and needles prick at my nerve endings.

But when I'm finally able to pry my eyes open and they adjust to the dim light of the room around me, I find that's not the case. I'm intact and seemingly unharmed, aside from the ache in every one of my muscles, but I know that's from my out of shape ass hightailing it through the woods trying to escape.

Where am I?

I'm not entirely sure what happened when we went through the portal. That part is a little fuzzy, and when I try to recapture the memories, they dart just out of reach and leave a massive blank space behind.

I dare to shift my eyes around the room and my heart skips a painful beat, nausea turning my stomach and my head filling with an angry buzzing drone.

My wrists are bound together, as are my ankles, and I'm lying in a nest of pelts on the floor. It's not entirely uncomfortable, but I can feel the hard floor pressing up against my spine, and I wish I could move into a different position, but I'm hopelessly stuck in the mountain of fur.

Fighting against the restraints is useless. They're tied tight. I'm not going anywhere .

My limbs ache from my frantic sprint and the adrenaline still adding fire to my veins.

I struggle to remember exactly what happened before the Grim stepped through the ring of light with me tossed over his shoulder, a swirl of hazy memories blooming in my mind, along with the dull pain of a headache. I was too in shock as it was happening, too busy running for my life for the panic to creep up, but now reality slaps me across the face.

I've been taken by the Grim.

While I'm alive, I'm not on earth anymore. He's brought me back to whatever realm or dimension he lives in, and I have no idea how I'm going to get out of here.

The Grim took me through a portal .

My eyes frantically shift to my surroundings, not sure what to expect. I'm in a small hovel of a space, staring up at a ceiling that twists to a point in the center. The walls are imperfectly carved stone, almost bell-shaped, and there are all sorts of things decorating them.

Brows narrowed, I scan the various items hung up on the more jagged parts of the stone.

Each one is topped with familiar trinkets like watches, bandanas, and random pots

and pans—things the Grim must have picked up on earth during his trips through the portal—and various skulls hanging from short pieces of rope. My eyes linger on one of the skulls, one of them obviously human with his jaw hung open in a silent scream, and I cringe.

Does the Grim plan to add my cranium to his collection?

No doubt he does.

My stomach pitches toward the floor beneath me. This slow march to death is so much worse than I thought. Better for him to get it over with. Why hadn't he just killed me in the woods? It almost seemed like he'd enjoyed the chase and capture more than anything else.

I tug on the restraints but nothing changes.

Crude light fixtures are also mounted on the walls, all flickering an eerie gray color, and there's an entrance cut into the far wall. A thick, tattered curtain fills the arched hole.

It's simple and much cleaner than I'd expect a blood-thirsty monster's home to be.

Outside of the skulls. Those are entirely expected.

My breathing comes quicker, despite my efforts to keep it under control, as I search for any sign of the Grim. Aside from the nest and the items on the walls, there are a few crude benches and a large stone basin filling the area. No table, no chairs, and no windows.

Finally, he steps into view, shifting out of my peripheral vision. His bright eyes glare at me unblinkingly, drinking in every part of me, and I catch my breath.

How the fuck did I not know he was there?

The dark pit in my stomach widens, shooting through my spine and down to the floor and I freeze, not sure what to do.

There's nothing I can do but lay here at his mercy, and as he slowly approaches, an animalistic rumble forms in his throat. I clench my eyes closed with a squeak, wishing I could wake up from this terrible dream.

No, not a dream, I remind myself as I clamp my hands together to keep them from trembling. This is all very real.

And I'm very much screwed.

I attempt to scramble backward, kicking at the furs and finding no purchase.

His footsteps continue to pad across the floor, growing louder, and I raise my bound hands to cover my face. Can the monsters still get you with your eyes closed?

I'm not sure why that's the first thing I think to do, instead of, you know, begging for him to let me go, but I'm panicking. Spiraling. Lost to the fear as it consumes me, and fighting the prickling feeling at the corner of my eyes.

Please. I don't want to cry in front of him. I'm already so much weaker than he is.

The footsteps stop right next to me, making my chest seize.

"If you're going to kill me, just do it," I whimper through my hands. "I can't keep playing cat and mouse. Just do it."

I wait, refusing to uncover my eyes, for something to happen.

I wait for the feel of his claws or his hands on me, trembling as my fearful anticipation mounts, but the touch doesn't come. Neither does a response, even though I know he understands me.

After an agonizing minute of nothing, he shifts beside me, and the sudden movement makes me flinch. I decide to peek through my fingers, but instantly realize my mistake when I find him crouched low next to me, his face hovering a foot or so above mine.

I whimper, starting to quiver from the crushing amount of fear and adrenaline in my veins, and I scream when he grabs my hands and drags them away from my face.

“ Silence .”

His voice is like a shockwave through my limbs, and I snap my lips together obediently, even though I'm still shaking and too afraid to look him directly in the eyes.

I look anywhere else to avoid those glowing, menacing hollows that flicker like there's a fire burning inside him, eager to escape. From his thick, fur-covered neck that stretches up to meet an elongated skull to his moon-colored jaw with sharp, curling fangs. I trace the curls of his horns that wind out in opposite directions.

He's taller than he appeared in the woods. There, he'd been a part of the shadows, as mighty as any of the tree trunks and just as terrifying.

Just like Tyler warned—I've been taken.

“You will do as I say, or I have no issue slicing you in half,” the Grim rumbles, running a singular claw from the waistband of my pants up to my sternum, dragging the shirt along with it.

My teeth chatter together, although my lips are still pressed firmly together, terrified of the thought of him fileting me with those six-inch claws. If I scream, he'll follow through. I have no doubt.

I try to move away from his touch and squirm in any direction to distance myself, but it's no use. The nest of furs is too thick and plush for me to get any leverage, and I just slip further into them.

"Do not scream," he commands, his icy voice slicing through the air. "Or something far more terrifying than me will find you; I promise you that's not a fate you want. You will swallow your tongue and be silent, girl."

Oh, sure, like he wants to protect me? Yeah, right.

This is a nightmare. I'm trapped in a nightmare. I'd said I was willing to do anything to find proof of the Grim's existence? I was an idiot.

He stands again, causing me to breathe the tiniest sigh of relief despite my racing pulse. His eyes linger on me again like he's studying me, trying to figure something out.

"I'm going to make sure we weren't followed," he says, his gravelly voice low. "If you make any noise or try to run away, your skin will be the next pelt I add to this pile."

He runs his hand along the edge of the nest before standing to tower over me again. Then, he turns and stalks across the room with my eyes trailing him as much as I don't want them to.

For such a big fucker, his strides are nimble, like he's moving through water and hardly affected by gravity. Maybe the gravity is less intense in this realm? I'll really

be able to tell if I can get out of these restraints and on my feet.

Or are his movements really just that refined?

The Grim swipes the heavy fabric covering the doorway aside with his massive hand and pauses, staring intently out into the darkness. I catch the briefest glimpse of a gloomy world outside, but beyond what looks like a tree branch or two, I can't make out anything else. Nothing to give me an idea of what exists outside the walls of my prison.

Without a backwards glance, the Grim slips through the opening, and the fabric rustles as it settles back into place.

He's gone.

I'm alone, and while that should bring me a tiny bit of comfort, it doesn't.

The space is empty without his presence crowding me, and the last thing I want is to be here with only my terror for company.

I've got to get out.

My heart gallops into overdrive as my mind starts spiraling with escape plans. There's only one door leading into the house, so if I'm going to make a run for it, I'll just be following right behind the Grim.

What's to stop him from catching me again and dragging me back here? I'd rather keep my skin where it is than risk him peeling it off and adding it to the pile .

Adrenaline shoots through my system, and I swallow over the huge lump in my throat.

If I'm going to make a run for it, now is the time. I don't know how many precious seconds I have before he returns, or how mad he'll be when he sees I'm gone, but I don't plan to be here to find out.

I bring my hands to my face again, tugging at the rope with my teeth. It's tight, and damn near impossible for me to move, but the knot finally slips the slightest bit, enough for me to maneuver and stretch my fingers to untie the rest.

I don't take time to massage my aching wrists before sitting up and attacking the binding around my ankles, fingers trembling as I try to move quickly.

My gaze flashes toward the door, and I strain to hear over the thunder of my frantic breaths.

It would make sense to come up with a plan first before blindly running into an unknown world, but I only have a few seconds I'm willing to spare. The Grim could be gone for several hours, or he might be waiting for me just outside the door. Either way, I have to get out of here.

I have to try.

I'll take my chances with whatever is outside these walls, but I'm not staying here a second longer than I have to. It's a matter of survival.

I have to get back to the portal and go home.

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Chapter

Seven

Erin

Once the bindings are shed, I crawl out of the nest, my eyes darting around the room to the collected junk, but I don't see anything useful. No weapons. Nothing that would help protect me if I run into danger.

My heart beats faster still, and my vision blurs.

I'm sore, especially now that I'm up and moving, but there's no time to worry about achy muscles and the fatigue in my legs. I creep to the door and tug the fabric back slightly, glaring out into the darkness for any sign of him.

The world is dark, with twisted, gnarled trees stretching up from the ground and disappearing into the inky sky overhead. It takes my eyes a second to adjust, but I can see a small pool of water gathered around the house and a thin stretch of ground running off from the front door into the distance.

No other houses.

No sounds of animals tiptoeing through the trees.

No birds, no insects. Nothing.

There's nothing but darkness and silence and my desperate urge to put as much space between me and this place as possible.

Without taking the time to second guess myself, I run. My feet pound against the thin bridge of ground hovering above the water, and I take off into the trees, realizing moments later this probably isn't the smartest plan of action. Especially since I don't know which way the Grim went.

I could be running right toward him, but I don't slow down.

Faster. I have to go faster and put distance between us.

My muscles cry out in pain and my lungs burn, but if this is my last chance at survival—my last whisper of hope to get away and make it home somehow—I'm not going to squander it.

I'll worry about the details later. If later comes .

I try to pick up the pace, willing my feet to move faster, even though it doesn't seem to help. I'm exhausted, more tired than I've ever been in my entire life, and the only thing keeping me moving now is my sheer will to live.

I'm not ready to die, not now.

Not here .

I've got too many other things to accomplish to give in now.

So many more adventures to go on and stories to tell. This isn't my time to go, no matter how high the cards seem stacked against me, and I can't give up, despite the exhaustion weighing down my bones.

I'm sure I'll collapse if I slow down, and I rely on my momentum and panic to keep me moving forward.

One more step. Then another.

I fight to keep up my steady pace with my arms pumping at my sides.

My ragged breath breaks the silence, my heart slamming unforgivably against my ribs.

I bob and weave through the trees, moving as quickly as I can in the almost pitch-blackness. It's difficult, and my shoes threaten to trip me up on roots and knotted underbrush, but I keep going, moving as quietly as possible.

It feels like déjà vu, a repeat of what happened in the woods after I discovered the portal, and I look for any glimmer of light shimmering in the distance. Any hint of a glow, something to guide me back home. I have no idea how long I was out, but it couldn't have been that long. Maybe the portal is still open and I'll find it if I keep running.

Maybe...

A terrible roar tears through the air, echoing from somewhere in the distance and threatening to split me in half. I choke on air as my heart stutters, and I swivel my head to look behind me, although there's nothing for me to see yet.

Fuck .

It seems the Grim has realized I'm gone, and now I have very limited time to hide. Surely he'll be on my tail, hunting me down once again, but I doubt he'll be so kind this go-around.

This time, he'll be out for my blood.

He's not going to let me off easily this time unless I somehow manage to get through the portal. A prayer echoes in the back of my mind that the portal is still open and will only close once I make it back through, sealing me on one side and the Grim on the other.

I run harder, screaming internally for my feet to move faster, reminding myself why I have to keep going every step of the way.

I have to get home and tell the world what I've found.

No one is going to believe me, but I'll make them—somehow. I'll make them all see the Grim for what he truly is, and maybe we can figure out a way to stop him from taking anyone ever again.

If I can save my own life, I'll be saving countless others in the process, and for that reason alone, I have to fight past the pain and keep going.

But none of those things will happen if I fail now.

The trees eventually open into a small clearing of grass, almost perfectly circular in the middle of the woods. The shape is peculiar enough to catch my attention since I haven't seen anything but gnarly tree trunks since I left the Grim's house—hovel? Dwelling?—but I hardly slow down, my gaze laser-focused several yards ahead where the trees continue.

I glance up briefly at the sky overhead, noting that it's lighter than I initially thought, a dark, murky gray flecked with emerald green. Does the brighter color mean the sun will rise soon? Or that the tree limbs blocked out most of the color before?

An alien world, a giant monster...it's almost too fantastical to believe.

The green pinpricks could be stars, or they could be something else, but I can't stop to analyze them. I keep running, bounding across the clearing. The ground is softer here, almost damp. The closer I get to the middle, the more noticeable the difference is, and my feet begin to sink into the vegetation.

A scream burns in my chest, but I don't have the air to spare to birth it.

Every step becomes slower, my feet disappearing further into the ground, and my heart leaps into my throat. Oh god, no. Is this quicksand? Did I really just free myself from one prison to be bound and restrained in a much worse fashion?

The terror is brighter this time and churns my stomach in a sickening wave.

I fight against the pull, using my hands to lift my thighs and drag my shoes out of the muck as I continue. I refuse to be taken out by grass. What a disappointing way to die. The thought is clinical and detached in the face of the surging adrenaline.

I'm ankle deep and almost across the clearing when another roar, this time much closer, cuts straight through me like a knife.

What would be a better death? Drowning in quicksand or being torn limb from limb by the Grim?

"Shit, shit, shit," I whisper between haggard breaths, pulling harder at my feet to free them from the sinking ground.

When I reach the other side of the clearing, the ground grabs onto one of my ankles hard and I fall forward, slamming my face to the ground. I expect the ground to start swallowing me whole, but my torso seems to have landed on solid dirt. No sinking or

dragging.

After a few seconds of exhausted fighting, unable to move without wincing from the pain, I'm able to free myself, and I scramble to my feet again. I curse over the precious seconds I've lost, knowing the fate that's inevitably coming for me, and then I run. Hard.

The Grim's going to find me.

He's going to catch me again if I don't do something quickly, pull an ace out of a sleeve or a rabbit out of a hat to save myself.

Would it be enough for me to hide in a tree? To scale to the top and refuse to come out until daytime? His sense of smell seems too keen for me to evade detection that way.

Is there even such a thing as daytime here? Or is this realm perpetually drenched in darkness?

When I stared through the portal it was dark like this, but that doesn't mean anything. It could still be nighttime. There's a chance I was only out for a couple of hours.

Or maybe there is no such thing as a sun in this realm?

My stomach shifts again, the realization that I'm in completely uncharted territory finally sinking in.

This is bad. So so bad.

Finally, when I feel like my legs are going to give out, a sliver of white breaks through the darkness, and I nearly scream with relief. The unmistakable glow of the

portal flickers in the distance, wavering through the tree limbs, but it's there.

It has to be less than fifty yards away. My heart leaps out of my ribs.

I'm going to make it. I'm going to make it.

The excitement that spurs in my chest somehow sends the message to my feet, and they pick up the momentum again. As soon as I reach it, I'll dive through, but I know that won't be the end of things. I still have to make it out of the trees and to town before I'll truly feel safe.

Can I even run that far? Or will I pass out before I get there?

My heavy breaths and weak limbs suggest the latter, but I can't give up. Not when I'm so close.

I don't know whether the Grim will follow me out of the woods—the stories and myths are unclear just how far he's willing to go to claim his victims—but hopefully when I make it to my house, I'll be safe.

I can barricade the door and windows, lock myself inside and refuse to come out. Tomorrow, I'll walk to Tyler's house to get my car, telling him about the incredible story of how I was almost stranded here in this world. Of how I almost fell victim to the Grim, and we'll post the pictures of the portal on my blog.

I'm so enamored with my thoughts of escape, so consumed by my looming success, that I don't notice the tremble in the trees nearby until it's too late.

I'm close, so close, to reaching the portal, when something slams into my back and I fly forward, skittering across the ground. I hit roots and twigs and bumps on the ground, the harshness of the terrain scratching and biting at my skin like hot pokers.

I try to get to my feet again, but a huge hand grips my side and flips me over, flopping me onto my back.

“You thought you could run from me,” the Grim growls, his words shattering the world around us and echoing into the distance.

So much for being quiet and not being overheard.

He obviously doesn't seem to care whether he alerts any other beasts in this forest. Honestly, whatever is out there probably isn't a match for him anyway.

“Please,” I whimper, pushing at his massive, bulging chest in a feeble attempt to get him off me. “Let me go. Please.”

“What part do you not understand?” His voice vibrates over my skin, the heat of his breath hitting me in the face as he lowers himself over me.

I try to flinch away, but it's useless.

The Grim reaches up to cup my cheeks in his coarse, leathery hand before glaring straight into my soul. “You're mine now. I will never let you go.”

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Chapter

Eight

Erin

His .

No, it's not possible.

He's a monster, a senseless beast. Sure, he can talk, but is it possible for him to possess someone, to make them his pet?

The only way he'll let me go is through death.

I shove against him, thrashing beneath his weight, but the Grim doesn't budge. He doesn't even react, like he can't understand my struggle, which only makes me angrier. How can he be so stoic, so cold, so god damned cruel, all while making my heart race and my blood boil at his closeness?

"No," I grunt out, twisting to grind my elbow into his side. "No, I'm not yours. I belong to myself!"

I'm tired. I want to go home.

I shouldn't have trailed a strange creature through the woods at night.

I shouldn't be here.

This isn't normal . In fact, I'm pretty sure I lost my mind at some point between discovering the portal in the forest and now. Not only my mind, but pieces of me I'll never get back.

The Grim only confirms my suspicion when he shoves one of my legs to the side, settling between my thighs the way he did before, and chills shoot up my spine, followed by a wave of heat.

He's massive, his body blotting out everything else.

"What do you want from me?" The question squeaks out before I have a chance to swallow it down.

His bottomless, glowing eyes meet mine and hold me in place as surely as his body.

Images of him pinning me to the ground earlier resurface, and my face flushes with hot embarrassment. I don't know what it is about the idea of being this thing's prey, the fact that he'll go to any lengths to hunt me down and devour me, that flips a switch inside me and turns my libido into a traitorous backstabber.

But it does.

Am I really so delusional that I want a ravenous monster to fuck me senseless in the woods? Or have I just been reading way too much paranormal romance? Probably both.

Why would I want a monster?

There is nothing human about him or his features. He's pure muscle, tall and dark as

a nightmare. His teeth alone are enough to have me break out in a sweat.

If I was smarter, I'd put up more of a fight.

Either way, when his hard cock suddenly presses against the fabric between my thighs, I can't keep my pussy from quivering. Nor can I keep it from moistening at the thought of him inside me.

Disgusting.

There is something seriously wrong with me, and as hard as I try to link my reaction to my need to survive, it's not working.

"You can run, but I will always find you," the Grim hisses, moving to graze my cheek with the end of his bony snout.

Despite chasing after me, the bone is chilled, and draws some of the heat from my face on contact.

"No matter where you go, little one, I have your scent. I will track you to the ends of this realm."

He remains crouched over me like an animal preparing to destroy its prey, like he's debating the best way to rip me apart. I whimper, and a needy growl erupts in his chest, like my weakness entices him. I'm sure it does.

If the massive boner that's pushing eagerly against my core is any indication, he gets off on the chase. The hunt.

His physical reaction has nothing to do with me and everything to do with what I represent. I am his quarry.

Or so I tell myself.

It's better than leaning into the alternative—he fucks humans. Whether they let him or not.

“Just let me go,” I beg, struggling against him.

I'm well aware how hopeless my attempts are, but I try to wiggle out from underneath him nevertheless.

He grabs my arms, pinning them unforgivingly to the ground above my head. Although his grip on my wrist is gentle compared to the rope, it is unbreakable. I may as well be fighting against pure stone.

“You'd like that wouldn't you? To be released and allowed to live out your meaningless existence? Too bad, my tiny human. In this world, you keep what you find.” He runs his tongue from my chest to my ear, making me squirm, and I scream, still trying to get away. “I found you.”

His skull snout dances down my front, rolling over my chest as he inhales my scent. The sharp points of his canines graze between my breasts and snag against the fabric.

I can't breathe. My lungs are painfully tight.

“And since you've done nothing but misbehave, I think I should show you just how mine you are,” he growls.

A pit opens up inside of me, and I shrink down into it at his words.

“What are you going to do to me?” I whisper.

Do I even want to know? Will it make me feel better if I do?

The sinking sensation in my torso tells me that I already know; I'm just not willing to consider it logically yet.

The power of his growl vibrates against my skin and makes my stomach flutter as he slides lower down my body. He trails his snout and one hand down my torso, past my belly button before finally letting go of my hands. I don't attempt to move them.

I'm shaking and frozen. I'm hot and my skin is tight, ready to erupt into a shower of sparks.

The Grim presses his hand to my gut, his fingers splayed out possessively.

I'm still not convinced this monster won't slice me in half with those menacing claws, and the torrent of emotions whirling within me stuns me still and silent. Terrified as I am, I'm slightly curious about what his next move will be.

Is that wrong?

I want to see what he plans to do.

Call it professional curiosity, even in the face of personal terror.

Or maybe it's just a way for my mind to process the experience.

I lick my tongue over my teeth and compulsively swallow.

I have to smell like straight up sweat considering how much I've run, not to mention the panic, but the Grim doesn't seem to care. He simply dips his head lower, gripping my thighs firmly and prying them apart before pressing his skull between my legs.

The warmth of his exhale against my pussy sets off some kind of explosion inside me.

My stomach whirls, muscles tightening, and I gasp in anticipation.

Fuck . This is not good.

Or is it good?

I'm struck mute.

In a swift motion, he grabs the sides of my leggings, not caring that his claws sink through the material, and rips them toward my feet. My tennis shoes stop them from being removed but, again, he's unbothered.

I suck in a breath, the air seizing in my lungs.

I'm entirely exposed. Every part of me. He grabbed my underwear along with the leggings and night air tickles my core.

"Look at that," he grinds out. "You're dripping wet."

He spreads my thighs even further apart, his claws scratching along my delicate skin and setting them ablaze. There's something tantalizing and dangerous in the sensation, and rather than sinking into fear, I'm on fire.

I pant as he sits back to stare at me. Those glowing eyes take in my naked legs spread wide for him, and as terrified as I am, as much as I want to fight and get away, running toward the portal only meters away, I stay frozen beneath his gaze.

My breath stutters, heart skipping a beat when my eyes fall down his form to the

swollen cock between his legs. I swallow hard. Even in the dim lining, my eyes have adjusted enough to make out the massive girth and weeping head, translucent liquid slowly dripping down the side.

Shit, it's the size of my forearm... maybe bigger. How in the—

No, he's not going to try to stick it inside of me. It won't fit. There is no way a monster like him can fit inside a small human like me. He'd rip me in half.

I trace the length of the shaft lower until my gaze lands on a softball-sized bulge at the base. My eyes widen, staring as I try to fathom what the hell it's for.

"I wonder what you taste like, little human," he purrs, and before I can answer swamp ass and salt he lowers his snout to my pussy again.

Squealing, I scramble backward, but it's not far enough to avoid the collision of bone on flesh.

This time, with not even a shred of fabric separating us, the contact makes me shiver. The hardness of his bone runs gently over my mound, dipping lower, and his long tongue rolls up to lap at me, making my back arch and my breath catch.

He glides his tongue through my folds, the tip circling my clit before he dives deeper. Without waiting for me to give the go ahead, he shifts and stabs his tongue inside my pussy, my muscles clenching around him. My gasp turns into a groan as heat invades my insides and spreads through my limbs.

He curls his tongue inside of me and brushes it against the walls of my core.

My head settles back, my eyes fluttering shut. Fear takes a backseat to full on sexual desire.

It's been a long time, so long , since anyone has touched me, since someone has been face to face with my downstairs, and even though I wish it were under different conditions, I can't deny how good it feels. Fuck, it feels amazing.

The things he's doing to me.

The Grim hums low in his throat before drawing his tongue out of me. "Interesting."

Interesting? In a good way or a bad way? What the hell does that mean?

Before I have a chance to ask, he laps at me again, that tongue swirling over every inch of me and quickly making me quickly forget everything . All I can focus on is the heat, swirling, roaring through me, the tingles racing up my spine, and this monster who seems desperate to mark me as his.

He's tasting me thoroughly, and there isn't an inch of my pussy left unexplored.

I'm panting, arching my back and urging him on. So there seriously must be something wrong with me.

He isn't even human.

He's going to kill me.

But, despite all that, I don't want him to stop licking me.

It's every bit as hot and terrifying as I'd imaging fucking a monster could be.

"Oh, god." I'm building up to something the longer he teases me with his tongue. Tension mounts, and my lower abdomen contracts, tightening. But the thought of orgasming in this situation has it banking under a tide of shame.

No matter how good it feels.

“Your taste—” He breaks off and slips his tongue inside of me again, and I bow upward, my jaw dropping.

He pulls free, and I pry my eyes open in time to watch the monster rear back. When he moves to line his cock up with my entrance, my stomach flips. His claws wrap around the base of the massive erection and my mouth goes dry.

Am I really attracted to this? I think as I stare up at the massive, dark figure hovering over me.

As much as I wish I could say no, something twists inside me, answering resolutely.

Yes . Yes, I am, and I'm curious how he'll feel inside me. I want to know.

Will he fill me? Stretch me? Will it hurt?

Of course it will hurt. His cock is the size of a club, probably thick and heavy enough to give me a concussion if he smacked me with it. I still have no idea where he's going to stick that thing, but the need to find out blots out every reservation. My pussy throbs in anticipation, every part of me on pins and needles.

I need him, and I need him now.

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Chapter

Nine

Erin

“Not so eager to run now, are you?” the monster growls, pressing the tip of his cock against me and making me mewl at the sensation.

Eager to run? No.

“Fuck you, asshole,” I say through gritted teeth. I curl my fingers into the soft ground.

“A brave thing to say. Brave and foolish.”

A chuckle rumbles in his chest and he surges forward, burying the head inside. I whimper at the stretch, but my pussy has a mind of her own. She conforms, pulses, wraps around him and clamps down like she wants to suck him dry. I might be a little conflicted, but she’s made her choice.

Traitorous bitch.

I’m sopping wet and aching for him to slide all the way home no matter how much it might hurt. Christ, that cock. It’s huge. I force myself to meet his gaze.

The glowing orbs of his eyes take on a darker hue of red.

“Better you learn to submit now,” he says, pressing further inside me. “You’re my pet. I’ll do what I please with you, with or without your permission. Including fucking you.”

I squeak at those words, the air in my lungs coming out in a strangled breath. His hand comes up around my throat, squeezing as he thrusts his hips forward, burying everything but the knot at the base inside me.

Shit .

He’s too big. Too girthy for me to take him comfortably inside of me. The fur of his hips tickles my bare skin as I stretch to accommodate him.

The moan that escapes my lips hardly sounds like me: needy, desperate. I want more, and I roll my hips up to meet him as my eyes flutter closed. I don’t know what else the Grim has in store for me, but I want it all. I’m at his mercy, my body calling for more.

Why has he stopped? To give me time to adjust?

His hand squeezes my neck.

I want to be licked, sucked, fucked, devoured . I can’t remember ever feeling like this before, this charged. Not with any of my exes for sure.

Is it the wrongness of this that makes it so hot?

My mind fractures as he withdraws and slams inside again quickly, a guttural noise erupting from his throat every time he buries his cock in me. I pant breathily through every stroke. My mind is cartwheeling out of control as my body is flooded with an animalistic pleasure, and I grab at the ground for anything to brace myself with as he

plows into me repeatedly.

Fucking me senseless.

Pain and pleasure mingle together and I can't move. I can't wrap my legs around him because my pants are still wrapped around my ankles.

He's deep enough without adjusting the position.

His hot breath fans across my cheeks and I turn my head away, tears of pleasure pricking the corner of my eyes through every harsh, punishing slap of his body against me.

I reach up to squeeze my breasts through my shirt, wondering what it would be like to feel his hot tongue flick over them , or how the sharpness of his claws would feel raked over each nipple. He must enjoy the show, because the growl in his chest grows louder, sending shivers skittering down my spine, and I chew on my bottom lip as he works his cock inside me.

Gods, I want more .

“You like this, little human? Knowing you are mine to use?”

No sooner does the thought cross my mind, he pulls his cock out of me abruptly and grabs my waist with one of his massive hands. In a swift motion, he flips me over onto my stomach and wrenches my hips up off the ground, forcing my knees to support my weight. The rough terrain bites into the tender skin of my hands and knees, but I quickly forget the pain as he lines himself up again.

“Knowing you are mine to destroy?”

Without warning, he pushes inside, thrusting so hard black dots flash before my eyes. I brace myself against the aching pleasure. He growls out into the night, and part of me worries that something is going to overhear us and come snooping, but he doesn't slow down. Instead, his claws dig into my hips, dragging me back against him with every thrust until I'm panting, gasping for air.

The girth of his cock, the length of it, is going to kill me.

He clamps down on me and leans over my back, using his hips to arch me almost off my knees from the force and the pressure.

I scream.

It's too much, but it's just enough. He fills every inch of space inside of me and then some, shifting into parts of my insides no human has touched.

I should say no.

I should tell him to stop when all I really want is for this to keep going. Not that he would.

He said I was his to claim, to use, to fuck. Nothing I can say or do will change his mind, but I should at least put up more of a fight.

But I can't deny how much I enjoy being fucked by a monster.

Tension builds in my core, my pussy tightening around his girth as the climax builds, and as I fall over the edge, it clamps down around him. A groan tears from his lips, a true, almost-human groan that's followed by his cock twitching inside me.

As though I wasn't already filled to the brim with him, he arches forward even more,

the knot at the base of his cock pressing against my opening until it's sliding inside too. It burns as it stretches me past my limit, pleasure and pain blurring together into a cocktail of sensation that has me whimpering. My body begs for more as it's still wracked by tiny spasms of pleasure, though I know logically there's no more room for him.

Somehow, he manages to work the knot inside me, where it locks into place. It's a strange sensation, and my insides feel like they're going to combust.

