FINE PRINT

(Or how a divine contract may not be the best cure for a broken heart.)

Chapter 15

Misery

THERE IT IS AGAIN...

ANOTHER ONE

EVERY SO OFTEN I SEE THEM PASS ME BY. IGNORING ME... JUST WALKING INTO THE WATER. SWIMMING TOWARDS THE HORIZON...

BUT EVERY NOW AND THEN SOME ARRIVE WITH THESE THREADS ATTACHED TO THEM...

IT'S ALMOST LIKE LIKE AN UMBILICAL CHORD

AND THEY TREAT IT THE SAME...

THEY SEVER IT...

AND INTO THE WATER THEY GO.

I DON'T KNOW HOW LONG I'VE BEEN HERE. BUT I'VE SEEN SO MANY OF THEM BY NOW...

AND EVERY TIME I SEE THE JOY WITH WHICH THEY JUMP INTO THE WATER, I WISH TO DO THE SAME...

I DON'T WANT TO KEEP SITTING HERE THINKING BACK ON MY FAILURES.

MY FEAR HAS FADED AND NOW, I JUST WANT TO FOLLOW THEM...

BUT I CAN'T...

BECAUSE NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRY....

HOW MUCH I STRAIN

IT DOESN'T MATTER...

I CAN'T BREAK THESE FUCKING THREADS

FINE!

WE'LL DO IT THE HARD W-- NNNGH

WHAT THE HELL? WHY IS THIS THING SO HEAVY?

HEY!

UM---

HELLO? UH...GHOST PERSON?

HASHDAH SSHHSSHS

SHHSHDSGH HSHSHSDS

I... I DON'T KNOW WHAT YOU'RE TRYING TO SAY?

CROSSED ARMS?

AS IN STOP? DON'T GO INTO THE WATER?

SIGH...

LISTEN, BUDDY, I APPRECIATE YOUR CONCERN, BUT I'LL TAKE MY CHANCES IN THE WATER

NOT LIKE IT CAN HURT ME. I'M ALREADY DEAD.

OH I WOULD HEED YOUR FRIENDS WARNING IF I WERE YOU...

THERE ARE WORSE THINGS THAN DEATH I ASSURE YOU...

YOU ARE NOT THE FIRST ONE TO TRY AND CARRY THEIR MEMORIES INTO THE NEXT LIFE, BUT HERE AT THE END OF THE ROAD, THEY ARE A GREAT BURDEN.

THE KIND OF BURDEN THAT WILL PULL YOU TO THE BOTTOM, AND ONCE YOU'RE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE UNENDING RIVER, YOU DROWN FOREVER.

MAY I?

MY MY...THIS IS QUITE THE TANGLE USUALLY BY THE TIME THE DEAD MAKE THEIR WAY TO THESE SHORES THERE ARE ONLY THE MOST STUBBORN OF THREADS LEFT, BUT THIS...

THIS MUST BE PURE TORMENT...

I MEAN... IT'S NOT THAT BAD. JUST A BIT UNCOMFORTABLE.

HEAVY...

AND IT WILL KEEP GETTING HEAVIER, I FEAR. ON THIS THRESHOLD ALL THE SOULS FEEL THE PULL OF THE GRAND CYCLE,

TO DENY IT IS TO...

SUFFER!

SO WHO ARE YOU?

MY OLD NAME IS OIZYS, SISTER TO DEATH

BUT YOU MAY CALL ME AS SO MANY OTHERS DO...

MISERY!

RIGHT... FIGURES.

YOU SEEM... UNFAZED

I'VE HAD A VERY STRANGE YEAR.

OH, I KNOW.

I'VE BEEN LISTENING TO YOUR STORY FOR SO LONG NOW...

QUITE THE TALE YET DIFFERENT EVERY TIME YOU TOLD IT

AND EVERY TIME... LACKING.

HIDING THE BEST PARTS UNDER ALL THIS...

MESS.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN MY STORY IS DIFFERENT EVERY TIME I TELL IT?

I HAVEN'T BEEN TELLING MY STORY TO ANYONE?

OF COURSE YOU HAVE.

THAT'S ALL THE DEAD DO.

SUCH IS THE NATURE OF THIS PLACE... HERE AT THESE SHORES OF FINAL CONTEMPLATIONS THE DEAD REMEMBER FOR THE LAST TIME.

AH...

AND THEN WHAT?

THEN YOU SWIM, UNTIL ALL YOUR BURDENS ARE GONE, AND YOU ARE MADE ANEW

BUT I SUPPOSE THAT'S NOT AN OPTION FOR YOU RIGHT NOW

IN FACT I'M SORRY TO SAY, YOU ARE IN QUITE A BIT OF TROUBLE RIGHT NOW. BURDENED AS YOU ARE YOU WON'T BE ABLE TO CROSS, AND A SOUL CAN'T LINGER INDEFINITELY.

STAY HERE LONG ENOUGH AND YOU WILL START DROWNING IN ANGUISH

IT IS ABSOLUTELY DREADFUL!

RIGHT...

CAN I BORROW ONE OF THOSE KNIVES?

OH NO.

THEY HAVE NO EDGE TO CUT, JUST A POINT TO STAB WITH

HOW BOUT YOU? SMUGGLE IN A PAIR OF SCISSORS?

CAN'T SPEAK?

MAYBE YOU JUST DON'T KNOW HOW TO LISTEN?

ANYHOW, THAT ONE IS JUST ANOTHER POOR SOULD STRUGGLING WITH THEIR LAST ATTACHMENT

NOTHING AS SERIOUS AS YOUR SITUATION THOUGH...

YEAH...

SO HOW DO I BREAK THESE?

THAT'S THE REAL QUESTION ISN'T IT?

USUALLY THE THIN ONES SHED ON THEIR OWN, LAST ONES THAT REMAINA RE USUALLY THOSE REPRESENTING LOVED ONES...

BUT TANGLED UP AS THEY ARE, THEY FEED INTO EACH OTHER STRENTHENING THE WEAVE...

SO I UNTANGLE THEM?

UNTANGLE? PERHAPS...

BUT PULLING ON THESE THREADS IS A MESSY BUSINESS...

YOU SEE, AT THE OTHER END OF THOSE STRINGS IS ANOTHER ONE'S SOUL, WITH ALL ITS SECRETS

THEN AGAIN, YOU HAD A GLIMPSE OF IT ALREADY AND YOU DIDN'T FLINCH

SO CARRY ON!

BE CURIOUS!

BE HUMAN!

PICK A THREAD!

AND PULL IT!

OKAY, CALM DOWN, MOUTH OF SAURON!

YOU GOT THAT, HUH?

OKAY THEN... PICK A THREAD...

AND PULL

OH YES!

WHAT A LOVELY CHOICE!

Chapter 16

The failure

I HAVE A LONG MEMORY

UNLIKE HUMANS I REMEMBER MY BIRTH

WAIT, NO. THAT'S A LIE.

I DON'T REMEMBER MY BIRTH ITSELF, AS I WAS STILLBORN

I REMEMBER THE MOMENT I WAS FORCIBLY AWAKENED AS MY MOTHER EXPOSED ME TO THE DIVINE FLOW

THAT WAS ALSO THE FIRST TIME THAT I SAW THE STRINGS...

WHAT WILL YOU NAME THE CHILD?

MERRYLIA...

KEEP IN MIND, MATRON, EXPOSING THE CHILD TO THE YEARNING FLOW SO YOUNG... IT MIGHT CAUSE PROBLEMS WITH ITS DEVELOPMENT

WE WILL CROSS THAT BRIDGE WHEN WE COME TO IT.

IT WAS A COMPLICATED BIRTH. I WAS THE ONLY CHILD OF THE ALARIS FAMILY BIRTHED BY HER...

I CAUSED HER GREAT PAIN.

EVER SINCE THEN I THOUGHT SHE HAD RESENTED ME FOR THIS.

PLEASE, TAKE HER TO THE NURSERY. I NEED TO RECOVER

BECAUSE THE SMILE SHE GAVE ME WHEN I FIRST SAW HER WAS THE LAST SMILE I WOULD SEE FROM THERE ON

IT'S FUNNY HOW MUCH THAT FIRST AND LAST SMILE OF HERS AFFECTS ME STILL..

HOW IT HURTS ME THAT I NEVER EARNED ANOTHER...

HUMANS OFTEN SPEAK OF UNHEALTHY SUPRESSION OF FEELINGS AND PSYCHOLOGICAL AND EMOTIONAL HEALTH.... AND THERE ARE DAYS WHEN I THINK THEY MAY BE ONTO SOMETHING

WHO KNOWS. MAYBE ALL OF MY KIND ARE JUST EMOTIONALLY STUNTED...

AFTER ALL, WE'RE LIVING IN A CONSTANT STATE OF EMOTIONAL CELIBACY THAT MAKES US CLING ON TO ANY SCRAP OFAPPROVAL WHEN LOVE IS SO THOROUGHLYABSENT...

MAYBE THAT IS WHY I STILL HAVEN'T EATEN THE AMBROSIA SHE GAVE ME....

SIGH... MAYBE I'M JUST NOT CUT OUT FOR THIS GODDESS THING AT ALL.

I MEAN, I KINDA SUCKED AT IT FROM THE BEGINNING.

BACK THEN ALLURIA AND MARCUS WERE ON THEIR WAY TO GRADUATING TO THE POSITION OF CALLERS,

EVEN ALTHEO WHO WENT AGAINST THE GRAIN AND PICKED THE PATH OF A SCHOLAR AT LEAST HAD A PATH CHOSEN...

MEANWHILE I WAS TERRIBLE AT WEAVING DESIRE SO MY ONLY OPTIONS WERE BUREAUCRACY AND WORKING DIRECTLY UNDER MY MOTHER... OR I COULD TRY BECOMING A SEER.

SINCE THE FIST OPTION TERRIFIED ME, I WENT WITH THE SECOND ONE...

UNFORTUNATELY I COULDN'T EVEN DO THAT RIGHT.

NOW, I WANT EACH OF YOU TO OBSERVE THESE STREAMS AND IDENTIFY ONES WITH SUFFICIENTLY PURE DIVINE DESIRE.

IT WAS MY EYES... SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITH THEM

BECAUSE WHERE OTHERS CLEARLY SAW STREAMS, ELEGANT AND FOCUSED... I SAW AN EXPLOSION OF LIGHT AND COLORS.

TURNS OUIT I WAS KINDA POINTLESS... AND THAT WAS A VERY BAD THING.,

IN A SOCIETY DRIVEN BY PURPOSE HAVING NONE WAS DANGEROUS

I REMEMBER MY PARENTS GLANCING LOOKS AS THEY SPOKE IN HUSHED TONES WITH MY TEACHER.

IN THE END MY MOTHER FIXED IT BY CALLING UPON A FAVOR FROM AN OLD FRIEND WHO CRAFTED ME A PAIR OF GLASSES TO SUBDUE THE GLARE THAT AT TIMES THREATHENED TO BLIND ME.

AND SO, ONCE AGAIN I WAS A BURDEN UPON HER....

AND YET... I WAS STRANGELY HAPPY.

THE FACT THAT SHE WENT THROUGH THE EFFORT TO HELP ME... IT MEANT THAT MAYBE SHE SAY SOMETHING WORTHWHILE IN ME.

OR SHE WANTED TO AVOID FURTHER FAMILY EMBARASSMENT BY HAVING A PURPOSELESS DAUGHTER...

IN ANY CASE, I WASN'T ABOUT TO GIVE UP, THAT DAY I DECIDED I I WOULD GET BETTER. I WOULD EARN MY PLACE. IN A WORLD WHERE YOUR PARENTS CAN'T LOVE YOU, I WOULD MAKE THEM PROUD!

WHAT'S THAT OLD SAYING?

MAN PLANS GOD LAUGHS?

SIGH

IT DOESN'T GET MUCH BETTER WITH DIVINE PLANS EITHER... I WOULD KNOW...

WE CAN PUT THE GEAR HERE FOR NOW AND---

OH, HEY, MERRYL! YOU ON A BREAK?

YEAH. I'M DONE THO, YOU CAN HAVE THE ROOM

AWESOME! WE'RE HAULING IN SOME STUFF FOR THE SHOW.

BY THE WAY SOME WOMAN WAS LOOKING FOR YOU. I TOLD HER TO WAIT AT THE BAR.

IF IT WAS LAURA I'D SAY LAURA. I NEVER MET THIS ONE.

IS IT LAURA?

RIGHT. FAIR POINT.

HEY, ALAN!

'SUP!

OH HEY, DID ANNE TELL YOU...

SHE DID. THO I HAVE NO IDEA WHO'D COME ASKING FOR ME HERE...

YEAH. I DON'T KNOW HER BUT YOU CAN'T MISS HER. LOOKS LIKE A TALLER FRIENDLIER ASHE.

A TALLER FRIENDLIER ASHE?

OH NO!

FINALLY!

THERE'S MY DEAR LITTLE SISTER!

OKAY, SWEETIES, I NEED SOME PRIVACY WITH MY SISTER SO I'D BE VERY PLEASED IF YOU COULD SCATTER

THANK YOU MY DARLINGS!

SIT WITH ME, MERYLLIA.

SEEING MY SISTER AT THE CRIMSON LIKE THAT... WELL... IT WAS PANIC INDUCING

WE NEVER HAD... WHAT HUMANS WOULD CAL A NURTURING RELATIONSHIP. DURING MY EDUCATION SHE WAS ENDLESSLY CRITICAL.

DURING MY INTERNSHIP IN MY MOTHER'S DEPARTMENT I WAS HER PERSONAL ERRAND GIRL...

IN FACT, I FEARED HER AS MUCH AS I FEARED MY MOTHER WITH THE ADDED BONUS THAT ALLURIA SMILED EVEN LESS.

WHICH MADE THIS SPECIFIC MOMENT EXTREMELY UNSETTLING.

HAH! MERRYLIA, YOU LOOK STIFFER THAN MY FIRST CUSTOMER!

RELAX, I JUST WANT TO TALK!

UH----HUH.

OH COME NOW, WHAT'S WITH THE FACE?

I DON'T KNOW WHAT'S WITH YOU BEING NICE. THAT SCARES ME MORE THAN YOUR USUAL MOOD...

WELL I SUPPOSE I HAVE BEEN A BIT HARSH ON YOU OVER THE YEARS BUT YOU CAN'T DENY MY REASONING.

YOU ARE A GRANDCHILD OF OF THE GREAT NIGHT!

BUT MORE THAN THAT YOU ARE...

I'M AN ALARIS AND I SHOULD...

ACT LIKE ONE EXACTLY. BUT RECENTLY I CAME TO A REALIZATION.

YOU HAVE BEEN ACTING LIKE ONE

AH. THERE'S THE ALLURIA I KNOW.

I MEAN IT. I MISJUDGED YOU.

EVER SINCE CALE'S CONTRACT I SAW ALL THE SCORN TOWARDS OUR FAMILY AND OUR MOTHERS DEFENDING YOU AND I THOUGHT THERE THEY GO COVERING UP FOR HER INCOMPETENCE

MERRYLIA,
I SWEAR IT ON NYX, I AM NOT HERE TO MOCK YOU.

THEN WHY DID YOU COME?

I HEARD OF THE NEW CONTRACT AND OF THE COMPLICATIONS WITH IT...

HEY! THAT WAS NOT...

IT WASN'T YOUR FAULT, AND I UNDERSTAND THAT NOW.

Y-YOU DO?

THE PROBLEM WAS NEVER THE CONTRACTS, IT WAS THE CALLERS HANDLING THEM.

MERRYL, THESE ARE NOT ORDINARY HUMANS. THEIR DESIRE IS DIFFERENT. NUANCED IT NEEDS A SKILLFUL TOUCH. SOMETHING FAR BEYOND THE REACH OF CLUMSY SLOPPY CALLERS LIKE CALE OR THADEUS OR...

...

OTHERS...

WELL... ANYWAYS. I WANT YOU TO KNOW THAT I AM HERE TO HELP.

HELP WITH WHAT?

APPARENTLY SO SINCE YOU KNOW ABOUT IT.

THE PROBLEM WITH THE GOLDEN CONTRACT!

THIS HAS TO BE RESOLVED FAST! THE NEWS ABOUT IT IS INEVITABLY GOING TO SPREAD. IDLE GODS' GOSSIP GETS AROUND...

YES, WELL I AM NOT YOUR PROBLEM, MERRYLIA. LUCIFER IS! SOONER OR LATER ALL OF THIS WILL REACH HIM

WHEN IT DOES HE WILL INEVITABLY PRESSURE OUR MOTHER TO FURTHER EXCOMUNICATE YOU.

OH...

WAIT WHAT DO YOU MEAN FURTHER EXCOMUNICATE?

WELL... LOOK AT THIS PLACE.

WHAT ABOUT IT?

DON'T KNOW WHAT?

YOU REALLY DON'T KNOW?

YOU WERE DEMOTED TO COVER A FETISH CLUB.

HEY, I ALSO WORK IN A SEX SHOP!

A... SEX SHOP...

YEAH, MOTHER DIDN'T KNOW WHAT IT IS, EITHER.

OH I KNOW WHAT IT IS!

I'M JUST CONFUSED WHY YOU'D DO THAT?

YOU TRY PAYING NEW YORK RENT WITH THE CASTE'S ALLOWANCE.

ALSO, WHAT DO YOU MEAN I WAS DEMOTED?

YEAH?

YOU WERE INITIALLY ASSIGNED A BOOKSTORE, RIGHT?

AND WHY DO WE PLACE SEERS IN BOOKSTORES AND LIBRARIES?

SIGH... BECAUSE HUMANS OFTEN USE FICTION AS A LIGHTNING ROD FOR THEIR DESIRES.

EXACTLY. BOOKS ARE LIKE A SPARK TO THEIR KINDLING. IT MAKES THEM SHINE. MAKES THE WORTHY ONES EASY TO FIND!

OKAY, SO WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PLACE OR THE SEX SHOP FOR THAT MATTER?

HOW MANY CONTRACTS DID YOU FIND IN THESE TWO PLACES?

I...

UHHHH...

FOUR? NO WAIT... SHIT... YEAH, IT WAS FOUR.

NO, ACTUALLY TWO WERE REFUSED SO... I GUESS TWO

OH...

YES. PEOPLE WHO VISIT SEX SHOPS ARE OFTEN THERE ON A WHIM, THEIR DESIRE IS UNFOCUSED. A VAGUE IDEA OF SEXUAL GRATIFICATION THROUGH THE USE OF TOYS OR MOVIES OR WHAT NOT. IN THE END, THEY DON'T EVEN WANT TO BE THERE.

OKAY BUT THESE PEOPLE WANT TO BE HERE.

MERRYLIA, THESE PEOPLE ARE FETISHISTS.

SO?

FETISHISTS ARE HUMANS WITH FOCUSED REFINED DESIRE, SHOULDN'T THAT MAKE IT EASIER?

NO. THAT MAKES IT DIFFICULT...

THEIR DESIRE IS... HOW DO I PUT THIS...

UNYIELDING...

CALCIFIED?

MORE OFTEN THAN NOT,A BOOK READER'S DESIRE IS PLIANT, FLEXIBLE. EASY TO WEAVE. WHILE THEY GENERALLY HAVE AN IDEA OF WHAT THEY WANT, THEY ARE ALSO OPEN TO GUIDANCE

A FETISHIST ON THE OTHER HAND KNOWS EXACTLY WHAT THEY WANT AND IN THE SPECIFIC WAY THEY WANT IT DONE. THEIR DESIRE IS LIKE... WEAVING A STEEL CABLE

IT CAN BE DONE BUT IT'S JUST... DIFFICULT.

THEY NEVER TOLD ME THAT.

I SUPPOSE NOT. I THINK THEY ARE HOPING WE MIGHT FIND ANOTHER ONE LIKE OUR MOTHER'S GOLDEN CONTRACT. THAT ONE WAS A FETISHIST AFTER ALL.

POINT IS, THIS, ALL OF THIS IS LUCIFER'S PAYBACK. AN ALARIS REDUCED TO WORK THE LOWLIEST OF JOBS AND YET HERE YOU ARE. RISING ABOVE IT ALL, IN THIS BARREN SOIL YOU ONCE AGAIN FOUND A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH

I AM PROUD OF YOU, SISTER.

THERE IT WAS... THE ONE THING I WANTED TOHEAR ALL MY LIFE, BECAUSE WHEN LOVE IS NOT AN OPTION THIS WAS THE CLOSEST THING TO IT

AND OF ALL PEOPLE TO HEAR IT FROM ALLURIA...

SO WHAT DO YOU SUGGEST?

INTRODUCE ME TO THE CLIENT. LET ME CLAIM THE CONTRACT.

I CAN FULFILL IT. AND REDEEM YOU IN THE EYES OF THE HIGH CASTE! THE TWO OF US TOGETHER WILL RAISE THE NAME OF ALARIS TO NEW HEIGHTS AND MAKE OUR MOTHERS PROUD

AH...

THERE IT IS...

HONESTLY I WASN'T EVEN SURPRISED.

IN FACT I APPRECIATED THE HONESTY.

AND SHE WAS RIGHT. IF SHE WAS THE ONE TO FULFILL THE CONTRACT IT WOULD DO WONDERS FOR THE ALARIS NAME...

