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Epilogue

“Why did I come here?” she gasps out, “I should have listened to them, taken the warnings seriously.”

We were just kids playing a game weren't we? Least that's how I look at it, most wouldn't call our ages kids anymore now though would they?

“I should have never come here.”

Surrounded by a blanket of darkness the girl shook, the back of her shirt tearing apart as it continued to rub against the rough bark of the old, withered oak tree with every breath she took. A gash strung across the abdomen bleeds through its makeshift bandages, tearing at its own seams. Tears begin to fall, flowing freely from her eyes down her cheeks before hitting the ground. There had been two players in this game, two who's bond surpassed the rest, one that was stronger than any substance one could obtain, and yet here she is. A sole survivor of this duo, the only player trying to stay standing in this game, met with nothing more than a merciless opponent.

We were meant to be a team, the girl thought as she shook.

We were a team right?

A defining void began to consume her, the silence ripping her very being apart save her choked up sobs, her own sounds leading her ever closer to her inevitable demise.

Pathetic, useless, insane, hysterical, that's all you'll ever be the girl thought to herself.

All of which she knew were lies but the more she heard them ring, bounce along the linings of her skull, the more she felt inclined to believe them.

Because when did she ever have a voice to call her own?

No one ever listened to her, no one ever cared enough to ask her for the thoughts that always seemed to wrack her brain for hours at a time. No one dared to listen to the insanity within the walls of her skull. No, everyone passed her by with ease and spilled lies from their teeth so it seemed like she really couldn't trust anyone anymore and she would think about that more if it weren't for the fact she felt there wasn't much of her time remaining.

The dread she felt was on the verge of toppling over and consuming all she was into the surrounding void, simply to be discarded and then remembered by no one. She was as secure as a blade of a vintage guillotine was when being held up by nothing more than a mere thread, on the edge of snapping itself into two.

In a cruel way she almost hoped it would snap on her, if anything just to finally put herself out of this miserable hell she got herself into.

Tearing through the sounds the girl made was the echoing of footsteps, the inevitable surely near, her fear showed on her face like an open book, amplified despite the blanket of darkness that covered everything her eyes may have touched.

And through it all, she realized only one thing.

"Now I'm all alone, merely falling apart at the seams."

Chapter One - Start Offs

A girl in her early twenties , that's all I was. Fair enough skin and faint freckles dusting across my cheeks just under my hazel eyes. I had rather short, brown hair while standing at a mere five foot six inches, weighing in at slightly hefty one hundred and ninety pounds. I went by Mil or Milly by those close to me but my name was Mileena, Mileena Cipher to be more precise.

My parents I knew little of. My father had worked full time as a professor at Oregon Health & Science University, "Time is money," he used to say. My mother was another story, she was a full-time author before passing shortly after I turned ten years old, leaving whatever memories I had of her tainted gray, faded, and blurred out in all the far corners and in what's between. All I have left of her is the original copy of Mythnic, her first book, one of great mythology. I don't think it helped knowing dad didn't make it but a decade after that, I guess the heartbreak was just too much even for him. In the end my older brother Kai dropped out of school to work full time in order to support the remaining mortgage and bills. He rarely gets a day off but when he does he's on school grounds talking to old friends or hanging out with me, otherwise I'm mostly alone in my day to day routines. I'm sure more people would think this was a dream, though to me it felt more lonely than anything else.

One of my favorite things to do to pass the overwhelming amount of time was looking through the book my mother had written, the pages crisping and creasing right under my fingertips. The rough sketchings of maps with notes written in ink sporadically displayed, whether it'd be cleanly, illegibly, or sometimes crossed out. It was always accompanied by rips, tears, and splatters of ink invading the confindings of every page. I couldn't help but further indulge my curiosity into the pages, despite having read them probably hundreds of times since her passing. It seems like I'm always finding something new hidden in between the lines, something I missed at some point.

Kai would always say, "You read that old thing as if it'll become an Olympic event." And in hindsight I suppose I did, it was one of the main ways I felt closer to her, especially since I didn't remember her as clearly as he did.