A primal heat burns its way from my pussy up through my throat as I clamp down around him, another orgasm tearing through me, and his knot pulses and grows. With another growl, he comes inside me, the pressure from being filled by such an ample amount of cum almost too much for me to handle.

The warmth of those jets spreads through my core and touches every part of my body.

"There." He grunts and leans down over me, bringing an arm up around my chest and pulling me to him as we breathe together, his knot keeping me in place. "Filthy little human."

As the pheromones retreat and my thoughts clear, I become painfully aware of the sticks and rocks digging into my skin, the sensation of being stretched internally to my limits, and I wince. I want to move into a more comfortable position, but my pussy isn't ready to let go of the Grim's massive cock yet. It throbs gently on his knot, becoming more used to the feeling as the seconds tick by.

After several minutes that seem to stretch on forever, his knot deflates and he pulls his cock out, the evidence of our sexcapade dripping down the insides of my thighs onto the forest floor.

God I need a bath.

And as much as I thoroughly enjoyed being taken here, I need to get out.

Do I want to leave?

“Okay, you got what you wanted,” I say, as though it wasn’t exactly what I wanted too. “Now, please, let me go.”

“Let you go?”

He hesitates for a moment, his red eyes burning into me as I turn and snatch my leggings back up over my hips. His cum sticks to the fabric.

Though his facial expression doesn’t change, there’s something a little more relaxed about his posture. He gets to his feet slowly and I follow suit, staring at him and waiting for an answer.

“Even if I wanted to, it’s impossible,” he finally replies, making my stomach pitch toward the ground. “The portal is closed.”

I spin around frantically, looking for the glimmer of light I saw earlier, however, there’s nothing but darkness in any direction. My stomach twists, and I think I might be sick.

There’s no sign of the portal. It’s gone.

“What? No,” I gasp, spinning around on the spot and looking in every direction for a glimmer of light in case I got disoriented as I was tossed around. Still, I see nothing.

I had been so close to getting home, only a few more steps and I would have made it. Instead, I tripped at the finish line and doomed myself to being stuck here in this monster realm. I did it to myself. My twisted curiosity trapped me.

A lump forms in my throat and I wrap my arms around myself, suddenly feeling ashamed for wanting to ride the Grim's cock like a rollercoaster. It cost me my freedom. It cost me everything .

“Come, my human,” he says, his voice snapping me out of my thoughts.

I should just tell him to kill me now. There's no sense in prolonging my torture just for him to slit my throat later. There's clearly no way I'm getting home now.

There's no more hope.

No reason to cling to it.

Or he could leave me out here to die. I'm sure something would come along shortly and do the job for him. So why doesn't he? Why doesn't he snap my neck and get it over with, instead keeping me alive and taking me back to his house?

I feel defeated. Let down by myself and my urges and my inability to figure a way out of this. I've always been able to get myself out of dangerous situations, but it seems like this time, my experience isn't enough to help me.

“Come,” he says again, this time sharper, and for some reason it makes my muscles snap to attention. I look up to find him waiting for me, halfway turned toward an invisible path through the trees and I step closer to him, completely uncertain of what it means.

All I know is that if I'm not going to die, the Grim is also my best chance for survival, and it makes more sense to go with him than to fight it. Besides, I'm exhausted, every bit of energy zapped from the events of the last several hours. I just want to crawl up in the nest of pelts back at his house and sleep forever.

Until I'm able to figure a way out of this, I'll just have to trust that he'll keep me alive until he gets tired of me. Not that I won't mind the entertainment. My pussy throbs at the thought of him slamming into me again and I blush, sore and needy.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

Some good monster dick and I'm already wanting more? Who am I?

Right.

I'm dead. That's what I am.

I'm just counting down the minutes until it's official.

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Chapter

Ten

Syros

Her spirit breaks as her posture sags and the corners of her mouth dip down. She wraps her arms around herself, slumping forward.

This should be a triumphant moment, knowing she's lost her will to fight back. She's completely and utterly mine with nowhere left to run. She is my toy, my plaything, broken to my whims.

But instead of the swell of pride I expect, I feel... nothing .

No happiness or regret. No sadness or empathy.

And I don't understand.

The hollow feeling in my chest where there's normally an instinctive pull one way or the other is foreign. Alarming.

Rutting her hadn't been enough to cause her to withdraw. If anything, her scent and her body assured me of her pleasure in the act, although pleasure hadn't exactly been my intention from the start. Domination, yes, and showing her it was futile to try and escape me. Now that she is covered in my seed and reeking of our combined scents, something has changed.

In me.

I turn to look away from her, heading back toward my home, and my hearing perks up when I hear her light footfalls behind me, trailing along in my wake.

Good little human , I think. She may understand obedience yet . But again, instead of any kind of pride, there's a vacancy left inside me that I can't explain.

I scrub a hand over my chest and the dull ache there.

Did this mortal put some kind of spell on me? Is she really some kind of witch with undetectable power? Nothing about her screams magic, but something doesn't quite add up. I shouldn't be feeling this way—I shouldn't have even kept her alive.

The smarter course of action would have been to end her the moment we stepped through the portal. To devour her in one bite and be done with her.

Something about the girl intrigues me, and I refuse to destroy her completely until I figure out what it is. There is more to discover here.

I ponder in silence as we move along through the trees, hyper aware of her movements behind me.

I've left her with little choice in the matter. It is either come back with me or be left to the wilds of this decaying world. There are worse beasts out here than the one she thinks I am—she's not wrong there.

I am a beast. Her judgment is true.

The forest is quiet. There aren't any other Grim in the area right now—if there were, it might turn into a bloodbath, attempting to protect the human. She might be

disposable but she's mine to dispose of, and no Grim is going to rob me of what I fought to find and keep.

No one will take her from me, and I'll cut down anyone who gets too close.

My spent cock throbs at the thought before falling still.

Something rustles behind me and I whirl around, chest puffed and claws outstretched, ready to destroy whatever dares to approach me and my human, but I see her catching her footing.

She sways on the spot and looks up at me shamefully with wide eyes.

"Sorry," she mumbles, righting herself, but I can tell she's exhausted. She didn't sleep for long after I brought her through the portal, and she hasn't eaten anything. Not to mention the exertion of being thoroughly rutted.

We're nowhere near my hovel—she made it much farther than she should have before I realized she was gone—and there's a good chance she won't make it all the way there in her current state.

Weak, pathetic humans .

The thought fills me with disgust. It's amazing that they manage to survive at all considering how delicate they are. So easy to end their lives in a blink of an eye, yet they thrive on earth. They are a parasitic race, corrupting everything they touch, but it's somehow possible for them to conquer.

Tempting as it is to avoid the hassle altogether, I can't just leave her behind. Not anymore.

Even if I don't plan to keep her forever, I have to eat her eventually. She's the only source of food that will keep me sustained until the next solstice when I can hunt for more . The rest of our realm has died off, leaving foraging for sustenance almost impossible.

There are no other choices left for Grim.

I need her, if not for the strange feelings she causes that I need to decipher, to keep myself alive.

It is the age old conflict of her versus me.

I choose me. As I have always chosen.

After a moment of hesitation, I approach the human and she winces, squeezing her eyes closed. Does she think I'm going to spear her with my cock again? Does she think I'm going to do as she asked and kill her now, after I came all this way to hunt her down?

I don't have long to wonder before she sways on the spot again, her eyelids fluttering. I lunge forward, throwing an arm around her to keep her from hitting the ground, and sweep her up into my arms.

Cradled against my chest, she looks even more delicate than before, like she's made of glass. If I squeeze her too hard, she'll shatter. Her hair is a bright spot in an otherwise dull landscape and her skin, pale as moonlight, seems to shimmer.

She's small for her kind.

Before, I have hunted and tracked grown men of their species, those who come up to my chest, although none of them dared lift their chin at me in such brazen disregard.

Not like her.

She forces her eyes open and stares up at me, her gaze becoming more unfocused by the second, before she reaches a hand toward my face. It's my turn to flinch, uncertain whether I should let her touch my face or if I should bite a few of her fingers off as a snack, but before I decide, her fingertips graze my jaw. It's soft and brief, a warmth sparking to life inside me at the contact, but then her eyes close and her hand drops to her chest.

She's still, unconscious again, and her uneasy breaths settle after a moment.

No, I am the one unsettled now.

Anything else I might have done or said slips away, and I shake conflicting thoughts from my head as I turn again to head home. I'm not carrying her as a courtesy or as a favor—it's merely the only way I'm going to get her back home. The easier course of action in this case.

But still, that touch... it carried more weight than I'd expected, stirring up even more foreign feelings inside me, and I hate them.

I think.

At least, I'm fairly certain I hate them.

It's difficult to fully comprehend the weight of the emotions, having never felt them before, but I do know one thing for sure: I'm even more inclined to protect this human than I was moments ago. My human .

It is just as easy to call her that as it is to carry her. Her weight is negligible.

My feet dig grooves in the soft mossy ground, my posture hunched as though to protect her from airborne threats.

I march through the forest and steer clear of the sinking pit where she nearly got herself stuck earlier. I wasn't close enough to see her struggle, but I could smell the whisper of her floral perfume and her perspiration in the air. It was a close call—she's lucky she made it out alive—and I'm not sure how I would have felt if she'd died there.

Disappointed, I'm sure. Robbed of an opportunity.

Dying by my hand is the only way I plan to let this mortal go, but the twinge of something stronger, something fiery, ignites at the thought of losing her to the woods.

I don't like it. Not one bit. Of that I am entirely sure.

With a growl, I tamp down those thoughts too, annoyed by how much this woman seems to consume my thoughts, but I can't help it. I've never wanted to know so much about my prey before, and the questions come before I can stop them.

I cradle her closer to my chest and feel her heartbeat through my fur.

How did she know where to find the portal?

She was completely unconscious when we came through, and slept until she was tied up in my nest. Does the portal call to her the same way it calls to me every solstice? Can she somehow sense her way home? Or was it a coincidence that she ended up near the only way back to her world?

My instinct says the latter, but my instinct also tells me to protect this woman and keep her alive, so I'm not sure how much I should trust anything at the moment.

It's clearly trying to mess up the order of things.

The entire certainty of my existence in this world has turned on its head and all because of this slight thing in my arms.

I don't even know her name. Humans all have them, just as Grim do.

I keep my eyes open and ears peeled for any sign of life as we move through the trees in near silence, but luckily, there's nothing. I would have thought our commotion earlier would have attracted prying eyes, but it appears they're all preoccupied tonight. Probably indulging in their captures from the solstice. They should at least be content for a few more nights before they come snooping.

That means I have until then to come up with a plan to keep her hidden.

But why do I want to keep her hidden instead of just eating her and being done?

I grunt, annoyed at the resilience of the thoughts I don't need clouding my judgment. No matter how desperately I force them aside, they return with renewed vengeance, attacking my brain and forcing me to face these things.

Things I'd rather not face.

I try to think of anything else as I make the trek through the woods. However, there's nothing pressing enough that can break through the sweaty, gamey, floral-hinted scent of the creature in my arms that's assaulting my senses so relentlessly.

I should throw her in the bushes and leave her there.

Then I wouldn't have this problem at all.

There are a handful of other options, and the majority of them are better than claiming her as my own.

But I can't leave her. I won't.

I'm not letting her go until I absolutely must, until the hunger becomes intolerable. Until the desperate, primal urge to hunt takes over and I lose myself. Then, I'll kill her. Savor every bite of her body until there's absolutely nothing left.

The thought makes my mouth water, and I look down again to see her peacefully tucked against me, lost to unconsciousness.

The curious melting sensation in my chest takes me aback.

Holding her this way shouldn't feel so natural. Touching a human, tasting her, rutting her in the forest. It's the opposite of natural—it's bizarre. Unheard of. This sort of thing does not happen.

Yet here I am, going against everything that's been embedded in my core for hundreds of years, doing just that. Here we are.

What is wrong with me?

Try as I might to understand, I simply can't. I don't know what's making me feel this way, but I think it has everything to do with the woman in my arms. She is not the same as any of the other humans I've hunted over the years.

What makes her different?

My foot lands hard and I stop, growling under my breath. The sound rolls through my chest as my head drops. My next inhalation brings her scent with it. I'm not sure what

else I can do, but I wish there was something—anything—to make this all make sense.

There is danger in the confusion.

Danger to me and my entire existence.

My home comes into view, the bulbous and crude shape emerging from the darkness, along with the soft trickling of stream water nearby. It isn't much, but it's more than many Grim abodes I've seen through the years.

Most don't care enough to add a covering over their door. Some don't even bother with walls.

We're creatures of this world and a part of nature itself.

I've always been different from the rest of them, constantly thirsty for knowledge, things better left unknown. I want more than what any other Grim has had before, and not just in terms of my living quarters.

There, I want something to protect me and my things—the items I've collected on my trips through the portal—from the elements. I want to be a sliver more sophisticated than the other feral Grims who sleep outside amongst the trees and have nothing but the fur on their backs to call their own.

It might not compare to the small buildings I've observed from the tree line of the human forest, but it's something, and it counts.

I carry my human inside, nearly knocking her head against the edge of the door, and gently lay her in the nest. I don't know why, but I do so gently, carefully. I don't want to disturb her. She seems so at peace after nearly fainting in the forest. It would be a

shame to wake her.

And then I'm back to wondering why I feel the need to take care of her at all. Why does this human call to me in a way that none other ever has? What could possibly be so special about her?

Eat her. Get it over with .

That way there won't be time to second guess or wonder what might happen. It'll be over and done with, and that'll be that.

I move closer, trying to force myself to succumb to the bloodlust, but I can't. No matter how vehemently I force myself to consider it, I hesitate.

Something invisible, a weight pressed against my chest, keeps me hovering above her. It roots me in place, staring down at her strange, delicate features, not letting me advance.

A little human...who would have thought I'd pause over one of them?

My stomach growls, the dull pain catching my attention, and I know I need to eat something soon. Grims aren't meant to go so long without feeding. We might be able to survive on next to nothing for months at a time, but hunting during the solstices is normally enough to hold us over.

This time, my prey is still breathing, and my stomach is empty.

Even though I know how impossible it is, I have to find something to eat besides the human. Something to hold me over until I cave and devour her. Tree roots? Mushrooms? I'll take anything at this point, even though none of them are easy to find, but that's not the only thing fueling my determination.

She needs to eat too.

I'm not an expert on the human diet, considering I don't keep any alive long enough to worry about feeding them, but surely she can consume the same things I can without them killing her.

There's only one way to find out.

I reach for more rope that's tucked beneath a corner of the nest, and carefully tie her wrists and ankles again. This time I double check the knots to ensure there is no chance of her slipping through them.

I should be back before she wakes up, but I'm not risking her taking off again. If she does, she won't make it very far. She's too weak.

Hopefully, I can find something to replenish her energy and mine. If not, I'm not sure what I'm going to do. I can only go so long without feeding, and if she's the only food source around, I won't be able to withstand it very long. Not as long as I want to keep her around at least.

Once she's firmly secured and I check the knots by pulling as hard as I can, I leave her there, heading toward the door. I'll hunt close enough to the house that I can sense if there's danger nearby and I'll be quick.

And when she wakes up, I can try to understand what makes this human so special.

I'm just not sure I want to know the answer.

Chapter

Eleven

Erin

I 'm running in the dark with some thing snarling behind me, nipping at my heels.

I scream, knowing it won't make a difference, and run until my muscles ache. My lungs hurt, I'm pouring sweat, and even though I'm sprinting as hard as I can, it feels like my movements are restrained. Limited.

No matter how hard I push myself, I never make it out of the trees. They stretch in front of me in an unbroken line of darkness with no end in sight. One of those expanding hallways.

Every lunge forward is a struggle.

Reality shifts abruptly and the world tilts on its axis.

I burst out of the woods abruptly, breaking into a brightly lit area that looks familiar. It's Great Oaks, but not like I've ever seen it. The houses are closer, only a few meters from the woods, and there's no one out despite the sun being high in the sky.

The streets are empty and desolate.

"Help!" I yell, but the sound is muffled, like I'm screaming through a dense wall.

I look back over my shoulder, and immediately wish I hadn't. The Grim is on my heels, snapping its teeth at me and growling like a feral animal. His eyes glow like rubies underneath the glare of an unnatural sun.

Blood running cold, I turn and run toward the nearest house. I don't recognize it, but something tells me Tyler lives there. I'm absolutely sure of it.

"Tyler!" His name leaves my lips and I run for the front porch, leaping over the stairs and rushing to bang on the front door. "Tyler, open up! It's the Grim! He's here!"

I pound my fist against the wood, rattling the glass, as the Grim closes in. When it's clear Tyler isn't going to open it, I spin around and plant my back firmly against the door. My lungs seize in terror.

The Grim is running full speed on all fours toward the house, getting closer by the second. He closes in on the porch, leaping over the few steps leading to it, and I squeeze my eyes closed with a whimper, waiting for him to slam into me.

Rather than the Grim, consciousness slams into me, and I gasp a huge breath of air as my eyes pop open. I'm once again staring up at the ceiling of the Grim's house, hands and feet bound—this time with more rope—my clothes sticking to my skin with sweat.

My heart is racing, slamming relentlessly into my ribs. My fingers tingle as sensation returns.

Asleep or awake, it doesn't look like I can escape this monster.

He's invading my dreams now and even there I have no chance of outrunning him.

My pulse throbs in my temples and my mouth tastes like I've been licking an entire

handful of pennies.

I blink to clear the blur from my vision. I scrub my knuckles into my eyes until black spots erupt and glance around the room.

The Grim stands to my left.

He's hunched over an enormous stone basin that's spilling smoke into the room. From this angle it's impossible to see what he's doing, exactly, but it looks like he's boiling something, and the basin is just big enough for a small person to fit inside. For me to fit inside.

I swallow hard.

The special of the day is Erin soup .

Once he gets it just right, he'll toss me in and boil the meat right off my bones.

If I have any shot at getting out of here alive, I have to do something quick . Otherwise, I'll be the main ingredient in the monster's dinner. I have no idea what I'll do or where I'll go when I escape this house, but I'll figure that out later.

So says the girl who already tried that and failed . What makes me think my half-assed plan will work this time around?

Panic lights my blood and sends acid churning in my gut.

I've always been more of a jump first and ask questions later girl, but look at where it's gotten me so far? I swallow hard around a rock in the back of my throat.

First things first, I have to get away from the Grim. Then, I'll figure out a more solid

plan, and cross my fingers it works this time.

“Hey,” I start, my throat dry and scratchy as I try to form words. “Please. Let me go.”

It sounds pitiful to beg for my life, and I never imagined I’d have to do something so degrading. But here I am, begging.

My pussy throbs randomly like the simple act of begging brings back memories of what happened in the woods. The sensation of being entirely filled to bursting with the Grim’s cock and cum.

Except it doesn’t really matter what kind of dance my sore pussy is doing. There won’t be a repeat of the sex, because I’ll be in his stomach, digesting.

Unless I do something now .

The Grim’s back stiffens at my words but he doesn’t turn around.

“I’m sure I wouldn’t taste that good anyway,” I ramble, wiggling in an attempt to turn myself more in his direction. His back is still turned to me and he hasn’t done anything to show he heard me. Is he ignoring me? “Please... uhh... Mr. Grim. Don’t kill me.”

“Syros,” he growls without offering a backward glance.

I stare at him, eyebrows furrowing together.

Am I supposed to know what that means? Is that English or some language native to his realm?

I rack my brain for a full minute, trying to decide if I misheard him, or if my brain

cells aren't functioning at their highest capacity.

"I-I'm sorry? What?"

"My name is Syros," he says, his gravelly voice sounding permanently angry.

Syros . It feels strange to finally know his name after being captured by him twice and fucked once. Even though he's just as beastly, and I'm still just as terrified for my life, knowing he has a name makes him slightly less scary.

If he planned to just kill me, surely he wouldn't bother sharing his name. Right?

"I'm Erin," I say, even though he didn't ask.

If I can seem more personable, try to appeal to his better nature—if he has one—maybe that'll be my ticket to getting out of here. That, or he'll just get very acquainted with his meal before consuming it. I don't have any other options right now, but maybe it'll buy me a little time.

Syros says nothing but continues stirring whatever concoction is in the stone basin.

"Now that we know each other... Look, I know it probably seems appealing to eat me, but please don't do this. Send me back. Send me home," I plead to his back, wishing he would turn around and acknowledge me, acknowledge my plight. I hate the way he ignores me. "I'll be out of your way, and you'll be free to do whatever you want with someone else."

I want him to see me, hear me, understand that I'm a person and not just a meal.

Especially after our romp back there in the woods.

There has to be some kind of connection between us after he was inside of me.

Now I'm grasping at straws .

Anything to survive, I reason.

People do whatever it takes when they know their back is against a wall.

Heat swells in my middle as the image comes rushing back, of Syros pinning me to the ground, slamming his thick cock inside me. I remember the feel of his knot swollen in me, locking us together for several minutes, and my stomach cartwheels.

I still feel him, the mark his intrusion left on my insides.

"I told you, it's impossible," he grumbles, just loud enough for me to hear. "The portal is closed. I can't send you back. It will not reopen until the next solstice."

I sigh, feeling like a deflating balloon. He's right—the portal disappeared at some point while I was getting railed in the forest.

Fuck.

There's no way I'm going to survive a whole six months here. He won't let me live that long, I'm entirely certain. If it's not today, then my death will come tomorrow or the following day. How long can I go living in a constant adrenaline-fueled state of stress?

My thoughts are spiraling down into a black pit, anxiety creeping into my chest and wrapping around my heart, squeezing hard.

Not long, it seems. I'm already breaking apart and it's only been a few hours. I think.

I realize for a second time that I don't know how long I've been unconscious. I could have been out for hours or days. Time is a construct I can't wrap my brain around anymore. Between the darkness and fainting twice, there's no way for me to possibly know, or to get back the time I've lost.

My head swims as the thoughts become overwhelming. Stale air clogs my lungs and I gulp, attempting and failing to get myself under control.

"At least untie me," I suggest, holding my hands up even though he's not looking. "The ropes are too tight. They're cutting off my circulation."

He stills briefly. "No. You'll run."

"No, I won't," I say. "I promise. I won't run again. Where would I even go?"

For a moment, I think he finally hears me, but then he goes right back to stirring whatever is in the giant pot.

Irritation prickles my skin.

"Syros, will you at least stop fucking ignoring me?" I grit, losing my patience.

If he wants to be an insufferable asshole, I've got news for him. He succeeded and now I'll retaliate. If he was just going to bore me with the cold shoulder, he could have already killed me and I could have avoided the mental torture.

"If you're just going to pretend like I'm not here, just go ahead and kill me to get it over with," I repeat out loud for his benefit.

Rude asshole.

I expect him to keep ignoring me the way he has been, despite the demand, but he whirls around to face me, his glowing red eyes lasering in on me and making me catch my breath. When he isn't doing something so mundane, like stirring water and pretending I don't exist, he's downright terrifying.

Although there is no change of expression on his skull face, it's almost like I see the play of emotions over his features. Which shouldn't be possible.

He is an image ripped straight from my nightmares and he's frustrated with me.

"If I slit your throat, would you talk less?" he growls, flashing his claws at me.

"Maybe." I shrug, an air of confidence appearing from nowhere. It has to be the adrenaline kicking up in my veins, throwing me right back into fight or flight mode. "Why don't you try it out? Just make sure you do a decent job. I'd like a quick death if you aren't going to let me go."

I hold my wrists up for him, waiting as the tense seconds tick by and neither one of us moves.

Taunting the Grim is a gamble, but the more I think about it, the less likely it seems that he plans on killing me soon. If he truly wanted me dead, he would have done so already. At least that's what I keep telling myself. He certainly wouldn't have wasted time fucking me. Right?

There's a reason I'm still alive.

I'm not sure what he's waiting for. My gut tells me it has something to do with what happened in the woods. Maybe he wants one more round before he takes me out. Maybe he wants to take complete advantage of me this time, to fuck me so hard I snap in half.

That'd be one way to go .

I work hard to keep the feral grin off my face.

“If you want me to kill you, I will,” he says, moving closer until he’s towering over me. “I bet you bleed beautifully.”

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Chapter

Twelve

Erin

His muscular body looks even more massive when it's up close and personal. Slowly, my gaze falls down his form to the enormous cock hanging between his legs. It's completely flaccid, yet bigger than most erect human cocks I've seen, and he catches me staring before I can look away.

"You must like what you see," he says, and before I can drag my eyes away, his cock twitches. I gape, heat scorching my cheeks, creeping down my neck, and he slowly kneels beside me, bringing his face inches away from mine. "You liked it just fine in the forest. Do you want more?"

I shake my head quickly, nerves eating me from the inside. Truthfully, I might enjoy him taking me again, but I refuse to tell him that.

And right now, I'm so sore from the first round I really might break from another.

He huffs through his nose, his warm breath hitting me in the face, and I swallow hard. I can see every fine detail of the skull, from small scratches to a thin crack running down the side of his face. His mouth hangs open, his slender tongue dancing over his teeth, and it hits me just how surreal this creature is. Unlike anything I've ever seen before, who shouldn't even exist.

Even though this feels like some bizarre dream, being this close to him confirms that it's all very real.

Everything I've ever worked for in my life, years of research and sleepless nights and dealing with trolls in my comments calling me a freak... It's led to this.

He reaches toward me and I wince instinctively, squeezing my eyes closed and expecting the worst.

Is he going to slit my throat as promised? Or slice me from navel to collarbone?

I'm preparing myself for the white-hot feeling of claws ripping through my skin, but instead, he grabs my wrists and slices through the binding with one of his claws.

My eyes pop back open, and I stare into his illuminated red orbs for a long moment, stunned he didn't hurt me. Maybe there is more to this monster than I've given him credit for? Or maybe he's waiting until the soup is ready before turning me into minced meat.

I'll probably taste best fresh...

After an uncomfortable second, he breaks the silence.

"Don't run again," he growls, standing to tower over me once again. "You won't survive what waits outside these walls. Trust me."

He turns his back on me, heading back to the stone basin as I massage my wrists and sit up on the pile of pelts. There's still rope around my ankles, but I refuse to ask Syros for more assistance. I immediately set to work on the knot, pulling and tugging at it until I'm free.

My eyes dart toward the door, temptation sending another burst of adrenaline through my veins. If I make a run for it, I might make it out of the house before he catches up. But then where would I go? And what's outside these walls that I wouldn't survive?

I have no weapons, nothing but the clothes on my back, and no idea what I would do if I got away again. I didn't see any other monsters last time, but perhaps it was sheer luck. Maybe Syros scared them off.

Surely there are more of him out there. What chance would I stand against any of them if Syros caught me so easily? Are there bigger, scarier beasts that even Grims fear? A part of me cowers at what other nightmarish things I might encounter here, while another piece soars in elation.

Imagine what I could do with proof for my blog that there is not only another world out there, accessed through ours, but different cryptids than we ever imagined walking and breathing and hunting.

"Well, I don't stand a chance surviving inside these walls either," I say timidly, suddenly afraid to heckle him in case he changes his mind about gutting me.

But what else am I supposed to do? Sit here silently waiting for death to claim me? It seems like a waste.

"Have I killed you yet?" Syros barks.

My jaw falls and I stare at the ridges of his spine poking out through coarse black fur. "Well, no. Not yet."

And he's had plenty of opportunities to.

"Then, I'd say your chances of survival are much higher inside."

If I didn't know any better, I'd say he's almost amused, in a dry sort of way.

I fall silent at his response. Okay, I'm almost positive he's keeping me alive intentionally now. But why? Has he done the same thing with any of the other humans he's captured and brought through the portal?

He has ropes here, so it's entirely possible.

What other humans has he tied up and tossed on the pile of pelts?

It's all too much to process, and I still need to form an escape plan, but it seems I have a little while to do that.

I move from the nest and get to my feet, stretching my sore muscles and noting the way Syros stiffens to my left. He probably thinks I'm getting ready to make a run for it, bracing himself to chase after me, but I'm not. Not yet .

I cross to one of the walls, admiring the various strung-up items from Earth; they're random, unevenly spaced with no rhyme or reason to the positioning. Wherever there's a protrusion or groove in the stone, something dangles. There is a broken pair of headphones, a bandana, a studded belt, and plush doll hanging by her blonde yarn hair.

An interesting selection to say the least.

Intrigued, I continue down the wall, checking out more strange items. A Britney Spears CD with no case, a charm bracelet, a thermos lid, and a gold dangle earring that glints in the dim light.

It's bizarre seeing the things he's collected, things that most people would have thrown in the trash. It's like the lost and found of the woods lining the perimeter of

Great Oaks, all preserved here perfectly in Syros' strange hovel of a house.

"You have an interesting collection."

He pauses, and then, "I've worked hard on it."

"Are these all the things you find when you go through the portal?" I dare to ask, not entirely sure I want to know the answer.

"Yes and no." He turns around, setting the long wooden ladle he's been using aside, and watches me intently. "Some things I found. Others were carried by the humans when I brought them here."

"The humans you brought here," I reiterate unintentionally, wondering how many dozens or hundreds of humans he's captured just like me.

How many times has he gone through the portal?

How long do Grims even live?

It's very clear that I'm the only human present currently—I haven't seen any hints of anyone else—but maybe there are others out there in this world who've managed to survive. If there are, maybe I can ally myself with them.

Maybe we can all escape together.

The thought brings with it a swell of hope. Maybe I'm not actually alone in this world. There might be others like me...

"What happens to them when you bring them here?" I ask, feeling like my throat is swelling. "Besides you playing pickpocket."

Something in my bones tells me I already know the answer. After all, the entire world has stories and legends about him saying the same thing, but I need to hear it out loud to confirm every suspicion I've had up until this point.

Although it's impossible, I swear Syros is smiling at me. "I eat them."

Chills skitter down my arms, even though I knew that answer was coming. Of course he eats them. What's he going to do? Hunt humans to keep us as pets?

Humans aren't interesting enough for that.

"A-Are you going to eat me then?" I ask, thankful that he's finally talking to me, but now afraid to keep asking questions. But without asking, how else am I going to get the answers I'm desperate for?

"If you keep asking questions, I will," he growls, the sound rumbling in his throat. "You're definitely the most annoying human I've captured."