AND PLUS, WHAT DID I CARE? WHO WAS LAUREN THOMAS TO ME?

AFTER ALL SHE WAS THE ONE WHO REFUSED TO MAKE A CHOICE!

SHE WAS THE CAUSE OF ALL OF THIS....

FINE, I'LL DO IT.

IT WAS THE SMART CHOICE...

BUT IF IT WAS SUCH A SMART CHOICE, WHY DID I FEEL THIS GUILT?

DONE FOR THE NIGHT, MERRYL?

YEAH. I'M FEELING A BIT OFF. JIM WILL COVER MY SHIFT!

NO... NOT GUILT

Crimson

SOMETHING ELSE.

SOMETHING INTANGIBLE...

PULLING ON ME

THIS DECISION TO HELP ALLURIA FEELS HEAVY...

IT FEELS...

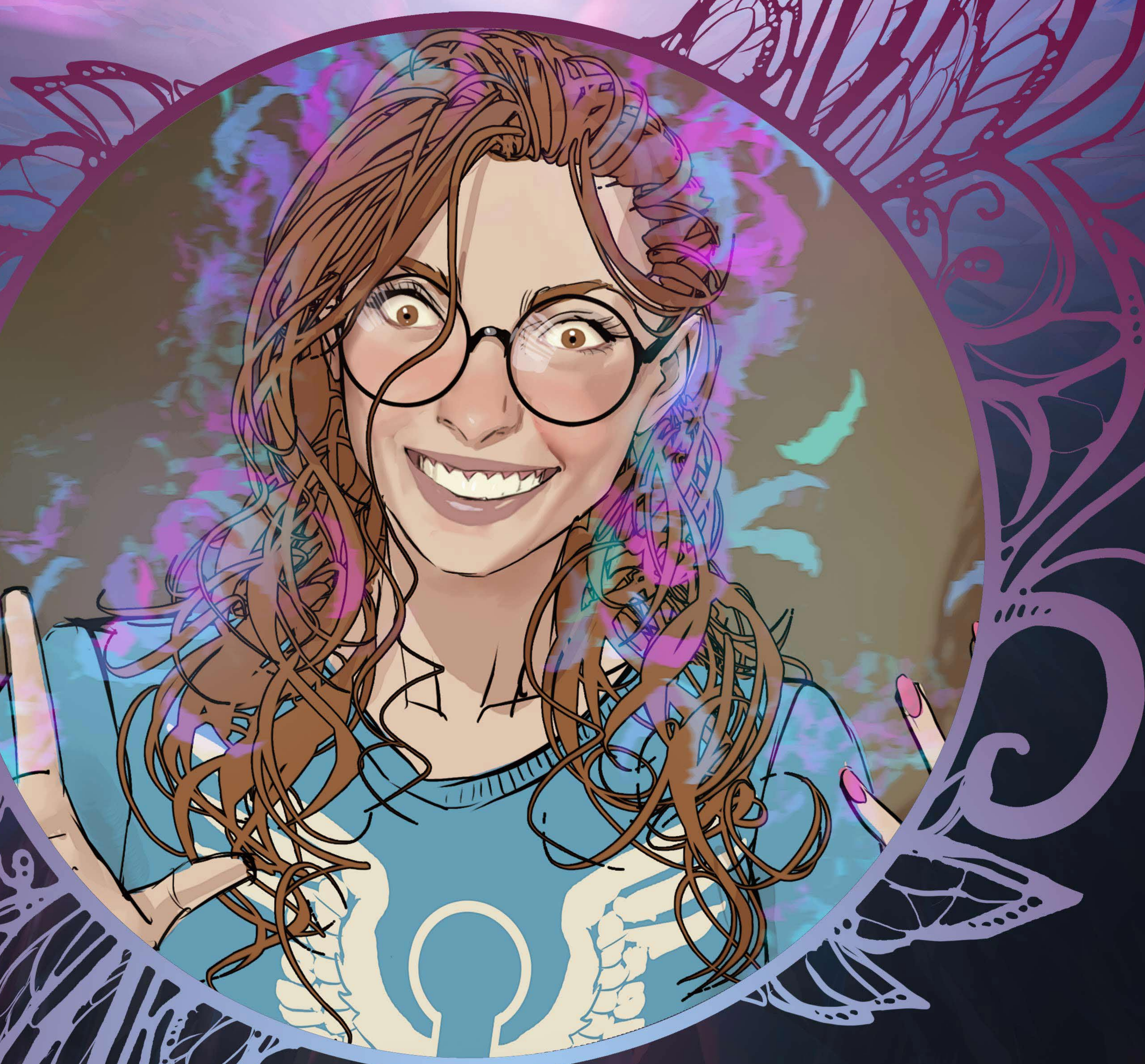
DESTINED...

AND JUST LIKE THAT...

THE STRINGS WERE BACK...

Chapter 17

The shimmer




A WEEK HAD PASSED SINCE THAD'S... DIVINE INTERVENTION. THE BUTTERFLIES WERE GONE...
BUT WHEN I WOKE UP ON THAT SEVENTH DAY, I SAW THE LIGHTS
FLICKERS OF PRISMATIC SHADES TRAILING OUT FROM ME
A GORGEOUS SHIMMER AKIN TO THAT I SAW AROUND THE GODS

ONLY A FEW TIMES IN MY LIFE HAVE I FELT SO MOTIVATED.... SO ENERGIZED! SO ALIVE!!!

IT FELT... MAGICAL.

NO...

NOT THE RIGHT WORD!

IT FELT DIVINE!

HOWEVER AS HOURS HOURS PASSED AND THE NOVELTY OF IT WORE OFF A MORE PRAGMATIC THOUGHT PREOCCUPIED MY MIND

COULD OTHER PEOPLE SEE THIS SHIMMER AS WELL?

SURELY NOT. IT WAS PROBABLY SIMILAR TO OTHER DIVINE STUFF... BUT STILL

I NEEDED TO TEST IT OUT.

TRUE, I COULD HAVE JUST SUMMONED EITHER OF MY... SUITOR GODS BUT LET'S JUST SAY IT WAS THE WRONG TIME OF THE MONTH AND CALLING THEM JUST TO ANSWER A QUESTION SEEMED EQUAL PARTS WASTEFUL AND RUDE...

SO INSTEAD... I IMPROVISED.

OH YES, AND EXTRA PEPPERS ON IT. THANK YOU!

OKAY, HERE GOES NOTHING.

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

OH, HEY, SORRY BOUT THE LIGHT SHOW,

WHAT LIGHT SHOW?

UH, NEVERMIND!

THAT MY PIZZA?

YUP!

YOU VEGGIE WITH EXTRA PEPPERS?

THEN THIS IS YOURS

SLICE-O-TASTY

RIGHT! HERE YOU GO! KEEP THE CHANGE.

THANKS!

PIZZA

UH... WANT ME TO LEAVE IT ON THE FLOOR?

NO... WAIT!

IT WAS A SPUR OF THE MOMENT DECISION. HE DIDN'T SEEM TO NOTICE THE SHIMMER SO I FIGURED MAY AS WELL GO ALL IN ON MY LITTLE TEST

IN FOR A PENNY IN FOR A POUND AS THEY SAY.

AND JUST FOR A MOMENT I THOUGHT I MADE A BIG MISTAKE.

SLICE-O-TASTY

COULD HE ACTUALLY SEE IT?

UH...

I CONSIDERED SLAMMING THE DOORS SHUT...

BUT THEN THE STRANGEST THING HAPPENNED

I NEVER IMAGINED I WAS GONNA BE DELIVERING PIZZAS!

I'M A FUCKING PROGRAMMER!

I WANT NOTHING MORE THAN TO DO THAT BUT I'M FRESH OUT OF COLLEGE SO FINDING A JOB I'S A NIGHTMARE. EVERY ENTRY PAID POSITION IS LIKE NEED THREE TO FIVE YEARS OF WORK EXPERIENCE

RIGHT.

I MEAN IT'S AN ENTRY LEVEL POSITION!

WHY THE FUCK DOES THAT REQUIRE FIVE YEARS OF EXPERIENCE???

MAYBE I SHOULD JSUT GO ONLINE, FIND SOME PEOPLE LIKE ME AND WE COULD START OUR OWN THING?

UH... MAYBE?

YEAH! FUCK IT! I'M GOING FOR IT! THANK YOU!

UH... SURE!

BUT... I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING?

AND IT DIDN'T STOP THERE

I WASN'T NEW TO STRANGERS STARTING UP CONVERSATIONS WITH ME...

SOMETIMES I FOUND IT CHARMING

HEY, UH... ARE YOU OKAY?

YEAH WHY?

IT'S JUST... I SWEAR I WASN'T TRYING TO STARE BUT IT'S LATE AND YOU'RE A GORGEOUS WOMAN STARING AT AN EMPTY GLASS. TRUTH IS I KINDA DO THAT WHEN I'M FEELING DOWN OR I COULD BE WAY OFF BASE SO, UH... I'LL JUST LEAVE YOU BE.

OR YOU CAN BUY ME ANOTHER DRINK AND THE GLASS WILL NO LONGER BE EMPTY.

AT OTHER TIMES... NOT SO CHARMING

I'VE BEEN WATCHING YOU FOR A WHILE AND THINKING THIS IS IF SHE LOST THE GLASSES SHE'D BE A PURE TEN!

SORRY, WHAT?

OH I MEAN IT AS A COMPLIMENT!

WE'RE LEAVING.

THIS HOWEVER WAS VERY DIFFERENT.

WHEREVER I WENT PEOPLE WOULD RANDOMLY START TALKING TO ME TELLING ME ABOUT THEIR HOPES AND DREAMS

GOING ON AND ON ABOUT THEIR DESIRES...

SO EVERYONE KEPT TELLING ME IT WAS A BAD IDEA...

AND AFTER A WHILE, IT ALL GOT A BIT RIDICULOUS

...AND I JUST WANTED TO CLIMB...

OH FOR FUCK SAKE, LADY! I'M ON THE TOILET!

A FEW DAYS LATER WITH NO CHANGE IN SIGHT I DECIDE IT WAS TIME TO TURN TO SOME PROFESSIONAL HELP

OKAY...

WHAT'S WRONG WITH ME???

ALTHOUGH "PROFESSIONAL" MAY BE A BIT OF A STRONG WORD.

WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?

NOTHING MISS THOMAS, YOU ARE ABSOLUTELY AMAZING!

OH MY GOD CAN YOU STOP BUTTERING ME UP FOR LIKE A MINUTE? I'M SERIOUS!

OKAY? SURE!

WHAT SEEMS TO BE THE PROBLEM?

WHAT SEEMS TO BE... LOOK AT ME!

I'M COVERED IN MAGICAL STRIPPER DANDRUFF! AND HONESTLY THAT'S NOT EVEN THE ANNOYING PART!

OKAY?

I'M ALSO BEING CONSTANTLY APPROACHED BY RANDOM PEOPLE REALLY FUCKING EAGER TO TELL ME ABOUT THEIR DESIRES HOPES AND DREAMS

I MEAN, DON'T GET ME WRONG, AT FIRST IT WAS KINDA CHARMING SEEING ALL THE ENTHUSIASM, BUT BELIEVE ME THE NOVELTY HAS WORN OFF BY NOW.

UH---- HUH

WELL???

WHAT'S WITH ALL THESE PEOPLE SUDDENLY CONFIDING IN ME?

OH, UM, THEY ARE PROBABLY RESPONDING TO YOUR INSPIRING PRESENCE

OH MY GOD CAN YOU JUST TALK LIKE A PERSON!?

I'M SORRY, I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY!

PEOPLE LIKE YOU ARE RARE, SPECIAL!

SIGH... JUST WHEN I THOUGHT YOU WOULD DROP THE POINTLESS FLATTERY

IT'S NOT FLATTERY!

WE'VE ONLY EVER FULFILLED THREE GOLDEN CONTRACTS IN ALL THE YEARS WE'VE BEEN DOING THIS,

TRUTH IS... I DON'T KNOW. IF I HAD TO GUESS, YOUR SEED HAS AWAKENED AND THERE ARE SOME SIDEEFFECTS... A... DESIRE SPILL...

KINDA LIKE... A DESIRE SWEAT!

WOW

WHAT?

THAT'S YOUR BEST METAPHOR?

YOU GOT A BETTER ONE?

I DON'T KNOW, HOW ABOUT THE FIRE OF DESIRE BURNS SO BRIGHT WITHIN YOU THAT YOUR BODY CAN NO LONGER HIDE ITS FLICKERING EMBERS?

OOOH... YEAH THAT'S GOOD. LET'S GO WITH THAT

YOU'RE PRETTY GOOD AT THIS.

I DON'T MEAN IT IN AN ASSKISSING WAY. JUST...

IT WAS A LOVELY DESCRIPTION AND YOU CAME UP WITH IT JUST LIKE THAT

EH I'M PROBABLY PARAPHRASING SOME BOOK...

I WAS AN AVID READER IN MY TEENS... EVEN DREAMED OF BEING A LIBRARIAN ONE DAY.

WHY DIDN'T YOU?

OH RIGHT, YOU REALLY CARE ABOUT THAT....

I MEAN... I DON'T KNOW. IT'S NOT THAT I CARE, IT'S MORE THAT I RARELY EVER GET TO HAVE A CONVERSATION WITH MY CONTRACT HOLDERS THAT GOES FURTHER THAN, WHICH HOLE ARE WE FILLING UP TODAY

HEH... FAIR.

AS FOR YOUR QUESTION... LIFE GOT IN THE WAY.

THE CHASE FOR A CAREER... FOR FAME...

AND I PAID DEARLY FOR THAT CHASE. LOST MY LOVE TRYING TO CLIMB TO THE TOP OF A MOUNTAIN I DIDN'T EVEN LIKE ANYMORE...

MMH...

I... UH... CAN'T RELATE.

RIGHT... YOU GUYS DON'T DO LOVE.

THERE WAS A TIME I WOULD HAVE CONSIDERED THAT SAD...

NOW I JUST ENVY YOU...

BUT HEY!

ON THE BRIGHTER NOTE, I LIKE YOU MUCH BETTER THIS WAY.

THE OUTFIT?

THE PERSONALITY.

THE ASSKISSING REALLY WASN'T DOING IT FOR YOU?

YOU WERE MORE FAKE THAN A SUPERMODEL ON A COCKTAIL PARTY. AND I WOULD KNOW, I WAS A SUPERMODEL ON A COCKTAIL PARTY.

LOOKING AT THIS PLACE...

FASHION INDUSTRY FELL ON SOME HARD TIMES I PRESUME?

NO... JUST ME.

LELIAH...

YOU WANNA GO OUT FOR SOME DRINKS?

UH.... WE ARE FORBIDDEN WHEN ON DUTY

PRETTY SURE I MENTIONED THAT BEFORE.

YEAH... I GET IT. IT'S JUST, I GOT THIS FRIEND... BEST FRIEND, BUT SHE'S AWAY AND... I JUST REALLY FEEL LIKE GOING OUT AND GETTING SOME DRINKS

BUT IT'S FINE IF YOU CAN'T.

I GUESS I COULD DRINK SOME...

UGH... VIRGIN COCKTAILS.

WHAT ABOUT YOUR... FLICKERING FLAMES OF DESIRE

YOU'LL PROBABLY STILL ATTRACT RANDOM PEOPLE LIKE THAT.

OH RIGHT... CAN'T YOU LIKE... I DUNNO... DO THE THING YOU DID WHEN I GOT THAT ENTANGLEMENT?

WOULD THAT DO ANYTHING?

UNFORTUNATELY, NO. AN ENTANGLEMENT IS JUST THAT... ENERGIES ENTANGLED

THIS IS AN ENERGY OVERFLOW....

BUT... OH!

COME TO THINK IF IT, THERE IS SOMETHING WE CAN TRY!

I COULD FOCUS IT WITHIN YOU BUT THERE'S A CATCH...

WHAT?

WELL, ONCE FOCUSED IT WILL BE GIVEN A MORE SPECIFIC PURPOSE

SO WHAT DO YOU PREFER? BEING OVERLY COMMITTED TO WHATEVER YOU FOCUS ON, CRAVING FOOD, CRAVING DRINKS, OR BEING HORNY AS FUCK?



HOWY FUWK!

KETCH

I CAN'T BELIEVE I'M SAYING THIS BUT THE SECOND ONE TASTES EVEN BETTER!

I'M GLAD... BUT I'LL BE HONEST THIS WAS NOT THE CHOICE I THOUGHT YOU WOULD MAKE

HEY, YOU PROMISED ME I COULD INDULGE ONE OF MY CHOICES TO THE FULLEST. THE WAY I SEE IT I DON'T NEED THE SHIMMER TO GET SATISFIED BY YOU, AS YOU GOT THE HORNY BIT WELL COVERED.

ON THE FLIPSIDE, I HAVEN'T EATEN SO GUILT FREE IN YEARS. FUCK, MOST OF MY LIFE!

BIG CHUNK

WHEN I WAS A KID I HAD THESE GARDENING TOOL TEETH THAT MADE ME FEEL EMBARASSED TO EAT IN FRONT OF PEOPLE

EVEN WHEN I GOT OLDER IT TOOK YEARS BEFORE I GOT USED TO THE FACT THAT I GOT MY TEETH FIXED

AND THEN I BECAME A MODEL AND FROM THERE ON PEOPLE AROUND ME MADE IT THEIR BUSINESS TO MAKE ME FEEL GUILTY FOR EATING ALL THE TIME, COUNTING EVERY CALLORY!!! I STILL HAVE ISSUES WITH EATING IN PUBLIC... ALWAYS GOT THIS FEELING PEOPLE ARE JUDGING MY EVERY BITE...

WORST PART IS IT'S JUST AS BAD AT HOME... A FEW DAYS AGO WHEN I WAS TRYING TO FIGURE OUT THIS WHOLE SHIMMER THING, I ORDERED A PIZZA

I THREW THE WHOLE DAMNED THING AWAY....

FUCKING PATETHIC...

BUT HEY, I'M ABOUT TO FINISH MY SECOND BURGER SO I'LL ENJOY THIS MOMENT AT LEAST!

SO WHAT ABOUT YOU?

ME?

YEAH! ANY SECRET CRAVINGS YOU CAN'T INDULGE IN IN FRONT OF THE OTHERS?

UH...

WHAT WAS THAT?

WHAWASWHAT?

YOU FLINCHED

WHAAA---

NO, IT'S NOTHING JUST... YKNOW, IT'S A SILLY QUESTION, I'M A GODDESS OF DESIRE, ALL MY DESIRES ARE IN THE OPEN AND I INDULGE IN THEM ANY WAY I FEEL LIKE

MUST BE NICE... MEANWHILE EVEN NOW, HOPPED UP ON THAT SHIMMER I'M LOOKING AT THIS FOOD AND A PART OF ME IS THINKING, I'M GONNA BE STRESSING OUT OUT ABOUT IT IN THE MORNING.

WELL... YOU COULD... OR YOU COULD SIMPLY BURN ALL OF THIS OFF IN FUN CONSTRUCTIVE WAYS

UH... *GULP*

YEAH, UM... JUST OBLITERATED TWO LARGE BURGERS!

I'M WAAAY TOO STUFFED TO GET STUFFED RIGHT NOW.

I WAS TALKING ABOUT DANCING YOU SLUT!

GET YOUR MIND OUT OF THE GUTTER!

OH MY GOD SO YOUR REAL PERSONALITY IS A SASSY BITCH!

STILL PREFER IT OVER THE ASSKISSING?

DEFINITELY!

ALSO THANK YOU! THE SHIMMER IS ALL GONE NOW.

SEE! I'M JUST BETTER THAN THADEUS. IN EVERY WAY!

WEEEL, I DON'T KNOW. HE DID HELP WITH MY PUKING BUTTERFLIES ISSUE

I'M SORRY PUKING WHAT NOW?

CHEERS!

CHEERS!

SO I'VE BEEN MEANING TO ASK THE WHOLE FETISHWEAR LOOK YOU AND. THAD AND... UH BOFFIT?

BAUPHETTE.

YEAH HER. IS THAT LIKE A UNIFORM FOR YOU GUYS?

IT'S A GLAMOUR. JUST ONE OF MANY WE USED OVER TIME. THIS ONE JUST SEEMS TO BE EFFECTIVE THESE DAYS.

AH... FAIR.

SPEAKING OF GLAMOURS, I NOTICED YOURS IS KINDA SIMILAR TO BAUPHETTE TODAY

WELL, I MEAN MY JOB IS TO FULFILL YOUR FANTASIES, AND I SAW HOW YOU WERE STARING AT HER

HEY NOW! IN MY DEFENSE I WAS HORNY OUT OF MY MIND BECAUSE OF THE SEED AND...

WELL, SHE WAS... INTIMIDATINGLY HOT

AND... UH...

OKAY, WAS I LIKE, HALLUCINATING OR DOES SHE HAVE A MASSIVE...

YKNOW

ONLY WHEN SHE'S PROPERLY PISSED OFF.

REALLY?

THAT'S THE RUMOR AT LEAST.

DAMN! SO I GAVE HER A LITERAL RAGE BONER.

SCARY.

OH SCARY MY ASS! I SAW THE WAY YOU WERE STARING AT IT! IF SHE GAVE YOU A CHANCE YOU WOULD HAVE HUMPED THE ANGER ISSUES OUT OF HER THEN AND THERE.