When it came to my dad at least I was able to mourn for him and properly handle my emotions, of course I still missed him but we had lives to get to, I couldn't sit around and wallow. But with my mom I kept hearing new stories growing up that pained me to hear simply cause I had no recollection of them, only having very vague and blurry scenes play in my head when certain things were talked about in the house.

Kai was never one who had time for creativity, all of his efforts went towards his job to help support my dreams of attending college and becoming an author like my mother before me. He never had long term ambitions, aside from keeping the house we grew up in and a steady job that involved some form of physical labor or had a competition factor. And while I knew I didn't *need* college to become a writer, I had learned financial aid and the money my dad left behind for us was enough to cover schooling, and we were always taught to have a plan B.

There are times when he'd read with me in attempts to both better understand it and understand my fascination with it. It wasn't often he had time he wasn't over working himself or simply catching up on sleep, but the times he did the house felt livelier, it felt more like what home used to be. It was like a distant dream that I was trying to grasp upon waking up at the early sunrise peeking through the curtains.

I know it's strange, the way I word things I mean, but I just can't seem to help myself much. I'm very anxious, despite how confident I always sound in my mind. I'm never like that in real life, but not without a lack of trying. All my confidence was in the words I wrote, just like how I assumed my mother before me did. In writing I feel like I finally have a voice people might find is worth listening to. It's here in the confinement of my mind that stories unfold and life becomes more interesting rather than the chore that it usually is.

I should be grateful. My brother works so I don't have to, I get to study full time to get a degree in a field I actually want to be in, and despite my lack of what society deemed a proper family upbringing I'm still in the house I have at least a few fond memories of. Yet here I am, afraid to be who I am. Here I am feeling lonely and hopeless in a usually empty house, though I really should stop thinking so much about this. After all today is a rare occasion indeed, Kai has the next three days off paid due to a small renovation occurring on his main job site. I'm excited, the house will feel a little less empty and for a little while we'll pretend things are the way they were, that things are going to be ok in the end.

I make a quick mark of the day which was June 12th , 2020, simply for self reference. With my Mythnic held in one hand and the other using my fingers to trace the symbol on the cover, placed just above the author's name, Lindsey Cipher. Thanks to the extra notes scattered throughout the book I find that the symbol on the cover stood for "falling". Whatever the reason, significance, or even affiliation to this book it had still baffled me with more unanswered questions than I'd have liked to admit. Before I am able to further question myself over the topic, a light knock is made at my door, causing my head to snap up and face towards the general direction of the sound.

“Hm,” I muse to myself, clearly it could only be one person since we kinda lived alone.

The door clicks open without further hesitation, guess I forgot to properly address that, whoops. The owner of the knock was my brother, black hair messy and lazily covering his right eye while the left shone a dull gray. Most of his pale skin was covered by a baggy, brown hoodie, dark blue jeans, and worn down tennis shoes. Why he wore all this in the house, I'll never know. He leans against the open door frame, perfectly balancing his weight and making eye contact with me before speaking.

“Still flipping through that old thing?” he asks, eyes now darting their attention between myself and the book in my hands.

“Indeed, I am Mr. Workaholic.” I say, flipping to a random page to emphasize my current activity.

I knew he was just saying that to poke fun anyways, he's pretty caring when you get past his seemingly cold exterior.

He merely growls at my smart alec way of response, but it quickly ceases. Soon being replaced into clear confusion in his eyes as they fall on my page. It takes me a moment longer than it should've to realize this, his figure already looming over the open page cocking his head to the side as he begins skimming it before I can even process his movement of choice.

“What is that?” he asks.

I follow his eyes to the middle of the page, moving the book a bit closer to my face to get a better look at it. A feeling of uncertainty makes its way into settling in the pit of my stomach. I find my breathing hitch and I'm utterly shocked by what I see.

“I honestly don't know,” I say, “I've never even seen this page up until this point.”

His head shifts from just above my head to looming over my right shoulder, clearly showing confusion, hoping that by staring at a different angle he can better grasp its concept. I already know what's about to be asked before I even hear the words sputtered out.

“You're telling me, you've looked through this book for over ten years and haven't even so much as had a glimpse of this page until today?” he asks, bewilderment clear on his features.