I huff and cross my arms over my chest. "Well, you're the biggest asshole I've met. So you can say we're even. Although I guess I'm not too annoying since you had sex with me."

He cocks his head to the side and hesitates for a moment. Then his mouth moves. "What is an ass-hole?"

I snicker, immediately suppressing the noise, and think about how best to answer him. Obviously he isn't familiar with some English terms. Hell, I'm not even sure how he learned to speak English in the first place. Maybe I'll ask him if he stops being such a dick.

"A jerk. Mean," I say, rolling my eyes for emphasis. "Someone who is nasty to others

and doesn't care."

"Have you met many nice monsters then?" he asks, seeming genuinely curious.

"That's what the humans before you called me."

A monster. That's... well, that's fitting.

The truth is, I haven't met any other monsters aside from my close encounter with Bigfoot, but he doesn't have to know that. Ghosts? Sure. A few poltergeists? Yeah.

But never an outright monster like him.

"Several," I huff. "And none of them have ever knocked me unconscious and dragged me through a portal, only to be an asshole once I'm in his world. Then again, none of them have ever taken me captive and dragged me through a portal before."

If the Grim could show emotions, I'd imagine his face would contort with utter confusion, and I'm not even sure why I'm saying the things I am. Maybe it's the nerves, all coming out as word vomit at this point.

"Crossing realms knocked you out, not me." He chuckles once. "You fill me with humor despite your annoyance, Erin. For that reason, you're still alive."

I fill him with humor? I don't know if we've existed on the same planet because I haven't said anything remotely funny.

In fact, aside from our escapade in the woods, I haven't said anything but nasty things back to him at all. Maybe he finds anger and irritation amusing.

"Glad I can offer you some entertainment," I say, dragging my eyes away and glancing at the items on the wall again. "Do you know what all these things are?"

I already know the answer to that question too, but now that I have him talking, I want to keep the conversation flowing. Find out what I can. I'll get tidbits of information out of him that will help me escape, to be better prepared for what I'll find outside, but I have to keep up the act.

"No." He shakes his head, eyes sweeping throughout the room. "I have guesses about many of them, but I'm not certain. No human has survived long enough to tell me." His lower jaw drops and I think it's a smile. "I'm always too hungry to let them live."

"All except me, apparently," I say dryly.

Flattering . I've already outlived all his other victims and there's no one here that I can brag to about it. Go figure .

Maybe if they'd tried bartering with sex they'd have made it this far. I shake my head, disgusted at the thought.

"Have you ever bothered to ask them?" I say instead. "No, you probably had the cauldron already bubblin' and you didn't want to wait."

He huffs out what might be a laugh. "Care to use your imagination?"

"Well..." I sigh, knowing I have to find something to distract him and fill my time because it might be the only way I stay alive. "Do you want me to tell you what these things are?"

He waits as though contemplating the decision before lowering this chin once in a clear yes .

I've gone from searching for the Grim, to being hunted and fucked by him, to now teaching him about things from the human world. Never in a million years would I

have predicted this, and no one in a million years would ever believe it.

“All right.” I say, rubbing my hands together. “Where do you want to start?”

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Chapter

Thirteen

Syros

I am not the only asshole in the room.

At least, not by Erin's definition. Since she so keenly pointed out the meaning of the word, it seems only fair for me to judge her under the same standards.

I want to eat her.

But something about her keeps stopping me in my tracks, and I don't know why.

Considering how deprived I've been of food for the last six months, I should have killed her the second I caught her in the woods.

I wasn't lying when I told her she amuses me. There's just something about her that piques my interest in a way that no other human has, and it's not just her intoxicating scent.

She alternates between fear and bravado, which may stem from the same source, and yet she has the ability to stare me down like she is utterly unbothered by what she sees.

I am not simply a creature in those moments when she meets my eyes.

I am not a man, either.

Yet there are other moments, there and gone in flashes, where it seems as though she is eager to study me and figure me out.

Not to mention the way her attention dips periodically to my cock.

Or perhaps I'm interested in the way she sought me out, rather than me having to search for her.

Perhaps I like the feel of her beneath my body a little too much, which isn't unheard of. I've known a few Grims who've delighted in their human's bodies before eating them. Some have even eaten them while their cock was still buried inside the corpse.

There are all manner of ways for us to survive, one of which including finding our pleasure where we can. This world is bleak.

Happiness, joy, desire, all must be found and taken where it can.

But this human, Erin... I'm not ready to kill her yet. Not when there are so many more interesting interactions waiting for us.

My stomach contracts in hunger, and I push the sensation to the back of my mind.

"Fine. Tell me some of your stories." I approach her cautiously.

She didn't run screaming from me this time when I let her free from her restraints, and she doesn't seem to mind being close to me. I'm curious to find out why she acts this way.

Why does she want to talk to me? Teach me things?

Does she find me as intriguing as I find her?

She stares around at my collection with her hands on her hips and her lips pressed into a thin line. “It must have taken you a long time to accumulate so much.”

“I have lived a long time.”

I’m also curious to find out about the random assortment of items I’ve collected over the years. What are they? What do humans use them for? So many questions I’ve gone without answers to for years— centuries .

Am I really going to learn now after all this time?

I’d hate to find out that some of my most prized possessions are nothing more than trash in the human world, but curious regardless. To me they are all priceless.

They are pieces of a world I can’t touch, only twice a year.

“Start with the item you’re most surprised to see,” I say, eager to see where she gravitates first.

The glint of obvious curiosity in her eyes urges me to further pick her brain and learn about her. In the same way, I guess, that she wanted to learn about me. Why else would she be hunting me on the solstice?

Clearly she had some sort of baseline knowledge of what kind of creature she may see. In spite of her shock last night, there had also been something like vindication.

As though she’d known she would find something for later use.

“This is great,” she says, holding up a flat disc that reflects the light of the room. One

side is silver and glints with a rainbow reflection, and the other is a pale, soft color. Pink, I believe it's called—a color that doesn't exist in our world. “What do you think this is, Syros?”

She clenches it between her fingers and it catches the light, reflecting it outward.

“Some kind of weapon?” I guess, noting the thin edge that could potentially slice through skin.

Perhaps the female warriors of Earth launch them at their victims. At least, that's what happened when I captured the previous owner and she tried to assault me with it.

It didn't matter.

She tasted good afterward.

Erin laughs, covering her face with her hand and spinning the disk expertly around her finger. “It's called a CD,” she says, like I'm supposed to know what that means. “A compact disc. It plays music.”

“Music?” I'm unfamiliar with the term. “Does it make you sick?”

She laughs again, enticing a growl from my throat. “No. You put it in a machine and it sings to you. Like pretty talking. The singing is accompanied by a beat, a pulse, and usually it makes you want to move your body out of happiness.”

I grunt, disappointed that the CD isn't meant for slicing throats, and move to the next object. Happiness is ridiculous and foreign. There is only survival.

There is struggle and bloodshed and a nagging hunger which is never satisfied.

“And this?” I pluck a small, hooked metal object off the wall. “Is this at least a weapon?”

She takes it from me, turning it over in her hands to examine it, before shaking her head. “It’s a can opener, but I guess you could stab someone with it if you really wanted to. The sharp part cuts through cans that contain food and keeps it fresh for long periods of time. Things like peaches or beans.”

My stomach grumbles again at the thought of food. What sorts of things could humans possibly store for later?

“What are peaches or beans?” I ask.

“It would take too long to explain our agriculture system to you.” Erin is distracted.

We go around the room as she explains wildly foreign concepts to me—bubble gum, makeup, telephones—and I’m quickly overwhelmed by how wrong my assumptions were about these things. There are no weapons, either.

This is interesting, and I have no idea of how long I stand there, listening to her talk and elaborate the purpose behind each object I point out.

I’m fascinated.

Her voice isn’t entirely unpleasant, and in fact, it begins to grow on me the longer she tells me about the things I’ve collected. Soft, alluring, sweet. Things that also don’t exist in our world.

Everything here is a mix of darkness and danger.

The beauty died out long ago, leaving a very desolate, unappealing place. The food is

almost nonexistent, and it's all because of them .

They are the invisible horrors that wander through the trees, sucking the life out of everything they find. No one knows where they came from, but they infected our world like a disease, forcing Grims into the shadows. They are the only creatures that can outmatch us, the only creatures we fear.

Ripping the throat out of my enemy? Easy.

Doing so when the enemy is completely invisible? Not so easy.

They are the reason we travel through the portals twice a year, because we have no other option. Seek sustenance on Earth, or perish.

It's enough to sustain us, but only just so.

My fellow Grim and any others trapped in this existence make the best of the only life we have ever known.

"Do you know what this is?" I'd been too lost in my thoughts to notice Erin grabbing a large pouch off the wall and rummaging through its contents. She's holding up a machine that fits in the palms of her hands.

It has a long metal stick poking out of the top that can retract into itself, and there are pressable shapes on the front. If I had any idea before, I already know it'll be incorrect, so I simply shake my head, wanting to hear her description of it.

"It's a radio," she says, turning the knobs left and right and flipping it over to look at the back. "My grandfather had one just like this a long time ago. The batteries are probably dead, so I doubt it works, but it also talks or sings to you. It allows you to hear the voices of people who are far away, or listen to music."

She pops off a piece from the back that I'd never noticed before and pulls out two tiny cylinders. She holds them out in her hand for me to see.

“Do you have any of these lying around? I know it's a long shot. Not many people carry batteries in their pockets these days.” She sounds hopeful.

I move across the room to a smaller pouch hanging by the door, another thing I found on Earth a few years ago, and pull the strings around the top loose. There are a handful of cylinders in various sizes, but I have no idea which ones she needs. Rather than fumbling through the bag, I carry it back to Erin, shoving it at her.

“Like these?” I ask.

Her lips curl into a smile and she nods. “Yes. Exactly. Let's see if any of them work. Then you can listen to music yourself and see what I'm talking about.”

Slowly, painstakingly, she digs through the batteries and tries all the ones that fit, flipping them this way and that until she finds some that seem to work.

Her smile splits her face and adds beauty to her features that I may not have noticed otherwise.

Pleased, she sets the radio down on the bench by the door and fiddles with the buttons again, explaining what she's doing as she goes. I'm eager to see what kind of noise could possibly fill her with such excitement, watching her movements intently until the machine screeches to life with a feral hiss that makes my hackles raise.

It sounds like a chorus of death, scratching at my skin until I feel the need to tear the flesh from my bones, but Erin's eyes glimmer with excitement. She fiddles with the knobs some more, and the hissing becomes louder and angrier.

My paws go to my ears, which does little to block out the infuriating sound.

Maybe I'll just kill her and the radio to get this over with.

Chapter

Fourteen

Syros

“What is that?” I growl, the noise vibrating down to my bones. “You call this music?”

It’s biting, offensive, and hardly appealing. If this is what humans call music, they can keep the atrocity to themselves.

Erin seems unbothered, and continues fiddling with the buttons, the wailing shifting and changing as though she’s attacking it into submission.

“Make it stop,” I demand, pushing my palms harder against my ear holes to alleviate the assault on them. “This is offensive.”

She doesn’t obey—such a stubborn thing—but she adjusts a few knobs. Finally, the wailing stops and a faint, delicate noise floats into the air. Afraid it’ll revert back to the demonic mating call from moments ago, I slowly lower my hands and focus on the noise.

It’s unlike anything I’ve ever heard, some kind of slow siren call that fluctuates from low to very high, and she turns it up a little louder.

The tension in my chest releases the longer I listen.

“See? Music,” she says, pointing to the machine like she’s proud of herself.

I can’t deny that I’m a little proud of her, too. Who knew the radio would function after coming through the portal? There must be something powerful that ties it to Earth, regardless of being in a different realm.

Just one more thing I don’t understand.

“You really don’t have music here?” she asks, her eyes softening. “Nothing like this? I find it hard to believe.”

I shake my head. “No. Nothing of the sort. This is alien and unique.”

Although I can see exactly why the humans would want to listen.

“That’s sad,” Erin says, moving in time to the music spilling from the radio. “So you don’t know anything about dancing either?”

I hesitate, wondering what she could possibly be referencing, but I’m clueless. Radios. Music. Dancing. What little I knew about humans before seems even less impressive now, and as much as I hate it, I find myself wanting to know more about them. More about her .

“No.” I say. “Explain it.”

“Well,” she starts, cocking her head. “It’s not really something you can explain. More, it’s a feeling, a release. I’m not the best dancer, but I guess I could show you. It’s a way of moving your body. You let the energy of the music push you.”

She positions herself in the middle of the floor. I step back, expecting something grand, but when she starts swaying back and forth on the spot in time to the music, I

nearly laugh.

Every shift of her arms or her hips matches the timing of the so-called beat .

“This? This is dancing?” I sway mockingly from side to side. “Are humans entertained by this? It seems like a waste of energy and time.”

I’m skeptical but entranced. The more Erin twists her form, the more I find myself unable to look away. I memorize her movements, greedy for more, staring at her hungrily.

This human is full of surprises.

“Well, there are lots of different dances,” Erin explains. “Some are faster. Some slower. Some with a partner.” Her eyes land on me and a curious glint, a look of pure mischief, appears in her eyes. “Come here, I’ll show you. You might even like it.”

I still, entirely unsure of what she’s thinking, and when I don’t move toward her, she stomps over and takes my hands in hers. I flinch, never having had someone willingly touch me before, and the sensation is strange. Unfamiliar.

Taking her in the woods was different. She hadn’t exactly been willing but aroused enough to make it a pleasurable process for her. This time, she made the decision herself.

She’s soft, delicate, dainty. Everything I’m not, but it makes me want to be careful with her.

I’m not willing to break her.

Not until I get to the bottom of the feelings inside me.

“So you’d hold your partner like this,” she says, positioning my arms out in front of me. “You can be closer, or farther away, and you move in step together to the music. It can be kind of romantic depending on the dance style...” Her voice trails off and she tugs me until I move, swaying with her to the music. “There you go. You’re getting it.”

The size difference between us is astonishing.

She is like a tiny toy compared to my towering frame. Yet something between us works. Something in the way our forms move together where it seems as though we are of one mind.

It’s strange, and would be laughed at by anyone else of my kind. But for what it’s worth, for Erin to take the time to teach me about things I’ve never seen, even when I plan to devour her eventually...I enjoy it.

She looks up at me, her eyes boring into mine, and for the second time I’m taken aback by her beauty. Dark lashes fan out across pale cheeks when she blinks. She’s unlike anything I’ve ever seen before, foreign and gorgeous. Like a moon goddess with her pale hair and small, perfect features.

The perfect rose of her lips, lifted in a slight grin, entrances me.

And then a sliver of doubt enters my mind. Something I hadn’t considered before.

What if I... don’t kill her?

Is it even an option when I’m starving?

So far, I’ve managed to sustain myself through the time between solstices with several herbs and plants along my riverbank. They aren’t much, and they don’t give

me the energy of a fresh kill, but they've worked to get me this far.

What if I keep her forever as a pet?

Learning from her what I can, enjoying her how I want. I don't know that it's ever been done before, but surely another Grim at some point has kept their human prey for longer than a few days.

We are not a talkative bunch. There is no connection or contact between the Grims, each of us only doing our best to keep living. As such, I have no way of knowing what has or has not been done before.

It would be incredibly dangerous, and she could never venture far from the house. I'd prefer if she never went outside at all, but I know that's impossible.

Eventually, she will want to wander and explore this world, as is natural.

The curiosity in her is not the sort to be banked.

Erin won't take kindly to being kept inside for the rest of her life.

My home would be her own personal prison, but I don't care. I'll keep her here if that's what it takes. And if things get too dangerous, if other Grims come snooping, I'll kill her. I won't let them take her away from me.

We dance together in time to the music on the radio and her touch is delicate.

A low growl rumbles in my chest as I consider the gravity of what keeping her would mean and the changes to my own existence. Can I really go against everything I've ever known and fight the hunger burning through me just to keep her alive? Ignore the yearning to eat her flesh and drain her body of everything it has to give?

I shake my head, annoyed that I'm even considering such things. This has to be her doing, because I would never willingly deny my hunger on my own.

Is she some kind of witch? Seductress?

I wasn't aware that humans possessed such powers, but there's no other explanation. The way we're swaying is hypnotic, almost as though she's swaying my thoughts without much input from me, and I don't like it.

I can't fight it, and the longer I stand here, the stronger the pull is.

I'm aroused by her in more ways than simply physical.

Abruptly, I pull away and step back, breaking whatever spell she'd had on me. Thoughts of keeping her here fade, replaced by my aching hunger, but there's still so much I need to know. So much knowledge I can obtain before I kill her.

"What's the matter?" she asks in an undertone.

Space . I need space.

To consider the options and figure out what the hell I'm actually doing. One small decision and it has the capacity to change my entire future, and hers.

I can try to hunt for scraps of food to soothe my hunger pains just enough to get by and clear my head before I do something rash.

Surely she wouldn't run. She has nowhere to go, no way out of this hell. There's no way back to Earth until the next solstice, if she survives that long, but she already knows that.

Staying here is her only chance of survival.

“Stay here,” I demand, turning toward the door and stomping heavily across the hard floor. “Do not go outside unless you wish to enjoy a painful, slow death. I’ll be back.”

If she decides to disobey, so be it. That will make the decision for me.

I’ll devour her and enjoy every second of it, if something else doesn’t catch her first.

At least that way, I won’t have to deal with this insufferable sense of doubt. The questioning, wondering about the possibilities that have no right taking up residence in my mind.

With a final look back over my shoulder, I whip the curtain aside and step out, finally able to breathe normally again. On edge, my skin goes tight and the rest of me is hot and tense.

This human has turned me inside out and it began before she ever told me her name. Or used mine in return.

I follow a thin pathway leading away from the door before wading through the waist-high stream that disappears into the forest, my mind troubled with conflicting thoughts.

This isn’t going to end well for either of us, but I refuse to be the one that suffers most. I’ll return once I’ve taken the edge off my biting hunger with whatever measly scraps of food I’m able to find. Maybe by then I’ll be able to clear my head.

Then, I’ll be able to decide just how this mortal will live.

That is, if I let her live at all, when the prudent thing would be to end her and be done.

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Chapter

Fifteen

Erin

Syros takes off on me.

One minute he's moving his feet, again with a strange grace I wouldn't have thought possible with his frame and height. And the next, he's threatening me and taking off like he's got an even worse nightmare poised to strike him down.

What did I do wrong?

Maybe it isn't me, but something came over him when he looked at me.

The urge to run out the door and not look back is intense, consuming my entire body until I'm bouncing on the balls of my feet. The song on the radio changes to something upbeat with a booming base, like a theme for my escape.

It urges me to take the chance because the risk may be worth the reward of freedom.

As much as I want to learn about Syros, my survival takes precedence.

I can't write for my blog if I'm trapped.

Running would be so easy right now, especially considering there's no locked door,

only a thick curtain separating me from the outside world. No matter what kind of horrors exist in the abyss outside, I'd be able to put as much space between me and this house as possible.

The cost?

Higher than anything I've experienced in my life.

I still don't have a plan, or supplies to take with me. Not to mention, I already tried to run once and failed. The odds are definitely not in my favor this time around.

Taking another look around the small room that is Syros' house, I don't see much that will be helpful if I flee. He might have thought his collection was made up of weapons, but outside of the tiny point on the can opener, they're harmless. Benign.

I've got no chance fighting against a Grim with a Britney Spears CD.

Plus, I have no idea what I'm up against or what I'll find out there in this monstrous realm, so just taking off right now doesn't seem in my best interest. Besides, Syros said I would enjoy a slow, painful death. Call me crazy, but I believe him.

My arms drop back to my sides and the exhaustion I staved off crashes back over my head. No amount of music or adrenaline will keep me going now.

Normally, I'd take a threat like the one he made with a grain of salt—like a cheesy line from a horror movie—but I'm not in a place to blow him off. Not after everything I've seen so far.

Whether at his hands, or the hands of something else, I know my life could easily end, so I have to be smart about this.

My stomach twists, demanding food and water. My eyes shift to the giant cauldron Syros was stirring earlier, and I take a few steps in that direction. A muddy-colored water fills it about halfway. Nope, not that hungry.

I need a fucking plan. This time, I have to be smart and look before I make the jump. I'm not sure I'll be able to land on my feet, and although my track record has me coming out on top every time, the odds of it happening this go around are slim to none.

I have to be calm, rational, and patient.

Patience has never been my forte, despite all my field work.

Finding out what I can about this realm is crucial to devising any kind of escape plot, and the easiest way to go about that is earning Syros' trust. It makes the most sense. Once I've earned it, I'll be able to needle him for information.

If he trusts me, then he'll be more inclined to not only allow me small freedoms, but to loosen his lips.

I snort. He only has lips to loosen in the metaphorical sense.

Besides, what other kinds of beasts live here? How and where do the portals open? He mentioned waiting until the next solstice, but could there be other portals here that he isn't aware of? Those open constantly or maybe once a month?

Anything is possible.

I sag down to my knees when they go jelly and refuse to hold me.

Oh yeah, I'm sunk. Even if I decide to give into temptation and bolt, I won't make it

far. My body is going downhill fast without food, water, sleep, etc. All the things a human generally needs to survive and be at full strength.

And if I'm honest with myself, I doubt there's any way I'll survive long enough to see another portal. Six months is a long time on earth, and I have no clue what that means in this realm.

Does time move slower here? Faster?

Judging from the way Syros reacted when I explained the watch, I'm not even sure they have a concept of time in this place. Maybe they only mark it by a change of season. After all, they know when the solstice arrives and the portal opens.

My heartbeat races, along with my thoughts, and I know it's only a matter of seconds before my anxiety gets worked up again. With no distractions to keep the nerves at bay, they threaten to rise up and drag me down into a panic attack, and I can't afford it.

I need to focus.

I reach for the radio again to ground myself, to feel something familiar, and twist the knob to the left to lower the suddenly overwhelming volume.

What a sight it was to find this piece among his collection.

I remember playing with one of these in my grandfather's house a long time ago—the memories hazy because of time—and I think of what it was like before I decided to chase ghosts and cryptids.

Back then, things were simple. Boring. But at least they were safe. I had grandparents and a home and my dad to keep me stable and grounded. He never exactly

discouraged my flights of fancy but redirected me more often than not to focus on things that were right in front of me.

College, he always said, is where young people learn who they are and who they want to be.

Then, he was gone.

There were no more trips to Grandpa's house to fiddle with the old radio. No more life lessons. Only a heap of money and a tentative direction I didn't end up taking.

What would Dad think if he saw me now?

Mouth dry again, I turn the dial, rolling through the few channels the radio is able to pick up. Honestly, I'm surprised the thing works at all. And the battery find was a miracle. Who knows how old the radio is or how long the batteries have been sitting on the shelf, unused.

I know it's only a matter of time before they die and I'm left with nothing but the discomforting silence, but I fiddle with it anyway. A few seconds of peace are worth the dullness I'll endure later.

I think of the Paramorning podcast and how hilarious this story would be to tell in an interview. How bizarre and unheard of circumstances like these are. I'm sure no one would believe it, even with all my proof.

You were chased and captured by the Grim? the host would ask.

My imaginary answer makes me snort a laugh. Yes, and then he ate me out and fucked me in the underbrush of a different world. How crazy is that?

You didn't want to fight back ?

Apparently not, I'd say. I really enjoyed it. The fucking, anyway. The rest was terrifying.

How did you escape? The interviewer would stare at me incredulously with awe and envy glowing in her eyes.

Crazy indeed, and the thought of it has my core melting with heat once again. Gods, his tongue. Long and soft and scraping my insides in exactly the right way to coax the most intense orgasm of my life.

I shouldn't have let him do those things.

Because I hadn't fought back, not really. Not when it came to him ripping off my pants and devouring me.

Something about getting chased, fearful for my life, and being pinned to the ground as the monster had his way with me did something, unlocked a wanton piece inside of me.

A kink? I can't be sure, but it was definitely something .

I'm a monster fucker.

I let him do things to me I wouldn't even let a man do after a few dates.

Hysterical laughter bubbles up, pinpricks of awareness skittering across my chest. A monster fucker, and I'd do it again for the sheer pleasure of it. Something about the situation, the whole I should not be doing this aspect, got me wetter than any partner in the past.

Maybe if I'm lucky, and brave enough, I'll get another chance to find out. But I'm not counting on it. It's better if I put it out of my mind entirely and focus on getting out.

I roll over to a new station and the static cuts off, suddenly giving way to a male voice, and I freeze, quickly turning the dial back. It takes a few tries, but I finally line the little red stick up just right where it settles on a stable station, and I listen as the man talks.

His voice is a little distorted, occasionally breaking with a glitch of static, but from what I can make out, it sounds like he's talking on the phone.

My heart pitches toward the floor.

"Yeah, I'm up here near the edge of the forest looking for anything that might have been left behind," the voice says. "So far, all I've found was her camera. There are a few tracks in the dirt, but I can't follow the trail. They look like they were made by her. There must have been a chase, and a scramble."

I gasp and instantly clap my hands over my mouth in shock.

There's no way. This has to be some kind of insane coincidence. Chance? A miracle? There's no way this person is talking about my camera that I left behind for Tyler to find.

I hold my breath, hoping with every fiber of my being that he keeps talking. There's a beat of silence, and then more muffled words.

"It's been three days," Tyler says to no one. "If we haven't found her by now, it's probably safe to say we won't. I just wish she would have listened to me. Then none of this would have happened and she'd still be safe."

I squeak, heart fluttering maddeningly against my ribs.

It doesn't sound very much like Tyler through the muffled static, but something in my gut tells me that I'm definitely hearing him from the other side of the portal. Whatever veil exists between this world and ours seems to be thin here, or the frequency is able to break through just enough that I'm able to hear him.

Things like this aren't entirely unheard of in the paranormal world, but I'm so relieved to hear his voice that I scream.

"Tyler!"

I have to take the gamble.

If Syros comes back, he's probably going to wonder if I've lost every one of my marbles because I'm screaming at an old radio, but I don't care.

"Tyler, can you hear me?" I've never heard of a radio like this being used as a two-way communication device but what do I really know? Does the connection work both ways?

Things are kind of upended right now.

I have to be dreaming. There's no way this is actually happening. In a desperate attempt to find out, I bite the inside of my lip hard enough to make my eyes sting. Definitely awake .

This is incredible—almost as unbelievable as being dragged through a magic portal by an eight-foot-tall, skull-faced monster.

Yet, it's happening.

“Tyler, if you can hear me, talk to me. Please. I need your help,” I yell.

Hearing Tyler’s voice coming through the speakers might be shocking, but it hardly compares to what happens next. As if the whole thing isn’t hard enough to believe, he answers.

“Erin?” He chokes on the word, sounding skeptical, and I scream into my hand again. “Is that you?”

I’m not sure what the chances of this happening are, but they’re small. Miniscule, and I’m worried that if I change the channel again or move the radio, that I’ll lose whatever connection we’ve formed.

I keep my hands at my side, my fingers clenching.

“It’s me, Tyler! Can you really hear me?” I ask, staring desperately at the radio face, hardly daring to breathe.

“Yeah, I can hear you,” he says, his voice breaking with static. “Are you okay? Where are you? Oh my god, I thought you were dead!”

“I’m alive,” I rush, trying not to ramble, even though the urge to gush and tell him everything that’s happened so far is overwhelming. There isn’t time for that. “We went through the portal. The Grim dragged me through it and I passed out.”

I should be quick to get the point across. There’s no way to know how long the connection will last. Tyler needs to know exactly what happened.

“The portal?” he asks. His voice is distant and tinny, fluttering in and out of clarity. “You mean the one we saw?”

“Yes. Take the memory card out of the camera and upload the pictures, if you haven’t looked at them already,” I urge, heart racing in my chest. “Post them to the website. Tell everyone what happened. The world needs to know.”

“What about you?” His voice is strained now.

“I’m fine! The pictures are more important than me.”

Is it too dangerous to urge him to come look for me? How would he even do such a thing with the portal gone until the next solstice?

My head is spinning, and I’m lightheaded.

He laughs, a strange noise through the white noise of the radio. “Now I definitely know you’re okay. Kidnapped by a monster and still worried about your blog. Is there a way for you to get back?”

“No.” I have no idea if it’s possible to get back between the solstices. Surely, the Grims would go through the portals more often if that were the case. “At least, I don’t think so. It’s too dangerous for you to come looking for me. I don’t know what to do, but I’m going to figure it out. How are you listening to me right now?”

“I’m in your car,” he answers, making me scowl. Of course he is—I’d left it in his possession when I took off. “I was trying to find our radio show and my dad called.”

“Okay, well just keep it safe for now and don’t wreck it.” I can’t believe I’m worried about such a thing right now, but I’ve seen Tyler’s driving, and it’s not great.

Besides, clinging to something so dull and realistic helps to shave off some of the anxiety mounting inside me. It’s just the distraction I need.

“The Grim left me here so I don’t think I have much time, but maybe we can find a way to open a portal if the veil is weak enough to transmit voices. Will you help me?”

“Of course,” he says. “Whatever you need me to do, just—”

Something outside the door rustles, making me jump, and instinctively I slam the off button on the radio. The connection severs and a horrible silence fills the room.

A second later, the curtain over the door rips aside, and Syros glances around before finding me on the floor. He has a cluster of plants gripped in his clawed hand. He curls his claws around the stems hard enough to grind them into dust, and his red eyes zero in on me.

Then he asks the one question that has my heart dropping to my toes.

“Who are you talking to?”

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Chapter

Sixteen

Syros

Her guilt is palpable and adds another intoxicating layer to her scent.

Erin, my delicate human, kneels over the radio, her hands hovering over its surface like she's afraid to touch it.

Her eyes dart around the room, betraying her nervousness. I can't help but feel a pang of annoyance. What is she doing touching my things when I'm not here?

Stranger still, I swear I heard voices just moments ago. Human voices. A male's voice, distinctly, but there's no way anyone else could be here.

The portal is closed, sealed shut for another six months. Yet, when I approached the room, I heard it—an unfamiliar sound coming from within, faint yet unmistakable. My keen senses pick up on every nuance. My ears never lie.

Unless Erin is somehow able to change her voice to such an extent as to be unrecognizable, then she was speaking to someone else, through that radio.