HAH! YOU BITCH!

YOU BETTER BELIEVE IT! NOW COME ON, ENOUGH DRINKING LET'S HIT THE FLOOR.

I MEANT WHAT I SAID... I LIKED HER THAT WAY...

WILD... RUDE....

A BAD INFLUENCE!

A DEVIL FOR MY SHOULDER PROMISING DELIGHTS AND WHISPERING MISHIEF

AND THEN AND THERE SWEATY AND BREATHLESS, A MISCHIEVOUS THOUGHT ENTERS MY MIND

AN EXCITING DANGEROUS THOUGHT...

SHE COULD TAKE ME! RIGHT HERE ON THIS DANCE FLOOR! AND I WOULD LET HER!

SUCH A CRAZY THOUGHT...

SUCH A SECRET DIRTY THOUGH I COULD NEVER...

VERY WELL, LAUREN.

V-- VERY WELL WHAT?

I WILL FULFILL YOUR DESIRE!

WH-- WHAT? LELIAH, WHAT ARE YOU--- THEY'LL... THEY'LL SEE US!

THEY WILL SEE ONLY WHAT I LET THEM SEE!

I COULD HAVE YOU, RIGHT HERE, RIGHT NOW ON THIS DANCE FLOOR

AND NONE OF THEM WOULD KNOW!

SEE!? HERE YOU ARE! NAKED IN FRONT OF THEM ALL! AN EMPRESS WITH NO CLOTHES, AND YET NONE OF THEM NOTICES IT

DOESN'T THAT MAKE YOU FEEL POSITIVELY MISCHIEVOUS

MY ... MY HEART IS POUNDING

IT'S THE MUSIC OF LIFE

WHAT DO YOU SAY, LAUREN?

SHALL WE DANCE TO ITS RYTHM?

I... YES!

LET'S!

AND SO WE DID!

IN A SPLIT SECOND A CHARGE RUNS THROUGH HER TAIL AND BY ITS MERE TOUCH I AMCONNECTED TO THAT ENERGY OF PURE BLISS

AND AT THE SAME TIME AS IF THROUGH SOME OUTER BODY EXPERIENCE I SEE THE ILLUSION WHE WEAVES FOR ALL AROUND US.

SHE SHOWS THEM A DANCE, AS WILD AS IT IS ENCHANTING AND SOON ALL EYES ARE ON US

WATCHING US...

ADMIRING US...

CHEERING US ON AS WE DANCE TO THAT WILD BEAT...

AND WHEN I CAN DANCE NO MORE...

SHE LIFTS ME UP

HER SHEER POWER REMINDS ME THAT SHE TRULY IS A GODDESS JUST LIKE THADEUS

AND SHE IS PROUD OF ME

ENCOURAGED BY HER I DRINK DEEP OF THE MOMENT AND GREET OUR CHEERING AUDIENCE

IT IS A SURREAL DREAM.

...AN INCREDIBLE HIGH

BUT THEN... WITH A SINGLE CURSED THOUGHT IT ALL GOES WRONG...

TERRIBLY WRONG...

SUDDENLY, IT'S NO LONGER A DREAM!

IT IS A TERROR!

I TOSS AND I TURN TRYING TO BREAK ITS SPELL

IN MY FUTILE ATTEMPTS TO WAKE UP, I STUMBLE AND FALL

THERE'S NO SUDDEN JERKING MOTION FOLLOWING IT , WRENCHING ME FROM SLEEP AS IT SO OFTEN DOES.

THERE'S NO ESCAPE

AND THE LAST THING I REMEMBER IS.... I START SINKING.

AFTER THAT THERE ARE JUST....FLASHES

LELIAH I'M SINKING!!!

GRAB MY HAND!!

I... I CAN'T...

LAUREN WAIT!!!

JUST... LET ME GO...

AAAAARGH!!!

LELIAH!

Chapter 18

Stupid cupid

I'M COM---

CRRACKLE

WAIT!

NO...

SIZZLE

DON'T! DON'T COME NEAR ME!

THAT'S RIGHT...

IT'S OVER!

IT'S FINE!

I CAN CARRY THE PAIN

THE PAIN IS A TESTIMONY!

THE PAIN IS A TESTIMONY!

SO... HOW DO WE DO THIS?

HONESTLY, NO IDEA. THIS IS MY FIRST TIME AS WELL

THE PAIN IS A TESTIMONY!

THE PAIN IS A TESTIMONY!

THE PAIN IS A TESTIMONY!

STUPID CUPID...

SO WHAT DO YOU SAY?

THE PAIN IS A TESTIMONY!

THE PAIN IS A TESTIMONY!

THE---

FUCK!!!

ARGH! FUCK THIS PAIN!

...AND FUCK LOVE!

MY MY MY THAT'S NO WAYFOR A LOVE GODDESS TO TALK!

FUCK OFF MEDEA!

FWOOP

WHOA, HOLD ON! YOU'RE NOT JUST PISSY, YOU'RE ACTUALLY HURT?

WHAT HAPPENNED?

SIGH

MEDEIA... WHEN YOU UH...

WHEN YOU ENGAGED IN CROWNING...

SSSHH!

SORRY! IT'S JUST... HAVE YOU EVER... UH...GROWN ATTACHED TO ANY OF THEM

THE CUBI I MEAN?

GROWN ATTACHED?

YOU'RE ASKING IF I'VE EVER FALLEN IN LOVE WITH ANY OF THEM?

YEAH, OF COURSE!

REALLY?

SURE! I MEAN, LOVE IS IN OUR NATURE. OF COURSE I WOULD FALL FOR THEM.

I SUPPOSE SO...

BUT IF LOVE IS SIMPLY OUR NATURE...

YES?

WELL... HOW DO WE DIFFERENTIATE THE TEMPORARY LOVE WE SHARE WITH HUMANS FROM TRUE LOVE?

HOW DO WE KNOW WHEN ONE OF THEM IS REAL?

HEURECA, THEY'RE ALL REAL

ARE THEY?

IF LOVE IS MY NATURE, IT'S NO LONGER MY CHOICE, IT IS SIMPLY WHO I AM.

YOU SAY THAT LIKE IS A BAD THING

MAYBE IT IS... I DON'T KNOW...

I HAVE SEEN SO MANY HUMANS TORN APART BY PURE DEVOTION. I HAVE STITCHED TOGETHER THEIR SHATTERED HEARTS

AND IN THE END EVEN MY BEST EFFORT COULDN'T FIX ALL OF IT... THERE WERE STILL SCARS. A SENSE OF NOSTALGIA... OF... LOSS

AND HONESTLY, I FIND MYSELF ENVYING THAT.

OUR HEARTS ARE NEVER SCARRED.

WE LOVE, WE MOVE ON WE, ENTER THE WATERS OF LETHE AND WE LET GO OF ALL THE PAIN!

WE CAST ASIDE THE GRIEF AND WE JUST... FORGET.

AND AFTERWARDS... THERE'S NOTHING! NO SHADOWS OF OLDLONGINGS, NO YEARNING THOUGHTS NO TUGS AT THE HEARTSTINGS...

IT'S AS IF THE LOVE WAS NEVER THERE... AS IF IT MEANT...

NOTHING.

WAIT!
ARE YOU CARRYING A HEARTBREAK!?
...
W-WHY? WHY WOULD YOU DO THAT?
BECAUSE... BECAUSE I... I WANT TO HOLD ON TO IT FOR JUST A BIT LONGER.
BECAUSE, THE MOMENT I TOUCH THE RIVER THAT'S IT. IT WILL ALL BE GONE.
LIKE IT NEVER HAPPENNED.
...
YOU WANT TO HANDLE THE REST OF IT LIKE A HUMAN TOO? WANT A BUCKET OF ICE CREAM? A BOX OF TISSUES MAYBE?
SIGH... DID YOU JUST COME HERE TO MOCK ME?
OH, RIGHT! NO, I'M HERE BECAUSE THE PRIMARIUS SENT FOR YOU!
WHAT!?
DAMN IT, MEDEA!
SORRY, TOTALLY FORGOT!

THAT ABSOLUTE BIRDBRAIN OF A CUPID I SWE--

OH!

I... UH, I'M EXPECTED?

YOU ARE ALSO LATE.

RIGHT. DO I LOOK PRESENTABLE?

LEAVES!

OH, RIGHT. THANK YOU

YOU MAY ENTER.

PRIMARIUS RAPHAELA, HEURECA HALLOW LUCIUS 4TH IS HERE FOR AN AUDIENCE

AH, MY LOVE. COME IN!

APOLOGIES FOR MY LATENESS, PRIMARIUS

NONSENSE, HEURECA

YOU NEED NOT APOLOGIZE FOR SUCH FRIVOLOUS THINGS

YOU CALLED FOR ME PRIMARIUS?

AND THERE YOU ARE BELOVED.

IS... ANYTHING WRONG?

WRONG? TO THE CONTRARY, MY LOVE! ALL IS PERFECTLY RIGHT!

IN FACT I HAVE ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL NEWS TO SHARE!

BUT I SHOULD PROBABLY LET MY GUEST EXPLAIN THE SITUATION.

I BELIEVE YOU KNOW OF HECATE?

H--HECATE!?

MISTRESS OF CONTRACTS AND SPELLS

OF FUTURE'S PATHWAYS

OF... OF SPELLS AND CEREMONIES

OF...

WEDDINGS...

JUST MISTRESS OF CONTRACTS TODAY.

AND I BRING YOU SOME UNDUSUAL AND I'M SURE, EXCITING NEWS.

HERE.

WHAT... WHAT IS THAT?

YOUR SPEAKERS TESTED THE HEART OF YOUR NEW PROSPECT AND FOUND IT WORTHY OF A GOLDEN CONTRACT. CONGRATULATIONS!

BUT... WE DON'T USE CONTRACTS?

WELL, TECHNICALLY THIS IS LESS OF A CONTRACT AND MORE OF A STRENTHENED BOND. SINCE YOU CUPIDS OPERATE DIFFERENTLY FROM CUBI, I HAD TO GET...

CREATIVE.

GOOD LUCK...

OH... AND WE MIGHT MEET AGAIN FOR A WEDDING.

IF WE DO... REMEMBER... AN ARROW CAN'T FILL WHAT IS ALREADY FULL.

WEDDING...

FUCK...

A... GOLDEN CONTRACT...

OUR VERY FIRST! AMAZING? YES?

YES...

OF COURSE! IT'S ABSOLUTELY WONDERFUL!

IT'S JUST...

WHY DID YOU GIVE ME ANOTHER'S ARROW? I'M PERFECTLY CAPABLE OF PRODUCING MY OWN.

THE ARROW IS MINE, MY LOVE.

I DO HOPE YOU CAN FORGIVE MY INTERFERENCE. ON ANY OTHER TIME I WOULD EXPECT NO LESS FROM YOU

HOWEVER A MATTER OF THIS IMPORTANCE REQUIRES A PURE HEART DRIVEN BY PURPOSE

AND YOUR HEART... BEARS A BURDEN. AN UNCLANSED HEARTBREAK OF YOUR OWN. I HAD TO STEP IN,

YOU UNDERSTAND, YES?.

SO YOU KNOW...

YOU ARE MY HEART-PROMISED

OF COURSE I KNOW...

ARE YOU... UPSET WITH ME?

HEAVENS NO, MY LOVE.

I UNDERSTAND THAT PULL. I HAVE SAMPLED THEIR FRUIT MYSELF IN MY YOUNGER DAYS...

YOU HAVE?

OF COURSE. LOVE BREEDS EMPATHY AND WITH EMPATHY COMES THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND

BUT NOW I THINK, YOU TOO HAVE UNDERSTOOD THEIR KIND, YES?

YES...

...YET YOU STILL HOLD ON TO THE PAIN...

...THE PAIN THAT HAS NO PLACE IN YOUR HEART!

AND I BELIEVE THAT HEART BELONGS TO ME STILL, YES?

Y-YES!

THEN PLEASE...WASH OFF THE STENCH OF THAT HEARTBREAK FROM WHAT IS MINE.

LET LETHE'S WATERS DO AWAY WITH IT

DO THIS FOR ME, MY LOVE? YES?

YES, RAPHAELA.

Chapter 19

Scarred

WHEN YOU ARE AMONG US, YOU ARE EXACTLY WHAT I SAID. FAMILY

AND IN THIS FAMILY I AM THE MOTHER, I AM THE FATHER, THE MATRIARCH THE PATRIARCH AND THE GODDESS ALMIGHTY

YOU FOLLOW IN MY FOOTSTEPS AND DO WHAT I TELL YOU AND WHEN I TELL YOU AND YOU WILL GO FAR

ARE WE CLEAR?

YES, MISS DELOUISE

CALL ME VERONICA PLEASE.

UM...
I GOTTA ASK THOUGH
IT SAYS HERE THAT THE CONTRACT
IS FOR THREE YEARS

WHEN I WAS
CALLED IN THE FIRT TIME
THE SAID IT WOULD BE
ONE.

YES, WE
USUALLY OFFER
ONE YEAR CONTRACTS
FOR NEWCOMERS
BUT SOMETIMES THE
POTENTIAL IS EVIDENT
ENOUGH FOR US TO
MAKE A LONGER
COMMITMENT

I DO HOPE
YOU WON'T MAKE
US REGRET THIS
GESTURE.

WHAT?
N-NO! I PROMISE!
IT'S JUST WELL, READING
ALL THE KINDS OF CLIENTS
YOU MANAGE, UH...

SOME THINGS
HERE...UH. LINGERIE
SHOOTS...

I DON'T KNOW
HOW COMFORTABLE I
AM WITH THIS...

I WOULD
HATE TO MAKE YOU
UNCOMFORTABLE

IF A CLIENT
REQUESTS THIS
OF YOU, WE WILL
CERTAINLY TAKE YOUR
FEELINGS INTO
CONSIDERATION.

ANYTHING
ELSE?

HEH... I
GUESS NOT.

EXCEPT,
UM...

DO YOU
HAVE A
PEN?

OF
COURSE,
DEAR!

DONE!

WAIT, UH I JUST NOTICED. WHAT'S THIS STUFF HERE?

WHAT STUFF WOULD THAT BE?

IT SAYS, BY SIGNING THIS THE MODEL AGREES WITH BECOMING A PUPPET TO BE CHANGED AND SHAPED AND USED UNTIL SHE IS PERFECTED OR DEEMED USELESS AND REJECTED

OH DON'T MIND THAT NONSENSE. THAT'S JSUT THE FINE PRINT A SMALL SURPRISE IN ANY CONTRACT.

WE JUST WANT TO IMPROVE YOU.

CHISEL AWAY THE SUPERFLUOUS UNTIL WHAT IS LEFT IS SUPERIOR!

WITH SOME PROPER DIETING I'M SURE WE CAN LOSE ALL OF THIS

IT WILL ALSO HELP WITH YOUR BREASTS!

THESE THINGS ARE TOO LARGE THINK OF THE FABRIC COSTS! THINK OF OUR POOR CLIENTS

AND OF COURSE IF DIET DOESN'T FLATTEN THOSE...

WELL... THERE'S ALWAYS SURGERY...

OH YES! WE ARE GOING TO MAKE AN ICON OUT OF YOU! ISN'T THAT EXCITING?

BUT FIRST, LET'S SEE WHAT THAT PRETTY FACE OF YOURS CAN DO!

GIVE ME YOUR BEST LOOK!

WELL, COME NOW! THIS IS NO TIME TO BE SHY

I...

UH...

I GUESS...

A SMILE!?

SILLY GIRL DO YOU THINK THIS IS A SCHOOL PHOTOSHOOT?

I ASK FOR GODDESSES, AND THEY SEND ME FUCKING CHILDREN

I... I'M SORRY

NO NO... IT'S PERFECTLY FINE. YOU'RE A WORK IN PROGRESS.

DON'T YOU WORRY, I'LL SHAPE YOU INTO SOMETHING MAGNIFICENT!

BUT FIRST, SMILE FOR ME ONE MORE TIME

LOOK AT IT... THE STRETCHING... THE WRINKLES...

SUCH A HIDEOUS THING...

LET'S FIX THAT, WHY DON'T WE?

...

MMMMMM!!!

THERE WE GO.

SO MUCH BETTER!

AAAAAA!!!

HUFF
HUFF
HUFF
WUH---
WHAT IN THE MATRIX LOVING FUCK WAS THAT!?

W-WAIT!
WHY AM I IN MY BED?

BECAUSE I BROUGHT YOU HERE
WAH!

HOW ARE YOU FEELING?

B--- BAUPHETTE?

BAUPHETTE?

YOU REALLY DO NEED THOSE GLASSES OF YOURS, DON'T YOU?

WH--
LELIAH?

WHAT'S WITH THE CHANGE IN COLOR? ALSO THE VOICE? YOU SOUND LIKE A FORTY YEAR HEAVY SMOKER!

FIRST OF ALL, FUCK YOU FOR THE SMOKER BIT!

AND AS FOR SECOND, HOW MUCH DO YOU REMEMBER OF LAST NIGHT?

WE DID...

I... UH... HONESTLY I'M NOT SURE. I HAD SOME WEIRD DREAMS SO IT'S ALL A BIT FUZZY AROUND THE EDGES. DID WE FUCK IN THE MIDDLE OF A DANCE FLOOR OR DID I DREAM THAT?

AND THEN...

UH...

DID I PASS OUT?

YES...

YES, IT HAPPENS SOMETIMES. WHAT CAN I SAY, WHEN I'M AROUND YOU I JUST WANT TO IMPRESS

I MAY HAVE OVERDONE IT A BIT.

STILL DOESN'T EXPLAIN THE CHANGE OF COLOR AND THE RASPY VOICE

OH THAT... I'M TRYING SOMETHING OUT.

RIGHT... UH...SORRY BOUT MY CONFUSION, I DON'T DEAL WELL WITH BACKLIT STUFF. ASTIGMATISM MAKES EVERYTHING GLARY.

SPEAKING OF WHICH, WHERE THE HELL ARE MY GLASSES?

PRETTY SURE YOU LEFT THEM AT THE CLUB...

GREAT... THOSE WERE PRESCRIPTION, DAMN IT...

I GUESS I CAN USE THESE...

HM... GOTTA SAY I PREFER YOU IN RED.

WELL, I GOTTA SAY I KINDA PREFER YOUR OLD GLASSES. WE DON'T ALWAYS GET WHAT WE WANT

HEY. I DIDN'T MEAN TO OFFEND YOU!

IT'S FINE! JUST... GET SOME REST!

SURE!

RIGHT AFTER I SWEEP UP THE FUCKING LEAVES AGAIN!

I SWEAR...FOR SOMETHING THAT WAS SOLD TO ME AS BLISS, SO FAR EVERY TIME I DID IT WITH ONE OF YOU IT'S BEEN NOTHING BUT WEIRD SHIT...

AND WHY DO I FEEL LIKE A GODDAMNED TRUCK RAN OVER ME!?

NNNGH! AND FUCKING LEAVES EVERYWHERE...

PUKING BUTTERFLIES SHIMMERING

FUCKING EMOTIONAL NERVE PINCHES

THE FUCK EVEN HAPPENNED LAST NIGHT?

BAH! SCREW THIS! I NEED A BATH....

YEAH...

I WOULDN'T FIND OUT ABOUT IT FOR MONTHS

BUT SOMETHING HAPPENNED THAT NIGHT AT THE CLUB

SHIT... IT'S STILL ALL OVER ME!

SOMETHING BAD...

COME OOOON!

SOMETHING THAT LEFT LELIAH SCARED...

AND SCARRED...

GET!!!

