

The Moth in the Mirror

A Splintered Novella

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The Moth's Machinations

“You’re sure about this, Morpheus?”

“I am,” Morpheus answered, dragging off his gloves and tucking them into his jacket.

“You, however, appear to need convincing.” Magic tingled at his fingertips, a pulsing blue light just beneath the skin. Due to the iron bridge outside, his powers were limited to a few benign tricks. But it would be enough to get his point across if necessary.

The carpet beetle—who stood as high as Morpheus’s collarbone after Morpheus had consumed a shrinking potion—gulped behind his many clicking mandibles. His carpeted hide quivered. “No, no. Please, you misinterpret my reservations.” The insect’s twiggy arms trembled as he flipped through the alphabetical tally on his clipboard of all the memories that had been lost in Wonderland. “It looks like a boring way to spend an afternoon, is all . . . spying on a human’s forgotten moments.”

Morpheus shifted, and his wings cast a shadow over the beetle’s face. “Ah, but this particular human has much to teach me.”

This particular human had managed to capture something Morpheus desired above all else in the world.

“Have a seat”—the beetle pointed to a white vinyl chair—“and I’ll ready the memories for you.”

Morpheus swooped his wings aside, sat down, and took a drag from the hookah provided by his host as a courtesy. The sweet, candied tobacco seared his windpipe. He blew puffs of smoke, fashioning them into Alyssa's face. It was easy to picture the way her eyes always frosted to blue ice when she saw him, filled with both dread and excitement. He adored that about her: the sharpened edge of her netherling instincts, warning her not to trust him, softened by human emotions forged during their shared childhood.

Before her, he'd lived his life in solitude, never needing anyone. He had no idea what spell she'd cast over him. She was beyond frustrating, always pledging her devotion to the wrong side. But her charm was undeniable. Especially when she defied him or glared at him with righteous indignation. It brought the most delicious snarl to her lips.

Morpheus set aside the hookah, although the burning in his chest had nothing to do with smoke. Alyssa was the only one who could quench the fire there, for she was the one who had first stoked those flames.

They'd spent five years together—childhood playmates—until her mum ripped her from him, bloody and wounded, and he had to stew in remorse and guilt from a distance because of a foolhardy vow he'd made to stay away.

Being deprived of his friend gave him his first taste of loneliness. Even all the years he'd spent in a cocoon prior to ever meeting her, trapped and claustrophobic . . . even they hadn't prepared him for the desolation of her absence.

Then at last she'd come back to him, reviving all the old feelings he thought he'd mastered. That time, too, was short-lived. She'd left again, by her own choice. The resulting pain and loneliness were excruciating. Debilitating.

She'd only been gone from Wonderland for six months, and he didn't understand this sick emptiness inside that could only be filled by her touch, her scent, her voice. Solitary fae had

no use for such nonsense. They required no companionship, abhorred emotional baggage. Their affection and loyalty belonged to the wilds of Wonderland and to no one or nothing else.

So what had she done to him to change that?

Each time he saw his reflection of late, he no longer recognized the moth in the mirror. He was incomplete, broken; and he despised it.

Despised it even more because she made him work so bloody hard to woo her, while she gave her affections freely to a worthless mortal.

Morpheus suppressed a snarl. He couldn't make sense of Jebediah's luck, how a human could wield such power over a netherling queen. How a mere boy could harness a royal half-blood heart so multifaceted, a spirit prone to pandemonium and madness. Jebediah was dragging Alyssa down, chaining her to the boredom and mundaneness of the human realm.

She must be set free.

Morpheus had considered killing his rival, but Alyssa would never forgive him. No. The time had come for creative measures.

If Morpheus knew what Jebediah had been thinking during his trek through Wonderland—all those times when the boy had been at his most terrified, his most discouraged—he would know the mortal's weaknesses and his strengths, *intimately*. He would see how to break Jebediah down, pit him against himself.

Those weaknesses would defeat him better than Morpheus could. Then, when he'd destroyed Alyssa's faith in her mortal knight, Morpheus would be there to comfort and win her.

He would once again hear her laugh the way she had when they were children, once again be the recipient of her dazzling smile.

Once again be complete.

"This way, please." The beetle motioned for Morpheus to follow.