I briefly wonder if there was some way another Grim had lost their meal and there was another human running amok in our world. But that's highly unlikely. My kind are not known for our clumsiness and we certainly do not wait once we have our prey

in hand.

Until me.

We are bloodthirsty and hungry, but we are well-equipped for this world. Killing machines. Clumsiness would give us away and make our hunt less successful. It would also make us more susceptible to the invisible beasts lurking in the trees, ready to pounce.

“I said,” I restate, taking a step toward her, “who are you talking to?”

She swallows and I watch the way her throat works as she struggles to speak.

Erin stares at me, eyes wide and posture stiff, as if I’ve caught her doing something I won’t like. But whether that something is touching my things or trying to plan another way of escaping, I don’t know. And one of those I can forgive. The other will get her killed, either by me or another monster.

I bite down on my jaw and wait for her to answer.

She mirrors me and clamps her mouth shut, glances at the floor, and my irritation briefly switches to... to... I’m not sure. Appreciation, maybe?

Very few would dare stand against an angry Grim.

She is a beautiful creature, even when she’s scheming, and too stubborn for her own good. It takes me off guard how much the emotion strikes me. Yes, beautiful, in a world of pure danger and ruin.

Two pillow soft lips, an oval face, arched dark brows, and a tiny nose... she’s the most stunning human I’ve ever come across during my trips to earth, and I’ve been

around a long time.

The attraction should not be there, especially if she is scheming against me.

What are my plans for her, truly?

I wish I could answer that question, but I really don't know. I don't think I could eat her now, even if I tried. Thinking about how she feels against me, thinking about the way her pussy grips my cock and milks me... I don't want to give her up.

But a human in my world puts us both at risk. There aren't many of my kind left, but other Grims will be able to lock onto her scent. They'll find her and they won't be as kind and accommodating as me.

That's where the gollilock plants come in.

Nearly forgotten, I glance down at the handful I'd gathered from around the swamp. One of the first things I'd done when finally deciding to end my nomadic lifestyle and settle in one place was plant a lot of these. They're the best tool when wanting to block your scent from other Grims, or nosey creatures who may take a liking to my dwelling and want to steal it for their own.

The fragrance of the gollilock is potent and overwhelming enough to be used as a shield.

For her.

I gathered them for her because, for some reason, having her direct me through the pointless dancing seemed overwhelming. The walls of the hovel started to close in around me, and I had to get out, to do something.

But what devilry did she get into once I left?

When my gaze falls back to Erin, she's watching me intently. Scared. Trembling slightly as though she has something to hide and does not want to be found out.

"I-I—" she stammers, her voice barely audible. "Syros, I didn't... I mean, I was just..."

I growl in annoyance. She hasn't answered my question.

Erin hesitates, then finally speaks, her voice tinged with fake curiosity. "It's just... I find your collection fascinating. I'm sorry if you didn't want me touching them. I think it's kind of cute that you collect them. So I was imagining how it would be to talk to someone else about it."

Cute?

"Cute is the very opposite of what I am." Perhaps she meant it as a nicety, but the word grates against my nerves.

"Okay, not cute, exactly," she mumbles, dropping her head. "But it's just not what I expected at all."

I study her carefully, my eyes locked onto her face. She seems genuine, her curiosity shining through her fear. A part of me softens. Even though humans are weaker creatures, even I can understand the allure of their world. The things they create, the knowledge they possess—it's all so different, so alien... it can be intriguing.

She's intriguing.

Maybe she's just something I want to possess, add to my collection, to look at and do

with as I please. It's one explanation for my fascination with her.

Maybe what I'd heard walking in had been only the static of the radio mixed with the confused buzzings of my own mind. When I sniff the air and find only the familiar scents of my home coupled with her very pungent, very human ones, it confirms no one else is here.

My frayed nerves may have me imagining things that don't truly exist.

Am I losing my touch? Has this woman really rattled me so much?

It would seem like it.

Her gaze swings to the plants in my hands, and her upper lip turns up in disgust at the pungent odor. "What do you have?" she asks after a moment. "Some kind of...food?"

She sounds hopeful, yet sickened.

I shake my head. "It's gollilock, but I don't recommend eating it, no. It's poisonous if ingested, but it's efficient at masking scents. It's something I discovered some time ago and now grow around here to keep Grims and other beasts away."

Her cheeks pale. "Other beasts? You've mentioned it before but I have no idea what else is lurking in the woods." Her smile is thin and lackluster.

"My kind aren't the only monsters in this world, just like in yours."

She nods. "I know what you mean."

A stiff silence settles over us, and I set the gollilock on a little ledge and place a second cauldron of water over a low-burning flame. Then, I grab my big metal basin

and set it in the middle of the room.

“What—what are you doing?” she stammers, fear rocking her voice.

Her eyes follow me as I dump the hot water into the tub and retrieve more.

“I just told you. The gollilock will mask your scent,” I say as I refill the cauldron and set it back on the fire. “If you bathe with it, rub it on your skin, I’m hoping you’ll become undetectable to things in this realm. There’s more to fear here than just me, little human.”

“Bathe with it?” she repeats. “So this is supposed to be a bathtub?”

She’s staring at the basin with a palpable measure of relief.

“What did you think it was?” I ask carefully.

“I don’t know. Maybe to make me into a stew or something. That this is your cauldron for boiling humans.”

I snort a laugh at the idea. “I don’t waste my time cooking. Your kind tastes better when it’s fresh and dosed in fear and desperation. There is no need for stew .”

Her throat works to swallow, and the movement doesn’t go unnoticed by me. I find myself imagining my tongue running along the curve of her shoulder to her jaw, tasting the salty tang of her skin.

Oh yes, she is certainly delicious, especially when she is a little afraid of what I might do.

My dick jerks awake, nestled in my fur, almost surprising me again. And I know I’m

dancing along this dangerous edge of primal hunger and primal sexual need. The two seem to intertwine when it comes to Erin.

I need to stop thinking about her as something to sink my cock into, but it's proving to be harder than it should be.

So long between meals of both varieties.

Even longer, however, since I've found an occasion to slide my cock into another. It has been only my own paw for comfort and then only when I am in dire need of release.

When the basin is halfway full and steam rises up from the water, I move my attention to the gollilock. I use my nail to slice the stems down the middle before squeezing all the clear jelly from the middle into a wood bowl. Then, I grind and mash it down with my knuckles to release more of the pheromones.

The scent fills the room and practically colors the air.

I gesture for Erin to come to the bath I've made, and she does, slowly and still unsure of my motives. That's okay because they're a little unclear to even myself. I'm not sure what kinds of rituals humans do when they clean themselves, but as long as hers involves rubbing this gollilock on her skin, I really don't care.

I will take whatever opportunities present themselves to touch her.

"Why don't I smell anything now?" she asks as she peers over the tub at the water. "There's nothing, good or bad. How will I know it's working? It seemed so pungent a moment ago."

Hmm...that is a good question. One I hadn't considered before. Then again, nothing

about this situation is usual.

“Maybe it has to do with your feeble human sense of smell? The plant itself is very fragrant. Very.” I’ve gotten more used to it from being around it for so long, but it still makes my lungs twinge with every inhale.

“What does it smell like to you?” she asks with a tilt of her head.

I think about it for a moment. I don’t know what flowers and types of nature she has in her world, but to me... “To me, it’s like every flower collided and expanded at the same time.”

“So...a sort of floral smell?” she asks.

“I’d say so.”

Hers is much sweeter, though, especially when combined with the undertone of mint. I would much prefer to smell Erin than the overwhelming gollilock.

She swipes a hand across her forehead and tucks a lock of silver hair behind her ear. “Well, that’s a relief. I was afraid I’d be rubbing something that smelled like baboon ass all over me.”

Baboon ass?

What is a baboon?

Must have been a foul creature by the sheer relief on her face for not having to smell like it.

“Either way, this will help protect you. Just get in the bath and wash with it.

Everywhere. Your hair, your arms, your..." My gaze falls on the swell of her breasts, only to glance back up to her face. "Everywhere. You must not leave any part of you untouched. I can help, if you'd like."

"Got it." Grabbing the hem of her shirt, she starts to wrench it up her body, exposing her flat naval, and I practically salivate at the sight.

There is something about her physically that draws me in, a hook to my stomach. The delicacy of her figure, the long lines of her, and the slight play of muscles underneath velvety soft skin.

Erin must've caught me because she pauses and stops her wriggling to cast a meaningful glance my way.

"You know," she says, her voice calm but stern, "it would be more polite for you to leave me alone. Give me some privacy. I'm capable of washing on my own."

I raise an eyebrow. "Privacy? So you can try and run again?" I shake my head. "Absolutely not."

Whether she answered my question from earlier or not, I know better than to take chances with her.

"I want to live," she quips. "And I realize now that the only way to do that is to stick with you."

Wise. Very wise.

But politeness? That's one of the things I'm not known for. The sooner she understands that we are going to coexist on my terms, the better off we will both be. I've made enough concessions for her.

She crosses her arms, her gaze unwavering. “Come on. Surely you know what manners are. Decency. Turn around, Syros.”

I only stare at her, but when she still doesn’t waver, I huff, torn between my curiosity, the insatiable lust I feel around her, and granting her the bit of respect she wants. Finally, I relent and turn to leave her to the bath, busying myself with the fireplace instead.

Much to my distaste.

There must be something wrong with me because in the past, a day ago, I would never have given in so easily.

It’s like the little human is bending me to her will. Or worse, wrapping me around her tiny fingers.

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Chapter

Seventeen

Erin

I sink beneath the warm water, letting its soothing embrace wash away the weariness of my journey. For a moment, I imagine the strong floral scent of the gollilock plant filling the air and perfuming the water like bubbles.

What would it be like to smell it the way he does?

The longer I hold my breath, the easier it is to relax and allow my thoughts to drift aimlessly.

For now, I'm safe.

For now, he's caring for me, and once I'm done bathing, I'll ask him about food. Is it safe to drink the water in his world? Not that I want to have a big gulp of bath water, but I haven't had anything to drink since...

Oh wow, how long? A day?

I force bubbles of air out of my nose.

Amidst the tranquility, there's something else churning within me, something I can't quite comprehend. It confuses and baffles me, like a puzzle with missing pieces. It's

the growing fondness I feel for Syros, this enigmatic monster who stands at the intersection of darkness and whimsical curiosity.

How can I find myself drawn to someone so different? Someone from a world I never thought I'd encounter?

No matter how much research I've done into the supernatural and portals, I guess a part of me has never really considered them something tangible. They've always been abstract theories until now.

I wanted them to exist, but seeing them for myself threw me for a loop.

My too-human mind has to grapple with the stark reality of all of my previously imaginative theories.

As I ponder these conflicting emotions, I hold myself submerged under the water, closing my eyes, hoping to find some clarity in its depths. When I resurface, however, I'm startled to see Syros' wavering outline towering over the basin, his red eyes fixed upon me.

I bolt out of the water, gasping for air, my heart pounding.

"Erin! Are you drowning?" His deep voice resonates with concern. "What are you doing?"

I let out a nervous laugh, attempting to compose myself. My hair is plastered against my face and I push it back before scrubbing my knuckles against my eyes. "No, no, I'm fine. Just... lost in my thoughts for a moment."

When I open them again, his outline is clear.

His skull-head is tipped to the side. If he had flesh, I imagine his brows would be furrowed together. “You seemed... startled. I thought something was wrong.”

His unexpected worry for my well-being strikes a chord within me.

It’s a glimpse of a side of him I hadn’t anticipated, a vulnerability that pulls at my heart. But why does it matter? Why should I care about the feelings of a monster who stole me from my world, wanted to eat me but fucked me instead, and now seems to want to keep me like some kind of pet?

This entire situation is absurd. Absolutely absurd.

Like a fever dream I can’t shake.

I meet his concerned gaze and ask, “Why are you so worried about me?” It’s time for stark honesty. “You wanted to kill me not too long ago, and now you’re trying to mask my scent so I don’t get eaten? Those two things don’t add up.”

He also seems like he has serious worries about me drowning in the bath he’s made for me.

So much for the privacy.

My cheeks blush when I realize he’s been watching me.

He hesitates as he searches for his answer.

“I mean, am I missing something here?” I push.

His back straightens and that frigid coldness washes over his bony face. This is the face of the hunter. Not the creature fascinated with human creation who has never

danced before.

“Do you want to be eaten, Erin?”

I know he means literally and not in the way my dirty mind takes it, but sweet Jesus, my thighs clench together when he says it.

“Of course not,” I reply automatically. “I just want to live long enough to go home.”

Syros hesitates only a moment before a deep, gravelly chuckle escapes from between his canines.

“Well, we both know that’s impossible until the next solstice. If you make it that long. So until then, the only way to keep other monsters from this realm away from you is to make you undetectable. And bathing with these plants will help until you erase the thought of ever leaving from your mind.”

I try not to think about his final statement.

“Is this a one and done thing or will these baths be a regular occurrence?” I swipe my hand over the surface of the water, allowing the heat to seep in to my bones

Despite the tangled knots of my thoughts, this moment...is nice, I’m forced to admit.

“You will have to repeatedly bathe in the plant for its effects to last,” he replies.

I bob my head. “I figured.”

He moves across the room and picks up a small cloth from the crudely-built table, along with the bowl of the remaining mashed gollilock, before kneeling beside the tub and bringing us eye to eye.

I twist my naked body away from him, covering my breasts with my arms, mostly out of habit, but Syros seems to have no reaction to seeing me naked.

It isn't like it's the first time, anyway. He's seen and tasted multiple parts of me.

"Allow me."

I watch him dip the cloth into the mixture, lathering it up well, before reaching for me.

When I flinch back, his paw hovers there, and he sighs in annoyance. Waiting for me to get with the program and obey.

"To answer your earlier question," he begins, his voice softer, "I... I find you fascinating. Your world, your resilience, your humanity. All of it. You're so different from the other humans I've encountered."

Eaten, he means.

But I let that thought go and listen to him continue without interruption.

"And I suppose, in my own strange way, I feel a connection with you. There is something stretching between us, Erin. I'm not sure what it is or what it means," he admits. "Since it appears to me you will accept nothing less than the brutal truth."

His words catch me off guard, and I struggle to process them. Syros, the collector of trinkets, the monstrous Grim with an appetite for human flesh, is harboring a connection with me?

"You're resourceful. Brave. Stubborn. Quick-thinking. Those are all traits I can relate to in a way and admire," he goes on.

“You make me sound too good to be true, when really, people think I’m a crackpot where I come from.”

“A crackpot?” he repeats, testing the word.

“Yeah, a crazy person. Believing in the things that are hard to find, like ghosts or aliens or Grims. There are people who look at me and think I’d be better off locked away somewhere,” I admit. “They don’t understand me or where I’m coming from.”

The corner of his jaw quirks up, and holy fuck, is that a smile? Is Syros literally smiling at me? It’s hard to tell with the skull face, but I think I’m getting the hang of interpreting his different gestures and expressions.

“Well, you persisted, and you found a Grim,” he says.

“Technically, you found me.”

“I guess you’re right.” He chuckles at my correction and closes the distance to begin washing my arm again.

And this time, I drop it from across my chest and let him. Despite his brutish nature and massive bulky size, his touch is gentle as he swipes the cloth over me.

I offer him a genuine smile, my skepticism giving way to a newfound warmth. “Well, I’m flattered by your compliments. You’ll probably change your mind when you get to know me. You’ll find I’m intolerable.”

“I highly doubt it.”

His concern warms parts of me better than the water. The area between my legs tingles the longer he brushes the cloth over my arms. He’s close. And he smells nice.

There is a musky undertone coupled with the fresh scent of evergreen and ash.

After thoroughly washing my arms, Syros moves to my chest, draping the cloth across my collarbone.

His red eyes deepen in color and he slows, paying attention to the dip between my breasts.

I suck in a breath as he tentatively shifts the cloth down more.

“Every part of you. Remember?” he reminds me. “You’ll let me do this.”

Warmth sparks in my stomach and sinks lower. My body is coming alive, and I’m not about to stop him.

I’d let him do just about anything right now.

A smooth growl rumbles in his chest, almost akin to a purr, and his voice drops even lower. “You will let me take care of you and taste and fuck you as I want. Whether or not you like it, little human, you are mine.”

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Chapter

Eighteen

Erin

Mine .

The word resonates in my chest, my throat growing tight at the implication, but the thought is drowned out a second later by the pounding throb between my thighs.

My nipples harden, and I catch myself biting down on my lip as he swirls the cloth over the left breast and then the right, paying special attention to both nipples. The friction on my skin is delicious.

My hands clench underneath the water and I hold his gaze, watching his tongue dip out of his maw and dance over his canines.

How can I be ready to go again? On no sleep, with no food or water, yet I'm acting sex-starved. It makes no sense to me, and the longer he works to massage my breasts, the less inclined I am to worry about it. I want him.

I clench my thighs together as my core goes molten with lust.

“Do you like this?” Syros asks.

His breathing picks up and his voice sounds hoarse. His tongue flicks out across his

teeth a second time, and his lower jaw drops slightly, his chest rumbling.

Is he panting?

I certainly am.

There are no words. My tongue has tied itself. I can only nod, swallowing hard.

Yes, I like it very much. More than I should like it because this is still a monster caressing me. The tip of his nail scrapes my nipple through the cloth and I swallow down a cry.

My breasts tighten, desire spiraling lower until I cross my legs against the sensation.

It takes everything inside me not to reach down and finger myself. Or to grab his wrist and have him do it for me.

His gaze drops to follow the movement of my legs. "You are aroused again, Erin. Your scent has changed." He lifts his skull and inhales deeply.

I force myself to laugh and meet his glowing red eyes. "How can you smell anything over the gollilock?" I'm surprised my voice holds firm. "You said it was pungent."

Looking at him does strange things to me. There is nothing human about his features and yet his emotions are clear, just like his lust. Syros is enjoying this as much as I am. His eyes go a darker and richer red the way they did in the forest when he chased me.

No, I correct. When he caught me.

Both of us enjoyed the chase and the time is past for me to keep denying it. There is a

different sort of enjoyment with this bath tonight.

There is something absolutely primal about the dance between death and sex, knowing your life hangs in a balance and being so utterly caught up in it.

His claws are still on my breast and he dips the tip of his snout to the crook where my neck and collarbone meet, dragging bone against my skin.

“I’m not sure how I can, but your scent has changed but your energy has as well,” he says, “and it’s intoxicating. I want to taste you again. I want to feel your body contracting around mine and squeezing my cock as I bury deep inside of you.”

I huff out a laugh, my mouth going dry. “I’m a little too tired for another repeat of what happened earlier. Especially with how hard you go.”

He fills me to the brim. I’m not sure where all of his length goes when he spears me. I don’t care.

“But you want it.”

Do I? Yes, I absolutely want it, he’s right.

My pussy throbs and aches from earlier, but I’m ready for another round. A wave of heat washes through me and I shudder. Syros draws in another breath and his lower jaw drops to nip at my neck.

He’s hungry all right, but this time there is only a trickle of fear.

“Stand up,” he orders. “I will take care of this.”

Rather than fight him, I grab hold of the edge of the tub and use it to lift myself up. I

can't look away. He's got me captured and frozen in place with the hot water lapping at my knees. Syros stands, towing over me, and slowly slides his hand from my breasts to the juncture between my legs.

His cock is engorged, jutting out from his dark fur and bobbing like it's eager to get to me. Precum slicks the slit at the top and drips down the base.

“Open your legs.”

His growl has me shivering in the best way. Still holding the basin side, I slowly inch my legs apart to give him better access.

He wraps his free hand on my waist to steady me and drops the cloth, using his fingers. He dips them toward my pussy, drawing the edge of his knuckle through my folds.

The first touch has me clenching and crying out with need. My clit twinges, sending electricity swirling through my system.

“You are so soft, Erin.”

My name is nothing more than two gravelly syllables ripped from the back of his throat as pleasure spirals through me.

The longer he works on me, the harder he gets, until he's growling through every touch. The brush of his fur accompanied by his steady working of my clit has me inching closer to orgasm.

My gaze drops to his erection, to the massive length and the bulbous head.

I lick my lips.

If I hadn't already been impaled by him, I wouldn't have thought it possible to fit him inside of me. But my body somehow found a way.

Why am I so attracted to him?

He's not human and there is nothing remotely human about him.

"Yes, little human," Syros groans. He looms over me and brings the tip of his snout to my head, inhaling deeply. "You know you are ready."

He brushes his knuckle to my throbbing pussy again before he changes the angle, pushing one clawed digit inside. I gasp at the intrusion and my legs wobble. The claw scrapes my insides and the mix of pleasure and danger has me closer than ever.

"This is what you want, isn't it? You are soaked for me, radiant. Hotter than a fire." His voice holds an edge of humor. "You can't wait for me to fuck you."

Words evade me.

He twists his sharp-clawed finger around inside my channel and I clench around him. The orgasm crashes over me, causing me to gasp, my head dropping back on my neck and my breath stolen. Every part of me goes tight and hot.

In the next moment, Syros pulls his finger free, taking me by the waist in both hands and hauling me out of the tub fast enough for me to gasp.

My feet dangle in the air for half a beat before he sets me down, turning away to grab a stool from someplace in the shadows. Syros sets the stool down, settles himself on top of it with his legs splayed and his cock jutting out into the air.

That is the only part of him even remotely familiar, anatomically speaking. The soft

flesh is at odds with the rest of his dark fur. I can't look away.

He growls. "Come."

"I already did," I whisper.

"Your humor is out of place here. Come, now, or I will be forced to take more drastic measures with you. I will show you what happens if you displease me." He stops. "If I'm not able to fuck you now, I'll be displeased."

It seems as though it's his own brand of humor, and the small edge of amusement I feel confuses me. I take a step forward, then another, until I'm standing between his legs.

How will he taste? If I bend my head and taste him?

He's had his tongue inside of me, deeper than any man has ever gone before, but the thought of using my own mouth on him, of sliding his dick between my lips, makes my abdomen tighten with a combination of desire and worry.

"You will obey me in all things," he reminds me. "Whenever I want to use you, you will let me do so. Although it is so very sweet and arousing when you resist."

I'm close enough to reach out and touch him if I want to. Something stops me from doing so, a small voice in the back of my head that says if I'm the one who makes the move, then it will mean something about me.

A story I tell myself where I am wrong for this.

Where I am sick, and there is something wrong with me for wanting it so badly.

A small measure of relief courses through me when Syros takes me by the waist again, with both hands. He lifts me high, balancing me over top of his cock. My legs widen automatically in anticipation before he spears inside of me with one thrust, impaling me on his hardness.

I'm ready for him, dripping, but the intrusion has me screaming.

"Yes," he grinds out.

He shoves me down until he's buried to the base inside of me; he's so deep, it feels like he's rearranging my insides. My pussy clamps down on him and I force my eyes open. Force myself to look up at him.

"Just like this." Syros moves me. He lifts me up until only the first inch of his cock is inside and then slams me back down. Working my body like I am some kind of toy for his pleasure.

Then he picks up the pace and I'm grunting, panting, struggling to see reason and make sense of this. There's no room to think about my exhaustion. There is only the fast pace, the way he fucks up into me, filling every bit of available space.

The way he feels like he's branding my insides.

"You are so tight," he groans.

I'm not supposed to like the way he's using me. I'm not supposed to like how he feels inside of me, the tip of his erection practically pushing into my stomach, or get even hotter at the thought of his knot.

He's forcing me to take him so fast I barely have time to cry out. The friction is incredible, the pace supernaturally quick. It's everything I can do to hang on and

reach for his shoulders while he impales me again and again.

Slamming me down onto his cock.

Forcing me to take him, punishingly, without mercy. Without stopping.

He uses my body.

Syros is coming inside of me in a matter of minutes, finding his own pleasure between my legs and filling me with hot semen. The knot at the base of his cock flares up and engorges. He forces me down on him through the length of his orgasm, keeping me in place until he's empty, keeping us attached so that his cum has time to coat every inch of my insides.

There is nowhere for me to go, and I'm not pulling free.

I've stopped fighting back.

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Chapter

Nineteen

Erin

I 'm no stranger to the unexplainable or unexpected, but laying curled up next to Syros on his nest of pelts while my pussy aches from being stretched to the brim by his knot is still hard for me to wrap my head around.

The strange twists and turns life takes...

If someone asked me a few days ago if I thought I'd be nestled next to a monster straight out of lore, I'd call them nuts. They'd have to be insane to suggest such a thing.

Yet, here I am, listening to the soft snores escaping his maw as he lays splayed beside me, snout toward the ceiling, his empty eye sockets glowing the faintest shade of red as he slumbers. The heat radiating from him is better than any furnace, warming me down to the bone even though he put out the fire from earlier before we settled in for the night.

Settled in.

I suppress a giggle, amused by how normal the phrase sounds in this very much not normal situation. We shouldn't be settled in. We shouldn't be anything, but... here we are.

When did we go from predator and prey to we ?

It might have been when I was too exhausted to make it through the woods and he carried me all the way back to his house. Or it might have been when we slow-danced to the fuzzy tune coming from the radio. Or it might have been after the last time he fucked me, when he cleaned the cum off my legs and carefully finished bathing me with the gollilock water.

Regardless of when it happened, the unsettling truth is that something between us has shifted. Whatever connection I felt earlier is stronger, like a tether drawing me to the massive monster. It's more than mere fascination, though I'd consider myself completely and thoroughly fascinated. Something deeper, instinctual.

I don't have a name for it, but I know it's there. Almost animalistic, primal and feral—much like Syros.

He's not a man and that's what I like about him. He's different, unusual, paranormal.

It's like my entire career of paranormal investigating, all my knowledge of cryptids and lore, has led me to this moment.

Like fate guided me here, to Syros.

With a smile curling my lips, I close my eyes. Exhaustion tugs at my limbs, urging me to let go and pass out, but I can't. Not yet. Not when my mind is racing, considering every angle of this arrangement and coming up with a confusing blank where reason should be.

Forget the podcast and forget my blog. In a million years, no one will believe me if I put my experience into words. Syros isn't the only thing straight out of legend. So is the tale I'll have to tell once I'm home again.

If I ever make it there...

I scoot closer to Syros and reach my hand out to brush against his fur. He's soft as velvet over a hard layer of muscle and bone, with patches of rough skin peeking through that tickle my fingertips.

He doesn't stir, the rumble of his gentle snore continuing to roll in his throat. He sounds like a giant, demonic cat.

Another giggle threatens to burst out of me but I clench my lips shut—I don't want to wake him. Not when things almost feel peaceful for the first time since before the solstice. Even though I can't find sleep, adrenaline isn't crashing through my veins and my heart isn't slamming in my throat.

I'm almost calm. Restful.

If I close my eyes, it's easy to imagine many nights like this. Nestled at his side and safe.

A girl can get used to this kind of thing, having a warm body beside her, vowing to protect her, pleasuring her beyond any kind of normal bliss.

Especially if I ignore the undercurrent of tension running through me, reminding me of the danger of this world and the tenuousness of the situation itself. Being here with Syros isn't so bad after all.

Once we got past the whole he wants to eat me thing.

He can eat me all he wants—with his thick, warm tongue buried in my pussy—but we've gotten to a point where I'm not worried about him trying to boil me anymore.

Thank fuck.

I continue to lay there with my eyes closed, slowly being lulled to sleep by Syros' snoring, absentmindedly running my fingers through his fur. Eventually, I start to drift off, heaviness tugging at the edges of my mind as unconsciousness threatens to drag me under, when a giant crack sounds from outside the room.

I inhale sharply and my eyes pop open, fear racing down my spine. My muscles go tight, and I hold my breath, waiting for whatever it was to sound again, dangerously close to us.

My heartbeat thunders in my ears, my heart twisting in my chest.

What the hell was that?

A long minute passes, and I take a slow, shaky breath while remaining perfectly still.

Maybe it was my imagination; I'm exhausted, after all.

Maybe my mind is starting to play tricks on me.

Maybe—

Another crack splits the air, this time loud enough for Syros to wake.

He's on his feet in an instant, alert and poised, crouched low with his upper body arched over me protectively. A low growl rumbles in his chest, tearing through my system and raising the fine hairs on the back of my neck.

"What is it?" I hiss out.

His head jerks around and his red eyes meet mine, the glow diminished in the gloom of night. Although there's no change in his expression, his cold gaze lingers on me like he's warning me to be quiet.

"It might be another Grim stalking through the land, hungry for prey that no longer exists," he whispers, his head slowly swinging toward the door. "Or it might be..."

His voice trails off, and I open my mouth to say something, but that's when I hear it: a slow, dragging rustle through the underbrush outside, interrupted by thudding footsteps.

My stomach turns, spirals of ice dancing up my spine.

Surely, whatever it is hasn't come for me so soon. Not after the precautions Syros took. Not after I bathed in the gollilock water.

Syros said it could be something else... but what else besides a Grim is large enough to make that noise?

I exhale shakily, clenching my hands into fists to stop them from trembling. Even with this vicious, skull-headed monster huddled over me, ready to protect me from whatever awaits outside the door, fear lances through me.

It dawns on me just how fragile I am, how much I don't belong in this world no matter how comfortable I am with Syros. Even if not by his hand, there is a very good chance I'll end up dead if I stay here. I hate how small I suddenly feel.

His body twitches when another crack resounds outside, closer this time, like someone stepping down on a twig and snapping it in two.

"Stay here, Erin. Do not move." His tone is lethal, even though his voice is barely

more than a whisper.

It's a command; one I plan to follow.

With his attention focused on the door, he raises up on all fours, looming over me.

"The plant is working," he assures me in an undertone. "If it weren't, whatever is outside would have already made it through the door."

"What are you going to do?" I fight to find my voice.

It's difficult to breathe with him this close and the silent terror of whatever stalks us just outside these walls. Another beat, and then the plaintive hiss and wail of a beast struggling to breathe reaches my ears.

My lungs go tight, and my blood turns to ice.

"Syros..."

His hackles are high, and the dark fur along his forearms lifts to attention. There is something terrifying about this posture. Despite the way he hovers over me, the hunter is back and primed for an attack, ready to tear those claws through flesh and bone.

Which doesn't give me the warm and fuzzies.

It's a reminder of reality, the same one I couldn't find earlier.