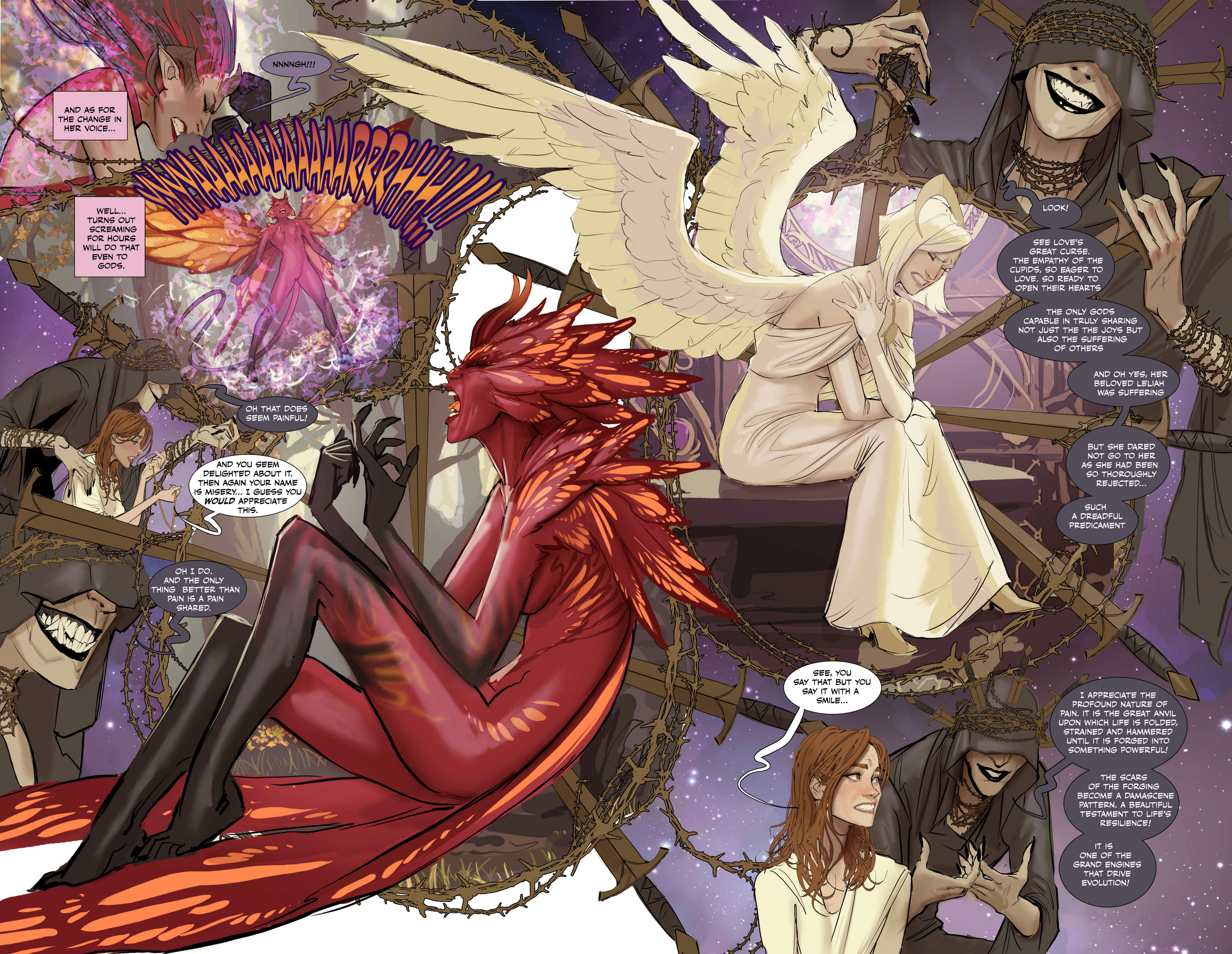
...OFF OF ME!

FUCK!

FUCK!

FUCK!

AND IT WAS THOSE VERY SCARS THAT FORCED HER CHANGE IN COLOR...


AND AS FOR THE CHANGE IN HER VOICE...
NNNNGH!!!
WELL... TURNS OUT SCREAMING FOR HOURS WILL DO THAT EVEN TO GODS.
OH THAT DOES SEEM PAINFUL!
AND YOU SEEM DELIGHTED ABOUT IT. THEN AGAIN YOUR NAME IS MISERY... I GUESS YOU *WOULD* APPRECIATE THIS.
OH I DO. AND THE ONLY THING BETTER THAN PAIN IS A PAIN SHARED.
LOOK!
SEE LOVE'S GREAT CURSE. THE EMPATHY OF THE CUPIDS, SO EAGER TO LOVE. SO READY TO OPEN THEIR HEARTS
THE ONLY GODS CAPABLE IN TRULY SHARING NOT JUST THE THE JOYS BUT ALSO THE SUFFERING OF OTHERS
AND OH YES, HER BELOVED LELIAH WAS SUFFERING
BUT SHE DARED NOT GO TO HER AS SHE HAD BEEN SO THOROUGHLY REJECTED...
SUCH A DREADFUL PREDICAMENT
SEE, YOU SAY THAT BUT YOU SAY IT WITH A SMILE...
I APPRECIATE THE PROFOUND NATURE OF PAIN. IT IS THE GREAT ANVIL UPON WHICH LIFE IS FOLDED, STRAINED AND HAMMERED UNTIL IT IS FORGED INTO SOMETHING POWERFUL!
THE SCARS OF THE FORGING BECOME A DAMASCENE PATTERN. A BEAUTIFUL TESTAMENT TO LIFE'S RESILIENCE!
IT IS ONE OF THE GRAND ENGINES THAT DRIVE EVOLUTION!

PRETTY SURE I HEARD A DOMINATRIX SAY SOMETHING SIMILAR ONCE.

YOU JOKE, BUT LIFE LEARNS FROM PAIN. LEARNS HOW TO SURVIVE IT, AND WHENEVER POSSIBLE, HOW TO ESCAPE IT!

THIS HOLDS TRUE FOR MOST GODS AS WELL...

WHAT IS THIS PLACE? ELYSIUM?

NOT FAR FROM IT...

THIS IS LETHE!

THE RIVER OF FORGETFULNESS

IN THE OLD DAYS YOU WOULD HAVE FOUND YOURSELF ON ITS SHORES. THIS IS WHERE YOU WOULD HAVE LET GO OF YOUR MEMORIES...

IT WAS A MECHANISM OF DEATH BELONGING TO DIFFERENT TIMES

NOW, THE ONLY ONES WHO MAKE ANY USE OF IT ARE GODS OF LOVE WASHING AWAY THEIR HEARTBREAK

HEH... I COULD HAVE USED THAT RIVER.

YOU WOULD HAVE PERISHED.

I HAVE PERISHED.

YES... I SUPPOSE YOU HAVE.

BUT THAT TOO IS THE BURDEN OF PAIN.

WHEN IT BECOMES TOO UNBEARABLE RECKLESSNESS TAKES HOLD OF YOU

YOU TAKE ACTIONS TO FIND RELEASE...

WISE ACTIONS...

FOOLISH ACTIONS...

REGRETFUL ACTIONS

IN THE END YOU EITHER ACCEPT DEFEAT TO YOUR PAIN OR YOU FIND A WAY TO ESCAPE IT

AND OFTEN THE EBEST WAY TO DO IT...

IS TO REMOVE ITS CAUSE...

GOODBYE, LELIAH.

YEAH, UH... HERE'S THE THING THOUGH...

SPEAKING FROM PERSONAL EXPERIENCE, THAT DOESN'T ALWAYS WORK...

Chapter 20

Efforts must
be doubled!

SEE, IT TURNS OUT THAT SOMETIMES, NO MATTER HOW HARD YOU TRY ESCAPING YOUR FEELINGS THEY STILL CATCH UP WITH YOU.

I CAN'T PROMISE I WILL BE THERE

NEW OLYMPUS OLD GOD MARKETS

HOW IS DRINKING UNTIL I COLLAPSE A FAVOR TO YOU?

WHY? TOO BUSY WALLOWING IN YOUR SOLITUDE? COME ON, JUST DO IT AS A FAVOR TO AN OLD FRIEND?

BECAUSE THEN I WON'T BE COLLAPSING ALONE!

I SEE... SO YOUR BELOVED IS NOT ATTENDING?

HECATE IS NOT MUCH OF A PARTY PERSON. NOT SINCE THE LAST TIME.

PAPILLON?

ANYWAYS HOPE TO SEE YOU THERE!

WAH! MISTRESS BAU---

L-LELIAH!?

SSSH! KEEP IT DOWN!

KEEP IT DOWN? WHY DO YOU LOOK LIKE THIS?

I HAD AN ACCIDENT, OKAY?

I'M HERE TO SEE IF I CAN GET HERMES TO ARRANGE ME A MEETING WITH HECATE.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN AN ACCIDENT?

YOU OKAY?

I'VE BEEN BETTER.

WHAT THE FUCK!?

ARE THESE... HANDPRINTS?

WHAT DID THIS?

IT'S A LONG STORY, BUT I'M HERE TRYING TO FIX IT.

SPEAKING OF WHICH... WHAT ARE YOU DOING HERE?

M-ME? NOTHING?

IT'S A MARKET... I'M... SHOPPING?

SHOPPING? THIS IS THE OLD GODS MARKET. TRUE IMMORTALS. DON'T TRADE IN AMBROSIA

THEIR CURRENCY IS FAVORS.

I KNOW. I'VE BEEN GETTING STUFF FROM HERE BEFORE

AND I'M OFFERING FAVORS.

WAIT!

YOU ARE FUCKING OLD GODS?

ONCE.

BY THE MOON AND STARS THIS IS MY LUCKY DAY! THREE HONORED GUESTS SO---

LELIAH!

OUGH!

THUKK

WHAT THE HELL!

HERMES!? I'M SORRY I....

I FELT YOUR HAND OUT OF NOWHERE AND...

I... I PANICKED

PANICKED?

YEAH...

WELL NO HARM. I GUESS OKAY SOME HARM BUT NOTHING MAJOR

ANYWAYS, HERE! THESE ARE FOR YOU.

WHAT ARE THEY?

AS HIGH RANKED CALLERS, YOU ARE AMONG A LIMITED NUMBER OF CUBI INVITED TO APOLLO AND DIONYSIUS' GRAND BACCANALIA!

SO... CONGRATULATIONS! HOPE TO SEE YOU THERE!

NO WAY!?

NOW IF YOU'LL EXCUSE ME, I GOT OTHER INVITATIONS TO HAND OVER.

FAREWELL!

WHAT THE---

WHA- HERMES, WAIT! I...

DAMN IT! I DIDN'T ASK HIM ABOUT HECATE.

THE GRAND BACCANALIA...

HOLY SHIT!

HOLY SHIT!

THADEUS YOU'RE NOT GONNA BELIEVE THIS!

WE'VE BEEN---

WAAAH!

VAIN!?

YOU OKAY?

I THINK I TWISTED MY PRIDE.

YOU KNOW, YOU DON'T HAVE TO WEAR THE HEELS ALL THE TIME.

THEY MAKE MY ASS LOOK FANTASTIC.

I MEAN... YEAH. I CAN'T ARGUE WITH THAT...

ALSO, BABE?

MIND TELLING ME WHY THERE ARE STILL ALL THESE HUMAN BOOKS ALL OVER THE PLACE? I THOUGHT YOU SAID THEY DIDN'T WORK?

THEY DON'T... BUT I FIGURE, MAYBE I JUST HAVEN'T READ THE RIGHT ONES

UHUH

RIGHT, A LOT OF SEX ADVICE IN "EVEN THE MEMORIES SING THE SONG OF OUR LOVE"

UH... I MEAN... A LOT OF THESE TITLES ARE VERY DECEPTIVE.

THERE'S A BIT OF A SECRET LANGUAGE TO IT ALL.

YOU WOULDN'T UNDERSTAND.

WELL, FAR BE IT FOR ME TO INTERRUPT YOUR DEEP STUDIES BUT I MUST INFORM YOU THAT WE HAVE BEEN INVITED TO THE GRAND BACCANALIA.

YOU'RE FUCKING WITH ME?

NOT AT THE MOMENT! BUT YEAH ACCORDING TO HERMES WE'RE AMONG THE TEN HIGHEST RANKED CUBI INVITED.

WELL, NOT INCLUDING THE HIGH CASTE THAT IS.

REALLY? CAUSE IT USED TO BE ONLY TOP THREE...

NOT SURE WHAT THE SITUATION WAS FOR CUPIDS?

CUPIDS...

HM WHEN I WAS AROUND I THINK IT WAS JUST THE PRIMARIUS ESCORTED BY A SINGLE WEADED PAIR.

SHE REALLY LOVED FLAUNTING THE VIRTUES OF OUR MARRIAGE.

Y'KNOW... I JUST REALIZED I NEVER ACTUALLY ASKED YOU ABOUT IT WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

HUH?

BETWEEN THE CUPID MARRIAGES AND OURS?

WELL, FIRST OF ALL THE MOTIVATION IS DIFFERENT.

HERE A MARRIAGE IS AN EARNED PRIVILEGE, A LOVELESS STATUS SYMBOL THAT LEGITIMIZES YOUR LAST NAME AND CARRIES IT OVER TO YOUR OFFSPRING

I MEAN... YEAH. NOBODY LIKES BEING CALLED AN ORGYSPAWN FOREVER

RIGHT... I GUESS.

ANYWAYS, CUPIDS VALUE ABSOLUTE DEVOTION. THEY... UH... YOU KNOW HOW HUMANS HAVE THIS IDEA OF A SOULMATE? THE PERFECT OTHER IN YOUR LIFE AND YOU ARE JUST MEANT FOR EACH OTHER?

I'M FAMILIAR WITH THE CONCEPT

YEAH. WHEN CUPIDS MARRY THEY BECOME THAT BUT... WAY WORSE.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY WORSE?

WELL... FOR A CUPID, MARRIAGE IS A TERRIFYING GAMBLE.

TO MARRY AS A CUPID IS TO LET GO OF YOURSELF. TO BECOME ONE WITH ANOTHER PERSON TWO BECOME ONE

AND WHILE THERE'S SOME ROMANTIC NOTION TO THIS IDEA OF PURE SURRENDER.... TRUTH IS....

IF ONE PARTNER'S WILL IS STRONGER THAN THE OTHER...

THERE'S A VERY REAL DANGER THAT THE WEAKER ONE WILL SIMPLY BE....

DEVOURED.

LESSENED...

DOOMED TO MINDLESS WORSHIP BECAUSE YOU WILL KNOW NOTHING BEYOND IT... AND YOU WILL NO LONGER BE YOURSELF.

AND I FIND THE VERY IDEA OF THAT...

TERRIFYING.

YOU NEVER TALKED ABOUT IT MUCH AND I GUESS I NEVER REALLY ASKED BUT... IS THAT WHY YOU SWITCHED?

WELL THAT WAS A PART OF IT. THERE WAS ALSO THIS ASSHOLE INCUBUS WHO DARED ME TO FUCK HIM AND I NEVER STOPPED

...AND WHEN I MARRY YOU I WON'T DISAPPEAR INSIDE YOU WHICH IS JUST A GREAT BONUS

HEH!

OH YOU BETTER BELIEVE YOU'LL DISAPPEAR INSIDE ME!

THAAT'S RIGHT!

OH... BECAUSE SEX AND MY DICK DISAPPEARING INTO...

THAT'S IT!

IF THIS IS THE WIT YOURE PICKING UP FROM THOSE BOOKS I'M BURNING THEM ALL!

HEY!

YYUP! BOUT TO BURN THIS SHIT LIKE I WAS A HUMAN WITH REPRESSED SEXUAL URGES MAKING IT EVERYONE ELSE'S PROBLEM!

WAH!

DON'T MESS WITH MY BOOKS!

IN FACT, ONCE WE ARE MARRIED I MAY JUST FILL UP A PERSONAL LIBRARY

WELL, AT LEAST YOU SOUND CONFIDENT IN WINNING AGAIN, SO I GUESS THE BOOKS DID SOMETHING GOOD!

OH NO THAT'S NOT THE BOOKS

I JUST GOT A REASON TO WIN!

AWW... SUCH A LOVELY ROMANTIC NOTION... AND YOU GOTTA LOVE THE CONFIDENCE.

BUT... THERE WAS A BIT OF A PROBLEM. TURNS OUT, GOLDEN CONTRACT SEEDS ARE... UNPREDICTABLE. THIS WAS SOMETHING ALL OF US WERE GONNA LEARN THE HARD WAY.

UM... WHAT ARE YOU DOING?

JUST CHECKING UP ON THE SEED

SEEING IF IT TOOK HOLD RIGHT!

NOW THERE'S A SENTENCE YOU DON'T WANT TO HEAR FROM A CASUAL FUCK!

YOU CHEEKY LITTLE WISEASS!

YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN!

OH DEAR I'VE DISPLEASED A GOD!

HOWEVER SHALL I REPENT FOR MY SINS??

WITH ACTS OF RELENTLESS FUCKERY, MISS THOMAS, AND LOTS OF IT!

OF COURSE...

WHEN YOU ONLY HAVE A HAMMER, EVERYTHING IS A NAIL I GUESS

NATURALLY, AND IN ORDER TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF SAID NAILING....

WELL, I'D LIKE TO KNOW A LITTLE BIT ABOUT YOUR PERSONAL SEXUAL FANTASIES

CAN'T YOU LIKE... FEEL THEM.

I AM A DOER, NOT A SEER

HEH...

MY FANTASIES...

I DON'T KNOW... I LIKE IT GENTLE...

THEN AGAIN... I ALSO DID A BUNCH OF OTHER STUFF

I'M OKAY WITH SOME PAIN... ROUGH STUFF...

I DON'T KNOW... MAYBE THAT?

YOU DON'T SOUND SURE?

I...

I AM...

LET ME REPHRASE THAT YOU DON'T FEEL SURE.

I THOUGHT YOU WERE A DOER. SO WHAT ARE YOU WAITING FOR?

DO!

I AM ALSO A GOD OF DESIRE AND... WELL AS MATRON ALARIS SAID, DESIRE CAN ONLY BE WILLINGLY GIVEN, NEVER TAKEN

AND RIGHT NOW YOU ARE NOT IN A... GIVING MOOD

I GUESS...

I WAS IN THE MIDDLE OF SOMETHING AND... I GOT THIS VAGUE IDEA OF CALLING YOU... BUT... I DUNNO... I THINK I JUST KINDA WANTED SOME COMPANY

I'M SORRY.

IT'S ALL RIGHT. HOW ABOUT TODAY WE JUST STAY HERE AND SEE WHERE YOUR NEEDS TAKE US?

YEAH... NOT GONNA LIE...THOSE BOOKS MADE HIM SMOOTH. WE DID JUST AS HE SUGGESTED.

A KIND GIVING GOD AND A BROKEN UNWORTHY SELFISH WOMAN WHO SOUGHT COMFORT IN HIS COMPANY...

WE SAT TOGETHER WATCHING A MOVIE BASED ON ONE OF THE BOOKS HE READ BELIEVE IT OR NOT...

I GUESS.... I WASN'T EVEN HORNY... I WAS JUST... LONELY.

CAN YOU BELIEVE IT? A LIVING SEX GOD NEXT TO ME AND I INVITED HIM TO CHILL...

THAT'S NOT HOW IT HAPPENNED!

AND HONESTLY, THAT WAS JUST WHAT I NEEDED...

HE MADE ME RELAX, AND ENJOY MYSELF,

AND EVENTUALLY... THE MOOD SHIFTED. THE SUBTLE MOVEMENTS OF HIS TAIL BETWEEN MY LEGS WERE PARTIALLY TO BLAME

BUT THE REST... IT WAS JUST SIMPLE DESIRE... READY, AND EARNEST. A CARNAL OFFERING TO A GOD OF CARNAL JOYS

AND HE ACCEPTED IT!

NOW, YOU GIFT IT WILLINGLY...

WAH!

AND I HAPPILY...

ACCEPT!

OH GOD!!!

YES!

IN THAT MOMENT I WISH FOR NOTHING MORE THAN FOR HIM TO COMPLETELY OVERWHELM ME, AND GUIDED BY MY DESIRE HE DOES JUST THAT!

BOUND BY HIS COILING TAIL I FEEL LIKE MY BODY IS HELD TOGETHER BY IT AND IF HE WAS TO LOOSEN HIS GRIP EVEN A BIT, I WOULD DIE.

THIS WAS NO REGULAR ORGASM, HELL, NOTHING WE DID UP UNTIL THAT POINT MEASURED UP TO THIS....

THE SEED HAD FULLY AWAKENED, AND FROM HERE ON OUT THINGS WERE GONNA GET WEIRD.

SO ANYWAYS AFTER SPENDING TWO HOURS LIT UP LIKE A PRIDE PARADE, I FELT MORE ALIVE THAN EVER

NO WORRIES, NO INSECURITIES. I FELT TAKEN CARE OF, I FELT WANTED...

AND YEAH I'M AWARE THAT THE WHOLE THING WAS BASICALLY A METAPHYSICAL VARIANT OF A SEX WORKER OFFERING ME THE BOYFRIEND EXPERIENCE...

BUT I DIDN'T CARE!

FAKE OR NOT, I WANTED MORE!

AND THAT WAS ALL RIGHT! THE WAY I SAW IT, THEY WANTED THIS AS MUCH AS I DID!

SO I MIGHT AS WELL MAKE THE MOST OF IT!

AND SO I DID!

DAY AFTER DAY, THEY TOOK TURNS!

THADEUS, NURTURING AND SUPPORTIVE!

COME ON, LAUREN! SHOW ME WHAT MAKES YOU SPECIAL!

YOU CAN GO LONGER!

OH FUCK I---

OH GOD!

I---

I CAN!

I CAN!!

AND LELIAH... THE UH... LESS SUPPORTIVE. (BUT NO LESS EXCITING)

AAAH! AAAHHHH!!!

THAT'S IT YOU LITTLE SLUT! AGAIN!

YOU WANNA DANCE WITH A GODDESS YOU BETTER BRING YOUR---

DANCING SHO---

ALTHOUGH OF THE TWO, LELIAH WAS PRONE TO REACTING TO MY UNEXPECTED CHANGES...

DRASTICALLY.

NOT TODAY, SATAN!

IT WOULD BE A HILE BEFORE I LEARNED WHY.

HONESTLY, AFTERA WHILE I GOT USED TO IT ALL. EVEN THE LIGHTSHOW

TRUTH IS, FOR A FEW WEEKS THERE...

LIFE WAS LIKE A DREAM!

NOW, AT THIS POINT YOU MUST BE WONDERING WHAT'S WITH ALL THE LINGERIE AND THE OUTFITS...

I'VE HEARD YOU TELL YOUR STORY MANY TIMES OVER... NEVER ONCE HAVE I WONDERED ABOUT THAT.

FINE... TOUGH CROWD!

YOU THEN?

