

“Theodosia, look!”

Theodosia brushes aside a few low-hanging branches, coming up next to her friend, Elena. “I found something!” Elena calls over the sound of rustling leaves and faint bird calls overhead.

There, shrouded in greenery, a thin path wound through the trees, leading into what seems to be the thickest part of the forest—so faint anyone not looking for it would have missed it.

“Should we follow it?” Elena asks, already stepping onto the path.

“I don’t know, Elena...” Theodosia says, “Shouldn’t we try to find a path out of the forest? Not one that heads *deeper* in?”

“Oh, come on!” Elena whines, “It’s not like we can get any more lost!”

Well, she’s not wrong.

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Sighing, Theodosia trudges behind Elena, who shoots her victorious smirk. Typical. Elena gets them lost but hey, at least she found the mysterious path that’ll lead them to who knows where in the forest.

Minutes—maybe hours—pass, time Theodosia spends trying to reach out for help while Elena walks ahead, taking the occasional selfie or shot of whatever catches her eye.

“You know,” Theodosia grumbles, “if we don’t find help soon, the only pictures we’ll have worth a damn are the pictures on the missing person’s board. Actually, at this rate, they might as well skip straight to our *obituaries*.”

“Relax, would you?” Elena retorts, rolling her eyes, “They’re probably already looking for us. We just need to find a clearing and make a camp. We already have everything we need! Just consider our camping trip a more intimate and authentic experience in getting to know the local geography!”

“I reserve the right to worry when we’re lost in the middle of the fucking woods.” Theodosia deadpans, refusing to admit how the words ease some of the tension in her shoulders.

It’s not long before the trees thin slightly, revealing what looks like an abandoned religious site. In the center of the rubble stands an old statue, half-consumed by time and vines, depicting the scene of a man holding a bird, almost as though in a caress.

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Elena steps forward, brushing off leaves from the statue. “This is definitely something,” she murmurs, circling the statue. “Think it’ll be our ticket out of student debt?”

Theodosia crouches near the base. Symbols—maybe script—are engraved in the stone, barely visible under the lichen. “Think anyone knows this is here?”

“No way. There’d be signs. Excavation markers. A group of archaeologists and their underpaid grad students,” Elena grins, eyes bright. “This, my friend, is something *undocumented*. And it’s ours for the taking!”

The thrill of discovery tugs at her, overpowering the unease that lingers just under the surface. They split up, carefully exploring through the clearing.

Wandering through the site, Theodosia stumbles on something half-buried in the loose soil. It’s a small figurine, worn down and wings chipped, its features eroded by time, but she thinks—Angel Gabriel?

Guess we weren’t the first to grace this site.

She kneels beside it, brushing off dirt with the sleeve of her jacket. That’s when she sees it, writing on the wall—lines etched deep, almost desperate, looping into shapes of what she thinks is some ancient language. Nothing she can read or make out anyway, it’s all Greek to her.

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Running her hand over the wall, she follows the carvings. Eventually finding herself staring at what looks like hieroglyphics, drawings of some scene. A ritual, maybe?

The scene stirs something deep in her gut. Familiar. But why?

It’s Prometheus, she realizes. She’d never been interested in old mythos, but she’s *certain* that the scene depicted the story of Prometheus, the titan punished for giving men the gift of fire.

Theodosia’s skin begins to itch. Her eczema, dormant for weeks, flares along her forearms. She scratches herself absently, distracted by a rising noise—the chirping of birds, at first distant, now swelling into something louder. Too loud.

A symphony of discord.

A warning.

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For as long as she can remember, Theodosia spent her summers at her grandparents' cottage.

She loved spending time there, surrounded by nature. She'd have lived there if given half a chance. She especially loved playing in the woods of their backyard, always reluctant to head back inside. She'd always felt as though she belonged to the great outdoors, always felt safe there.

The only time she'd felt otherwise was when she was eight years old.

She's barefoot, the grass damp with morning dew as she chases after a butterfly when suddenly, a black blur swoops in and rips the butterfly out of the air.

She stops cold. Looks up.

A bird is perched on a low branch. Silent. Watching her.

Not a crow, not a hawk—something else, colossal, its feathers too dark. Too still. Eyes almost human.

It doesn't move. Doesn't blink.

She takes a step back.

In the distance, she thinks she hears her mother calling. She doesn't dare look away from the bird.

If she didn't know any better, she'd swear it *grinned*.

A beat passes.

The bird lifts itself into the air and disappears from view.

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She presses a hand to her arm, where red patches have bloomed beneath her sleeve—raw, raised, and burning. The itch intensifies, but it's not just on the surface anymore. It writhes under her skin, like it's clawing its way to the surface. Like it's something *alive*.

She bites the inside of her cheek to keep from clawing at it.

It isn't just a flare-up. This feels... wrong.

Invasive.

A wave of nausea rises in her. Her breaths come shallow. She squeezes her eyes shut. Tries to ground herself—dirt under her boots, the faint echo of footsteps ahead. But the sensation keeps creeping back.

She curls into herself, trying to shut out the rest of the world. The burning in her arms, the pressure under her skin—it's all too much.

A scream cuts through the haze.

Elena?

It comes again—raw, high-pitched. Pleading.

Elena!

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Her eyes fly open.

“Elena!” Theodosia cries, searching wildly for her friend, “Elena, where—!”

She freezes.

N-no....

Elena is lying, bloodied and motionless in front of her. Her torso is a mess of bloodied flesh. Her eyes were vacant. Her face is agonized and tear-stained.

She's... dead

Horried, Theodosia brings her hands up to her mouth, her stomach lurching.

Only.... She looks down and realizes her hands are.... Stained. Stained red. And in her mouth, the taste of copper lingers.

Slowly, she feels herself crouching down beside her friend. She strains herself, trying to move away from her but finds she can't. She feels like a passenger in her own body, as though something is imposing its will on her. Controlling her. Resisting feels like she's shouldering the weight of the sky.

Sobbing, Theodosia is forced to bring her face next to her friend's corpse, her liver.

The itch *burns*.

Against her will, she feasts on her friend. Against her will, she savours every bite.

She looks up and finds a bird perched on the statue.

Silent. Watching her.

It grins.

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O blessed Archangel Gabriel, messenger of God, we humbly turn to you in this time of need.

You were chosen to announce the good news to Mary, bringing the message of salvation.

We ask for your intercession before the throne of God, that we may achieve the definitive cure of all the evils that afflict our bodies and souls.

May you bring healing to all our infirmities, whether physical, mental, or spiritual.

We know that only with your help and God's grace can we overcome our difficulties.

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