Syros is not a man and he's not gentle.

He's a killing machine who eats humans.

I struggle against the urge to lean into his arm and steal some of his strength for my own. Then I forcefully remind myself that he's just like whatever creature is outside, and there is nothing to stop him from changing his mind and deciding to just give me up.

It would be easier.

His curiosity about me can only last so long before he gives in to his own hunger. I'm sure of it.

"What are you going to do?" I push.

Syros takes another step forward on all fours, and the moment he clears the nest, he straightens. The tips of his horns practically brush the ceiling overhead as he stands to his full height.

"Stay here," he warns again, ignoring my question. "If you move, you risk your life."

He's a menacing presence in the dancing shadows from the fire. The light plays over the bones of his face, emphasizing the sharp lines of his skull. Those pointed horns are perfect for gouging holes clear through flesh.

More noises sound from outside the house, and before I have a chance to tell him to stay with me—a coward's plea—he leaves abruptly.

The curtain swings closed behind him, a pitiful barrier of protection from whatever is lurking outside, and I'm left alone.

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Chapter

Twenty

Erin

My chest is so tight my ribs are primed to squeeze both lungs into ash.

This time, he didn't bother to tie me up before he left to investigate.

Now is my chance if I want to make a run for it.

Probably one of the only chances I'll get before Syros returns and finds me gone.

Only the thought of going out at night alone, while he's distracted, makes me sick to my stomach.

You're a brave, independent woman. You have to hurry!

I shake my head and the insanity from it. Even if I make it out of the house, there's no way I can make it past Syros and whatever the hell is stalking through the woods. I couldn't even escape Syros last time. However, sitting here and waiting for him to return doesn't sit well either.

An idea strikes.

I scramble out of the makeshift bed, ignoring his demand to stay put, and hurry

toward the corner of the room and the ledge holding the radio.

I have to be quick.

My hand shakes as I bring it down, kneeling on the floor while I fiddle with the knobs.

If I managed to make contact once, it might take a miracle to do it again. But the connection exists, between this world and mine—there's some thread of energy bridging the two planes of existence, and I have to believe Tyler is still waiting on the other end for me to contact him.

Static sounds as I adjust the radio back to the right frequency. I turn the sound down as low as I can, hoping the noise doesn't draw the attention of either monster outside.

The static shifts into silence, and I suck in a breath.

"Hello? Tyler? Are you there?" I whisper. My insides clench, waiting for an answer that might never come. "Say something if you can hear me."

This is stupid .

I glance at the door, tense, ready for the curtain to whip aside at any moment. For Syros to, once again, catch me in the act.

This is insane .

And then—

"Erin? Oh, thank god." Tyler's low reply is followed by a groan of relief. "I've been waiting to see if you'll come through again."

My stomach shifts sickeningly, but the smile on my face is genuine. The thin grin pries my lips apart, and I stare at the radio like it's my lifeline. In this case, it is.

Contact has been established against all odds. I sag forward, my nerves raw and my blood replaced by ice.

"Thank you for waiting for me. I'm here."

A swell of static accompanies my words.

"What?" Tyler is louder than before and I wince, halfway prepared for Syros to come storming inside, claiming it was all a test. "I can't hear you. Where are you? It's hard to hear, the connection is bad."

How much of our earlier conversation actually got through to him? Shit, I hadn't considered that before.

It's impossible to know.

"I have no idea where I am, but the portal closed behind me," I tell him. "It's a miracle we can even talk now."

"Do you know any way to get it to re-open?" Tyler presses. "Or can you search for another opening? There has to be a way for the Grim to get into our world. Not just on the solstice. If you can find it—"

I shake my head before I remember that Tyler can't see me. Urgency weighs me down, making every inhalation unnecessarily heavy.

"I haven't had a chance to explore," I interrupt. "Right now, I'm someplace safe. I'm just not sure for how long."

Hearing myself say the word out loud rocks me. I can't help but think about Syros and the house he's made for himself in these dark woods, full of beasts and quicksand pits.

Am I really safe?

Yes, I guess I've started to think about his hovel in those terms.

At least I know what I'm dealing with, somewhat, when I'm here. Especially when the sounds from outside make me want to cringe and huddle underneath the furs, closing my eyes until the battle passes.

A roar explodes outside, ripping through the air and making my hairs stand on end.

Shit .

Something's wrong.

Whatever is happening with Syros and the other monster outside, it's nothing good. And I have to hurry.

"There has to be a way for us to connect through more than these radio waves," Tyler says. An edge has entered his voice. "We have to be able to find a bridge between our worlds. I'm gonna get you back, Erin. If it's the last thing I do, I'll get you back."

The poor guy sounds ready to cry, like his guilt has finally gotten to him enough to prick through even the strongest wall of stoic machismo.

College kids .

"I'm not sure how we can do it, but there's got to be a way," I say, my own dread

seeping into my voice. “Otherwise, I’ll be forced to wait for the winter solstice.”

“Will you be able to survive that long?”

The starkness of the reminder isn’t helpful, and it clangs around in my head and heart like someone unraveling a pile of chains.

“I’ll either have to survive or we find another bridge. Those are the options right now.” The idea of radio waves tickles the back of my mind.

I glance at the door again, my eyes wide enough to have them burning. “What if there is somehow a way to amplify the static, not just on my side but on yours? Could we cause a rift big enough for a person to walk through? My physics is rusty.”

Rusty? Try nonexistent.

That kind of theory isn’t really my forte.

“I have no idea how to do that. I barely know what you’re talking about,” Tyler replies.

So, it’s a long shot and I’ve never heard of anything like that happening before. At least, not in any of the research I’ve done.

The theory of other worlds on top of ours has always been just that—a theory. Other paranormal investigators haven’t been able to gather concrete evidence to prove or disprove it. Until now.

Yet, Tyler and I made a connection on this channel. And where there is connection, there is a possibility to expand it. He’ll have to be the one to do the research, though; I’ve got none of my books or notes on this side.

“None of my college courses have prepared me for this. It’s entirely out of my scope, Erin!”

His voice cracks.

“Okay, don’t panic, Tyler.” How am I the one trying to calm him down? “We’ll find a way. You have all of my equipment there.”

Tyler laughs, hysterically, and says, “I want to save you, I do. So tell me what I need to look for and I’ll do it. I’ll even talk to my old physics professor if you want, and he failed me out of his class. But I’ll do it.”

“I appreciate your willingness,” I say dryly. And I do.

Another roar sounds from outside, and I flinch at the violence in it.

“I’ll work on it from my end, nonstop. What do you have there with you?” Tyler asks.

I scan the room and start taking a mental inventory of all of Syros’ trinkets. Good thing I’ve always been pretty handy.

All my childhood years of Girlscouts, don’t fail me now.

There aren’t exactly a whole lot of options when buying the sort of electronic scanners most paranormal investigators use. I’ve ended up making a lot of them myself, outside of the cameras we placed around the woods and the one I’d left for Tyler.

My father used to hate when I’d take apart his clocks and things to check their insides and see how they work. Syros has to have something in his collection I can use. Even

the watches will be useful.

It's a matter of seizing the opportunity in front of you.

There must be more things tucked away that I haven't had a chance to explore yet, hidden and just waiting for me to use them.

But seriously—do I really think we'll be able to do this?

Tyler isn't exactly a professional when it comes to paranormal investigation. The fact that he stayed behind once I took off is great, and him sticking around? Being willing to help me? A pure miracle.

Is it really so odd to think we can amplify the static to create an actual bridge?

I suppose stranger things have happened.

I clear my throat. "I have a few odds and ends," I tell him. "We'll figure something out, as long as you are willing to stick around a little bit longer."

A beat of silence stretches into two, and then he says, "I'll do whatever it takes to get you back, Erin. I feel responsible for what happened."

My brows knit together. "Why would you be responsible?"

Another terrible roar sounds from outside. A dull thud like two bodies colliding makes me wince. Whatever is happening, Syros is fighting, and the tendril of terror inside of me grows into a sensation that's impossible to ignore.

Uh oh.

“I should have never let you run into the woods that night. If I’d been stronger, if I’d insisted, we would have stayed in town and locked our doors—” Tyler starts.

“I wouldn’t have listened to you.”

I’d just like to see the poor guy try and stop me.

One of the beasts—I can’t tell if it’s Syros or not—growls. The sound is immediately cut off and a low whining screech of pain follows.

“Tyler, I’m sorry, I’ve got to go.”

My attention is firmly on the door and it’s impossible to look away. Not when one of them is whimpering in pain. What if Syros is hurt?

If another Grim takes him down, there’s no guarantee I’ll be able to live through it. Not to mention I’ll lose my access to his collection.

It’s better to stick with the monster you know, rather than the one you don’t, right?

My spine snaps straight, my teeth on edge, and my hair lifts in a wave of goosebumps. It sounds like a knock ‘em out, drag ‘em out fight, and it’s almost too terrible to consider what might happen if Syros is the injured one.

I barely spare a thought before I shut the radio off, cutting off Tyler’s worried reply. I’m on autopilot, fear propelling me toward the door, and before I know it, I’m reaching for the thick curtain draped over the opening.

The sounds outside are getting louder, more vicious, and I can’t take it anymore. I know it’s dangerous to leave, but I have to see what’s going on. To assure myself that Syros is fine.

Steeling myself, I pull back the curtain and poke my head out. Syros is face to face with another monster, and whatever it is, it's not a Grim; it's much worse.

The creature has to be at least ten feet tall, towering over Syros with long, white limbs that stick out starkly against the dark forest. The thing's skeletal fingers are tipped with foot-long claws, its bulbous head packed with several eyes and mouths. To my horror, each mouth is filled with razor-sharp teeth.

I watch silently, heart galloping in my chest as they circle one another... sort of. Syros is crouched, his head shifting left and right like he can't zero in on the beast that's right in front of him. Like he can't see him.

The new monster steps to the left and Syros looks right, giving the creature the opening it needs. It lurches forward, slamming into Syros and knocking him back onto the ground and pinning him there.

I clap my hand over my mouth to cut off a scream, my eyes falling to Syros' form. Only then do I notice his wounds, several small ones in his chest and arms that are oozing blood that glistens in the moonlight.

He's hurt.

My stomach gives a sickening twist.

Syros swings at the monster pinning him to the ground, missing every time. Not only do his attacker's limbs help it stay out of reach, but it doesn't seem like Syros knows where to aim.

A sickening realization slams into me, and I lose my ability to breathe.

Syros can't see his opponent.

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Chapter

Twenty-One

Syros

The Ech is known for its brutality.

Driven by an insatiable hunger not unlike the one Grims suffer, the creatures prowl across our land stealing resources and demolishing anything in their path. They are mindless, killing machines, whose only instinct is to survive... by any means necessary.

They have destroyed our world, reduced it to a rotting carcass of what it once was, and have killed many Grim. Too many.

And this one has set its sights on me.

If only I could say the same.

The Ech's most powerful—and endlessly infuriating—attribute is that they are invisible, making them nearly impossible to fight. Impossible to kill.

The underbrush shifts suddenly, and I launch myself out of the way, rolling through the grass and twigs, and landing on my feet once again. My hackles raise and I growl, hoping the fury in my roar will scare the beast off. It doesn't.

Instead, the creature makes an angry hissing noise and takes several thunderous steps to the right, readying to charge again.

Echs are notorious wanderers. The stench of rotting corpses clings to them, the most obvious sign when one is near. Their guttural bellows and clacking teeth are also giveaways. But aside from the impression of their footsteps in the underbrush, the small plants bending and crunching under their weight, I can't see them.

Though I'm no stranger to Echs, I've only fought a few since they first appeared many years ago. They rarely venture into this part of the woods, mainly because all the life that once existed here is long dead. Except for me .

Perhaps it caught a whiff of my scent the last time I foraged for food, or maybe the thing somehow picked up Erin's human scent. While the gollilock plant can mask her from other Grims, there's a chance the invisible beast has an extraordinary sense of smell. Maybe it scented her beneath the strong florals. Maybe it showing up now, of all times, is merely chance.

Hopefully, the latter. My entire plan to keep Erin for myself depends on my ability to keep her hidden, and if the other beasts in this realm can track her easily... Keeping her hidden won't be an option.

My tongue flicks out to taste the air in anticipation of the Ech's next move.

I could run; Ech's might be brutal when it comes to combat, but they aren't faster than Grims. I could lead it away from the hovel and lose it somewhere in the trees, but I can't. Not when Erin is tucked just inside the nearby stone structure, unable to protect herself. I won't leave her defenseless.

I won't leave her.

Thoughts of my little human have a fresh wave of adrenaline shooting through me, and my hands curl into fists. This time when the Ech lunges at me, I stand my ground, crouching low and leaping at the last second. I slam into a slender form wrapped in leathery, armor-like skin. With a howl, the beast staggers away clumsily, and I whirl around to track its uneven footsteps through the grass.

I lurch forward without a second thought, swiping my claws at where the Ech stood half a heartbeat earlier. It jumps out of the way to avoid my attack, and I growl out my frustration.

This isn't good. Unless I can wound it, the beast will simply dance around me until I wear out from exhaustion, biding its time until it can kill me and Erin. Until it can feast on our carcasses, drain the marrow from our bones.

We dance around one another, my senses on high alert while I wait for sudden movements. It's getting too close to the house, too close to her .

I need to draw it away, deeper into the woods...

Movement in the corner of my eye catches my attention, and my gaze flicks toward the fabric-covered entrance of my hovel. There, just visible in the darkness, is a wisp of silver hair and a sliver of Erin's pale face.

No.

Erin is watching.

Erin is here, and the scent of the gollilock plant will only protect her for as long as it takes me to die.

My flash of distraction costs me everything, and the Ech slams into me full force,

knocking me off my feet. I hit the ground hard, the air ripping from my lungs, and slide to a top with the weight of the invisible beast crushing down on me. I snap my jaws up at the empty space above me, hoping to grab any part of the creature between my teeth, but something wraps around my horn and slams my head against the ground.

I swipe at the beast with my claws, swinging my limbs and bucking against its hold, but I miss every time. Fury boils my blood, but everything around me shatters when white-hot pain rips through my side. Something hard like bone sinks between my ribs, and I roar, my rage exploding out of me.

I buck and lash out again, this time managing to hit something with my claws. The Ech yelps, and I kick into the air, planting my foot against its armor-covered abdomen. With a howl, it releases me, and I'm back on my feet a second later.

Pain splinters through me, my side where I was stabbed freely oozing blood now. My chest burns with every inhale, and I stagger while I get my bearings.

“Syros! No!”

My fur raises at the sound of Erin's voice, and my eyes flick to her again.

It shouldn't surprise me how she chose to ignore me. She is the most stubborn little human I've ever encountered. She should not have to witness my failure, though.

If I die, there is nowhere safe for her. She'll have no chance here without me, absolutely none.

She'll die a painful, agonizing death.

I should have let her go when I had the chance.

“Behind you!” Her scream burns through my thoughts, and reality slams into me. I’d been so distracted that I lost track of the creature’s movements in the underbrush.

I whirl around just in time for the Ech to slam into me again. Long claws wrap around my shoulders as we tumble to the ground, even more tearing at my fur and raking across my skin. Its claws are not as sharp as the Grim, but they will do untold damage if I allow it to gain the upper hand.

The creature bends close and roars out a challenge, once again pinning me to the ground.

I’m hurt, and there is a very real possibility that I won’t make it out of this alive if I don’t do something fast.

Regret mingles with the pain as something slender—probably a tail—wraps around my throat with enough strength to crush bone. I buck in an attempt to knock it off, kicking up with the strength I have left, but the Ech doesn’t budge.

Under normal circumstances, I’d be filled to the brim with food and prepared for such an attack. However, I’d opted to crawl up with Erin on my furs and feel the heat rolling off of her skin instead of eating her. The moment was peppered with memories of fucking her on the stool, her tight hot little body wrapped around mine.

Selfishness has been a way of life for me for so long... this world isn’t for her.

No doubt she will take this time to run. It’s her chance. Not that she will get far, with the other dangers lurking in this world. But I don’t blame her for trying.

The Ech’s tail squeezes tighter around my throat to choke off my air supply, and pain splinters through me, becoming my reality.

This is my fault for allowing the creature to get the upper hand.

I lost my focus. And with it, any advantage I could have hoped for.

Black spots dance in front of my vision as the Ech increases the pressure around my neck. My movements grow sluggish, ineffective.

I'm dying .

There is no room left for embarrassment either. My little human will watch me die, and there is nothing either of us can do. There is only shame at bringing Erin this far only to leave her behind.

There are so many other things I'd wished to explore between us.

We will never have the opportunity now .

I pry my eyes open, coughing, struggling to breathe when a flash of movement from the side captures my attention. A dull thwunk sounds and suddenly I'm able to suck air down into my lungs again.

The Ech yowls like someone has cut off its tail. The ground shakes.

I force myself up to my knees, shifting to the side while I get my bearings back, and there is Erin. She stands there, holding one of my trinkets, the look in her eyes promising death.

Rather than waiting for the Ech to recover, she slams the object down on the invisible monster again, hard enough for me to wince at the cracking sound that follows.

With a thud, the creature drops to the ground, the grass depressed in the shape of its

long, slender form.

It doesn't move again.

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Chapter

Twenty-Two

Syros

For a moment, I hardly dare to move.

Erin lowers her arms to her side and loses her grip on the item in her hands. It tumbles to the ground, and she crumbles to the forest floor right after it. This time, I'm not fast enough to catch her before she drops.

She lands hard on her rear as I scramble to get to her.

"Erin." My throat burns, and her name comes out low and gravelly. "Are you okay?"

She came for me .

Shock tightens my chest.

She could have left me to die, but she saved me when she had the opportunity to run.

There is hardly any time to give into the temptation to draw her to my chest, to clutch her tightly and assure myself of her safety. Not when I'm losing blood and my head is spinning toward the sky.

"I couldn't let that creature hurt you," she says breathlessly, her eyes tracking to the

unconscious creature a few feet away. A wrinkle forms in her forehead as she stares at it. “That’s one ugly fucker.”

My stomach drops when I recall her warning from earlier. She called out to tell me the creature was behind me when I lost track of it.

“Erin...” I hesitate, my gaze shifting between her and the invisible form lying on the ground. “Can you see the Ech?”

“Ech ?” She makes a disgusted face, like the creature’s name tastes terrible when she says it. “Yeah, I can. And I take it you can’t?”

“No. No one can see them,” I assure her, still in disbelief. How is it that this little human—weak and useless when it comes to combat—is able to see the invisible beasts that have plagued our world for so long?

Maybe it was more than my selfishness that kept me from killing her.

Maybe... maybe she holds the key to defeating them once and for all.

If she can see these invisible beasts, I can’t help but wonder what other magic skills she might possess.

“What did you use to knock it out?” I ask, looking at the large box she’d held moments ago.

“This old thing?” She huffs out an incredulous laugh. “You just happened to have a portable generator. Battery operated, so I doubt the campers you stole it from would have gotten more than an hour or two of power, but it’s hefty enough to make a good weapon,” she explains. “It was a lucky find.”

Her giggling takes me by surprise. Rather, the slight hysterical tone and the way she stares at the generator as though she can't believe her own strength.

"I don't know if I killed it, but it's definitely not moving anytime soon," she says, leaning closer to the Ech to inspect the damage. "Definitely cracked its skull."

I should yell at her for putting herself in the middle of danger, but the truth of the matter is, I needed her intervention. Otherwise, I'd be dead.

I shudder to think what might have happened if she hadn't chosen to come to my aid when she did.

"A generator," I repeat. I swipe a claw across one of the wounds in my chest and it comes away smeared with blood. "What does it do?"

"It gives you energy, sort of like those batteries did for the radio. Human machinery needs power to operate. Our world doesn't have any magic in it."

We stare at each other across a chasm of no more than a few feet.

A hum of gratitude sounds from deep in my chest. "It is also an acceptable weapon." I fall silent. "I thought you would try to get away from me."

I would not have blamed her for it.

Yet she came for me, and the realization sends a strange sensation washing through my chest and into the lower regions of my stomach. It is an unfamiliar emotion, one I'm unable to name.

"Can you move?" Erin crawls over and reaches for my arm, ignoring my remark about her leaving. Tentatively, she places her fingers on my forearm, waiting for me

to react.

My body is slow to respond. My energies are focused on healing the wounds to my flesh but without food, it will be a very slow, grueling endeavor. The wounds are too slow to knit back together. I need supplies.

I test out my legs and find them halfway unwilling to hold my weight. “I will be able to make it into the hovel, if that’s what you’re concerned about,” I grind out.

“You really have to stop calling it a hovel. It’s decent. Why not say it’s a cabin?”

Erin, unfettered and attempting levity, maintains her hold on my arm and gingerly helps me to my feet. I’m hesitant to allow her to hold my weight. If I’m not careful, I’ll crush her, and I won’t be able to do much if she’s hurt.

Not in my current condition.

“Ca-bin,” I repeat, unsure. If Erin says I live in a cabin, a cabin it shall be.

“He really did a number on you,” she adds. “Some of these scratches are really deep.”

I glance sideways at her. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“You let that awful thing get the upper hand. You’re bleeding from half a dozen wounds. The ones on your back... just terrible.”

“Yes, I’m aware.”

I feel the movement of my flesh with every step.

We take it slow and, once we’re over the threshold with the curtain draped back into

place, my shoulders slump forward in relief. Erin helps me over to the basin still filled with her bathwater, and I drop on the stool.

My head spins, and the rest of me needs more than just a good night of rest in order to recover.

Food will be the biggest help. I'm drained, but the thought of eating Erin is banished to the farthest corners of my mind.

She refuses to release her hold on me until I'm settled and only then to stand back and consider me from top to bottom. Her hands go to her hips, presenting a mighty image of fierceness.

The little huntress, and instead of killing the beast, she's helping him survive.

"Tell me what I need to do for you, Syros. Do you have any bandages? How do you normally clean cuts and scrapes?"

An edge of panic seeps into her voice.

I grunt, steeling myself through a fresh swell of pain. The scent of the gollilock plant still permeates the air, and the heat from the banked fire is a comfort to my bones. "Normally, I suffer through until the skin knits itself together," I say. "That may not be an option now."

She turns to me and taps her foot. "If you're joking, then it must not be serious. You don't have any sort of bandages or gauze? No plants that work to stop the bleeding?"

"I'm not joking," I insist. "There are precious few resources in this world. Plants like that are extremely rare, and we do not have the other things you speak of."

“You know, the next time you go through the portal, maybe try to raid a campsite and grab a first aid kit. Or find a ranger’s station. One of them is sure to have supplies you’ll need if this happens frequently.”

I shake my head, instantly regretting the motion when it impacts my dizziness. “The Ech is not frequently seen in this part of the forest. They are rare and predatory.”

“It looked like a cross between Slenderman and lizard,” she says, sounding amused. “Maybe if they had a baby with a demon.”

Clearly she’s speaking to remain calm, and I indulge her, forcing a grin. “I will have to take your word. Not only can I not see it, but I have no idea what a slenderman or a lizard are.”

Erin moves over to the fire and pours fresh water from one of the pitchers into a pot. The pot is small in my palms but in hers, it is much larger than her head and it takes both hands for her to maneuver it.

“You were doing a terrible job of surviving. The sounds gave you away,” she resorts, her back turned to me. “Not to mention if it’s so rare, then what is it doing here?” Her muscles clench, her scent filled with a combination of stress and worry. For me. “Why is it coming around all of a sudden?”

“It is not because of you, if that’s what you’re thinking,” I reply with a groan. “They are constantly on the move and in search of whatever food they might find.”

“Do they eat humans too? Like your kind?” Erin presses.

“Yes, but only rarely, as the Grim are not likely to give up their prey to the Ech if at all possible.”

Erin returns from the fire with the water, warmed by the flames and steaming slightly. She sets it down on the table near me and draws a cloth from the depths.

“You’re going to sit here and let me take care of you. We need to clean this out so I can see what we’re working with. Then, I might have to take more of your cloths to bind the wounds, if the bleeding hasn’t stopped by then.”

I watch her move, the deft way she handles the cloth. The first swipe of the hot water over my back has me Grimacing, suppressing the need to yell out at the pain, but the vulnerability and determination on her face has me biting my tongue.

“Why are you fussing over me?” The need to know consumes me.

“Is that what you call this?” Erin refuses to meet my gaze. “You call it fussing?”

“Yes.”

It is simple and oddly comforting. No one has ever done such a thing for me. Although, it’s not like I’ve had another person or Grim in this hovel before.

Cabin , I mentally correct.

She drags the cloth over my shoulders before dipping it back in the hot water, crimson staining the depths.

“You’re hurt,” she bites out. “After what you’ve done for me, it’s only right for me to do the same for you. Besides, I’m the only one around to do anything.”

“You want me in peak condition to fuck you again,” I growl. “I understand. You are hungry for my cock to fill you, and I can’t pleasure you when I’m like this.”

“Wow, you’re arrogant.” But her cheeks blush a pretty pink, and I glance back to see her tuck a lock of silver hair behind her ear with her free hand.

The silence that falls between us is anything but strained. There is an ease to it, a comfort, as though we have reached an accord. Soon, the smoothing motion of her hands lulls me into a mental space where I am able to close my eyes and allow her to continue her ministrations.

This is... nice. Strange, and out of place, but nice.

Even my hunger takes a back seat to the soothing sensation and her presence.

“Perhaps I should allow myself to be hurt more often,” I mutter. “If it results in this kind of care.”

There is a small pinch on top of my hand, where it rests over my knee. I glance down to see Erin with my flesh between her fingers, squeezing it in admonition.

“Stop it,” she says. There is no ire in her tone, though, and I swear she is suppressing a grin. “Some of these are very deep. It’s a wonder you’re still breathing normally.”

I may not have been if she hadn’t decided to help me. If she’d run, or if she’d let me die—I stop myself before I give into those thoughts.

“Thank you.” The words are foreign. “For helping me.”

It’s strange to say them to another living being and even stranger to mean them.

The Grim are solitary. We take care of ourselves in whatever manner we see fit and without a thought to anything outside of our own survival.

But here is Erin, and I find myself oddly protective over her. It almost seems as though the feeling is mutual.

“There is something in the jar near the fireplace you could use—” I start.

There is no warning before the curtain over the door bursts open on an invisible wind. A long shadow framed in moonlight falls across the cabin floor, though I can’t see anything blocking the doorway. Decidedly not unconscious, the Ech yowls into the room, the sound high enough to lift my fur on end.

It all happens so fast.

I surge to my feet a wave of dizziness, ready to protect my little human, just as she’s knocked off her feet. She screeches, landing hard enough to cut off the terrified sound, before the Ech drags her toward the cabin door.

I have to move. Fear and fury mingle together inside of me, both emotions strong enough to tie my tongue and clench my heart into pieces.

It’s got her .

We should have killed the creature before it had a chance to rise. Why hadn’t I thought to make sure it was dead?

I roar, the sound burning my throat as I struggle toward the door. Erin is screaming from somewhere outside. The more primal part of me rises and takes hold, controlling my movements. There is no time left for rational thought. Not when she’s in danger.

Something else has taken my possession, has taken what’s mine.

A branch snaps somewhere to my left, and the Ech's tail wraps around my wrist. In the blink of an eye, it hurls me forward.

I lose my balance and crash against the ground, pain and horror mingling inside of me at Erin's cries for help.

The creature shrieks before its tail wraps around my neck and drags me backward. My claws are helpless to stop the movement, digging furrows in the ground, and suddenly the creature is on my back. Crashing into me and forcing me down, buckled beneath its weight.

Its claws rip across the wounds I already have and spray my blood.

Before it has a chance to score my throat, I turn on my side and ram my horns into its side.

Erin . Everything I do is for her.

The creature retreats, and I scan the forest for my tiny human.

There . I finally see her huddled against the side of a tree with her arms wrapped around her torso and blood dripping from her arm and shoulder.

This creature came into my territory and hurt Erin.

I might have been able to let it leave if it hadn't attacked her, but now this is personal.

Its scaly skin makes it impervious to most attacks. This time, it won't matter. I'm going to make sure when it goes down, it never recovers.

Pure rage fills me with fire, and when the underbrush shifts near me again, I rear up,

swing my skull to the side and piercing the Ech on my horn. For half a heartbeat, it fails to react, and then its screech of fury and pain constricts my heart.

I shake him free, the Ech thuds to the ground. Rather than giving it a chance to move, I launch myself toward the impression in the grass, slamming the creature down onto the forest floor.

It roars in anguish, and I slam my shoulder down against it to keep it pinned. Sharp teeth gnash out and the Ech heaves upward like it's going to shake me off.

I tuck my body in tight, rage adding strength to my attacks. The creature's hot breath ruffles the hair along my neck and shoulders and I drive it down, the air rushing out of its lungs.

"Syros."

Erin's cry is almost too soft to hear above the roar of the creature and makes it hard for me to finish this when I want to go to her. To make sure she is okay.

My pulse thunders in my ears, adrenaline like lightning inside of me.

The creature thrashes underneath me but I bear down, keeping my footing and wrapping my hands around its skull. My claws dig deep through the scaly skin, piercing beneath it, and a single twist snaps its neck.

I grit my teeth. Lost to the sensation, the world narrows, constricts, and I keep wrenching the skull to the side even as the body goes lax beneath me.

Finally, I pull the head free and feel the torso drop beneath me.

This fucking monster. It got what it deserved.

“Syros? Are you all right?”

Erin’s voice draws me out of my head, and the bloodlust slips away moment by moment, leaving only a cold and horrible reality behind. I slowly lift myself up and away from the dead Ech, turning until I find her again in the trees.

She’s curled in on herself and hasn’t attempted to move. I draw in a deep breath and her scent is full of the rank stench of sweat and fear.

I approach her slowly, holding out my arms, but she only cowers and turns herself into a small ball.

“I’m not the one who needs to worry. It hurt you,” I grind out.

“Its tail cut my ankle and my arms are sliced up. I tried to defend myself.” Her voice is reedy and small.

Even from here, I can see she’s ashen from the loss of blood. And she’s still worried about me.

Pride filters through me. Yes, she did her best.

“Let me help you. It’s going to be okay,” I soothe.

“It hurts.” She cries, and the slight movement has fresh blood dripping from her wounds. “Everything hurts.”