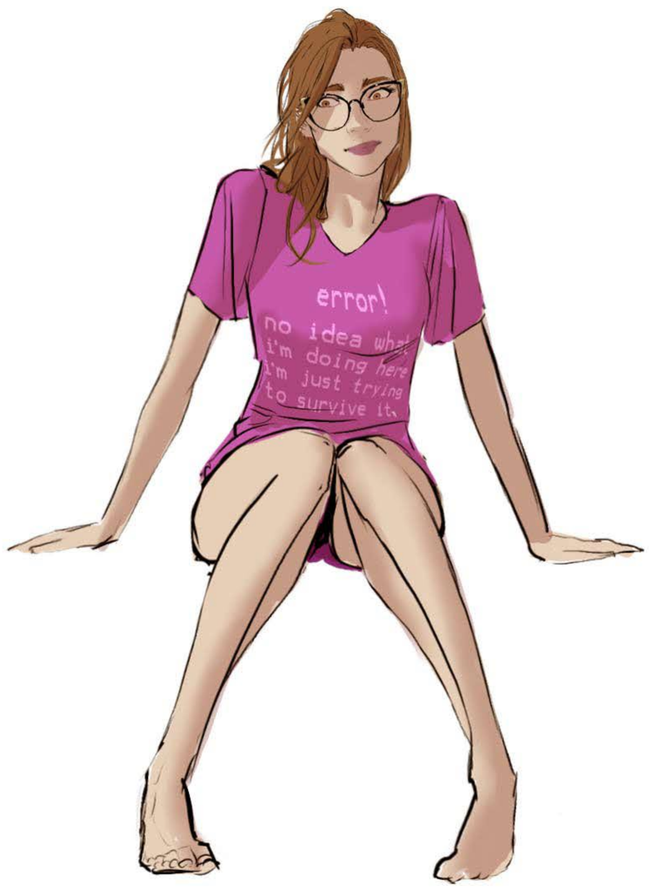
I'M... JUST GONNA ASSUME THAT'S A THUMBS UP!

SEE, EVER SINCE THAT TIME WITH THADEUS IN THE HOTEL, EVER SINCE THE SEED HAD... AWAKENED?

I'VE FELT THIS LOW GRADE BUZZ

AT FIRST IT WAS HARD TO PIN DOWN WHAT WITH ALL THE OTHER SIDEEFFECTS LIKE THE SHIMMERING AND BUTTERFLIES...

BUT ONCE THOSE WENT AWAY I GRE AWARE OF THE SUBTLE CHANGE IN ME.



LIKE... EVERY TOUCH FELT JUST A LITTLE BIT BETTER

I LIKED MYSELF A LITTLE BIT BETTER...

SO ON A WHIM I TOOK SOME PICS AND POSTED THEM TO SAM AND MY SHARED ACCOUNT...

NOTHING SPECTACULAR, MIND YOU! JUST SOME SIMPLE PORTRAITS...

THE RESPONSE, HOWEVER WAS... UNEXPECTED.

HOLY FUCK SHE CAN SMILE!

DAMN, LOOKING EXTRA GORGEOUS TODAY!

I WOULD PAY FOR SOME SPICY PICTURES WITH THIS ENERGY, NGL

SAME! GIRL OUT HERE MAKING ME QUESTION MY SEXUALITY RIGHT NOW!

I WAS NEVER GOOD AT THE WHOLE INFLUENCER THING. THAT WAS SAM'S FIELD

ME, I JUST KINDA TAGGED ALONG TRYING TO PAY THE BILLS

I GUESS THE WHOLE THING WAS TOO INTIMIDATINGLY PERSONAL TO ME. WITH MODELLING YOU WERE SELLING A PRODUCT, YOU WERE MARKETING A BRAND...

BUT WITH THIS FOR BETTER OR WORSE, YOU WERE THE PRODUCT. YOU WERE THE BRAND.

AND TURNS OUT, PEOPLE LIKED THE PRODUCT!

AND THEY WANTED MORE!

WHICH... HEY, WHEN YOU CAN BARELY AFFORD THE RENT ON A SINGLE ROOM APARTMENT IS A GOOD PRROBLEM TO HAVE

SO THERE I WAS, GENUINELY CONSIDERING GETTING SERIOUS ABOUT IT ALL...

AND QUESTIONING WHETHER OR NOT I WAS WILLING TO WALK DOWN THE NUDITY SLOPE AS SAM PUT IT ONCE.

THE NUDITY SLOPE?

YEAH. THIS IS A HYPERCOMPETITIVE LINE OF WORK. ATTENTION ECONOMY AT IT'S MOST DESPERATE AT TIMES.

SOONER OR LATER MANY OF US SLIDE DOWN THE SLIPPERY SIDES OF THE NUDITY SLOPE, AND NOT GONNA LIE, IT'S HARD TO MAKE YOUR WAY BACK FROM THAT.

DID YOU?

OH YEAH. I PULLED SOME OLYMPIC LEVEL SLALOM DOWN THAT SLOPE!

SO DOES IT FEEL WEIRD? BEING GAY AND KNOWING... YKNOW THAT PEOPLE... THAT MEN...

JACK OFF TO MY PHOTOS?

YEAH?

HEY, RENT'S EXPENSIVE AND MONEY DON'T COME IN RAINBOW COLORS. IT'S ALL GREEN.

PLUS IT'S NOTHING NEW TO EITHER OF US.

I NEVER DID NUDE SHOOTS.

DON'T BE NAIVE. EVERY LINGERIE SHOOT, TIGHT DRESS AND MINI SKIRT WE'VE WORN IN THE PAST HAD PROBABLY FUELED SOMEONE'S SEXUAL FANTASIES.

FAIR... I GUESS

SO DO YOU ACTUALLY GET ANY WOMEN SUPPORTING YOU

SOME.

BUT SEE, THAT'S WHERE MY BIG BRAIN PLAN KICKS IN!

I GET YOU TO START SHOOTING WITH ME, WE GET A BIT FRISKY UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL, AND BAM! UP TO MY EYEBALLS IN LESBIANS!

SO I'D BE YOUR... QUEERBAIT?

EXACTLY! SO, WHAT DO YOU SAY? I'LL SLIP INTO SOMETHING MORE BUTCH AND YOU SLIP INTO ONE OF THESE?

I'LL THINK ABOUT IT...

YEAH, AFTER A WHILE... I HAD A WHOLE ASS BOX FULL OF I'LL THINK ABOUT ITS...

WHICH LEAD TO ME MAKING AND POSTING BUNCH OF SEXY PICS ONLINE AND THEN...

WELL, SINCE I WAS ALREADY DRESSED FOR THE OCCASION... YOU KNOW THE REST.

ANYHOW, THE REASON I'M GOING OVER THIS IS... THE NUDITY SLOPE.

SEE, THE THING YOU QUICKLY LEARN ABOUT THE INTERNET IS... THERE'S NO SUCH THING AS ENOUGH.

LINGERIE SHOOTS BROUGHT THE INCREASED ATTENTION AND TRAFFIC TO THE SITE WHICH CERTAINLY HELPED MAKE MY FINANCIAL ENDS MEET THAT MONTH HOWEVER THERE WAS A SIGNIFICANT INCREASE OF PEOPLE ASKING FOR... THE NEXT STEP

PROBLEM WAS... I WASN'T LIKE SAM. SAM LOVED THIS. SHE WAS ACTIVE IN THE COMMENT SECTIONS, SHE WOULD POST SHORT FUN VIDEOS, SHE WOULD JOKE AND TEASE AND ENGAGE PEOPLE...

AND THE IDEA OF NUDITY WAS JUST A PART OF THE JOB TO HER...

I WASN'T LIKE THAT...

NO MATTER HOW HARD I TRIED...

THE VERY IDEA OF SHOWING MYSELF NAKED...

IT MADE ME FEEL VULNERABLE

I...

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I GUESS...

I DON'T KNOW... MAYBE I'M JUST NOT MADE FOR IT

MODELLING?

NO... ALL OF THIS NEW STUFF, THE ONLINE THING ALTOGETHER

LIKE, ON ONE SIDE THE ATTENTION IS NICE...

SO IS NOT HAVING TO DEAL WITH PEOPLE FACE TO FACE....

BUT ON THE FLIPSIDE... THEY ARE ASKING FOR SOMETHING THAT I'M JUST NOT COMFORTABLE WITH...

YEAH, I'VE SEEN THE NUDES COMMENTS.

I TRIED DOING IT...

OH?

I COULDN'T.

LAUREN...

I'M A PART TIME SEX WORKER. I'M FINE WITH THAT BUT I NEVER ASKED YOU TO DO THE SAME.

I KNOW...

IT'S JUST... I FIGURED IF I COULD GET OVER IT, I DON'T KNOW, IT WOULD HELP BOTH OF US

YOU KEEP TRYING WITH ME BUT I JUST KEEP FAILING. I DON'T KNOW... MAYBE YOU SHOULD JUST GIVE UP ON ME.

ARE YOU JUST TRYING TO GET ME TO PITY-FUCK YOU AGAIN?

CAUSE I'LL JUMP ON THAT LANDMINE FOR YOU,

HAHAHAHH!

MY HERO!

HEH!

BUT LISTEN, ALL JOKING ASIDE, I TOLD YOU FROM THE GET GO, IF YOU WANNA DO THE ONLINE STUFF WITH ME, I'M HAPPY TO HELP.

HAVING SAID THAT, I NEVER REALLY EXPECTED YOU TO STICK AROUND FOR THE LONG TERM.

I APPRECIATE THAT. THANK YOU, SAM

STILL... NOT LIKE I CAN JUST QUIT IT.

ISN'T THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU'D LIKE TO DO?

YEAH... I'D LOVE TO BE A LIBRARIAN

HM...

I CAN SEE IT! WITH THE GLASSES AND YOUR LOOKS YOU'RE A LIBRARIAN THEMED PORN WAITING TO HAPPEN

FUCK OFF!

HEHE! SO WHY DON'T YOU TRY FOR IT?

NEED TO GET A MASTER'S DEGREE IN LIBRARY SCIENCE.

THERE'S LIBRARY SCIENCE!?

YEAH...

SHIT.

I'D MAKE A STRIPPING YOUR WAY THROUGH COLLEGE JOKE BUT IF YOU COULD DO THAT WE WOULDN'T BE HAVING THIS CONVERSATION

EEEEXACTLY!

ALTHOUGH IT'S NOT LIKE YOU'RE OUT OF OPTIONS YOU CAN STILL DO LINGERIE AN COSPLAY SHOOTS WITH ME. THEY LOVE THOSE SO THAT'S NEVER OFF THE TABLE

PLUS, JACK PERKINS ASKED IF YOU'RE STILL INTERESTED IN WORKING WITH HIS COMPANY?

JACK PERKINS...

JACK PERKINS...

OH...

HE STILL WANTS TO WORK WITH ME?

EVEN AFTER I RAN OUT?

YEAH HE ASKED ABOUT THAT. TOLD HIM YOU HAD FOOD POISONING

OH GOD!

YUP! TOLD HIM YOU WERE LIKE A BROKEN HYDRANT ON BOTH ENDS

YOU BITCH!!!

THANK YOU, SAM. I SWEAR YOU ARE THE ONLY REALLY GOOD THING IN MY LIFE THESE DAYS...

I MEAN, OKAY, MY SEX LIFE IS NOTHING TO SNEEZE AT EITHER.

OH NOW WE'RE TALKIN'!?

COME ON! WE'RE TAKING A DAY OFF AND YOU'RE TELLING ME EVERYTHING!

DAY OFF FROM WHAT?

I DUNNO... BEING RIDICULOUSLY GOOD LOOKING?

GROAN

AND WE DID JUST THAT. WE SPENT THE REST OF THE DAY JUST CATCHING UP. I TOLD HER A SEVERELY EDITED VERSION OF MY ADVENTURES WITH THADEUS AND LELIAH

DAMN! SO YOU MET THEM AT THE CRIMSON?

YEAH, MERRYL, THAT... UM BARTENDER INTRODUCED US

GIRL, YOU SHOULD TALK THEM INTO A THREESOME!

RIGHT... THERE'S AN IDEA!

LISTENED TO HER TALES OF EUROPEAN ADVENTURES...

AND IN THOSE WONDERFUL HOURS MY LIFE JUST FELT... KINDA NORMAL.

GUESS EVERY STORM NEED ITS PRECEDING CALM...

AND THIS PARTICULAR STORM WAS COMING FOR ALL OF US.

Chapter 21

The Grand Baccanalia



AND IT WAS GOING TO BE MASSIVE.

NEW OLYMPUS
THE APOLLONION

FINALLY...

BLACK IS A NEW COLOR FOR YOU?

WAIT UNTIL LAUREN HAS A BAD DAY AGAIN... IT'LL BE A NEW COLOR FOR YOU TOO...

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THAT?

IT'S... IT DOESN'T MATTER.

LELIAH...

THERE THEY ARE! EROS' FAVORITE CHILDREN!

HOLY SHIT, SO THAT'S WHAT HE SOUNDS LIKE!

ALL THESE YEARS AND THIS IS THE FIRST TIME I ACTUALLY HEARD THE FIRST SON, ASMODEUS SPEAK!

FIRST SON MY ASS...

WHAT ?

I'LL TELL YOU LATER!

A WELL EARNED WELCOME TO YOU ALL!

TO THE *GRAND BACCANALIA!*

I CAN NOT OVERSTATE THE IMPORTANCE OF TEN OF YOU BEING GRANTED THIS HONOR TODAY!

BY VIRTUE OF YOUR VERY PRESENCE YOU NOW ACT AS AMBASSADORS OF THE CUBI, STANDING PROUD AMONG THE ELDER GODS AND REPRESENTING POWER OF DESIRE!

SO MINGLE!

BE YOURSELVES, AND DO WHAT YOU DO BEST!

FOR TODAY, YOU TEN STAND FOR ALL OF CUBI!

AFTER ALL, ONE OF YOU WILL LIKELY BECOME THE NEXT ARCUBUS. AN ELDER A REPRESENTATIVE! YOU WILL ONE DAY BUILD FRIENDSHIPS WITH OTHER GODS IN ORDER TO STRENGTHEN US ALL!

THERE ARE FEW GREATER ACTS OF FRIENDSHIP THAN SHOWING OTHER GODS THE JOYS DESIRE CAN BRING!

I SEE... WELL THAT EXPLAINS SO MANY OF US WERE INVITED.

WE'RE NOT SO MUCH GUESTS AS WE ARE THE BUFFET...

THAT'S A VERY CYNICAL WAY TO LOOK AT THIS HONOR, VAIN LUCIS!

YOU ARE HERE BECAUSE YOU EARNED THE RIGHT TO BE HERE.

AS FOR THE REST, NO MORE IS EXPECTED FROM YOU THAN TO BE TRUE TO YOUR NATURE

NOW, SHALL WE?

IT'S STRANGE HOW SOME THINGS HOLD TRUE FOR GODS AND MORTALS ALIKE...

IN THIS CASE IT IS THE SIMPLE TRUTH THAT THOSE IN POWER WILL ALWAYS USE YOU AS MUCH AS THEY CAN

THE VERY FACT THAT YOU ARE HERE TONIGHT MEANS I HAVE THE HIGHEST HOPES FOR YOUR FUTURE

YOU ARE ABOUT TO BE INTRODUCED TO AN EXCLUSIVE WORLD ONLY FEW CAN EVER HOPE TO ENTER

AND EVEN WHEN YOU FIND YOURSELF REWARDED FOR YOUR EFFORTS, YOU INEVITABLY FIND THERE'S SOME HIDDEN CLAUSE TO IT.

I EXPECT YOU TO MAKE THE MOST OF THIS EVENING. PEOPLE HERE ARE IMPORTANT, THEY ARE THE KIND OF PEOPLE THAT CAN HELP YOU GO FAR IN LIFE OR CAST YOU OUT FOREVER.

A SINISTER FINE PRINT READY TO TRAP YOU AND TEAR AWAY ANY DIGNITY YOU THOUGHT YOU COULD CLING ON TO

SO BELIEVE ME WHEN I SAY, YOUR PERFORMANCE TONIGHT WILL HAVE FAR REACHING CONSEQUENCES FOR YOUR CAREER.

AND THE FUCKED UP THING IS YOU DON'T EVEN NOTICE IT BECAUSE THEY MAKE YOU FEEL SPECIAL, A PART OF SOME INNER CIRCLE,

NOW, MAKE ME PROUD!

BUT IN THE END YOU INEVITABLY LEARN THAT THAT CIRCLE IS NO MORE THAN A RIM OF A PLATE... AND LIKE VAIN SAID... YOU'RE NOT ONE OF THE GUESTS... YOU'RE THE BUFFET.

AND THE REAL GUESTS ARE HUNGRY

STOP IT!

JUST...

STOP!

I'M SORRY, DID YOU SAY SOMETHING?

NO... JUST... JITTERS.

RELAX. MISS THOMAS. I PROMISE, JACK'S ONE OF THE GOOD ONES.

ONE OF THE GOOD ONES...
WHAT?
W-WHY ARE YOU TELLING ME THIS?
I'M SORRY... AFTER YOU RAN OUT THE WAY YOU DID LAST TIME... I ASKED AROUND ABOUT YOU.
YOU WERE ONCE THE RISING STAR OF DELOUISE MODELS
AND THEN OUT OF NOWHERE, VERONICA DELOUISE MADE SURE YOU WERE BLACKLISTED IN THE INDUSTRY.
USUALLY THAT IMPLIES UNPROFESSIONAL BEHAVIOR OR A BREACH OF CONTRACT
I--- I SWEAR...
THAT'S NOT---
HOWEVER...
I QUICKLY FOUND OUT THAT MISS DELOUISE HAS SOMETHING OF A WHISPERED REPUTATION OF HER OWN...
I'M NOT GONNA LIE, MADE ME CURIOUS IF THERE'S ANY TRUTH TO THE RUMORS ABOUT HER...
MMHM
JUST AS I THOUGHT...
WELL IF THERE'S ANY COMFORT TO IT, YOU'RE NOT THE FIRST MODEL BURNED BY THIS INDUSTRY THAT CAME HERE OUT OF SHEER LACK OF OPTIONS
AND FOR ALL IT'S WORTH MOST OF THEM ARE STILL WORKING WITH US.

YOU'RE NOT THE FIRST MODEL BURNED BY THIS INDUSTRY THAT CAME HERE OUT OF SHEER LACK OF OPTIONS

I THOUGHT OF THOSE WORDS MANY TIMES OVER...

SPINNING THEM AROUND IN MY HEAD LIKE A HALF FORMED IDEA...

A REALIZATION WITH UNCOMFORTABLE IMPLICATIONS...

DID I COME THERE OUT OF SHEER LACK OF OPTIONS?

WAS IT JUST A STRANGE BIT OF COINCIDENCE...OR WAS ITSOMETHING DEEPER? MORE PROFOUND, AND IN ITS IMPLICATIONS DOWNRIGHT TERRIFYING AND HAD IT BEEN STARING AT ME MY WHOLE LIFE?

EURIDYCE

SO THEN SAMANTHA CALLS ME TO CHECK UP ON OUR MEETING AND I TELL HER HOW YOU RUSHED OUT, RIGHT? AND I SWEAR SOMEHOW WHE MUST HAVE ASKED FIFTY QUESTIONS IN THE SPAN OF TEN SECONDS

HEH!

SHE'S A GOOD FRIEND, THAT ONE. HANG ON TO HER!

MISS THOMAS?

HUH?

YOU OKAY?

EURIDYCE

YES, SORRY... JUST... ADMIRING THE PERFUME AD

OH, YOU LIKE IT? THAT'S A NEW ONE. IT'S DONE BY ONE OF OUR IN HOUSE PEOPLE

AND SPEAKING OF IN HOUSE PEOPLE... HAS SAMANTHA TOLD YOU ABOUT HOW WE DO OUR BUSINESS HERE?

SAM? OH, UM SHE SAID YOU HANDLE FREELANCERS? RIGHT?

BASICALLY YES. WE MAINTAIN AN ACTIVE NUMBER OF FREELANCE MODELS AND ARTISTS OF DIFFERENT VARIETY, WE HOST THEIR PORTOFOLIOS AND CONNECT THEM WITH POSSIBLE CLIENTS.

UPON THE COMPLETION OF WORK, WE TAKE A PERCENTAGE OF PAY. WE TAKE FROM 10% FOR SMALL CLIENTS UP TO 15% FOR LARGE COMMISSIONS.

SO, DOES THAT KIND OF WORK SOUND AGREEABLE TO YOU?

YEAH THAT SOUNDS FINE...

IT'S JUST... THESE CLIENTS THAT YOU FIND... CAN I REFUSE THEM IF I DON'T LIKE THE JOB?

OF COURSE!

FREELANCING IS A MESSY BUSINESS BUT IF IT HAS ONE PERK ITS' THE FREEDOM TO TELL SOMEONE TO FUCK OFF INTO THE SUNSET.

HEH!

WELL THAT COVERS THAT THEN...

SO... UH... WHAT DO YOU NEED FROM ME? TO GET THINGS STARTED I MEAN.