“I’m going to make it better, little human.”

She’s immobile when I bend to take her in my arms. Drawing her up, I head back to the cabin , limping slightly.

I'm going to make it all better.

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Chapter

Twenty-Three

Erin

I slowly swim up through unconsciousness yet again, although I don't want to actually wake up this time. Not when I know what's waiting for me.

Fear, uncertainty, life or death a knife edge away from each other.

But my body is bound, unable to move, and oddly warm. My fingers twitch, and the soft surface beneath my fingers...that's fur.

I'm inside the cabin again.

I come to wrapped in cloth—and he said he had no bandages or gauze—opening my eyes to see the fireplace back to a dull roar and soft atmospheric music wafting from the radio. It takes a long moment for my mind to put the pieces together.

I was here, with Syros, tending to his wounds when the creature attacked again. This time, the fight was nothing but a blur, and I was in the middle of it, struggling to free myself, struggling to survive.

Then Syros—

He must have saved me because I'm here and I'm alive.

Carefully, I lift my hand to my face, staring at the bandages covering me, made from the cloths he used to wash me in the bath.

Syros stares at the radio with a distant expression on his skull face. Lost in thought. How do I know that ?

He hovers over it, his arms loose at his side.

I must make a sound because, once he sees me awake, he hurries over.

“Erin. Are you all right?”

Yes. No . I’m not exactly sure.

He turned on the radio for me, made sure I was comfortable, nestled in the bed of furs.

Syros kneels at my side, his tongue flicking out to lick over his sharp canines, his eyes a dull red as he scans me.

“You will answer me.” He draws the pads of his fingers over my face to push back my hair, giving him a better view of my expressions, and I swallow hard.

“You’re going to fawn over me, now?” I ask.

“I’m making sure you’re okay. You came to help me. This is me returning the favor, as you seem so keen on reminding me.”

“Well, I wasn’t going to let you die protecting me.”

He bares his teeth in his version of a grin. “Are you trying to tell me we are even

now?" he asks.

Without waiting for me to answer, he gently pries at the edge of the cloth around my ankle, unwinding it to check the scratches underneath. The memory of the Ech's tail around my skin returns with startling clarity, the way it burned where it touched.

Rather than the massive burn I expect to see, there's only a thin red line marking the area.

I gawk at the healing that's already taken place. "What's going on?" I want to know. "How have my wounds healed this fast?"

I glance up sharply at his chest and see the exact same thing. The deep gouges carved into him from the Ech's claws have healed to the point where only missing fur and pink skin mark where the wounds were.

"How is this possible?"

"I thought about what you said, a healing salve. Truthfully, I didn't know if it would work. I mixed some herbs with the gollilock plant and cooked them into a paste. It appears to have been a success."

I stare up at him in awe. "You did all that... for me?"

He's silent for a long moment before answering, "I didn't want you to be in pain."

Warmth spreading through my chest, I sit up straight, surprised to find I'm not as dizzy as I expected to be. I work my wrists in circles. No aches there, either.

"It sped up the healing, as long as the wound wasn't too bad. I used it on you and on myself," he says. "You were right."

I stare up at him, my attention focused on his chest. Those wounds certainly looked bad when I was cleaning them out. Yet they might as well have been scratches for all the evidence left behind.

The longer I'm awake, the better I feel.

It's the strangest sensation and, with Syros watching me, I drag myself to my feet.

The fur covering my lap falls away as I twist my arms and legs like there are kinks to work out, only there aren't—I'm stronger, faster.

"Some miracle ointment," I mutter.

A miracle in more ways than one. I feel brand new. The adrenaline in my veins buzzes and fills me with electricity.

"Oh wow." I don't mean to say the words out loud, but they somehow slip out of me, my excitement evident. "This stuff is like a drug."

I've never been one to try any of those things, but there are always moments in a person's life where it feels better to drink the anxiety away than deal with worry. I definitely fell into a little bit of a hole after my dad died and the clerks at the liquor store one block over began to greet me by name. A bottle of wine every couple of days made the pain take a backseat.

That's no way to go through life, though. After about a month of losing myself to the numbness, I got my act together, and got back to work, using the money from my inheritance to fuel my investigations.

Whatever plant Syros used, this is way better than any kind of artificial high.

“I’m sure it is having a different effect on you as a human,” he says, “but I’m pleased to see it is still speeding up your healing.”

Syros watches me, crouched over the pile of furs.

I spread my arms out to the side and spin in a circle, sucking in breath of air that reaches the bottom of my lungs.

I’m rejuvenated. There’s no other word for it.

This is the best I’ve felt in too long to remember, and I don’t want it to change anytime soon. There’s a certain wall of numbness between me and the fear, the underlying sensation that seems like it dogs my very movement since I got out of the car on the solstice.

When I finally slow, I lock eyes with Syros, finding him watching me.

It’s odd how I’ve gotten used to the changes in expressions although his face is a skull. There can’t be any real change but, for some reason, I’m adept at knowing what he’s feeling or thinking.

“It is different to see you this way,” he admits in a low, rough tone.

I cock my head to the side and stare right back at him. “What way?”

I’ll blame it on the effects of whatever he gave me, but even the fear is out of my reach. He stepped in to save me. The same way I charged into the fight to save him. Maybe it puts us on even footing where I can start trusting him when he says he will protect me.

I better be able to trust him .

I've fucked him twice.

"Unbridled," he answers. "Full of joy. There is sorry little of it in this world."

"What happened?" Although my body is lit from the side, I settle in front of him, cross-legged on the floor.

I need to take it easy. Just because I feel better doesn't mean I need to dance and jump and overtax my already exhausted body. It's asking for trouble when I've already found enough of it. Had it dropped right in my lap.

"To my world?" Syros clarifies. He sucks in a breath and holds it in his body, hunched forward. "Long ago, it was a different place. The Grim fought over territories and food, but when the Echs arrived, our resources dwindled. They've destroyed everything, choking the life out of our world. We tried to fight back, but fighting an invisible enemy is a losing battle."

I listen, perfectly still, enrapt in his words.

"When food became scarce, we searched farther, traveled to unknown regions. That was when we discovered the portals that led to your world. There, we found food to survive, but it was not enough. It is never enough. There are too many creatures fighting to survive."

"But it seems like the forest here is endless." I cock my head, my brows furrowing together. "Besides the Ech... I haven't seen anything else alive."

There aren't even birds here.

"Yes, that is what happens when we fight for resources. The strong survive, but there is still not enough food to build back our numbers."

He grunts, the red of his glowing eyes banked for a moment, like he's blinked.

"It sounds like a terribly lonely existence." I glance around at the trinkets on his shelves, so many of them.

There has to be something here I can use to create a bridge between our worlds, but it gets me thinking—his collection is extensive. If the portal only opens twice a year, how many trips has Syros taken?

At this point, he's probably been at it for hundreds of years.

Which is crazy.

I shake my head, the thought staying lodged inside, and once its roots have grown, I know how difficult it will be to move past it.

"It can be lonely," he admits. "Grim are solitary creatures. My kind gives birth to only one offspring at a time, and our females can go hundreds of years between births."

I chew on the corner of my mouth. "Haven't you ever heard of strength in numbers? You'd be able to gather more and share it between you. You'd be able to fight the Echs—"

"That is not our nature. It is not the way we are...what's the human term...hardwired?" Syros huffs out a laugh. "I heard someone use it once."

A grin breaks out across my face. "You used it correctly, too."

It's impossible not to smile at him. Not when he is genuinely sharing information without hesitation. My fingers twitch, my fervent wish for a pad and pen or even my

cell to make a voice recording doubling with every passing second.

This is information other living humans have never heard before.

The life-changing kind.

If I ever make it out of here, no one will ever believe me when I publish this story. They'll think I've lost my marbles, that I made it all up.

They'll think I'm insane.

"I like telling you about me and my life, my history," Syros continues. Hesitantly, like he's afraid of being truthful. Or maybe it's just as hard for him as it is for anyone else to share his emotions. "I like it when you ask me questions."

"None of which would have happened if you'd eaten me," I joke.

He flashes his teeth in his version of a smile, and a deep chuckle shakes his chest. "You make a good point."

Silence falls between us, and I shift on the floor. I open my mouth to speak again, but he beats me to it.

"I want to know about you, too," he says.

My eyes widen. "About... me?"

What could he possibly want to know about me?

"Yes," he says slowly, pausing to consider his next words. "You are not like other humans. What were you doing in the woods the night I found you?" His voice

prickles over my skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake. I recall standing in front of the portal, the blinding light rippling like an electric current. The moment I realized my life had changed forever. “Very few of your kind dare approach the portal, and even through your fear, I could sense your curiosity. What were you doing?”

Would he believe me if I told him that I was hunting him on the solstice? That I’d spent so much time trying to find him, and then stupidly stepped into the woods. Is it worth trying to explain a blog or the Internet to Syros? I nearly laugh at the thought.

It takes a long moment for me to realize he’s waiting on my response.

“I was... looking for you. I wanted to find a Grim.” The words fall out of my mouth, and my gaze slowly treks to his glowing red eyes. He stares in silence, unmoving, as though waiting for an explanation. I huff out a deep breath. “In my world, I’m what they call a paranormal investigator. I try to find explanations for the unexplainable. I hunt monsters, ghosts, or anything mysterious.”

He tilts his head to the side, and I can only imagine his confusion. “What did you plan to do after you found me? You had no weapons, so I assume you weren’t there to kill me.”

Images of my name in news articles flash through my mind, and I chuckle. It all seems a little silly now that I’ve faced death so many times in the last few days.

“I wanted to share you with the world,” I say, forcing a smile. “I wanted to prove that you exist, that all the stories I’ve heard were true.”

He nods his skull up and down, absorbing the information. I mentally trace the sharp cut of his jawbone, my eyes trailing over his enormous canines.

“What do they say about me?” he asks, his voice lower. “That I’m a blood-thirsty

beast? That I kill mercilessly?”

I swallow over the lump forming in my throat. I’ve heard countless stories about the Grim, and while they’ve all checked out so far, they also lacked some crucial information that I’ve come to learn. Yes, the Grim kills people every Solstice. Yes, he’s a blood-thirsty beast.

But... he’s so much more .

He’s intelligent, and his collection of human belongings is a testament to his quest for knowledge. He’s powerful—there’s no doubt about that. He’s fierce, protective, caring. Even though he kidnapped me and planned to eat me, he also saved me. If he didn’t have to go to Earth to find food, if he wasn’t desperate due to his lack of resources, I doubt he’d even hunt humans. He does what he has to in order to survive...

“Your silence is enough of an answer,” he says with a dry chuckle that sounds more like a growl.

“People fear what they don’t know, what they don’t understand,” I respond softly. “But if they knew what I know, if they could see what I see...” I swallow again, my mouth suddenly impossibly dry. “They would feel differently.”

Heat prickles across my cheeks at the admission, and another beat of silence passes between us. I take the moment to admire the details of his haunting face again. My gaze dips to his muscular frame, to the swell of his biceps, his razor-sharp claws, before climbing back up again. They land on his mouth again, and my stomach flutters.

How would it feel to kiss him? The thought catches me off guard, and the butterflies in my gut turn into knots as my thoughts run wild. How would it feel to press my

mouth to his and feel the swipe of his tongue against mine? He doesn't have lips, so it's impossible for him to kiss me back, but I can't help but wonder how it would feel.

Would he like it? Would I?

I'm still working up the nerve to move closer when his eyes snap to mine, and I freeze. Even without facial expressions, I can almost see the wheels turning behind his eyes as he watches me, his glowing sockets lingering on me.

"I do not want to lose you." His words hit me like a brick wall, and my breaths stutter.

He stands, straight and tall, towering over me, and extends a hand down to me on the floor. More heat spreads over my face, creeping down my neck, and I allow him to pull me to my feet. His rough hands dip over my shoulder, brushing down my arms, before he tugs me close. I slam into his muscular torso, craning my neck to stare up and meet his gaze.

"There is something about you, Erin," he goes on, a soft rumble rolling in his chest. "You are stubborn and breakable and you infuriate me, but the more time we spend together, the less I care about my hunger and the more I want to keep you alive."

The pressure in my chest intensifies. My lungs constrict and my heart beats faster in an effort to reach him.

I've never felt this way before, not about a human man in connection to romance.

Is that what we have? Is this a romance?

How is it even possible?

I only know I feel the same way he does; I wouldn't have jumped into danger to help him otherwise.

“Syros—” My voice catches and I swallow hard. “I have no idea how to describe it, either, but... it's strong. Whatever it is.”

He growls, and I feel the scratchiness of the sound inside my body. It travels in a wave down to my core, and my pussy pulses, letting me know exactly what she wants.

This time, I lift on the tips of my toes and reach up to wrap my hands behind his thick, muscular neck. I tug gently, guiding his skull down to meet my face, and press my lips against the tip of his snout. The bone is cool against the heat of my lips, and little bolts of electricity zip through me at the contact.

He might not be able to kiss me back, but this is the only way I know to show him the feelings I'm unable to speak.

I want him.

I know that much.

I want this monster more than I've wanted anyone else in my life, and it only takes one look, one touch, to light me on fire. My body craves him.

I'm not sure it's wrong anymore, but I do know I can't keep my hands off of him.

Maybe there's something special in his cum that makes me addicted to him. For all I know, that's exactly what this is. But the more he touches me, the more I want to figure out what exactly has started between us and what my own feelings are.

I have a million questions for him, and each one is harder to hold onto as his hand slides down my back, over the curve of my ass.

Who taught him to speak? Is it a quality shared by all Grim? What other creatures are in this world and how have the Grim survived this long when they have no familial unit or community to support them?

Does it really matter, though?

He tugs me against his chest and hikes me up to bring us face to face, my arms wrapping automatically around the base of his neck, tangling with his thick fur.

None of the questions churning in my mind matter, not really, because I'll be going home soon.

After that, I'll never see him again.

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Chapter

Twenty-Four

Syros

She is a dream made of flesh. A vision beyond anything I could have imagined.

Never did I think I would find another being who understands me and fits together with me the way she does, but here she is. Despite our size difference, when my cock is buried inside of her, the rest of the world fades away into nothingness. When she looks at me, I feel seen and understood in a way I've never known before. I feel... wanted.

Erin.

Every thought of her causes a warmth in my chest that spreads out through my body the longer she lingers in my thoughts. My pet. My human.

She's mine, and nothing can ever change that. No Ech, no Grim, no power that exists in this realm.

No one would ever believe the way she has transfixed me, how desperate I've become to keep her by my side, but it is not for them to understand.

What we have is special, unique. I might be the first Grim to ever keep a human for themselves, and I could be the last, but I cannot deny myself that which overrules my

hunger. She calls to the most primal parts of me, the most basic part of my nature. She is what I want, what I need.

Erin presses her lips against my maw again, and heat seeps into my fleshless bone. It swells, sinking lower, as she repeats the motion.

A growl vibrates up my throat as desire washed through me. “What are you doing?”

“I’m kissing you,” she says softly, pulling back just enough to meet my gaze before trailing her lips farther up my jaw.

It feels...nice. Her lips are soft, and the way she presses them to my skull, around each canine and along my lower jaw, sends tingles through me. My cock twitches in response.

My tongue darts out to taste her, painting a lick over the seam of her lips. With a sigh, Erin opens her mouth, tilting her head back to give me access to her mouth.

Following her lead, I wrap my tongue around hers, twining them together. I brush fluttering licks along her tongue, the roof of her mouth, along the inside of her teeth.

Erin groans, and her eyes flutter closed, her lashes dark against her cheeks. She remains open for me, exactly the way I want her.

The way I need her.

I tug her closer, my hands slipping from her waist to the curve of her ass. I massage the softness there, working her, kneading her, until she is pliant and moldable. She doesn’t shy away from my claws any longer.

If anything, she leans into me, enjoying the flash of pain along with her pleasure.

I scratch her skin, but not hard enough to scar her.

“I like this,” I say when I’ve pulled back enough to speak. “I like when you kiss me.”

I don’t have lips to press against her tender flesh the way she kisses me, but I drop my lower jaw as though I might bite her head off. I plan on nibbling her everywhere.

Keeping her close, I maneuver us to the fire, lifting her slightly and holding her against me. With my foot, I draw over one of the furs and set her down on it.

Even then, I don’t let her go.

I keep her close, reveling in the feel of her body close to mine. Nothing else matters. A thousand Echs could be on their way right now, ready to advance their fallen brethren, and it wouldn’t matter. The world outside fades away, my hunger diminishes to a barely noticeable twinge in my gut, and everything—for the moment—is perfect.

As long as she doesn’t stop touching me.

Her palms are soft on either side of my skull, the pads of her fingers brushing delicately over the bone. I drop down to my knees and bring Erin with me, her grip gliding higher to the base of my horns.

“Can you feel this?” she asks, her eyes wide and full of intrigue.

Pleasure spirals through me, and I swallow back an unseemly moan. “I feel everything.”

She works the base of my horns, up to the first point and back down again, memorizing the curves and swirls of them.

The sensation is almost as good as my own hand wrapped around my cock, but better, because I am not doing it to myself. It is all Erin. She has bewitched me.

What would I not do for this little human?

I pause, forcing myself to keep still while she explores me.

“They aren’t the same texture as antelope or buffalo,” she comments in an undertone. “I’m not sure what they are. The exterior of your horns are almost smooth, velvety but...not.”

It’s the first time she’s felt comfortable enough to touch me this way. Before, it’s always been me initiating and taking the lead, even when she was telling me no.

She wanted me then, no matter her protests.

That hasn’t changed.

Now, she is curious and allows her desire to lead her. I wonder what else she might do. If she might mount me and appear herself on my cock while I watch. If she’d be willing to get on her knees and let me fuck her pretty little mouth until tears fall from her eyes.

“Where do you want me to touch you, Syros?” She drags her tongue along my jaw and meets my eyes.

“Anywhere you want,” I manage to get out, groaning. “As long as you keep touching me.”

A pause, and then, “Okay.”

She's not sure of herself, yet her tactile exploration does not falter.

It's work to allow her the slow and torturous exploration of my body. She starts with my skull, drawing her soft fingers along the bones and the bottom of my eye sockets. Along my horns from base to tip and then down my sinewy neck to my shoulders. The juncture where the skull meets fur.

I growl, and she stills, her gaze lifting to mine. "Am I hurting you?" she asks.

"The opposite, little human."

It feels too good to put into words. Never before has anyone, human or Grim, done such a thorough job of seeing me. My cock aches for attention.

What does Erin think?

What sort of ideas form inside her mind, what machinations?

What will she do with her new knowledge?

We lie facing each other, and from this position, the height difference between us is not as noticeable. The more she touches me, the harder my cock grows, until I'm aching to bury myself inside her tight little cunt.

To lose myself in the sensations of her.

Her scent blossoms into something deeper and headier, that mixture of floral and mint I find absolutely intoxicating, along with the musk of her arousal.

I love the way her wetness tastes on my tongue.

If I could live on that alone, I might be able to survive for so much longer.

She drags her nails down my chest toward my hips and the curve of my erection. “You’re huge.”

“And terrifying,” I add.

Much to my surprise, she laughs and shakes her head. “You aren’t as scary as you think you are. At least, not to me.”

“Then, I must try harder. You’re supposed to say I’m the stuff of nightmares”

Her breath hitches in her chest. “Then, why do you make me so wet?”

I draw my hand toward the juncture between her thighs and feel her desire through the thin material of her pants. “You are always dripping for me. It is one of the things I like most about you.”

Erin continues her tender exploration of my body, teasing me with it, every flick of her fingers across my fur and skin. Finally, she sighs and wraps both hands around my cock, starting at the base and slowly sliding her fingers upward.

My heart contracts and stops beating before resuming its frantic and uneven pace.

I clamp down on my back molars to keep from exploding much too soon. She is unskilled with her hands, at least, for someone of my size.

But everything she does makes me want her more.

She glides her palms along the ridge of my hardness to the underside of the head before smearing my precum across the length.

I forget how to breathe. How to do anything other than lose myself to the sensation of having her hands on me.

“Harder,” I rasp, still wanting her lead. I fight the urge to grab her and fuck her until she’s full of my seed. “Touch me harder.”

She increases the pressure, working my shaft with both hands, picking up the pace until my hips piston on their own accord. Like they are desperate to reach her.

Then her mouth is on my skull again and she is doing the kissing thing like she can’t help herself, like she is desperate for more closeness.

I wish I could kiss her back. Never before have I wanted features like a human, because they are small, breakable. Too delicate for their own good.

But at that moment, I would give anything for lips like hers, to use them on her in a different way.

Unable to take it any longer, I roll Erin onto her back, covering her body with mine and burrowing my snout against her neck. I grab her pants and drag them down to her ankles before my claws accidentally shred through the material.

They were practically rags to begin with, after our first stint in the forest.

Now they'll be thrown into the fire.

Once I have had my fill of her.

She squeaks, yet the moment I press the pad of my thumb to her pussy, the sound drops to a low, guttural moan.

“I will find you new clothes,” I assure her. “Whatever you want, it’s yours.”

I take one hard nipple between my teeth through her shirt, rolling the nub between my canines, until Erin gasps. Then she moans, the sound a purr.

“I want you. I want you to fill me up,” she admits, her voice a desperate pant. “To fuck me so hard I see stars and my body is imprinted with you. The way you always do.”

Her hips bow up to meet mine, and she grinds against me, reaching up to take hold of my horns as I push her into the fur. She is completely at my mercy here and yet...

I’m at hers, too.

“I want more, I want everything, Syros.”

It is impossible for me not to give her what she wants. Especially when her tone deepens to a dark rasp I feel inside my bones.

“I want you to taste every inch of me,” she whimpers, pulling her shirt off and exposing her breasts.

They bounce delightfully, her areolas pink and both nipples pebbled.

My little human has gotten bolder and more demanding.

Who am I to say no to her?

I press my knuckle against her pussy, until she arches up to get me notched where she needs, her legs on either side of my hips and her muscles twitching. She whimpers again, and the sound is too much for me to bear. Especially when she’s panting, and

her hands are digging into me.

Her pussy clenches and liquid desire pools on the floor beneath her.

I push her toward her release, increasing the speed, touching her where I know she needs to be touched until heat flushes her skin.

I've seen her naked before but now, bathed in firelight, she's exquisite.

She squirms against me, begging for more under her breath, and freezes right before she explodes. Her scent fills the cabin along with the heady undertone of her desire, and my body is aching.

There is nothing more delicious than the taste of the cream between her legs. My cock hardens to the point of agony. I know the only relief I'll find is buried inside her tight little pussy.

Her breathing turns ragged, and the small sounds in the back of her throat are higher now. Her body tightens, and I feel her release against my knuckles, a liquid rush of pleasure.

"I love the way your body responds to me," I murmur.

"And I love it when you fuck me." She shudders against me, her eyes dark and wide.

Her body is alive for me.

I take my cock in my paw and stroke it once, but I need no sort of priming. Not when her pink pussy lips beckon me so sweetly.

One hand holds my weight off of her and I notch the head of my cock at her entrance,

rubbing it gently up and down until it's Erin who growls.

"You're teasing me," she whimpers.

"No, I'm not. I'm savoring you."

"Where is the naughty Grim who takes what he wants whether I want it or not?" she teases, her fingers fluttering around my eye sockets.

"He is still here. And he's learning how to go easy."

The head of my cock fits inside of her, and I reach for her leg, lifting it up to allow me to go deeper. Slowly, I push into her clenching pussy, deeper and deeper until I am fully sheathed inside of her.

"You are mine."

My tone is darker than normal, gravely, and Erin shivers.

I increase my speed until her skin blushes with heat and she is twitching beneath me.

"Yes, please." She gasps, moaning with every thrust. "More, please. Please, go faster, Syros."

I love her this way. Begging for me. Fitting around me so perfectly. I don't want to see her reaction before I grab her thigh again and yank her to me.

Erin gasps, her hips undulating, staring up at me as though she can't look away.

"Your cunt is perfect." I shudder violently, much too close to my own orgasm. "You are ruined for anyone else."

She grips me hard to stay steady, but there is no stopping us. Not when I push into her forcefully, making her stretch for my size, her body shaking. Straining to hold all of me.

Her inner muscles clamp down around me, increasing the pressure until everything inside me pulsates and threatens to come undone.

My breathing goes shallow as Erin pulls me down, all of my weight, her hands buried in the fur at my shoulders. Her knees are bent, and I cup the sides of her ass.

Pulling back just enough to shove inside again. Loving the way her breathing hitches at the pressure.

She's pleading for more, clinging to me, and my body quakes.

"I want you. I want all of you."

"Then fucking take it," I reply to her demand.

She's like wildfire beneath me, her eyes flashing as I push into her violently.

Her back arches and she grips me, her thighs twitching.

Harder and harder.

Something snaps inside of me.

Erin is like an animal in heat, her entire body shivering.

"Your cunt will never belong to anyone else." I need to hear her say it.

“It’s yours,” she answers breathlessly.

“Do you love it when I fuck your dripping pussy with my knot?”

“Yes!” She cries out and locks her ankles behind me. “Yes!”

Her nails are blunt against my chest as I drive upward and make her scream.

I can’t take it anymore. I increase the speed, fucking her until tears drip from her eyes and I might break down at any moment. My cock gives a pulsing swell and I knot, spilling into her.

Erin stops breathing as I spurt inside her, filling her, making her mine in an undeniable way. I rock my hips through the orgasm and she cries out when the wide flare of my knot fills her up. Filling her with my seed.

When I’m spent, my knot still locked inside of her, I lean up to find Erin staring at me. She’s sucking in greedy lungfuls of air with her heartbeat racing, her eyes alight with something primal.

She may not be my mate—at least, not in the way our kind identifies mates—but one thing is certain: I belong to her, more than I’ve ever belonged anywhere else.

I am at her mercy.

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Chapter

Twenty-Five

Syros

Erin fits neatly in my arms, nestled against the crook of my shoulder with her head on my chest. She bobs slightly with the rise and fall of my chest.

Her yawn is adorable.

I'm not sure how things shifted between us, or when it began, but I am powerless against her charm. Against her sweetness and her strength. She may be small, but Erin is mighty, and the thought of losing her now, to any of the myriad of dangers around us, fills my heart with an unbreakable chill.

"Syros." She stops, biting off the end of my name and shifting back to look at me. "I want to talk to you about something."

She is naked, the way she should always be.

If I had my way, she'd stay naked, my seed dripping down her thighs constantly, smelling of me.

Only now, her lips are pressed together in a thin line, her eyes narrowed, and a small pit of apprehension opens up underneath me.

I sweep her hair away from her face with my claw. “What’s the matter?”

“I have to tell you—” She is hesitating, her cheeks flushed but the rest of her face pale. She’s hiding something. “When you were outside, I fiddled with the radio again.”

“You found more music?” I ask, confusion clear in my tone.

Do I want to know this? Whatever it is, she feels the need to speak about it. How important could it really be?

“No.” She pauses again, chewing the corner of her mouth. “I’m not sure how it happened, but I actually found a connection. Between this world and mine. I spoke to the man who was with me on the solstice, Tyler, through the radio. I was able to talk to him.”

Rage floods my system and lights every nerve on fire.

I clench her to me, my grip going tight enough to squeeze the air out of her, and it’s impossible to let loose. Not when I feel as though I might explode at any second.

“Who is Tyler?” I somehow manage to get the words out.

No other man will have her.

Her cunt has already conformed to me and my knot. The thought of any other man taking her in the same way, coming inside of her—

Erin is shaking. If I don’t calm down, I’ll terrify her, and erase any sort of progress we have made between us. But the thought of her with anyone else, another lover knowing her body and tasting her the way I’ve tasted her, is unimaginable.

“Tyler is a college student who agreed to help me locate the Grim,” Erin explains. Her body may tremble, but her voice remains calm and composed. “He was the only person in town willing to talk to me about the lore and the disappearances that occur with the solstices. He was with me in the car the night you came through. He’s been looking for me.”

If I ever see this Tyler, I’ll tear him apart limb from limb while he’s still alive. I will swallow over his screams and digest them.

I’ll make sure he never touches Erin again. I am the only one who can touch her this way.

She’s mine. She belongs to me. Nothing and no one else will ever experience the softness of her body except for me.

“Tyler is the closest thing I’ve ever had to an assistant,” Erin is saying, oblivious to my mental imagery of death and torture. “It’s a miracle we found the same signal and managed to speak to each other. He’s the one you heard me talking to the other night.”

“And you want to return to this Tyler?” Every word feels like acid, burning up my throat, acrid as they roll off my tongue. “To let him fuck you?”

I jerk in surprise when Erin bursts out laughing. “Fuck him?” she repeats. “Absolutely not! He’s a college student and so not my type. He’s basically a child.”

My anger banks as quickly as it formed. She doesn’t want to leave me for another man. Or so I think, until she says—

“We were trying to figure out a way to get me home.”

Her voice drops, and along with the statement, a yawning emptiness in my head blots out everything else.

Home.

She is home.

There is no going back from what we've done, or how far we've come together.

"I know it sounds crazy, but if we managed to communicate with each other, then I believe there's a way to form a bridge between our worlds using the same signal." Her words come out in a rush. "I think I can build a machine to amplify the signal with some of the items you have on your shelves. I just—with the Ech and everything—I never had a chance to actually look."

"You want to leave me."

Speaking it out loud sends a spike of pain through my chest. The anger has shifted to hurt at the thought of her leaving. It's the last thing I want, despite the shortness of our time together.

I dread it. Going back to the loneliness, the isolation and the unquenchable hunger.

None of those things exist when I'm with Erin.

"It's not that simple, Syros," she whispers. "What we have is amazing, truly, but... I don't belong here. It's too dangerous; I can't survive here."

"I can protect you," I growl out. How can she not see that? I will go to any lengths, do whatever it takes, to keep her safe in my world. "With your ability to see the Ech and my strength, no one will ever hurt you again. You will be safe."

A pained smile curls the corners of her mouth, but it quickly disappears. “It’s not just that, Syros. I-I belong on Earth. I have a life and a job and... I want to go home.”

My chest constricts, like all the air has been ripped from my lungs, and every heartbeat after is a painful throb behind my ribs.

She wants to go home.

She wants to leave me.

The reality is hard to swallow, but despite the pain, I understand. She is right, this world isn’t safe for her. It’s dark and menacing and dangerous, and she is delicate. I would do anything to keep her safe, give my life to protect her, but would it ever be enough? She already almost died once. Who is to say it won’t happen again?

I take a deep breath to clear my thoughts, straining to keep my hold on her gentle. I say nothing as I gather her to my chest, absorbing the feel of her body on mine.

I could always keep her here anyway, regardless of her desires. I could destroy her precious radio so she can never contact her world again. I could tie her up and force her to stay, but... is that really what I want?

What kind of life will she be able to have when she is trapped inside the cabin? I’ve already seen the wildness in her; She deserves much more than a life of imprisonment. Not to mention, she would hate me. She would loathe me for keeping her trapped, despite how close we’ve grown since I brought her through the portal.

Part of me doesn’t care. She can hate me all she wants, but I’ll have the one thing I need more than anything else: her.

Erin is the only thing I need to be happy, to survive in this bleak wasteland of a

world.

However, the other part of me, the part that has my chest throbbing with an unfamiliar ache, doesn't want her to hate me. It wants to provide for her, whatever she needs.

And if what she needs is not me...

I'm silent for a long stretch of time.

"Will going home make you happy?" I finally ask, the words burning up my throat. "Will being far away from me, never seeing me again, satisfy you?"

Her mouth falls open, but no words escape. They don't have to. Her answer shines clearly in her eyes, and simultaneously shreds through me like a pair of claws.

She doesn't want me the way I want her; She doesn't want me enough to stay.

And I want her too much to keep her against her will.

"If you want to leave, then I will help you," I agree, forcing the words out despite the lump in my throat. "Whatever you need, if it is within my power, I will find a way to get it for you."

Erin pushes up onto her elbows to stare down at me, a smile brightening her features. "Really?"

"Yes, little human." I nod. "Name it, and it is yours."

I force my sadness to the side when she kisses my snout.

Whatever it takes to protect her, I will do it, even if it kills me.

I'll do anything for her.

Erin falls asleep in my arms, and my heart thuds out a hollow beat.

Talking faded and we simply held each other in front of the fire until her breathing evened out and her eyelids fluttered shut.

Keeping her cuddled close, I shift us both to the bed of pelts, drawing the warmth around her to ensure she's comfortable. She looks even more fragile wrapped in the thick furs, her pale skin nearly shining in the dim light. With one of my claws, I tuck a strand of silver hair behind her ear.

She wants to go home. The reminder stabs me in the chest as I watch her, wondering how many more moments we will have like this before she is gone forever.

Many things have changed from days ago. For the first time in my life, I'm afraid—afraid of losing her, afraid of going back to my old existence—and the realization rocks me to my core.

I don't want her to leave, and I would do anything to get her to stay.

Even though this world is not hers, and every part of it is designed to tear her fragile human flesh to pieces, I want her.

To be with me.

To want to be with me.

I curl my body around hers, tugging her ass until she is fit snugly against my front,

and listen to the sound of her slight snores. For such a tiny person, she makes a whole lot of noise, and this is something I want to get used to. Something I feel I will miss the moment she leaves, despite the chaos she brought to my existence.

We are from two different worlds and cannot exist together.

It's impossible.

Right?

It feels less like the truth and more like a convenient excuse as to why helping her escape is the right thing to do when it goes against my every natural instinct. Yet I care about her too much to risk her life and make her stay with me. No matter what I want.

I draw in a breath colored with her scent, gollilock and flowers and mint, the combination unique to her.

When had I changed?

At some point I went from being the blood-thirsty, ravenous beast I'd been for so long to something more. Aside from the familiar hovel around me, I barely recognize my life. Life as I know it is different, and I am different.

And it's all because of Erin.

A growl rumbles in my chest as I—once again—run through the events that led me here.

How much easier would it have been to simply eat her when I first found her in the woods and be done with it? Yet all this feels like it happened for a reason. Like it was

supposed to happen. Like something bigger than us, some cosmic force, made sure our paths crossed that night, manipulated the circumstances to bring us together, all so that I could meet Erin.

Our threads of fate are woven together, but it doesn't matter.

I have to let her go.

As much as I want to keep her here with me, to protect her, to use her, letting her go is the right thing to do. For her. It's the only way I can completely ensure her safety, to keep her happy.

Keeping her as a pet was always a silly dream. And keeping her as more than a pet? As a... partner?

It's impossible.

There is no universe that exists where the two of us can pursue whatever this is bubbling between us, to see where it leads. She certainly cannot bear me offspring. Our blood is likely incompatible, and if a miracle did occur, a Grim child would shred her from the inside before birth. It would never work.

So, I'll help her enhance the radio, build whatever she needs to try and open a portal. Whatever she believes she needs in order to get home, even if I hold my breath and hope for her failure the entire time. If she cannot open a portal, she will have to stay with me, but I have to help her try.

If she does manage to make a connection, to open a portal between our worlds, I will abandon this hovel and move far away. I will find another place to set up a life for myself and, that way, when the portal opens again, it will be nowhere near her. Then, hopefully, I'll be able to forget about Erin and the life that might have been between

us.

I grimace in the darkness.

I am nothing but a fool, a sentimental fool, and I halfway wonder if I've always been this way or if it is a change thanks solely to her. She's managed to get under my skin and alter me from the inside, without having to lift a finger.

Life will never be the same when she leaves and I'll make it work, somehow.

Erin shifts in her sleep, snoring, making a soft sound I can't stand because of how it makes me feel. This is ridiculous.

The thought of losing her is a crushing weight slowly splintering me into pieces.

My palm rests on her hip and I move it in small circles, massaging her until she lets out a small sigh. I need to feel her again. I need to feel something and make it last me for the rest of my immeasurably long existence.

Already, it feels like torment to imagine a world without her in it.

With most of her pants still in shreds, I hook my claw into the elastic of what's left at the top and give it a tug. It pulls away easily. The velvety glide of her skin against my callouses makes my cock painfully hard and sends a growl of longing through me.

She continues to snore softly as my hand dances over her skin, and my desire to taste her swells. I dip my head, poking my tongue out to paint long licks down her neck and over her chest. I go slow, keeping my movements soft, so as not to wake her. I want to revel in this moment, drinking her in, tasting her, touching her while she sleeps.

Gently, I nudge her thighs apart, exposing her already dripping center. The scent of her arousal blooms around us, and my mouth waters, saliva dripping from my tongue and peppering her chest. I wonder if I could taste her without waking her, to sink my tongue into her channel and feel her flex around me.

My cock throbs painfully as I crawl down her form, settling between her legs. I stare up at her sleeping face over the gentle curves of her body, waiting until I hear her soft snores to continue. When I'm sure I haven't woken her, I drag my tongue through her wet folds, lapping up the sweet taste of her arousal. My cock throbs, weeping precum onto the stone floor. My teeth brush against her skin as I work my tongue over her.

I move slowly, torturing myself in the process, as I taste every inch of her. I poke and prod at her channel, slipping my wet muscle inside her to brush against her walls, and a whine slips past her lips. I groan at the noise, desire ripping through me. My instincts urge me to take her, to claim her, to bury my cock inside her, and I will. But not yet. Not until I've savored the taste of her, committed it to memory, and felt her orgasm around my tongue while she slumbers.

It doesn't take long. After a few short minutes of massaging her with my tongue, she comes undone. Her muscles flex around me, choking my tongue while I continue to explore her depths, and a soft, prolonged moan dances up her throat.

After her climax subsides, I crawl back up her body and settle with my hips between hers, my cock painfully erect and eager to feel her wrapped around me. My cock is much larger than my tongue, so I doubt she'll be able to sleep through me fucking her even if I go slow, but I'm intent to try.

How will she react when she wakes up to find me inside of her? Will she be afraid? Will she urge me to go faster?

I notch the head of my cock at her opening and gently apply pressure until it slips

inside. She stretches around me, her pussy perfectly conforming to my shape, and I slowly bury myself deeper. Inch by agonizing inch.

I dip my head to brush my snout against the side of her neck, breathing in her essence as I slowly pull out and thrust forward again. A delicate whine passes her lips when I bury myself, deeper this time, inside of her, and her eyes flutter open.

“Syros...” Her voice is gentle, reverent like a prayer to a higher being.

“Shhh...” I hiss softly, pulling out and pressing into her again. Her walls flutter around my cock, her pussy milking me, begging for more. “I just want to feel you again. One more time, little human. I want to remember the feel of you long after you’re gone. Will you let me?”

She nods sleepily, and her eyes drift closed again. It takes every shred of my self control to maintain my excruciatingly slow, deliberate pace, but I manage. I take my time, licking and nipping carefully at her skin while I fill her with my cock.

This isn’t like the previous times my cock has been inside her, when I lost myself to my primal instincts and could only think about filling her with my seed. This is slower, more intimate, more meaningful. While I can’t put a name to it, I can feel it down to my marrow. The way she reacts, running her fingers gently over my skin, sighing with every touch tells me she feels the same way.

If she were my mate, this is how things would be all the time. Taking my time, savoring her, relishing in her touch.

However, seeing as she’s not—and can never be—my mate, it’s a bittersweet way to say goodbye.

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Chapter

Twenty-Six

Erin

This world has its wonders no matter what Syros says.

In the morning when the sun, or whatever passes for light here, rises over the tops of the trees, he heads out into the woods. He returns a short while later with a handful of some kind of plant, shredded greens with flecks of red mixed in, which he promptly sets in a pan over the fire.

After several minutes, a pleasant smell like frying cheese fills the interior of the cabin.

“Here,” he grunts when he realizes I’m awake. “This will help you.”

“What is it?” I wrinkle my nose at the wilted leaves on the makeshift plate, but my stomach grumbles. I’m starving.

“Just eat. There’s no reason for you to question my every move.”

I gulp down a retort. A wall has come between us no matter what has occurred physically.

Syros can hardly stand to look at me as he shoves the plate into my waiting hands and

returns to the fire.

He's distancing himself.

That much is clear.

Like whatever happened last night was the last time, the final experience, and now he wants to sever the connection.

Why does it make me want to cry?

There are no forks for eating utensils here. Once the plant cools enough for me to pick up without burning myself, I pinch off a bit and eat. The texture is similar to kale when it's sauteed, but the texture is less familiar, a little bitter and salty but delicious. The kind of thing I might devour in an entire sitting if I was snuggled on the couch watching one of my favorite movies.

The image forms in my head, of my living room back at home, the television playing Something's Gotta Give and a bowl of this stuff nestled in my lap. The blanket would be tucked around both of us.

Syros probably won't fit in the house, as the ceilings are low and his horns would carve grooves in the plaster.

The absurdity of the scene draws laughter out of me.

I'm the one going home, and he'll stay behind. It's not like he'll ever be able to fit in my world, anyway. Not looking the way he does.

People will see him and run screaming, thinking he's some kind of nightmare fuel made flesh, or worse. They'll hunt him down. They won't stop and get to know him

the way I have, they won't talk to him and actually hear his intelligent answers.

Have I even done such a thing?

The first few days of our acquaintance consisted of me running and him catching me, to some very sexy fun times afterward.

My cheeks flush, and I clear my throat before drawing another bite of whatever this is to my lips. "Is this what you eat when you can't get your fill of humans?" I ask him through a mouthful.

"It suffices, yes, but it isn't enough to fill me or to satiate my hunger completely."

See? I tell myself.

There is no way to make this work when I am literally his main food group. The sex isn't a good enough reason to keep me around.

Syros finishes off the rest of his breakfast while I clean my own plate, neither one of us willing to speak.

A heavy pall has fallen over the room and encapsulates us both. I'm not exactly sure why it sets my teeth on edge. I should be happy because, not only am I on the right track to get back to my world, but Syros has agreed to help me, rather than hinder me.

There is no more growling about how he's going to keep me forever.

My stomach gives a single, sorrowful flip.

Is that why I'm feeling a little weird about this? I settle back on the furs, adjusting my legs when my muscles start to tingle, my feet going to sleep.

Did I want him to fight a little harder to keep me? I shake my head because that's absolutely ludicrous. He's already fought against the Ech attack, and we barely made it out the other side.

I'd still be knocked on my ass or even dead from bleeding out if he hadn't done whatever magic shit with the plants.

"What do you need?" he blurts out. "To make your machine?"

The gruffness of his voice startles me, and I twitch, running a hand through my hair, wishing I had something to tie it back with while we work.

"I need to search your shelves to see what you have. And any tools will be helpful."

He cocks his head to the side and stares hard at me. "Tools?"

"You know, a screwdriver or needle nose pliers. Anything I can use to manipulate the pieces of whatever we find."

Despite my hesitation, a small glimmer of excitement brings a smile to my face. This is where I excel. I haven't been able to find much success with my paranormal blog—yet—but I've always been good at tinkering, taking things apart to see how they work and manipulating the pieces to make something new.

Here, at least, I'm confident.

I'm not sure if the machine I make will have the capacity to form a bridge solid enough for me to cross, but I know I'll do what it takes to try.

"Tell me what you need from me, and I will make sure you have it." Syros crosses the room to a pile of trinkets near the fireplace, bending to check it. After a few

moments, he turns, holding out a leather pouch and waiting for me to take it.

It's heavier than I expect, weighing several pounds despite its small size. I pluck apart the ties, prying open the sides, and see a neat row of screwdrivers lined up according to size.

"Is that what you need?" he asks.

Joy warms my heart when I lift my face to meet his. "You are full of surprises. You know that?"

I swear he's grinning at me. "I aim to please."

"I thought you aimed to eat," I joke.

He snorts, his version of a laugh. "That, too. Although I have done my share of devouring you. Today, we work." He spares a glance toward the curtain-covered entrance, and the sliver of sunlight filtering inside through the gap in the fabric.

"I, ah, need to turn on the radio and connect to Tyler, to tune in to the correct frequency."

Why does it fill me with embarrassment to admit it? Especially when I note the way Syros' red orbbed eyes begin to darken to the color they always turn when he's less than thrilled with something. Okay, correction. He's pissed.

His tongue flicks out to brush against his canines. "Fine." He bites out the word. "Although I make no promises that, once the connection is established, I won't eat this Tyler. I still haven't had my fill, and if the bridge works, I may have to take him in your place."

“I’m not sure if you’re joking or not.” But I’m gonna choose to look at it like a joke.

I break eye contact, my gut settling low and my chest constricting as I crouch closer to the radio, fiddling with the knobs until I find the right channel and the static fades.

“Hello? Tyler? Are you there?”

A yawn comes through loud and clear. “Erin? I’ve been up all night waiting to hear from you.”

A growl sounds from behind me, lifting the hair on the back of my arms and neck, and I don’t need to turn around to know Syros is pacing in front of the fireplace. I feel the heavy thuds of his feet as he stalks back and forth in the small space.

“Yeah, I’m sorry, I was busy,” I say, clearing my throat. Busy getting stuffed full of monster cock. “But I’m here now, and I’m going to start trying to boost the signal.”

“What do you need from me?” Tyler wants to know. “I’m ready to do whatever it takes to get you back.”

“Stay connected. I have help from my side.”

I have a half-baked plan already, though I’m still not sure it will be enough to create a bridge between our worlds. The extendable antenna on the radio isn’t nearly enough for the signal strength we need—I’ll need to make it longer somehow, a way to strengthen the radio waves. It wouldn’t hurt to relocate either, to search the surrounding area and see if there is a place where the signal is stronger than inside the cabin.

That means going outside, in the open.

Hopefully, Syros will be on board once I explain my plan. I need his help if I'm going to make this work.

Syros helps me get the things I need, moving whenever I ask him to grab something from his collection. A few pieces of scrap metal, a bit of aluminum foil, and a metal coil is what we come up with. It's not much, but it will have to do. He doesn't complain while we work, though he rarely speaks aside from a random comment here and there. Nothing deeper than surface level, nothing, nothing more than a few words.

After several hours, his distance starts to weigh on me, dragging my shoulders down despite my resolve to make this radio portal work. Tyler's voice accompanies us the whole time, filling the quiet gaps when silence settles between Syros and me, but it's not the same. It isn't just conversation I want; I want to talk to Syros, especially since our time together is growing more limited as the minutes pass.

My departure is impending; I can feel it in my gut.

Very soon, I will be face to face with my way back to Earth.

My fingers fly over the wiring that used to belong to an electric kettle. If my transmitter works, then we'll attempt to make the connection around midnight, the same time the original portal opens.

There is a lovely symmetry to the plan, but everything hinges on supposition, physics, and a whole lot of magic. I dare not lean into the small shred of hope too much in case this entire endeavor fails.

A clawed hand falls on my shoulder and grips it hard. "Erin, take a break," Syros grumbles. "You haven't moved in a very long time."

I shake my head, my eyes gritty and burning, my stomach flipping. “I need to get this done. Otherwise, we’re wasting daylight. And there’s no guarantee it will even work.”

“Erin? Who’s there with you? Who is that, really?” Tyler wants to know, his voice reedy and anxious.

Syros has never spoken close enough to the radio for his voice to transmit clearly. He reaches past me like he’s going to turn off the radio, but I grab him by the wrist to stop him.

“I am a little hungry and thirsty,” I admit, ignoring Tyler’s question.

He’ll be full of them once I get home, and there are some parts of my story I’m going to have to omit. Definitely the sex, because we don’t want Tyler turning his Cornholed by the Cryptid into a memoir. Maybe it should be Gagged by the Grim instead.

I can see it now.

But a large part of me doesn’t want the college student knowing about my connection to Syros, the lovely and insular relationship we’ve sort of established with each other. I’m protective over it, and over him.

“You have to talk to me. Are you sure you can trust whoever it is with you? I know you said you were in a safe place, but what happened to the Grim?” He groans in frustration.

Now I’m the one ready to turn off the radio, but it could be the hunger talking.

Syros releases my shoulder and holds out his hand, waiting for me to place mine in

his, and then he drags me to my feet. “Come. We’ll take a walk, and I’ll show you the stream, and my patch of plants.

My excitement spins up from where it’s been buried underneath the weight of tiredness and single-minded drive.

We move toward the door and rather away from Tyler’s squawked demands over the radio.

“Is it safe to go outside?” I want to know. “We’re not going to run into any more creatures like the Ech, are we?”

“We should be safe as long as we make the outing brief and you stay by my side. Always.”

It certainly makes a girl think when a man—monster—says those words to her. And right now, my mind is churning a thousand miles an hour as Syros leads the way out the door, holding the curtain open and waiting for me to pass over the threshold.

The sun overhead is duller than I thought, but compared to the comforting gloom inside the cabin it might as well be a blindingly bright day on a sandy beach.

I squint against the glare and shield my eyes with my free hand, the other still gripped tightly in Syros’ hold. It’s light enough for me to see the trees looming over the small cabin in their gnarled detail. The trunks are a strange gray color streaked through with black, and the leaves a dark green, nearly blue.

The sky is a darker version of our robin egg blue back home, and there are no clouds. At least, not from this vantage point.

I glance toward the area where the Ech dragged me and halfway expect to see a dead

body there.

“I took care of the body while you were healing. There are no spots of blood to draw any other predators to the area, either, and everything doused with more gollilock,” Syros explains.

“You were very busy.” The memory of pain constricts my throat, and the burning sensation travels down to my heart.

If Syros hadn’t pulled an extraordinary win out of a hat, I’d be dead. There is still so much about this place and these creatures that I don’t understand. Which is part of the reason why I need to get back home.

These are stories I need to tell, only this isn’t the right time to do it. Now, I need to focus on survival. And it is much harder to focus on it when I’m enjoying Syros and his company, knowing our time together is limited.

“The woods used to be filled with the sound of living creatures. They were noisy, exciting. Finding food never took much effort,” Syros explains.

“You’re old enough to remember those days. How long has it been since...” I hesitate to finish my question.

“I am much older than your kind. The life expectancy of the Grims extends for centuries.”

So not only am I fucking a monster, but one old enough to be my great great-great-what-have-you many times over. Syros is not the kind of partner you’d take home to meet your parents, although a strange voice in my head thinks my father might have liked him.

I must be starving. I'm lightheaded and going crazy.

Drawing in a deep breath, I hold it in my lungs, the quality of the air around us slightly sweet.

Yes, this is a special place, even though it's dying. And this is a special kind of creature walking next to me with his oddly graceful stride. Syros draws me to the left, the path beneath our feet soft and spongy.

The babble of a brook grows louder until the path splits, and ahead of us, a small sandy beach leads straight down to the water.

"I have my garden over here," Syros says, pointing. "It is not the correct sort of food to sustain my kind over long periods of time, but it does help in the interim between the solstices. Everything you see here is edible, I'd imagine, for human consumption."

I straighten, my shoulders thrown back. "You mean the stuff you've been feeding me might have killed me?"

"Erin, I told you the only way you were dying was by my hand, and I meant it literally. I would not waste your death by poisoning you."

I slap the side of his furry arm. "Stop joking."

Although he laughs again, he is definitely not joking.

The more time we spend outside, with the wilderness around us and the conversation flowing easily, the less concerned I am with the plan. Midnight is hours away from us.

I drink from Syros' cupped hands, the water clear and pure tasting. This is the kind of stuff companies would charge an arm and a leg for back home. How is it possible for this world to decline and yet the resources, like water, are still better quality than what I'm going back to?

The worry is a niggling sensation at the back of my brain through the rest of the day. Syros keeps our walk in the woods short, as promised, and hustles me back into the cabin to resume work once my stomach is full and I've done my business.

Away from his prying eyes, of course.

My pussy throbs and aches in the most delicious way from all our lovemaking. I'll definitely miss the way he makes me feel.

Not just my body, but the closeness when we're together and the way we talk. It's strange to think I had to survive everything I did in order to get to this place, and stranger yet to know this is one of the most genuine and real connections I've ever had.

I always thought there was something wrong with me. The relationships I've had with men in the past either never get off the ground or they end after a few months. I always claim I'm too busy to settle down, or that I get bored easily and they lack the capacity to stimulate me mentally.

Or maybe I've been waiting for something of this magnitude. This caliber. Maybe my entire life and every situation I've lived through has given me the perspective to appreciate what's right in front of me. And I'm willing to give it up .

I shut down that rain of thought.

Otherwise, I'll break my own heart, and I'm not willing to stop and look at it in those

terms.

I twist the final wire and stare at the product. The handheld device, when tuned into the frequency of the radio, should boost the signal to the point where the static solidifies into an honest to goodness rift.

Not so much a bridge as a way of penetrating through the walls of this world and mine. Hopefully the connection will be wide enough for a person to step through.

“You look pleased,” Syros admires.

“I’ve done everything I can and this is the final product.” I rear back proudly. “It’s one of my cleaner works, too. Compact and light and packs a punch.”

“Shall we test it?”

“What time is it?” I fire back.

“We do not keep track of those things here, but judging from the slant of the sun in the sky, then I’d say it is approaching twilight,” Syros says.

Twilight . That means we still have several hours until the main event. AKA the biggest win of my career if this machine actually works the way I want it to.

“How should we test it?” he asks, the low growl back in his voice.

“Let’s go outside, just in case it explodes.”

“Would it be such a great loss if the hovel evaporated?” Syros follows me to the door, moving lightly, his frame crouched over me in a protective shield. “Although, you hate it when I call it that.”

“Yes,” I say simply. “Because it’s your home.”

“But is it really such a home if you aren’t here?” He asks the question so casually that I have to do a double take. I freeze, trying to wrap my mind around his words, but I can’t seem to force enough air into my lungs.

My throat tightens, and I fight for the words to say, but he leads the way out of the cabin without another word.

Chapter

Twenty-Seven

Erin

The machine doesn't work.

With a frustrated sigh, I pick it up and move several feet to the left, in the direction of the cabin that's just out of sight. I fiddle with the nobs, move the extra-long antenna this way and that, but again— nothing . I swallow down the disappointment welling inside of me, trying not to let it show on my face.

This has to work. I spent so much time, worked too hard, for it not to. There's got to be something I'm missing, something I overlooked.

Reluctantly, I flash a glance at Syros, who's been watching silently, crouched beneath a tree with low-hanging branches. His red eyes glow in the dim light of the setting sun, lasered in on me.

"What is it, Erin?" Tyler's voice comes through the speaker loud and clear; it's the best I've been able to hear him since we first made the connection. The signal is stronger out here, in a small clearing in the forest, but it's still not enough. The connection isn't strong enough to form a tear between our worlds.

"It's... not working," I admit, fighting to keep my voice level. Crying over something so stupid as a radio signal feels ridiculous, but I can't shake the depression growing

heavy in my chest. “I know it’s not midnight, but I expected something to happen.”

A spark, a sizzle, anything .

This isn’t good, and it doesn't bode well for our midnight attempt.

What if all of this was for nothing? What if it doesn’t work after all, and I really am stuck here until the next solstice?

I chew my bottom lip to keep it from wobbling.

A disgruntled noise comes through the radio. Tyler’s obviously as disappointed as I am.

“So, what now?” he asks, and the question hangs heavy in the air around us.

The truth is, I have no idea.

Even though I tried not to get my hopes up when Syros agreed to help, a faint shred of optimism settled in my gut and grew, festered over the last several hours. I’d nearly convinced myself that this would work, that I would be face to face with Tyler or at least see a sliver of home through a faint portal.

To see nothing is soul-crushing, defeating.

“I don’t know,” I mutter. “I don’t know... I—”

Syros gets to his feet, shaking out his limbs, which are probably stiff from being still for so long. I expect him to tell me to give up, to encourage me to abandon this crazy idea. After all, I can tell he’s disappointed about me leaving. It’s evident in the wall he’s constructed between us, the distance he’s keeping.

He paces over, and my eyes slowly climb his form, locking with his glowing red gaze through the gloominess.

“Come,” he says, offering me a hand. “Maybe there is something else we can use. Something we overlooked.”

Reluctantly, I reach for his hand, trying not to get my hopes up again. I don’t know if I can make it through another let down without tears falling, and I’ve held it together so well. But I’ve come too far to give up now; I have to keep trying, especially if Syros thinks there might still be a chance.

I nod once, leaving the radio laying amongst the underbrush. He drops my hand as we head back to the cabin, putting an uncomfortable distance between us, but he holds the curtain open for me to dip inside.

I stare around at the familiar space, the place I’ve committed to memory over the last few days. I’ve searched through his belongings, gathered all the useful metal I could possibly use for an antenna.

Was there something I missed? Something I didn’t think of?

I stand in the middle of the room while Syros peruses his collection, opening boxes, rummaging through small piles, clinging to the faintest whisper of hope that he’ll find something useful. However, dread keeps me rooted to the spot, my feet feeling like lead. I can’t move, my mind spinning a thousand miles per hour, as I watch him.

When he finally stops and grunts approvingly, my eyes snap to him. He’s making his way back over, and I nearly laugh when he holds out a fork to me.

“Will this help?” he asks, and I stare down at the utensil.

“There’s only one way to find out.” I force a smile on my face, twirling the fork around in my fingers. It’s heavy, though I’m not sure what kind of metal it’s made out of, and I can bend the prongs in different directions to get a stronger signal.

It’s worth a shot.

It’s my only shot.

When we head back outside, it’s darker, the sky overhead nearly pitch black with a few pinpricks of light shining through.

Are those stars? I can’t help but wonder as he leads us back to the radio.

With numb fingers, I set to work again, using the extremely limited lighting to see while I work. I attach the fork, and Syros bends the prongs in strange angles according to my directions; the fork might as well be a bendy straw for how easily he manipulates it.

With the mess of metal and wires I’ve already assembled, this has to be enough.

I hold my breath and flip on the radio.

Instead of Tyler’s voice, I hear static, and my heart plummets.

Shit.

Did I make things worse instead of fixing it?

Twisting the dial, I run through the channels, listening as the static morphs into all different sounds. Music, static, muffled voices, more static... I stop on a channel that sounds otherworldly, a melodic, ethereal hum coming through. It’s unlike anything

I've ever heard before, and makes me wonder if there are other worlds out there that I could also make a connection with.

Are there other monster realms? Aliens?

My heart lurches into my throat

"Tyler?" I call, going through the channels more slowly.

His voice fades in through the static, becoming clearer. I turn the dial again, searching for a new frequency.

"Tyler?"

The air around the antenna begins to vibrate, and I jump back when his voice comes through again. It's so loud, so crystal clear, that it's like he's right next to me.

"I'm here, Erin. Can you hear me?"

A shaky exhale escapes me. "Yes, I can hear you." The air shifts in front of me, almost like it's trembling. Supercharged with invisible energy, twisty with a hazy image of something that isn't really there.

It's working.

"Holy shit," I whisper under my breath, watching as the air shifts and pulsates before me. "Syros, it worked!" I squeal. "Do you see it?"

I look over at him, to his glowing red eyes, but he doesn't respond. He's watching me in silence, his shoulders sagged, skull tilted slightly toward the ground.

Unease turns my stomach. I hate seeing him like this, knowing I'm doing this to him. My heart squeezes in my chest.

"I think it's going to work," I say, turning my attention back to the radio. "At midnight, the signal will hopefully be strong enough for the portal to open. We just have to wait a little longer."

A relieved sigh comes through the radio, followed by Tyler's voice. "Hold tight, Erin. I'll see you soon."

Waiting is grueling. The minutes drag by, and the sky overhead gradually grows darker. We keep an ear out for any movement in the trees, listening for the rustling of leaves or the thump of approaching footsteps, but the forest is silent. We're completely alone.

I try to force conversation, but Syros barely acknowledges my questions. He's checked out, staring into the distance, simply waiting for this to all be over. Waiting for me to leave.

"You know, if this works, I can always visit you," I attempt after countless minutes in the silent dark. "This doesn't have to be goodbye forever."

Syros grunts in response. "Returning would not be a wise idea for you, little human. It is not safe for you here, and there is no promise that I will be the Grim you encounter when the portal opens again."

My shoulders sag. As difficult as it is for me to hear, I know it's the truth.

The idea of seeing him every solstice, of traveling back and forth through the portal, comes with enormous risks that might not be worth the payoff.

Still, the thought of never seeing him again causes a dull throb in my chest.

It sinks all the way to my marrow, making my bones ache.

As much as I need to leave, a part of me will always belong here, in this wasteland of a world.