LIKE I SAID WE MAINTAIN ACTIVE PORTOFOLIOS FOR OUR TALENT SO A PROTOFOLIO BOOK WOULD BE PREFERRED, MAYBE SOME SOCIAL MEDIA PRESENCE. THAT GOES A LONG WAY THESE DAYS

AH...
SOCIAL MEDIA...
UH...LET'S NOT. I HAVEN'T REALLY KEPT IT PROFESSIONALY PRESENTABLE. AS FOR A PORTOFOLIO BOOK... I DON'T HAVE A CURRENT ONE
THAT IS... I'D RATHER NOT USE THE DELOUISE STUFF.
UNDERSTANDABLE.
WELL IF YOU'RE OKAY WITH YOUR CLOTHES AND MAKE UP, WE CAN MAKE ONE FOR YOU NOW
REALLY?
YEAH. WE HAVE A PHOTOGRAPHER OF OUR OWN. HE'S GOOD.
COME ON, LET'S GET IT TAKEN CARE OF
YKNOW, IT'S KINDA FUNNY, ACTUALLY!
HE'S THE ONE WHO MADE THIS AD!
WELL, I'M NO BUTTERFLY BUT I THINK I'M IN GOOD HANDS!

ALL OF IT WAS SO MUNDANE.

NO GODS! NO SHINES OR NIGHTMARES OR RAINBOWS AND... WELL A VERY MINIMAL AMOUNT OF BUTTERFLIES.

I WAS JUST A GIRL WITH BILLS TO PAY LOOKING FOR A JOB

AND HONESTLY AT THAT MOMENT I WELCOMED THE NORMALCY OF IT ALL

MATT, YOU HERE?

BUT YOU KNOW WHAT?

JUST A SEC I'LL CALL HIM!

I SHOULD HAVE GUESSED IT WAS TOO GOOD TO BE TRUE

HM... HE'S NOT ANSWERING..

AFTER ALL I LEFT NORMAL IN THE DUST EVER SINCE I OPENED THE DOORS TO MERRYL'S SHOP.

HEY, JACK SORRY I'M HERE! JUST HAD TO TAKE A---

SHIT!

U--
AH!

H-HI!

THAT WAS WHEN I STEPPED INTO A WORLD WHERE STRANGE MAGICS ARE THE NORM AND CURIOUS COINCIDENCES BECOME A MATTER OF GREAT CONCERN...

BECAUSE WHEN YOU'RE MEDDLING WITH THE DIVINE, A COINCIDENCE COULD BE MORE THAN A MATTER OF CHANCE ENCOUNTERS AND MATCHING CIRCUMSTANCES

AFTER ALL, A COINCIDENCE CAN BE A HERALD OF FATE .

THE WIND OF THE FIRST BUTTERFLY.

MOTHERFUCKER!

AND AS WE WOULD ALL SOON LEARN, ESCAPING FATE IS NOT AN EASY THING TO DO...

FUCK! FUCK! FUCK! FUCK!

BECAUSE EVEN IF YOU TRY RUNNING AWAY FROM ONE OF ITS HERALDS...

YOU'LL JUST FIND YOURSELF RUNNING INTO THE NEXT.

UNF!

OOMP!

OH COME ON! WATCH WHERE YOU'RE GOING!

IT'S A PARTY NOT A RACING TRACK!

L-LORD HADES!

I---I AM SO SORRY

PLEASE, LET ME---
IT'S FINE I GOT IT.
JUST, PLEASE... MIND YOUR...
STEP?
HEY! I KNOW YOU, DON'T I?
Y-YEAH?
OF COURSE! YOU AND THAT CUPID GIRLFRIEND OF YOURS!
SHE'S NOT MY...
ANYTHING!
BUT SHE IS HERE WITH YOU, THOUGH, ISN'T SHE?
N-NO
WHY DO YOU ASK?
WELL, YOUR HORNS ARE TIPPED IN GOLDSO I FIGURED YOU AND HER WERE... UH, CROWNING AGAIN?
OH, NO... THIS IS JUST... DECORATIVE.
FOR THE BACCANALIA...
ANYWAYS... SHE IS HERE, JUST NOT WITH ME.
SHE'S WITH THAT TALL GOLD CLAD CUPID I THINK
A TALL...
OH...
OH DEAR!

THAT'S AN IMPRESSIVE CUPID

WHATEVER... SHE'S TALL. BIG DEAL, I CAN BE TALL!

AND GOING FULL GOLD ON THE DRESS? HOW GAUDY CAN YOU BE!?

RIGHT...

HONESTLY IF THAT'S HER CHOICE OF AN ESCORT I'M QUESTIONING HER SENSE OF TASTE

ANYWAYS I REALLY DON'T...

CARE?

UH... FRIEND OF YOURS?

NEVER SEEN THAT PERSON IN MY LIFE!

OUT OF THE WAY NOW!

LORD HADES!!!

LORD HADES IT HAS BEEN SO LONG!!!

I... DO I KNOW YOU?

OH DEAR! HAVE I CHANGED SO MUCH THAT EVEN YOUR EYES CAN'T RECOGNIZE YOUR DEVOURER OF RESENTMENT ANYMORE?

WAIT!?

MAEGARA?

SSSH! WE SPEAK NOT THE OLD NAMES! I GO BY OMEGA NOW.

HAD TO CHANGE! HAD TO BLEND IN WITH THE LOVE GODS FOR THE SAKE OF MY MISTRESS!

SHE HAS A REPUTATION TO KEEP!

YOUR... MISTRESS?

OH YES! MY LADY RAPHAELA!

OH SHE'LL BE SO HAPPY TO SEE YOU!

HOWEVER... WE SHOULD PROBABLY BE RID OF THIS ONE FIRST.

DON'T BE RUDE! SHE'S AN INVITED MEMBER OF YOUR SISTER'S CASTE!

MY SISTER'S...

OH DEAR! IS BAUPHETTE HERE!?

HAVE YOU SEEN HER TONIGHT? I KNOW THAT SHE USUALLY ATTENDS THESE THINGS PRETTY REGULARLY BUT I CAN'T SEEM TO FIND HER

UH... NO... HAVEN'T SEEN HER AROUND...

HOLD ON! MISTRESS BAUPHETTE IS YOUR SISTER?

IT'S... A FITTING DESCRIPTION, YES.

SO YOU'RE... A FURY?

A FORMER ONE, BUT JUST LIKE MY SISTER I NOW WALK A KINDER PATH.

UH----HUH. AND HOW'S THAT GOING FOR YOU?

DEPENDS!

PLACES LIKE THESE ARE A CHALLENGE. IT'S JUST WHEN I SMELL SO MUCH POWERFUL ENVY...

AFFECTION AT ITS WORST...

SUCH DESIRE TURNED FOUL!

IT JUST BRINGS OUT THE WORST IN ME!

BUT ENOUGH ABOUT MY CRAVINGS!

WHERE ARE MY MANNERS!? I SIMPLY MUST CALL MY LADY OVER SO SHE CAN GREET YOU PROPERLY, IT HAS BEEN SO VERY LONG.

THAT'S REALLY NOT NECESSARY...

OH I INSIST! SHE'S HERE WITH HER NEW FIANCEE YOU KNOW!

OH YES, REALLY WARMS MY HEART TO SEE HER SO HAPPY! YOUR DEAR LATE BROTHER HAD QUITE AN EFFECT ON HER, EVEN NOW THE SCARS RUN DEEP BUT SHE IS HEALING.

RIGHT, NEW FIANCEE...

OKAY, MAEG--- UH OMEGA, I GENUINELY HAVE NO IDEA WHAT YOU ARE TALKING ABOUT...

UH, JUST ONE MORE THING! FIANCEE? THE TALL ONE IN THE GOLDEN DRESS IS YOUR LADY?

YES?

SO THE WHITE CUPID IS...

HER BETHROTHED

AH...

I SEE...

WAIIIT....

THERE'S NO WAY...

AND YET THE WAY YOUR JEALOUSY SCREAMS AT ME...

YOU ARE HER, AREN'T YOU!

HEURECA'S SUCCUBUS!

WHAT???

OH THIS IS JUST...

DELICIOUS!

OH, LADY RAPHAELA!

YOU WILL NOT BELIEVE WHO LEFT HIS CAVES!

W-WAIT

OH NO!

LISTEN TO ME! YOU NEED TO RUN! NOW!

RUN!? I'M NOT GONNA RUN FROM SOME FEATHERY CUPID!

THAT'S NO MORE A SIMPLE CUPID THAN BAUPHETTE IS A CUBI!

THAT'S HERA!

W-WAIT!

H-HERA!?

AS IN ZEUS' HERA!?

THE VERY SAME AND GIVEN YOUR REACTION, YOU KNOW THAT SHE HAS A HISTORY WITH PEOPLE WHO SLEEP WITH HER SIGNIFICANT OTHERS!

NOW RUN!!!

AS I LIVE AND BREATHE IF IT ISN'T... RAPHAELLA, WAS IT?

HADES, AS DELIGHTFUL AS EVER I SEE

HEURECA I COULD TWIST YOUR NIPPLES BLUE RIGHT NOW!!!

YOU MADE ME THE THRIRD WOMAN TO HERA OF FUCKING OLYMPUS!!!

WHY THE FUCK DOES ALL THIS SHIT HAVE TO HAPPEN TO---

HEY!

OOMPF!!!

OH COME ON!!!

WHAT THE FUCK, SIGRID!?

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, WHAT THE FUCK, SIGRID? YOU RAN INTO ME!

WHAT ARE YOU EVEN DOING HERE?

ISN'T IT OBVIOUS? I'M SERVING THE PARTY. NOT ALL OF US GET TO DRESS UP ALL FANCY AND...

NICE DRESS...

BLACK IS A NEW CHOICE? I'M GUESSING ALLURIA IS AROUND?

NOT NOW, OKAY! I NEED TO...

SO YOU ARE THE ONE THEN?

EEK!

Chapter 22

The Ring



SO... I KINDA WISH I KNEW SOME CLEVER SAYING ABOUT CHANCE ENCOUNTERS

A FOLKSY BIT OF WISDOM I COULD DROP TO MAKE THIS WHOLE THING FEEL A BIT LESS WEIRD

=CLICK=

MAYBE I COULD MAKE SOMETHING UP...

HEY, MATHEW, DID YOU KNOW THAT A CHANCE ENCOUNTER IS... A SIGN FROM THE UNIVERSE THAT TWO PEOPLE ARE WALKING THE RIGHT PATH?

ALSO YOUR LUCKY NUMBER IS 42

=CLICK=

=CLICK=

YEAH, NO... THIS WAS A MESS AND THERE WAS NOTHING THAT I COULD SAY TO MAKE IT ANY LESS AWKWARD.

MATHEW HOWEVER... WELL, HE WAS ALWAYS GOOD AT GETTING THROUGH THE AWKWARDNESS... PART OF THE JOB AND ALL THAT...

OKAY, SO... YOU NEED ME TO GET YOU ONE OF THOSE PRISON NAMEPLATES?

WUH-- WHAT?

WHAT DO YOU MEAN, WHAT? WE'RE GOING FOR PORTOFOLIO PICS...

MOST MODELLING GIGS JACK OFFERS ARE COMMERCIAL YOU GOTTA SELL THE IDEA THAT YOU LIKE THE PRODUCTS YOU'RE ADVERTISING

I KNOW WHAT COMMERCIAL MODELLING IS. MATHEW!

OKAY, THEN WHY ARE YOU HERE TAKING PICTURES LIKE YOU'RE PISSED AT THE DETECTIVE THAT ENDED YOUR CRIME SPREE!

OH COME ON!

NO, YOU COME ON! LOOK!

CHECK IT OUT! THE NOTORIOUS AXE MURDERER LAUREN THOMAS, FINALLY MEETS JUSTICE!

OH FUCK OFF!

THERE SHE IS!

"CLICK"

HEY I KNOW I'M A BIT STIFF, OKAY?

I'M SORRY.. IT'S JUST... THIS IS WEIRD! I DIDN'T EXPECT RUNNING INTO YOU LIKE THIS!

SO THIS IS... UNINTENTIONAL?

YEAH!

UH... LAST TIME I MADE A MESS OF THINGS... BUT I WAS THERE ON PURPOSE!

THIS IS JUST

SIMPLE COINCIDENCE...

YEAH.

RIGHT....

OKAY THEN.

NOW WE GOT THAT CLEARED UP, WHAT DO YOU SAY WE ACT LIKE A COUPLE OF PROFESSIONALS AND GET THIS DONE'

I... YEAH, I CAN DO THAT!

IT'S STRANGE. I WAS A MODEL WHO SPENT MOST OF HER LIFE FEARING THE CAMERA

FIRST AS A SCRAWNY KID WITH CROOKED TEETH

LATER BECAUSE OF VERONICA DELOUISE... THE WOMAN WHO PROMISED ME THE WORLD IF I WAS ONLY PERFECT ENOUGH FOR THE CAMERA WHICH I NEVER WAS...

MATHEW HOWEVER

HIS CAMERA NEVER SCARED ME...

OH THAT'S A NICE ONE, POP A THUMB OUT, GIVE ME THE FULL HITCHIKER!

I NEVER FELT JUDGED BY ITS DARK EYE

HE ALWAYS MADE ME FEEL...

BEAUTIFUL! KEEP THE POSE BUT LOOK TO THE SIDE LIKE YOU JUST MISSED A BUS!

AND EVEN THOUGH I WAS SUPPOSED TO BE ON MY WAY WITH CARVING THIS MAN OUT OF MY HEART.....

THERE IT WAS, BEATING WILDLY...

BECAUSE OF HIM...

FOR HIM...

ABSOLUTELY GORGEOUS!

AND IT SCARED ME!

SUDDENLY I FEARED THAT MY SMILE WOULD BETRAY THE TURMOIL WITHIN ME SO I DID MY BEST TO HIDE IT BEHIND A WELL PRACTICED DISTANT GAZE.

NO POUTING! THIS IS NOT A FASHION SHOOT. SHOW ME THE WARMTH I KNOW YOU HAVE!

IT WAS A FUTILE EFFORT...

THE SMILE ESCAPES ME ONCE MORE. THIS TIME IT IS ONE OF THOSE SMILES THAT TELLS JUST A BIT TOO MUCH AND INSTINCTIVELY I DO MY BEST TO HIDE IT

IT IS AN OLD INSTINCT...

A PAINFULY FAMILIAR GESTURE, AND TO MY GREAT SHOCK, I NOTICE SOMETHING ABOUT HIM...

SOMETHING BROKEN

M-MATHEW?

ARE... ARE YOU OKAY?

YOU SURE?

ME? YEAH. SURE!

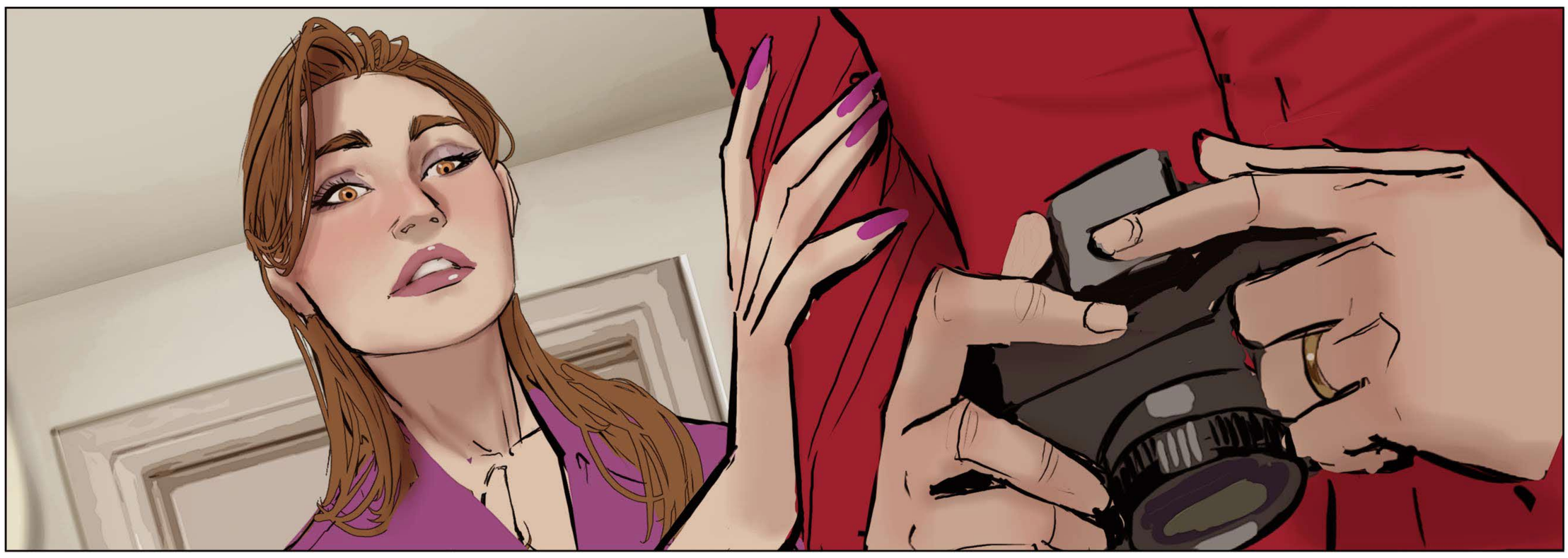
MHM... I---I THINK WE GOT ENOUGH HERE.

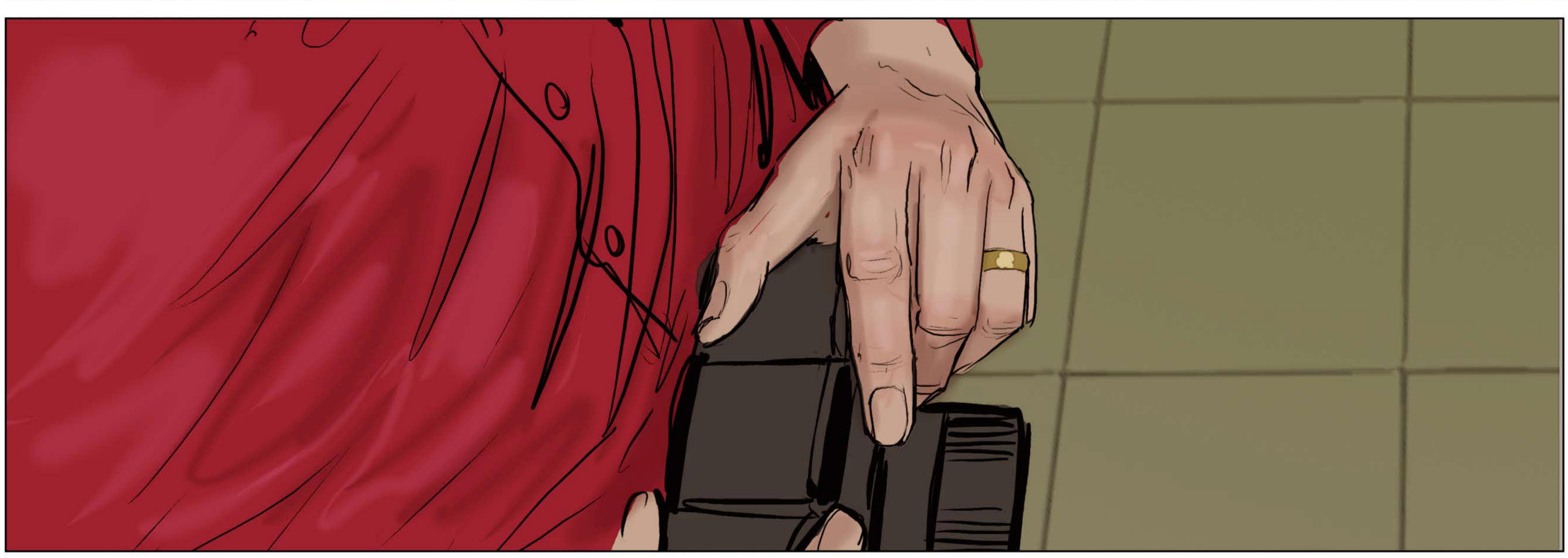
HE WAS LYING...

I COULD SEE IT. AND YET I COULDN'T SAY ANYHTING ABOUT IT...

AND SO...
YEAH...









RIGHT... UH...SO WHAT NOW?

JACK HAS YOUR INFO SO HE'LL CONTACT YOU WHEN THESE ARE DONE

RIGHT... THAT MAKES SENSE...

WELL... I GUES I'LL BE OUT OF YOUR HAIR THEN.

BYE, MATHEW...

IT'S... BEEN A NICE SUPRRISE.

SURE...

AND... I GUESS... MY REGARDS TO THE MISSUS.

SLAM

MISSUS?

THE HELL IS SHE...

AH...

OF COURSE... THE MISSUS...

HAH...

ARGH! FFFUCK OFF!

Chapter 23

A Goddess scorned

AND YOU KNOW WHAT... KNOWING SOMETHING THIS IMPORTANT AND HAVING TO KEEP IT TO YOURSELF...

IT'S QUITE THE BURDEN.

APOLLO?

HEY!

APOLLO!

OH! HEDONE!

APOLOGIES! I WAS...

YOU WERE DOING IT AGAIN...

I... SUPPOSE I WAS, YES.

THIS IS NO TIME TO PICK AT THE FUTURE'S THREADS.

WE NEED YOU IN THE NOW.

RIGHT...THE SPEECH!

TREASURED GUESTS, WELCOME!