With him.

“How will we know when it’s midnight?” I ask to change the subject. My eyes are prickling a little too much for my liking, and I blink the tears away. “You said you don’t keep track of time here.”

“His skull tilts back, his glowing eyes lifted toward the dark sky overhead, and he points up to the dark expanse with a long, slender claw.

“Do you see that glowing speck?” he asks. “It is pale blue and doesn’t flicker like the others?”

I follow his line of sight and squint through the darkness at the dot he’s referring to. It glows softly against the pitch black backdrop, a pinprick in the night like a star on Earth, but it doesn’t twinkle like one. Could it be another planet?

My mind spins with the possibilities.

“I see it.”

“When it reaches the center of the sky, it will be your midnight,” he says confidently. Ah, so like the sun... kind of.

It’s nearly there now.

“Syros, I—” I want to say something, some final goodbye that will serve as closure for us both, but there are no words to express how I feel. My mind is a mess of confusion and sadness, tangling with longing and desperation. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry that I have to go home.”

I wait, and his fierce red orbs fall to me once again. If I expect him to accept my apology, I’m mistaken.

“It’s almost time,” he says instead.

Chapter

Twenty-Eight

Erin

My heart feels like a boulder in my chest, threatening to drag me to the ground, and the blood has frozen in my veins. All the hours of waiting, counting down the minutes, watching the blue dot slowly reach its apex in the sky has led to his moment, and now I can't breathe.

Syros watches expectantly as I settle next to the radio again, my hands shaking with anticipation.

What if it doesn't work?

What if it does?

My eyes shift to the silent Grim nearby, still wishing there was something I could say—anything to help alleviate the tightness constricting my chest—but I've already tried and failed.

The time has come for me to go, and we both know what comes next.

I flip on the radio, static exploding through the clearing around us. A quick twist of the dial has the sound dissolving, and the air in front of me trembles.

I suck in a sharp breath.

“Tyler?” I call out, my voice sounding much calmer than I feel. My eyes are glued to the shifting air above the radio, rippling like heat rising off scorching pavement.

“Erin?” This time, when Tyler’s voice comes through, the movement in front of me trembles harder, shimmering with a pale light that seems to grow brighter with every second that passes.

Oh. My. God.

It’s working. It’s working!

I can barely breathe as the air glows brighter, shimmering and splitting like a hole has been sliced through it with a hot knife. It’s small, about a foot from top to bottom, but it’s growing—slowly. Too slowly. If it doesn’t go faster and widen enough for me to pass through before the signal weakens again, I’ll miss my chance.

“Come on, come on,” I mutter.

Nearby, Syros shifts, but my eyes are glued to the portal opening before me.

“Holy shit, I see it!” Tyler calls through the radio. “Can you see it? What’s happening?”

“I can.” I force out the reply, my heart suddenly galloping in my chest. “It’s... glowing.”

He can see it. It’s happening. It’s working. I repeat the words silently to myself over and over, clinging to them like a prayer. Like the more I think them, the stronger the signal will grow, even though that’s not how any of this works.

Every muscle in my body is wound tight, ready to spring forward and dive through the portal at the first possible second. Is it the safest thing to do? No, there are probably a million things that could go wrong. The connection might not be strong enough for an object—or me—to pass through at all. The rift could splice me in half and spit the two parts out on the other side. I could blink out of reality and land in a different unknown world.

So many things could go wrong...

I swallow down my doubts, focused on the task at hand as the rip stretches and grows into a circle, reminiscent of the portal I saw on the solstice, only much smaller. The air inside the ring of light ripples, like a pebble dropped into a pond, and an image appears. It's dark on the other side, illuminated by a nearby streetlight, and I can see a few trees and blades of grass swaying in the breeze.

After being completely transfixed on the growing portal for a full minute, I'm finally able to tear my eyes away to find Syros. I expect him to be on pins and needles as well, ready to lunge through the portal to rip Tyler in half as promised, but he's staring at me, watching me like a hunter watches its prey.

"I don't like this," he growls, his voice a low rumble in his throat. "Something is off. Erin, I don't think it's safe."

I'm only halfway listening when a crackle nearly snatches my attention away. I look back at the portal, now the size of a dinner tray. It's nearly broad enough for me to dive through if I get a running start. The only problem is that it's three feet off the ground, and I'm not graceful enough to leap through it like a gymnast.

Maybe Syros can throw me...

Movement through the portal catches my eye, and Tyler's wide-eyed face comes into

view. He's wearing a beige denim jacket and jeans, with a backwards ballcap. I'm so relieved to see him that I forget I'm only wearing a tank top and the tattered remains of my leggings. I haven't even looked in a mirror since before the Solstice—I probably look like hell warmed over.

“Holy shit, Erin!” He gasps, stepping closer to the portal as it continues to stretch open. He grips something just out of view—probably his cell phone—and stares at me like I'm a ghost. “You did it! You opened the portal!”

“I did it.” My words are barely audible to my own ears, but a swell of pride fills me. I'm so overwhelmed with emotions that the magnitude of what we've achieved is nearly lost on me; we created a bridge between worlds, which has likely never been done before outside of the Solstice.

I take a shaky breath.

Tyler's gaze flicks to the edge of the portal right as it crackles with electricity. “This thing doesn't seem very stable; I don't know how long it'll stay open.” His eyes shift back to mine. “Can you make it through?”

I step forward slowly, cautiously, afraid that something will blow up at any second and this will all backfire. Even as the thought crosses my mind, a spark of electricity cracks, and Syros growls in protest.

Tyler's eyes widen even further. “Erin, what was that? Is it the Grim?” His face pales suddenly, terror clear in his expression. “Hurry, I'm right here. I'll catch you.”

My stomach drops. The logical side of my brain is fighting to be heard, drowning out the undercurrent of adrenaline pumping through me. It's just a jump. I can dive right through and be back home, if I could just get my feet to move.

I take a step forward.

“Erin,” Syros roars, sending goosebumps skittering up my arms. “Wait. You shouldn’t—”

White hot energy crackles through the portal, blinking out my view of Tyler for a moment. My heart skips a painful beat, and it seems the portal has stopped growing. It’s still not as tall as I am, even with my short frame, but it’s enough for me to fit through. Especially if I get a running start.

With a deep breath, I brace myself and run toward the opening. I only have one shot, and I have to make this count.

I grit my teeth, picking up the pace, prepared to leap. I’m nearly there, just a step from the split.

So close. I’m almost home.

My feet leave the ground as I dive forward, tempted to close my eyes as the blinding white light gets closer.

Then, something slams into me, snatching me out of the air. The breath is ripped from my lungs as I get my bearings, and I realize Syros has me in his hold.

“What the—” My words are cut off by a dangerous sounding snap as the portal blinks out white again. It cracks and sizzles, the circle completely white and glowing, and then Tyler is there.

His eyes settle on Syros, whose massive paws are still around me, and he screams.

“Erin, run!”

“You have to close it,” Syros demands, his growly voice drowning out Tyler’s protests. “Now.”

He lets me go and pushes me out of the way, going for the radio.

“No!” I cry, moving after him, but not nearly fast enough. “Stop! I can make it through. I can—”

“Let her go, you monster!” Tyler yells through the portal, though I can’t see him past Syros’ giant form. “You... you beast!”

Syros stands to his full height and roars, his rage directed at Tyler. I guess I should be glad the portal didn’t open wider—my Grim probably would have launched himself through it to rip out the poor guy’s throat.

The Grim then kneels, reaching for the radio, and I catch a glimpse of the portal once again. Tyler is there, watching with pure horror painted over his expression as he fumbles with something in his hands. He steps back, positioning himself, and raises a shotgun, pointed directly at Syros.

The scream doesn’t leave my throat before the gun goes off, the blast echoing through the clearing and making my ears ring. Syros roars again as he slumps to the ground, and my blood turns to ice.

My world slams to a stop.

No.

An invisible fist wraps around my chest and squeezes as I watch him crumple.

No, no, no.

He rolls onto his back, his mouth tipped up toward the sky, and I rush forward, nearly tripping over my own feet to get to him. I fall to my knees, shock making my limbs numb and my blood cold, and quickly scan him for a gunshot wound. When I find the bullet hole, my heart sinks.

It's just under his ribs, gushing a steady stream of dark blood. Nausea churns in my stomach.

"Syros," I say, immediately pressing my hand to the wound to staunch the blood flow. It doesn't help much, the thick crimson liquid seeping out between my fingers and drenching my hand in seconds. My stomach turns, and I frantically look around for anything I can use to pack the wound.

The closest fabric is back at the cabin, but he's losing blood with every second that passes.

"Fuck, Syros, please don't die." I rip my tank top off over my head, leaving me in just a bra, and press the material to the bullet wound. My eyes bounce between his dim eye sockets and the wound, panic lancing through me.

Shit. He's losing a lot of blood, more than I'd expect.

Did the bullet hit something vital?

"Leave him, we've got to go," Tyler demands, but I ignore him. I can't focus on anything but the Grim in front of me, and his rasping breaths.

"Erin," he says, and the word is a knife to my heart. His eyes slowly find mine, and I position his head on my lap to cradle his skull. "He's right. You have to go."

Tears burn the corners of my eyes, and I shake my head in refusal. "No. I'm not

leaving you like this.” My gaze tracks down to the bullet wound again, noting how blood has soaked into the thin tank top. I don’t know what to do, he’s losing too much blood too quickly, but I can’t leave him like this. Not when he’s injured because of me.

If he dies, it’ll be my fault.

The portal crackles, and I look up to see it shrinking once again. The edges are getting closer together, my view of Earth diminishing right before my eyes. Tyler is watching, his mouth hanging open, his gaze bouncing between Syros and me.

“The portal is closing,” he snaps. “Come on before you miss your chance. We’ve got to go.”

Syros raises his hand and strokes my cheek with one of his claws. “Go, little human. Please ...” He chokes on the word, and my heart shreds into pieces. “I’m sorry I tried to stop you. I... I was being selfish.”

Everything fades away as I stare down at him. The portal, Tyler, the radio, my need to return home. Nothing matters in this moment aside from Syros, each and every one of his breaths that are becoming more erratic.

“No,” I mutter, pulling his skull closer to me. “I... Syros, I’m so sorry. This wasn’t... I didn’t want you to get hurt. You can’t die. Please, don’t leave me.”

“Little human, you have shown me that there is light yet in this dark world,” he says slowly, gasping for air between words. “If I die, I can think of no better way to spend my last moments.”

“You’re not going to die. You can’t.” I shake my head firmly. “Syros, you can’t leave me.”

Tears stream down my cheeks as my emotions cartwheel. I don't want him to die. I don't want to leave him.

"Let me run and get your healing salve," I urge, squeezing his hand in mine. "It'll help. I'll be quick."

"It will not work." He shakes his head. "The wound is too deep."

"Please," I cry, pressing my cheek into his palm, desperate for his warmth to melt the icy fear gripping my insides. "Let me try. I... I don't want to lose you."

Reality slams into me like a brick wall. I'll do anything if it means saving him. I'll get the salve, I'll tend to his wounds, I'll stay here with him. Anything, if it means he'll be okay.

I need him to be okay.

Whatever has blossomed between us is more than attraction, more than mere fascination. I care about him, more than I care about anyone else in the world. I need him to be okay, not just because he doesn't deserve to die, but because I can't imagine a world where he doesn't exist.

"Syros," I say when he's gone too still, fear shooting through my system. "Syros, I need you to hang on. I'll stay here, I'll be with you, but you have to pull through. You have to live. I... I... I love you."

"Love?" he repeats, his growly voice softer now. "Is that what I feel? Like you are the piece I have always been missing? Like my world is a little less dark when you're near? Like I need you more than I need to breathe, more than I need to eat?"

A smile crosses my face right as a sob wracks my chest. "Yes." I nod. "That's what it

means.”

He takes a deep breath, groans, and lets it out slowly. “Then, I love you, little human. And you must leave before the portal closes.”

I shake my head again. “I’m not leaving you. We’re in this together. If I have to choose between you and Earth, I choose you, Syros. Do you hear me? You can’t die, because I still need you to protect me. I need you to live.”

I lean down and press my lips against the side of his skull, my stomach sinking further as the red glow in his eyes dims.

“Erin, come on, we’ve got to go,” Tyler snaps, his voice frantic. “Much longer and the portal will be too small for you to pass through. Forget him.”

Forget him. The words bite through my fear, and anger sparks in my gut.

I could never forget Syros, even if I wanted to. He’s branded himself on my soul forever, taken things and given things to me that I never imagined were possible.

He is mine , no matter if I’m here with him or in my own world.

I belong to him, body, soul, and mind no matter the distance between us.

“Hold on, Syros,” I say gently, and slip out from beneath him. I approach the glowing portal, my eyes locked with Tyler’s. If I wasn’t so upset and confused and afraid, I’d cuss him out ten ways to Sunday for hurting the Grim—possibly killing him—but I can’t think about any of that right now.

The portal flashes white, and Tyler disappears for a second before he returns. I can tell the portal is getting more unstable as it closes, probably too unstable for me to

pass through even if I wanted to leave.

“Tyler, I’m... I’m staying here.”

His eyebrows shoot toward his hairline. “You can’t be serious right now. After all this work? After trying so hard to get back, you’re staying there with him? ” His eyes fall to the downed monster. “He’s going to eat you, Erin. He’ll kill you when you let your guard down.”

“He won’t hurt me. I’m his mate,” I say proudly, a warmth spinning through my chest that quickly flits through my entire body. “It might not make sense—hell, it definitely doesn’t make sense—but this is what I’m choosing.”

A beat of silence passes, interrupted only by the crackling of the portal.

“Do you have my camera?” I ask suddenly, an idea occurring to me.

“Um, yeah. Why?” He holds it up, and I extend my hand.

“Toss it,” I demand, and he does.

It shoots through the portal, causing the rip between our worlds to flare and spark, and I catch it by the strap before it hits the ground. It isn’t much, but if it’s the only piece of my world I get to keep, so be it.

“Tell my story,” I say, meeting Tyler’s gaze a final time as the portal shrinks to the size of a basketball. “Tell the world that there are creatures out there that we don’t understand, but they aren’t the monsters we make them out to be.”

Before he can respond, the portal fizzles out, and darkness engulfs the clearing once more.

I rush back to Syros' side, falling to my knees and grabbing the sides of his skull between my hands. His breathing is shallow, the glowing orbs of his eyes dimmer than ever.

"You... stayed," he mutters, forcing out the syllables.

"Of course." I stroke my fingers gently along his jaw bone. "I'm not leaving you—not now, not ever—and you're not leaving me. You kidnapped me and brought me here, now you're stuck with me. Understand?"

He forces a chuckle, followed by a raspy wheeze, and I grab onto his shoulder and squeeze.

"Just hold on a little longer," I say. "I'm going to make it all better."

Chapter

Twenty-Nine

Syros

I t has been many years since I've dreamed.

In fact, I cannot remember the last time I dreamed before Erin came into my life, but since meeting her, all kinds of images have plagued my sleep. Thoughts of losing her, of keeping her forever, or what the future could hold for us, of her going home. They are just as conflicted as my waking thoughts, but one thing is always certain: when I fall asleep, she is there in my mind, waiting for me.

After being wounded by the human weapon, I fall into a deep sleep unlike anything I've experienced before. Pain bleeds into my thoughts, physical and emotional, as I dream about losing her over and over again.

I can't wake. I can only watch as she leaves me time and time again.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity, consciousness returns to me and I wake. I stare up at the roof of my cabin, tracing the familiar sight in my mind, wondering how I made it back here. The last thing I remember was collapsing in the forest, staring up at Erin's pretty face, telling her to leave and let me die. The rest is darkness.

Noise nearby makes me bristle, but movement causes pain to tear through my side. I

look around frantically, wondering if a Grim made their way into my home as I slept. I find that my torso has been wrapped in cloth—the fabric that once hung over the door to my cabin. My gaze flicks to the gaping doorway where sunlight now spills into the space. Did I tear it down at some point?

My gaze sweeps across the room, and a flash of silver hair catches my attention. My heart clenches painfully as I realize it's Erin, moving around the cabin, rearranging my collection. More fabric from the doorway is fashioned around her, tied behind her neck, clinging to her curves. I stare, drinking in the sight, confusion clouding my thoughts.

What is happening? Is this yet another dream?

I look around the room, taking it all in. Everything is different, things lined neatly against the walls, more objects hanging up around the space. It's clean and neat, the best it's ever looked, and an inhale brings a delicious smell to my nose.

Did she cook while I was asleep?

Warmth spreads through me as I watch her, my curiosity piqued. She didn't leave the way she planned, and she looks perfectly at home in my cabin. Like this is her home as well. After watching her for several minutes, I growl low to catch her attention, and her eyes snap in my direction. Her features light up, and she rushes over, dropping next to me on the nest of furs.

“You're awake!” Her fingers trail across my chest, the touch lighting up my skin and causing my insides to twist in excitement. Touching her is electric, despite the other times my skin has been against hers. It feels new, foreign. “You scared me there a few times.” A dark expression flashes over her face. “I was worried you might not make it.”

I force a laugh, and pain shoots through my ribs. “It will take more than that to kill me, little human.”

More darkness plays over her face. “Syros, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know he had a gun with him. If I knew he would hurt you, I would have never... I—” Her voice warbles, and I shush her.

“Do not worry about that,” I tell her. “I hold no ill feelings toward you. Tyler, on the other hand...” Rage turns my vision red, but I fight against the feeling. He is not here, and there is no reason to take my anger out on her. I swallow down the growl forming in my chest. “How did you get me into the cabin?”

She works her bottom lip between her teeth. “How much do you remember?”

I replay my last memories before losing consciousness again, straining to put the pieces together. “I remember falling and staring up at your face. You told me you loved me, and I don’t remember ever feeling so content, so happy . If I had died, I would regret nothing,” I say. “Your face is the last thing I remember.”

She smiles, but I can swear I see tears banked in her eyes, and the thought of upsetting her hurts my heart. I’ve caused her so much pain and torment already; the thought of making her sad is enough to tear me apart.

I want to be the reason for her happiness, not her anguish.

“I managed to slow the bleeding, and I let you rest in the forest. I brought you water, and you came to enough to walk back here,” she recounts slowly, her fingers dancing through my fur as she speaks. “I tried to help, but you’re freaking heavy, sir.”

“I walked here?” I repeat slowly, surprised by the information. I can’t recall any of that, no matter how much I prod at my memory, but there’s no other explanation. I

must have managed somehow. “What happened after that?”

Her cheeks turn pink, and she glances quickly around the room. “I cleaned your wound and bandaged it the best I could. I hope you don’t mind, but I had to use your curtain.”

My eyes flick to the sunlight spilling into the room, and I shake my head. Her concern is endearing; she cares so much about how I feel. Little does she know, she could burn my house down with me inside it, and I wouldn’t care, as long as it kept her warm.

“You can use anything I have, whatever you need,” I assure her, brushing my knuckle gently along her collarbone.

“I also rearranged a little,” she says, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. A smile curls her lips. “I got a bit bored after the first day.”

Panic rushes through me, and I glare at her in disbelief. “The first day? How long was I unconscious?”

The thought of her alone, completely unprotected while I slumbered away on my nest, twists my insides. Anything could have happened to her, and I wouldn’t have been able to keep her safe. If a Grim stumbled upon my home—or worse, another Ech—she could have died.

I never would have forgiven myself.

“A few days,” she says, thoughtfully. “Like I said... you worried me a couple of times, but I’m so glad you’re okay.”

She brushes her fingers gently against my maw, the touch settling some of my

uncontrolled feelings, and a swell of sadness overwhelms my other thoughts.

“Thank you for tending to me. You did not have to,” I say, wrapping my arm around her and pulling her to my chest. She carefully avoids my injured side and settles into the crook of my arm. “As soon as I am able, I will help you remake your machine so you can go back home. It is clear that I cannot keep you safe here.”

She purses her lips and glares at me. “I’m not going anywhere. Do you remember what I told you?” She doesn’t wait for me to answer. “You went through all the trouble to keep me, and now you’re stuck with me. I don’t want to go home. I want to stay here... with you.”

“But what about—”

“But nothing.” She shakes her head. “I had the chance to leave, and I made my choice. This is where I want to be.”

She leans down to press a kiss to my snout, and I inhale her familiar floral scent. The gollilock is fading, so she’ll have to bathe again soon to keep her natural aroma masked, but the smell of her makes my mouth water.

I reach up to caress the curve of her ass, and she smacks my hand away.

“Absolutely not,” she scolds, a crease forming between her eyebrows. “You need to rest. No fun times until you’ve eaten and can move a bit on your own.”

My jaw falls, and I stare at her. “Should I not be rewarded for surviving? For not dying?”

Her laugh pierces the air, music to my ears, and her shoulders shake with the sound.

“Nice try, but you’re on bedrest.” She jabs a finger into my chest. “But don’t worry, there will be plenty of that when you feel better. Now, I spent all morning cooking what I hope is not a poisonous lunch, so get ready to be the judge of that.”

Chapter

Thirty

Erin

S yros drifts in and out of consciousness over the next day, despite his best attempts to stay awake. He's worried something will show up to kidnap or eat me, but we've been lucky so far. Aside from the Ech he fought, there's been no sign of any other life in the forest.

That won't last forever, but for now, I feel safe. Safe enough to wander around the cabin, picking herbs and wading through the small pool of water that wraps around the structure and connects to a small stream. The water is shallow near the cabin, and only a couple of feet at its deepest point. Surprisingly, the water is clear—almost perfectly see-through.

The scene reminds me of an ethereal painting back home, something you'd see in a fantasy book about fairies and dragons. Only, it's real, and I get to look at it every day for the rest of forever.

A smile works its way across my face at the thought of spending the rest of my life here, and I don't hate the idea.

Pausing at the edge of the pool, I untie the dress I made myself and let it fall to grass around my feet. Then, I step in.

Like the air kissing my skin, the water is warm, and I quickly sink down and submerge my body. It isn't enough to swim in, but it's perfect for me to relax into and let my mind wander.

Even after several days, my body hasn't adjusted to my new normal. It'll take some getting used to.

Not having to constantly worry about paying bills or getting things done is new. So is not having to update my blog or stress about my next big story. It feels like I should be doing something, a nagging feeling in my gut, but for the first time in my life I'm just existing. Existing in a world not made for me, and certainly not welcoming of me, but none of that matters.

Not when my monster is sleeping just inside.

Syros .

It isn't the first time I've been in awe of everything that led us here, and I get butterflies every time I think about it. I gave up my mundane life on Earth for the chance to be with a creature from another realm.

This really is the stuff those monster romance readers pine over, and I gotta say... they're not wrong to want that.

Once he's healed enough to move around freely, nothing will come between us. We'll spend all day naked in his nest, fucking and cuddling until we drift off to sleep every night. We'll find something else to cover the doorway of the cabin—maybe I can even help him build a bonafide door. There are enough trees around to make it happen. Maybe we could venture out, as long as we're on high alert, and he can show me more of his world. Maybe—

Movement sounds behind me and I jump, splashing water as I whip around. Syros is

leaning against the doorway, watching me soak.

I slap a hand to my chest, right over my racing heart. “You scared me. You shouldn’t be up. Do you need something? I’ll get it for you.”

He shakes his head and shoves off the frame, wobbling a little as he approaches.

“No, you’ve done more than enough for me,” he says, stopping next to the pool of water.

“But you should rest—”

A growl of annoyance cuts me off. “I have rested enough. Besides, I can’t rest when I know you’re wandering outside the cabin. I...”

“Worry?” I offer, and he nods.

With a smile, I gesture next to me in the pool. “Why don’t you join me then, so you can keep an eye on me?”

He hesitates for a beat before reaching for the fabric around his middle. He undoes it, letting it fall to the ground, and my eyes snap to the bullet wound. It still looks gnarly, the skin barely knitted together and crusted over with blood, but as far as I can tell there is no sign of infection. It has to hurt like hell though.

Syros steps into the water and sinks down next to me. The water barely covers the tops of his thighs, soaking the thick fur covering them. His closeness immediately has heat sinking through me, settling between my thighs, but I shove the thought aside.

He’s recuperating; I shouldn’t be thinking about fucking his brains out right now.

“It’s actually quite pretty here,” I say, dragging my eyes away from him. “Like

something out of a dark fairytale.”

He makes a noise, somewhere between a chuckle and a growl. “If only you could have seen it before the Echs destroyed everything. It was much more like your world than it is now.”

At the mention of the Echs, my stomach coils into a knot. I’ve done a lot of thinking while Syros has slept—probably way too much—and considered lots of possibilities, some more dangerous than others. But a singular thought plagues my mind, and I can’t seem to shake it.

“What if you were able to destroy the Echs?” I ask, unable to keep the question inside any longer. “Do you think your world could be saved? Would it go back to the way it was before?”

Syros’ red glowing eyes flicker like he’s blinked. “You’ve seen one of them, but there are hundreds out there. Possibly thousands. What you are suggesting, eliminating all of them... it cannot be done.”

“How do you know that?” I prod.

“Because we have tried.” His tone is flat, edging toward irritation. “We are no match for them, Erin.”

“But don’t you think you’d stand a better chance if someone on your side could see them?” I dare. “Maybe this is how you win. I can help, Syros.”

Without a word, the Grim scoops me up out of the water, spinning me around to face him as he plops me onto his lap. A shiver works its way through me at the feel of him beneath me, and I stare up into his glowing eyes with growing curiosity.

“I will not allow you to be put in harm’s way. Not for me, not for this world.” He

shakes his head with finality. “A war between monsters is no place for a human.”

I sulk, but his knuckle comes up to lift my chin, and he leans forward to press his snout to my forehead. It’s his own version of a kiss, and it melts my insides.

“Fine,” I huff. “I’ll drop it.”

For now.

I don’t plan to let it go forever.

His knuckle dips lower, tracing over my shoulder, my collarbone, the swell of my breast. He teases around my nipple, and a little whine escapes my lips. His touch lights up my nerve endings and kick starts the heartbeat between my thighs.

“You are too precious to me, Erin,” he says, gently pinching my nipple between two fingers. “So beautiful, so delicious, so completely mine.”

My thoughts cloud with lust, and I find myself nodding before I can stop it.

“I’m yours,” I mutter as he shifts beneath me, his cock pressing up against my ass.

He dips his snout lower and his tongue snakes out between his teeth, painting a lick up the column of my neck. His canines graze my skin, sending jolts of electricity through me, and my pussy throbs needily.

The few days I’ve had to go without feeling him inside me have been damn near torture, and the thought of his knot draws another whimper from my lips. He rocks his hips, the head of his cock pressing against my entrance, and his hands come around to palm my ass.

“Forever?” he asks softly, the word accompanied by a low, delicious growl.

I nod, and my eyes flutter closed. His cock presses harder against me, slowly working its way inside, and I sigh. “Forever.”

A growl rumbles in his chest as he drags my hips down and buries himself to the hilt, and I moan as his cock fills me to my limit. I expect it to feel like all the other times we’ve done this—incredibly hot and stretching me to the point of pain—but a surge of energy bursts through me this time that I’m not expecting.

It warms my chest, blurs my mind, and fills me with a foreign power I’ve never felt before.

“Syros!” I gasp as the energy swells, and I cling to him as he picks up his pace.

Sensation overwhelms my system, and I squeeze my eyes shut, trembling from the pleasure. I haven’t even come yet, but my body is tingling with aftershocks. Something inside me snaps into place, a connection that I don’t recognize but immediately understand.

Syros.

He’s there in my mind, completely consuming me as he picks up his pace, burying himself inside me again and again. Whatever has happened, it’s bonded us together. He’s in me, beneath me, around me. He consumes me, and as I gasp a breath, his dark, musky scent fills my lungs. He’s everywhere, all at once.

When I pry my eyes open again, his skull is tipped back in ecstasy, and my gaze falls to a glowing symbol emblazoned on his chest, just to the left of dead center. It’s blood red and pulses with magic, written in some ancient language I don’t recognize.

I glance down at my own chest, and find an identical mark glowing against my pale skin. My jaw drops, but I can barely focus on anything but his pounding thrusts and his knot that’s quickly swelling and pressing against me. My pussy throbs, and I grab

onto one of his shoulders for balance, grinding down on him to meet every thrust. With my other hand, I reach for my clit, rubbing frantic circles around it until I catch up to the climax I've been chasing.

My cry echoes through the forest, and I tremble with the release. Syros comes right after, his cock twitching before he shoves me down on his knot and locks us together. Warm cum fills me as his cock twitches with the release, the sensation enough to cause another tiny orgasm.

Then, Syros is laying back in the water, clutching me to his chest. He's so massive that the water doesn't rise up over his sides to reach me.

"What was that?" I gasp, tentatively touching the mark on his chest. Even as I watch, the glow begins to fade and it becomes a bright white tattoo on his skin. It stands out starkly against his fur, impossible to miss. "What is this?"

"A bond mark," he answers, his clawed hand stroking gently up my back. "An ancient magic that connects two souls, binding them together."

My heart flutters, and I reach for him in my mind. I can feel him there, our connection nearly tangible. "What does that mean? If you knew that would happen, you could have warned me." I poke him in the chest.

He laughs beneath me, the movement of his chest jostling me as I cling to him.

"I did not know bonds were still possible, or that they could happen between Grims and humans," he admits, running his fingers over my damp hair. "It has been so long, centuries, since I have seen a mate bond. If it has appeared, that means the magic still lives."

He tilts my head up to meet my gaze, and the walls of my channel flutter around him at the contact. Clearly, he's ready for round two even though I've barely caught my

breath.

“It means you belong to me,” he says. “And I to you, Erin.”

So like some magical marriage ceremony. Not that I’m complaining. I’ll take a bonding ceremony over a big white dress and nosey spectators any day.

“I will protect you at all costs. I will give you anything you need,” he assures me, lifting to press his snout to my cheek. His tongue dips out to caress my skin, dance over my lips. “All you have to do is ask, and it shall be yours.”

I smile, the edges of my eyes burning with tears. I blink several times to chase away the sensation.

“All I need is you, Syros. We’ll figure out the rest together.”

I can handle anything this realm throws at me, as long as I have him—my monster, my mate—by my side.

THE END