ONCE MORE YOU GRACE US WITH YOUR PRESENCE AS ANOTHER CYCLE OF PLENTY DRAWS TO ITS END

AND SO, LET US JOIN TOGETHER IN CELEBRATION FOR OUTLASTING THE ENDLESS SHADOW OF THE CALM

BUT LET US ALSO THINK OF, AND DRINK FOR THE LOST AS THIS IS THE POINT OF OUR BACCANALIA.

WE DRINK FOR THOSE THAT HAVE LONG PASSED, FOR EVEN THOUGHT THEY SUCCUMBED TO THE CALM'S ROOTS, THEY STILL LIVE IN OUR MEMORIES

SO KEEP THOSE MEMORIES ALIVE! DRINK AND LIVE HERE AND NOW, FOR SOME DAY OTHERS MAY DO THE SAME FOR YOU.

TO LIFE!

TO LIFE!

TO LIFE!

AND ALL THE DELICIOUS DELIGHTS IT HAS TO OFFER!

JUST ONCE I'D LOVE IT IF SHE DIDN'T BUTT IN AT THE END OF ONE OF THESE SPEECHES!

I DON'T KNOW... SHE BRINGS SOME LEVITY TO THESE THINGS.

SHE IS A GODDESS OF WORLDLY PLEASURES AFTER ALL.

WORLDLY PLEASURES ARE FINE. I MIND THE LACK OF CLASS AND SOPHISTICATION

STILL GOSSIPING BEHIND MY BACK... LITTLE BROTHER!

AWW, LOOK AT THAT FACE! I MISSED THAT SCOWL OF YOURS, ASMODEUS!

HUH... YOU KNOW, I NEVER IMAGINED ASMODEUS WAS THAT BITCHY

YEAH, THIS IS A RECURRING THING. I SAW IT BACK WHEN I WAS SERVING AT THE PREVIOUS BACCANALIAS. HEDONE JUST HAS THAT EFFECT ON HIM.

WAIT? HEDONE? THE HEDONE? AS IN THE ACTUAL DAUGHTER OF EROS AND PSYCHE, HEDONE?

THE ONE AND ONLY. AND THAT'S EXACTLY HIS PROBLEM. ASMODEUS MAY PRIDE HIMSELF AS BEING THE ELDEST SON OF EROS, BUT WHEN IT COMES DOWN TO IT, HE IS NO DIFFERENT FROM THE REST OF US.

A MERE SPLINTER OF A SHATTERED GOD

EQUAL TO A CUPID WHEN IT COMES DOWN TO IT...

SHE HOWEVER IS THE REAL DEAL. AN ACTUAL TRUE DESCENDANT, AND THIS IRKS HIM

DAMN... AND I THOUGHT THE CUPID HIGH CASTE MEMBERS WERE PISSY

HEH...
YKNOW... I CAN'T HELP NOTICING...
YOU'VE BEEN SURPRISINGLY CHATTY ABOUT THE CUPIDS RECENTLY
I HAVE??
YEAH, USUALLY YOU'RE QUICK TO CHANGE THE TOPIC SO I DON'T PRY, BUT...
I DON'T KNOW, WE'VE BEEN TOGETHER FOR YEARS NOW AND I STILL KNOW NEXT TO NOTHING ABOUT THAT PART OF YOUR PAST
HONESTLY, I APPRECIATE IT. YOU SHARING I MEAN.
RIGHT... SORRY ABOUT THAT.
IT'S JUST...
JUST WHAT?
YOU REMEMBER WHAT I TOLD YOU ABOUT CUPID'S IDEA OF MARRIAGES?
YES?
WELL... WHEN I CROSSED OVER I ALSO TOLD YOU I DID IT BECAUSE I WANTED TO BE WITH YOU
OH, THAT'S STILL TRUE!
IT'S JUST... NOT THE WHOLE TRUTH.

TRUTH IS... I WAS A VERY SUCCESSFUL HEARTMENDER... IT'S A WORKER CASTE SIMILAR TO WHAT CALLERS ARE WITH THE CUBI. ANYWAYS, MY PREFORMANCE CAUGHT THE EYE OF MY SUPERIOR...

SHE PUSHED FOR MY ASCENDANCE TO HIGH CASTE, AND GRANTED ME THE RANK OF WATCHER

THIS MEANT I WOULD REPORT DIRECTLY TO HER

WHICH MEANT SPENDING A LOT OF TIME WITH HER.

OVER TIME SHE FELL IN LOVE WITH ME, WHILE I... DIDN'T.

WHICH MIND YOU, TO A CUPID IS A TEN TIMES WORSE AN INSULT THAN A CUBI REFUSING TO PARTAKE IN AN ORGY.

EVENTUALLY, SHE PROPOSED... I TOLD HER I NEEDED SOME TIMETO THINK... AND PROMPTLY RAN AWAY

RIGHT INTO YOUR ARMS.

SO ANYWAYS, THE REASON I'VE BEEN SO... CHATTY ABOUT MY OLD KIN IS BECAUSE... WELL, AFTER WE WERE INVITED HERE I REALIZED THAT THERE WAS A PRETTY HIGH CHANCE THAT I MIGHT RUN INTO HER

AND HONESTLY... THAT FREAKS ME...

OUT...

VAIN?

YOU ARE THE BEASTIE THAT DEFILED MY BELOVED

WELL, UP CLOSE LIKE THIS YOU DO POSESS CERTAIN CHARMS I'LL GIVE YOU THAT MUCH.

SO? DO YOU HAVE A NAME THEN?

COME NOW. YOU WEREN'T SHY AROUND MY HEURECA, DON'T BE SHY WITH ME

IT'S HERA!

IT'S HERA!

IT'S HERA!

IT'S H--

L LELIAH MY LADY

YES...

LELIAH...

EVEN THE NAME REEKS OF SWEAT AND BODILY FLUIDS... BUT I SUPPOSE THAT IS TO BE EXPECTED FROM A SUCCUBUS.

I AM SO FUCKED!!!!

RAPHAELA THEY ARE BRINGING IN THE NECTAR WINE NOW, WOULD YOU LIKE SOME AS WELL

OH NO, I FEEL LIKE PARTAKING OF SOMETHING MUCH SWEETER!

HEURECA, DEAREST, YOU WILL NEVER GUESS WHO I FOUND

UM... I DON'T KNOW? WHO?

W-WHAT?

WELL THIS IS EMBARASSING...

COME NOW, MY LOVE!, SURELY THE WATERS HAVENT WASHED ALL YOUR THOUGHTS OF THIS ONE.

I'M SORRY I DON'T REALLY KNOW ANY CUBI... UH... IS IT LILITH? SO MANY OF THEM SEEM TO BE CALLED LILITH

GOOD GUESS, BUT NO. IT'S LELIAH.

YOU WERE VERY CLOSE TO HER ONCE!

I WAS?

I DO APOLOGIZE SHE IS SO FORGETFUL WHEN IT COMES TO IRRELEVANT SHORT TERM THINGS

H-HEURECA?

COME ON, HEURECA! IT'S ME! LELIAH! YOU KNOW ME! Y--YOU LOVE ME

OH... OHOHOH OH DEAR YOU REALLY ARE NEW TO THIS AREN'T YOU. SHE IS A ***CUPID!*** THAT IS WHAT SHE DOES. ***LOVES. INDISCRIMINANTLY*** AND OPENLY. WE ALL DO..

FOR A WHILE AT LEAST, HOWEVER, AFTER THE LOVE HAS OUTLASTED ITS... USEFULNESS...

WE DISCARD IT IN THE RIVER LETHE, FORGETTING IT WAS EVER EVEN A THING.

UNFORTUNATELY, TO HER YOU ARE BASICALLY NOTHING NOW.

UNLOVED...

UNWANTED...

IRRELEVANT

I SEE...

HEY NOW, CHEER UP! IT WON'T DO FOR SUCH A LOVELY THING TO BE SAD. THIS IS A PARTY AFTER ALL. AND YOUR KIND IS USUALLY HERE TO ENTERTAIN AFTER ALL.

WHY NOT ENTERTAIN ME? SHOW ME SOME OF THOSE PLEASURES YOU SO EAGERLY SHARED WITH MY BETHROTHED YES?

WH-WHAT?

I...

NO!

NO?

MY LOVE, LET'S JUST LEAVE HER--

TELL ME HEURECA...

ARE YOU ASKING OUT OF CONCERN OR JEALOUSY?

IF I WAS TO SULLY MYSELF BY BEDDING THIS CREATURE, I WONDER WHICH OF US WOULD HURT YOU MORE

HURT ME... BUT WHY?

YOU SAID YOU HAVE FORGIVEN ME

SHE LIED!

WH---

SHE DOES THAT WHEN SHE WANTS SOMETHING FROM YOU

YOU!

HELLO, DEAREST. IT'S BEEN A WHILE

ANTEROS...

HOW DARE YOU PLACE YOUR FILTHY HAND UPON MY LADY

I SHOULD---

OMEGA.

THIS IS NO PLACE FOR VIOLENT OUTBURSTS.

B-BUT L-LORD HADES WHY DO YOU PROTECT THE INCUBUS!?

I'M NOT.

HOWEVER IN YOUR RAGE YOU MIGHT INJURE OTHERS. YOU MIGHT INJURE ME, AND THAT WOULD PUT EVERYONE IN DANGER. INCLUDING YOUR LADY.

STAND DOWN!

PLEASE.

SIGH APOLOGIES. I... I WILL LET MY LADY DEAL WITH THIS.

THANK YOU, OMEGA. I APPRECIATE THAT.

UHUH...

I APPRECIATE THE INTERVENTION, LORD HADES.

YES. YES, DISPENSE WITH THE POLITENESS!

WHAT DO YOU WANT, ANTEROS?

WELL, FIRST OF ALL, FOR YOU TO STOP USING MY DISCARDED NAME. I DON'T DISRESPECT YOU BY USING YOURS

FINE, FINE! WASN'T YOUR NEW NAME SOMETHING RIDICULOUS LIKE ***ENVY?***

IT'S ***VAIN,*** THANK YOU.

WELL, FITTING I SUPPOSE

AS FOR WHAT I WANT, IT'S SIMPLE REALLY. I NOTICED YOU MAKING AN UNWANTED ADVANCE UPON ONE OF MY KIN, AND WE ARE HERE TO HELP WITH THAT

OH THAT IS RICH. I DON'TKNOW WHAT IS MORE HILARIOUS, YOU CALLING THESE CREATURES YOUR KIN OR PRETENDING THAT THEIR KIND WOULD CONSIDER ANY ADVANCE UNWANTED!

WELL, THEY ARE EAGER TO SHARE THE JOYS OF DESIRE, THAT MUCH IS TRUE. IT'S THEIR NATURE AFTER ALL, AND DESIRE ITSELF IS TRULY A WONDERFUL THING...

BUT THE THING WITH DESIRE IS, IT CAN ONLY BE WILLINGLY GIVEN. NEVER TAKEN

AND UNFORTUNATELY FOR YOU, SHE DOESN'T WILLINGLY OFFER IT TO YOU

IN FACT IT'S EVEN WORSE THAN THAT, I'M AFRAID. IN HER CURRENT STATE SHE FINDS YOU QUITE UNDESIRABLE

UNWANTED

I DARE SAY EVEN REPULSIVE

AND, OH YES.

ENTIRELY UNFUCKABLE!

I SEE THOSE BIG CUBI EARS ARE GOOD FOR EAVESDROPPING

WELL, THIS PLACE DOES HAVE WONDERFUL ACOUSTICS, AND YOUR VINDICTIVE TONE CARRIES THROUGH THE ROOM QUITE WELL

YOU INSOLENT LITTLE

BY ALL THE SUNS, DO MY EYES DECEIVE ME OR IS THAT WHO I THINK IT IS?

MOTHER DEAR, IT HAS BEEN SO LONG!

AT LONG LAST YOU DECIDED TO GACE ONE OF MY PARTIES.

WELL, I UH... AS THE CURRENT PRIMARIUS OF THE CUPIDS...

OH YES OF COURSE! YOU NOW LEAD THE LOVE GODS, DON'T YOU? PLEASE COME AND DRINK WITH ME! I YEARN TO KNOW MORE

I--- I SUPPOSE A DRINK OR TWO CAN'T HURT.

COME ON. LET'S GET OUT OF HERE.

Y--- YEAH...

I SO WISH MY SISTER WAS HERE AS WELL

HOW IS ARTEMIS?

GASP

OH, SWEET LOVE ETERNAL!

CRACKLE

CRACKLE

IT...
IT BURNS

I SEE...

YOU CAST IT AWAY, DID YOU???

SO YOU *DO* STILL YEARN FOR THAT CUBI FILTH!

WH---
WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT!?

THE HEARTBREAK! HER HEARTBREAK!

YOU STILL CARRY IT WITHIN YOU!

YOU...
YOU TRAITOR!

TRAITOR!?

THE HEARTBREAK BELONGS TO THE HUMAN, RAPHAELA!

HE IS READY!!!

UH

THE... THE HUMAN?

WAIT, *THE* HUMAN

THE ARROW, IT'S... WHERE DID I...

HEUREKA, WAIT HERE, I WON'T BE LONG!

HEY!!!

AN APOLOGY WOULD BE NICE!!!

YOU KNOW WHAT ACTUALLY?

FUCK THIS!

HEURECA!?

I'VE GOT IT!

FWOOOM

WH---

WHERE IS SHE?

SHE... UH...

LEFT.

L---

LEFT?

OMEGA.. WE'RE LEAVING.

FWOOOM

SEE, THIS RIGHT NOW!

THIS IS WHY I AVOID YOUR PARTIES.

HEH... HADES, I'VE KNOWN YOU FOR MILLENIA. YOU AVOID MY PARTIES BECAUSE YOU'RE A WALLFLOWER

BUT THANK YOU... FOR DEFUSING YOUR GREEN FRIEND THERE..

I JUST WANTED TO AVOID GETTING HURT IN THE PROCESS....

I KNOW. I'VE SEEN THE VERSION OF EVENTS WHERE IT ALL WENT WRONG

VISIONS STILL BURDEN YOU?

ALWAYS.

BUT... CAN'T WASTE TIME DWELLING ON THEM NOW.

I MUST GO AND BE A GOOD HOST...

BUT I AM GLAD TO HAVE SEEN YOU.

DO SAY HI TO PERSEPHONE FOR ME!

OF COURSE

UNENDING SORROW COMES FOR THE KING OF ALL ENDINGS

AND HIS SHALL BE THE END OF ALL...

WHAT?

UH... NOTHING. I REALLY SHOULD LISTEN TO HEDONE AND STOP DWELLING ON THE FUTURE'S POSSIBILITIES.

JUST... ENJOY THE PARTY.

APOLLO WAIT!

WHAT DID YOU SEE?

I SAW A POSSIBILITY OF AN END MY FRIEND.

YOUR END...

JUST ANOTHER THING THAT MAY OR MAY NOT BE.

THAT IS ALL I EVER SEE

IN THIS I AM NOT UNLIKE HECATE.

WHERE SHE SEES THE INFINITE CROSSROADS OF CHOICES LEADING TO ENDLESS NUMBER OF FUTURES, ALL I SEE ARE SOME POSSIBLE ENDINGS.

SHE CAN'T TELL YOU WHICH PATH TAKES US THERE BECAUSE SHE SEES ALL OF THEM. I CAN'T TELL YOU BECAUSE I SEE NONE OF THEM

SO I WON'T.

A HUMAN ONCE WROTE; A PERSON OFTEN MEETS HIS DESTINY ON THE ROAD THEY TAKE TO AVOID IT

SO BEST NOT TO WORRY ABOUT IT, AND ENJOY THE PARTY.

DON'T WASTE YOUR TIME DWELLING ON THE TERRIBLE SYMMETRY OF YES AND NO.

Chapter 24

A terrible symmetry

THE TERRIBLE SYMMETRY OF YES AND NO... I KNOW IT WELL NOW.

IT IS A PRECARIOUSLY BALANCED WEIGHT OF A CHOICE.

ANY CHOICE.

EVERY CHOICE.

EACH CHOICE MADE IS A BLADE THAT SLICES AWAY ALL THE POSSIBLE FUTURES WHERE A DIFFERENT CHOICE COULD HAVE TAKEN YOU. AND UNTIL THAT BLADE IS SWUNG, EVERYTHING EXISTS IN A STATE OF YES AND NO.

MY CHOICES GOT ME HERE...

DEAD AND PINING FOR A TIME WHERE I MADE A DIFFERENT CHOICE LEASDING TO A DIFFERENT FUTURE.

IN THAT FUTURE HE IS STILL MINE AND I AM HIS.

IN THAT FUTURE... WE ARE HAPPY.

IN THAT FUTURE I'M A LIBRARIAN...

HE DONATED HIS NEW BOOK OF PHOTOS TO THE LIBRARY. I SMILE KNOWING THAT VERY FEW EVER BROWSE SUCH BOOKS.

IT'S PHOTOS OF SUNSETS.

WE SPEND OUR EVENINGS WATCHING MOVIES TOGETHER UNTIL ONE OR BOTH OF US GETS A BIT TOO COMFORTABLE.

AND...

WE MAKE LOVE

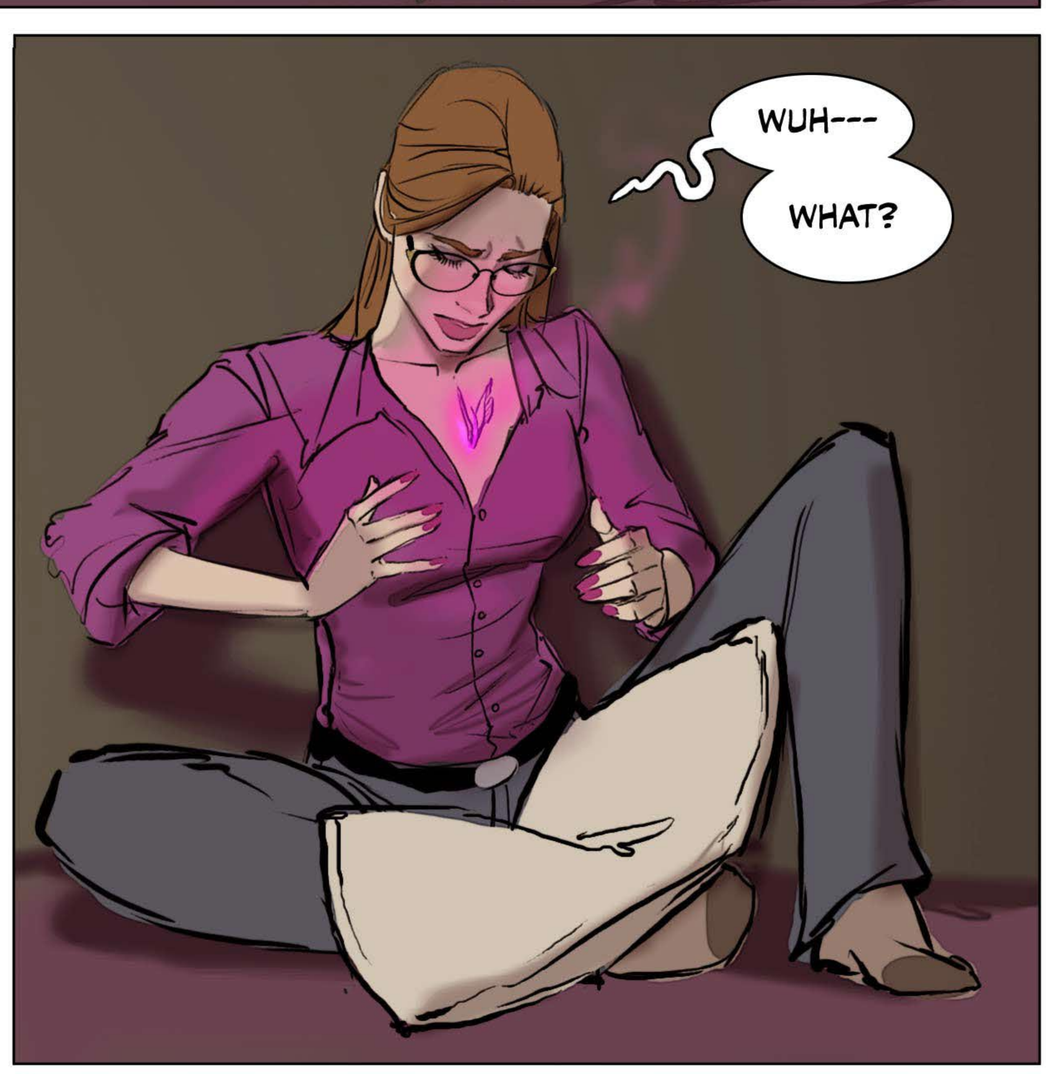
YES AND NO....

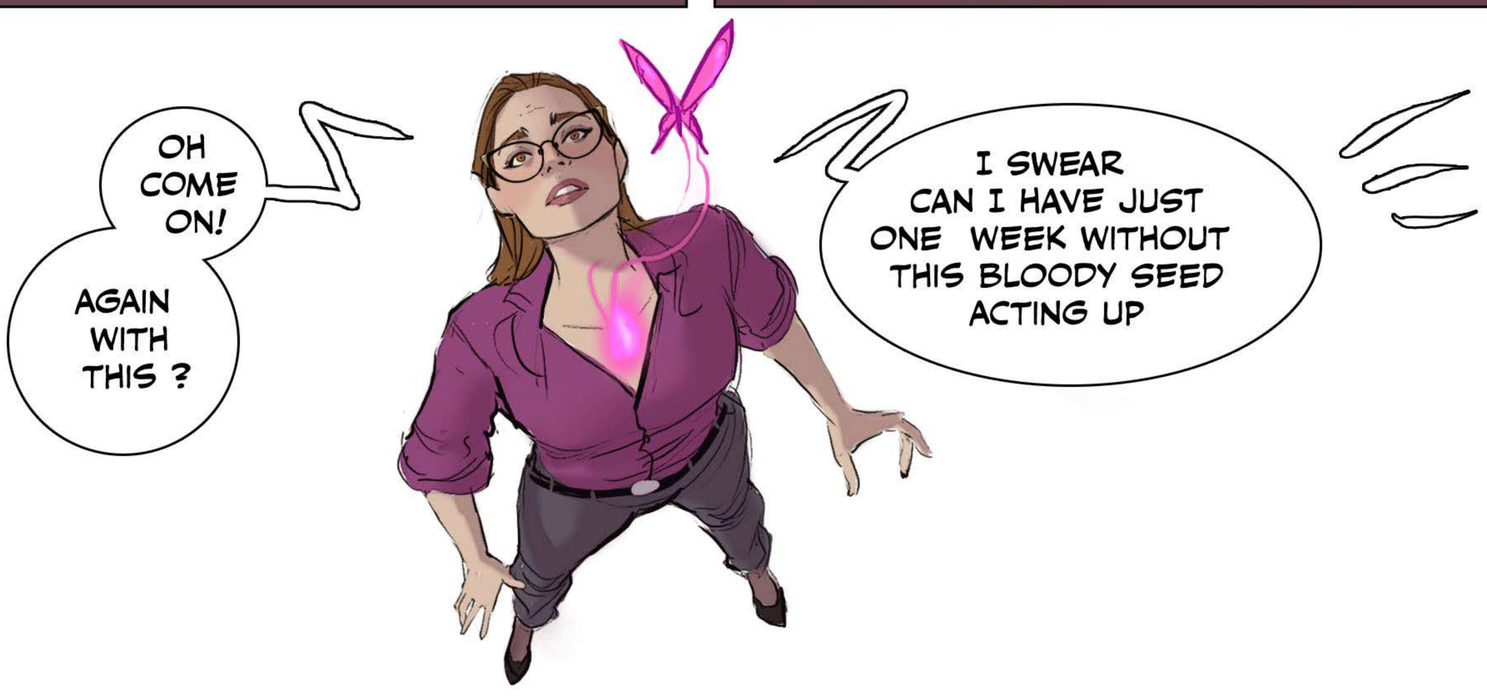
WE FALL ASLEEP.


AAAAAARGG


THIS WAS NOT THAT FUTURE.
FFFFUCK!!!! WHY THE HELL DID HE HAVE TO BE THERE!!?
FOR FIVE FUCKING MINUTES I WAS DOING BETTER
AND THEN OF ALL THE FUCKING PLACES OF ALL THE PEOPLE...


WHY DID HE HAVE TO BE SO... HIM


WUH---
WHAT?


OH COME ON!
AGAIN WITH THIS ?
I SWEAR CAN I HAVE JUST ONE WEEK WITHOUT THIS BLOODY SEED ACTING UP

HELL I'D TAKE A FEW DA--- NGH---

WHOA?

WUH, WHAT'S HAPPENNING

ARGH

WHAT THE FUCK!?

OH GOD... THIS IS BAD!

WHAT THE FUCK???

STOP

STOP!

STOP!!!

THADEUS! LELIAH!

ANYBODY!!!

MISS THOMAS!

LELI--

CLOSE YOUR EYES!

NOW!


AND WHATEVER YOU DO, DON'T OPEN THEM!

WHO?

WHERE... ARE...

SSSHHH! BE STILL NOW. NIGHT WILL KEEP YOU SAFE

YOU JUST REST NOW!

REST AND DREAM...

KEEP THE LIGHT OUT...

WHY?

SO YOU MAY KNOW ME...

WHO ARE YOU?

I AM...

MATT, I GOT THIS IN THE BALKANS. DRINK RESPONSIBLY!

KHM!

DAMN!

KNOCK KNOCK

WHATEVER YOU'RE SELLING I'M NOT BUYING!

DAMN, BLONDIE, HEAR MY OFFER FIRST AT LEAST!

OH HEY--- UH--- YOU!

THIS IS KINDA AWKWARD NOT KNOWING YOUR NAME....

ANYWAYS... WHAT BRINGS YOU HERE?

MY SIXTH SENSE TOLD ME YOU WERE TRYING TO DIE VIA ALCOHOL POISONING AGAIN SO I CAME HERE TO PROPOSE A BETTER SOLUTION

SURE...

I THOUGHT YOU WERE HERE TO STOP ME FROM GETTING DRUNK

NO. I'M JUST HERE TO STOP YOU FROM TAKING IT TOO FAR. SOME BOOZE DULLS THE PAIN OF THE HEART.

TOO MUCH WILL STOP IT ENTIRELY.

YOU ASSUME I WOULD TAKE IT TOO FAR...

WHEN I FIRST MET YOU YOU WERE ASKING THE BATENDER HOW MANY DRINKS WOULD KILL YOU...

YOU TELL ME.

YEAH... WELL... I THINK I NEED IT THIS TIME.

NO OFFENSE YOU'RE GREAT! BUT I DON'T THINK A NAMELESS ONE NIGHT STAND IS GONNA FIX THINGS THIS TIME

OKAY THEN. A DIFFERENT APPROACH THEN. HOW ABOUT YOU TELL ME YOUR STORY, AND I'LL GIVE YOU MY NAME

WHAT GOOD WILL THAT DO?

INDULGE ME BLONDIE.

IT'S... MATHEW... MY NAME IS MATHEW.

ALL RIGHT. MATHEW THEN.

AND YOU ARE?

U-UH!

FIRST THE STORY.

IT'S THE STRANGEST THING... THE SHEER POWER OF HAVING SOMEONE WILLLING TOJUST LISTEN TO YOU

TO JUST BE THERE FOR YOU AS YOU SHAPE YOUR PAIN WITH WORDS AND LET IT ALL OUT

IT IS IN THESE MOMENTS THAT THE COMPLICATED FEELINGS FINALLY COME INTO FOCUS AND YOU OFTEN FIND YOURSELF SURPRISED WITH WAT SHAPE YOUR TRUTH TAKES AT THE END OF IT ALL

AND SO HE DID JUST THAT. HE TOLD THIS NAMELESS WOMAN THE STORY OF US

OF THE GIRL HE LOVED...

Aquila
The eyes have it!

OF THE WOMAN WHO LEFT HIM...

THE WOMAN WHO RETURNED ONLY TO MAKE A MESS OF HIS LIFE ALL OVER AGAIN

WHO RUINED HIS ONE CHANCE OF HAPPINESS

WHEN LAUREN KISSED ME THAT DAY... I CHOSE TO BE HONEST ABOUT IT...

I TOLD ERIKA EVERYTHING! DID EVERYTHING I COULD TO CONVINCE HER THAT I HAD NO INTEREST IN LAUREN WHATSOEVER...

AND AT FIRST IT SEEMED THERE WAS NO DAMAGE DONE...

ON HER END OF IT AT LEAST...

ME... I FOUND MYSELF DWELLING ON IT.

I GREW DISTANT... MOODY.

I'D GET ANGRY ABOUT THE DUMBEST THINGS

WHEN SHE'D POINT IT OUT, I'D GET ANGRY AT HER...

IN THE END SHE GOT TIRED OF MY BULLSHIT AND LEFT ME

AND THE WORST PART IS, I THINK SHE DID IT BECAUSE SHE WAS AFRAID THAT I WOULD EVENTUALLY BREAK HER HEART THE SAME WAY LAUREN BROKE MINE...

AND THE FUCKED UP THING IS, I THINK SHE WAS PROBABLY RIGHT. SHE WAS BETTER OFF LEAVING ME!

BECAUSE THE TRUTH IS... EVEN THOUGH I DON'T WANT TO... EVEN THOUGH I'M AFRAID TO.... I STILL...

I STILL LOVE HER.

HOW MESSED UP IS THAT?

GOD I'M FUCKING PATETHIC.

SSSSHHH... THAT'S ENOUGH OF THAT NOW.

HEART IS A REBELIOUS THING. IT TAKES NO ORDERS FROM UP HERE.

IT'S STUBBORN IN WAYS THAT DEFY REASON

BUT EVEN BROKEN IT IS STRONG...

AND IT CAN HEAL... IF YOU LET IT.

WHAT THE...

WHO... WHO ARE YOU?

REALLY?

OH THAT'S RIGHT, I DID PROMISE YOU MY NAME IN RETURN.

WELL. THEN MATHEW...

ALLOW ME TO PROPERLY INTRODUCE MYSELF...

MY NAME IS HEURECA HALLOW LUCIUS 4TH

AND I AM HERE TO HELP.

GOOD MORNING, GORGEOUS! HAD A NICE NAP?

W--- MORNING? WHAT?

WHERE AM I?

SELENE'S CRADLE.

REALM OF NYX.

IT'S A PLACE THAT NONE BUT FEW CAN ENTER.

AND FOR YOU IT IS A SAFE PLACE.

AND YOU COULD USE A SAFE PLACE RIGHT NOW, BECAUSE YOU, MISS THOMAS... YOU HAVE PROBLEMS.

LUCKY FOR YOU, I CAN HELP WITH THAT.

I...UH... APPRECIATE IT, BUT...

WHO ARE YOU?

APOLOGIES!

MY NAME IS ALLURIA NYX, FIRSTBORN OF HOUSE ALARIS.

OH!? ANOTHER ALARIS?...

WELL, UH... THANK YOU, UM... FOR SAVING ME.

YOU MAY THANK MERYLLIA FOR GUIDING ME TO YOU

WAIT! MERRYL CAN TRACK ME?

NOT JUST HER.

ALL WHO ARE INVOLVED WITH YOUR CONTRACT CAN TRACK YOU. THIS IS HOW YOUR CALLERS FIND YOU WHEN YOU SUMMON THEM.

SO... WHY DIDN'T THEY COME WHEN I CALLED FOR THEM TODAY?

YOU CALLED OUT OF FEAR, NOT DESIRE. THEY COULDN'T HEAR YOU.

YOU HEARD ME....

I AM... DIFFERENT.

FWOMMMM

I AM A GRANDDAUGHTER OF THEGREAT NIGHT. DREAD, MISERY AND PAIN ARE AMONG MY KIN.

AND SPEAKING OF PAIN...

WHAT THE AGAIN WITH THE BRUISES

HERE, EAT THIS. IT HELPS!

UH... I DON'T KNOW ABOUT THIS...

THIS IS KINDA HOW I GOT INTO THIS MESS TO BEGIN WIHT.

DON'T WORRY, THIS ONE IS BARREN. IT WILL HELP WITH THE BRUISES.

HMM.. THE OTHER ONE TURNED MY LIFE INTO A PARADE OF WEIRD EVENTS

WHAT HAPPENNED TODAY... HAS IT HAPPENNED BEFORE?

MHM

ONFE!

WOW... LOOK AT 'EM GO!

THANKS!

SO...I DON'T SUPPOSE YOU KNOW WHAT THAT WAS ABOUT?

ALL THE... BLACK STUFF I MEAN.

WE CALL IT THE TIDE OF THANATOS

THE WHAT?

IT'S LIKE A FORCE OF.... ANTI DESIRE, UN-LIFE... UH... IMAGINE IF... DEPRESSION HAD A PHYSICAL FORM.

IT ROBS YOU OF YOUR WILL TO DO ANYTHING... TO LIVE. WE ALSO CALL IT THE CALM, AS IT BRINGS ALL THINGS TO A STANDSTILL.

STRANGE THING IS IT'S ALSO SOMETHING THAT ONLY AFFECTS US GODS.

SO WHY DOES IT KEEP AFFECTING ME?

I CAN TAKE A LOOK.

MAY I?

YEAH.

OH...

W-WHAT IS IT? WHAT DO YOU SEE?

I SEE SUCH A BURDEN WITHIN YOU A BURDEN YOU HIDE FROM ALL AND CARRY ALONE. YOU SMILE, YOU LAUGHT AND THEN YOU GO HOME AND GROW... HOLLOW

HEH...

HAHAHA

WELL... NOT ANYMORE I'M NOT.

WHAT'S SO FUNNY?

WELL I'M DEAD NOW SO... I MEAN...

I'M DONE WITH ALL THAT BULLSHIT!

WHAT WAS IT THOUGH? HAS THE BOOZE GONE BAD?

OH NO THE WOMAN THAT WAS WITH ME, SHE DRANK IT TOO. FUCK!!!

OKAY, COME NOW MATHEW! YOU'RE SMARTER THAN THIS.

I LITERALLY TRANSFORMED IN FRONT OF YOU. I AM THAT WOMAN

AND MORE IMPORTANTLY...

YOU'RE NOT DEAD!

BUT YOU ARE BARELY ALIVE.

WELL?

HOW LONG HAVE YOU CALLED FOR THE END TO CLAIM YOU?

W- WHAT?

YOU , LAUREN, HAVE LOST YOUR WILL TO LIVE

I KNOW THIS MUST FEEL BEYOND STRANGE TO YOU...

IT'S... YEAH. THERE'S AN ANGEL IN MY ROOM... TELLING ME THAT I'M NOT DEAD.

BEYOND STRANGE IS A DESCRIPTION FOR IT.

WOULD IT HELP IF I CLARIFIED THAT I'M NOT AN ANGEL. I'M A CUPID.

RIGHT... AND I'M THE EASTER BUNNY UNDER COVER. HOLD THAT THOUGHT!

SHE POURED THE BOOZE...

DID SHE DRUG ME?

THAT'S ENOUGH OF THIS NONSENSE MATHEW.

YOU ARE NOT DRUGGED, NOR ARE YOU DEAD....

BUT LIKE I SAID YOU ARE BARELY ALIVE...

BUT I CAN FIX THAT.

THAT IS UNLESS YOU WISH TO BE RID OF THE SEED ALTOGETHER.

IT IS AN OPTION.

NO!

I... I WAS PROMISED...

PROMISED WHAT?

AN END TO LOVE. AND END TO... PAIN. I WAS PROMISED BLISS.

AND DID YOU RECEIVE IT?

NO...

Y-YES?

I--- I DON'T KNOW. IT'S COMPLICATED

WHEN IT'S NOT BAD IT'S SO VERY GOOD... AND... IF YOU REMOVE IT I FEAR.. IT WOULD JUST BE NOTHING BUT BAD ALL OVER AGAIN.

WELL... THEN I GUESS YOU NEED MY HELP.

WHAT ABOUT THADEUS AND LELIAH?

HAVE THEY SUCCESFULLY HELPED YOU WITH YOUR PROBLEM?

EXACTLY!

NOW, HOW WOULD YOU LIKE IT IF I MADE ALL THAT PAIN GO AWAY.

I CAN HELP IT HEAL. I CAN HELP YOU FEEL ALIVE ONCE AGAIN.

BY STABBING ME WITH THAT

WELL... YES.

AND THAT WILL HELP ME FIND MY TRUE LOVE...

NO. THAT PART IS ON YOU. THIS IS MERELY A HELPFUL JOLT

THINK OF IT AS...

ADRENALINE TO THE HEART,

LIKE IN PULP FICTION...

IT'S...

NEVERMIND.

SO YOU REALLY ARE WHAT YOU SAY YOU ARE. I'M NOT LOSING MY MIND?

YOU MOST CERTAINLY ARE NOT. BEFORE YOU STANDS A BRANCH OF OLD DIVINITY. A DESCENDANT OF EROS OFFERING AID IN YOUR TIME OF NEED.

IT IS YOUR CHOICE WHETHER OR NOT YOU'LL ACCEPT IT.

OKAY.. OKAY... BUT WHY ME?

WHY NOT? I SOUGHT OUT A BROKEN HEART AND FOUND A MAN IN A BAR WONDERING HOW MUCH ALCOHOL WOULD KILL HIM.

I WAS CONSIDERING IT TODAY AS WELL...

SO EITHER ALL OF THIS IS REAL...

AND THIS WILL SOMEHOW TAKE THE PAIN AWAY...

OR IT WILL KILL ME

JUST LIKE THE BOOZE.

JUST LIKE THE BOOZE.

SO IS THERE A BOW THAT GOES WITH IT?

YES...

BUT THERE'S NO NEED FOR IT.

TRUST ME

I PROMISE, IT WON'T HURT.

WHAT WILL HAPPEN?

I WILL INFUSE YOU WITH PURE DESIRE. NOT TOO MUCH. JUST ENOUGHT TO... JUMPSTART YOUR ENGINE

A SHOT OF ADRENALINE TO GET ME BACK AND RUNNING

HUH?

LIKE IN PULP FI... UH NEVERMIND.

SO... ARE THERE SIDEEFFECTS?

OF COURSE. EUPHORIA, EXCESSIVE ENERGY, SEX DRIVE YOU WOULDN'T BELIEVE.

I WILL REQUIRE ONE THING FROM YOU HOWEVER.

OH... LET ME GUESS. YOU WANT ME TO PICK YOU FOR MY CONTRACT?

CLEVER GIRL. BUT NO. THAT DECISION AS ALWAYS REMAINS YOURS.

I MERELY ASK OF YOU TO KEEP WHAT WE'RE ABOUT TO DO HERE A SECRET. BECAUSE AMONG MY KIND THIS ACT IS CONSIDERED A MAJOR TRANSGRESSION.

FINE. I PROMISE. SO WHAT IS IT THAT WE ARE ABOUT TO DO?

WE CALL IT... CROWNING.

NOW CAST ASIDE YOUR PAIN...

AND LIVE GLORIOUSLY!

HOLY...

...FUCK!

WHAT THE...

...FUCK?

Chapter 25

The king of endings and the Queen of beginnnings



SIGH

HADES!

THERE YOU ARE YOU OLD STICK IN IN THE MUD!

WHAT ARE YOU DOING OUT HERE ALONE!?

IT WAS TOO LOUD IN THERE.

TOO LOUD!?

WELL... COMPARED TO WHAT I'M USED TO.

MY FRIEND, WE ARE BOTH USED TO SILENT PLACES, BUT THAT'S THE POINT OF A PARTY, TO TAKE US OUT OF SUCH PLACES! TO EAT DRINK AND BE MERRY!

AND I SEE YOU HAVE PARTAKEN OF PLENTY OF DRINKS AND MERRYMENT.

IT BRINGS BACK MEMORIES OF THE OLD DAYS... NOT MANY OF MY CIRCLE ARE STILL AROUND

SUCH IS THE FATE OF DEATH GODS. WHEN ALL ELSE FADES WE WILL BE THE ONES LEFT TO TIDY UP THE UNIVERSE.

MMMH...

BUT NOT TODAY. TODAY I LIVE!

I NOTICED YOU... LIVING.

IS THAT THE SAME SUCCUBUS LIKE THE LAST TIME?

WELL...YES, ACTUALLY.

THE ONE THAT MAKES A HABIT OF STEALING FROM YOUR TEMPLES?

HEY, THERE'S NOBODY TENDING TO THOSE TEMPLES ANYWAYS

NO HARM IN HER WANTING TO TAKE SOME OF THOSE TRINKETS.

YOU SANG A DIFFERENT TUNE THE LAST TIME WE MET, OLD FRIEND.

I'M THINKING SHE MAY HAVE GOTTEN UNDER YOUR SKIN

WHAT DOES IT MATTER? SHE'S A SUCCUBUS. IT'S NOTHING SERIOUS. I MEAN... WITH THEIR KIND IT CAN'T BE SERIOUS.

OH I DON'T KNOW. I HAVE SOME EXPERIENCE WITH THEM AND THEY WOULD SURPRISE YOU.

YOU HAVE EXPERIENCE WITH THE CUBI?

HADES???

WHAT WAS IT AN UNEXPECTEDLY LONG SUMMER OR SOMETHING?

I MERELY ACTED AS A GRACIOUS HOST

HEH... BETTER KEEP PERSEPHONE IN THE DARK ABOUT THESE... CUBI HOSTINGS

YOU JOKE...

BUT STRANGELY ENOUGH SHE IS CURRENTLY HOSTING A SUCCUBUS AS WE SPEAK.

CHIRP
CHIRP
CHIRP
CHIRP
CHIRP
CHIRP
MMMMHM
CHIRP
CHIRP
CHARON UNH-- WHAT'S WITH ALL THE
CHIRP
CHIRPING?
CHIRP
CHIRP
WHERE AM I?
CHIRP
AND... WHAT AM I WEARING?
CHIRP
CHIRP
CHIRP
CHIRP
CHIRP

APOLOGIES FOR THE WILDLIFE. IT GETS A BIT NOISY HERE BUT I PREFER IT THAT WAY

AS FOR YOUR CLOTHES, YOU HAD NONE WHEN WE FOUND YOU

SO I HAD TO IMPROVISE.

HOW ARE YOU FEELING, MY FRIEND?

PERSEPHONE!?