“I'm telling you the truth!” I start, “I don't recall seeing this page at all before.”

I glanced back down, the page didn't even have a number, the one before being labeled fifty-three and the one after it fifty-four. That was more than strange, I remember clearly that the

pages had once been side by side while the one we stared at originally nonexistent. The page took up both the right and the left sides, symbols that seemed indescribable and unidentifiable alike littering the page most prominent lined around a large circle placed dead center of the linking pages. The circle surrounding a dark beast with large wings and a long tail.

My hands move before my thoughts can catch up and fully process what I've done. My hands are shaking and the book is now closed, more pressure being placed onto the cover than need be. I don't understand why I did this, or why, despite the unfamiliarity of those symbols they had left me such an eerie feeling. Why had they left me racking my brain trying to familiarize the unknown? More importantly, why do I feel like I'm forgetting something? Something important. What is it? My brain is spiraling now and I nearly fall out of my seat when I hear something outside my own thoughts.

"You okay there, Mil?" Kai asks, a hand wave in an attempt to grasp my attention.

"Yeah, yeah I'm fine." I say.

I shifted my position, so I can look at my brother better. I needed to make sure he understood the gravity of our next course of action, to understand the weight of my words. I'm not usually one for immediate actions, but this page was leaving me unsettled,

like something was hiding in between the roughly scribbled ink lines waiting to be discovered, if the page was in here that meant it was linked to my mother somehow and that was enough for me to push past this sickening feeling and dive head first as best as I could.

“Let’s just find out exactly what we’re dealing with here.”

I soon lay the book back across my desk, flipping between the pages until I land back on the one just moments prior. It almost sends my insides reeling, it's ridiculous. I don't understand why this is making me so sick, it's not like I've ever seen it before.

Right?

I'm practically silent as I trace the strange scribbles and symbols spelling out some kind of code. This is all honestly too surreal. It's like I'm losing a sense of reality the longer I look at it and trace upon the words I couldn't understand. It's not exactly reassuring to not know exactly what it is you're looking at. This was bothering me a lot more than I thought it would, especially since this was the weekend we had plans for a sort of mini vacation, something that rarely occurred with my workaholic brother. And I couldn't help but think maybe I should have been skimming through another book the more the page reminded me of something, something I couldn't quite place or understand, but something I at least knew affected me at some point. It was like

having deja vu if I'm being honest. And the beast, it looked oh so familiar yet so foreign, though I know for a fact I've never seen it on any of the other pages in this book. It had two sets of what looked like eyes, stripes along the tail and an odd symbol on its wings, long pointed ears that stood straight up and bird-like claws adorned its limbs. It was sitting like a peaked Doberman but seemed like it could've used its front limbs similarly to hands.

I could swear on my life it blinked at me, despite having no pupils.

"What's in the pocket there?" Kai says, snapping me out my internal tangent to myself.

I steal a quick glance to see where he's looking and try to find the place it is on the page and sure enough a small pocket is hidden within the dark scribbles and eerie eyes that I swear are still following me. Without much thought, my hand is already reaching into the strange pocket and soon I feel a somewhat flimsy yet rustic piece of paper, pulling it out carefully I push the book lightly to the side to see what it holds. Unfolding the paper ever so carefully as I'm filled with both fear and anticipation it soon unravels into what seems like a map, covering the majority of my somewhat small desk.

I think I am going to be sick now.

Spinning my chair to the side I empty my stomach of what little contents I had for breakfast in the nearby trash can. While nausea wasn't uncommon for me, an immediate reaction without some kind of warning was rare for me. And the burning in my throat only made me sicker by the minute. But I forced myself to look back at it after wiping my face as best as I could.

It was a map of our home, our town, and worst of all, the neighboring forest. It had shown a trail not seen in any recommended pamphlets at town hall for tourists. No, it looked dark like the book, with phrases and symbols I couldn't quite understand yet they seemed so familiar. I keep wracking my brain to see if maybe they were in another part of the book, but the more I think the less I can recall. Once I'm breathing somewhat normally again I wipe off my face with my sleeve out of habit and find myself looking at my brother since he had been mostly quiet this entire ordeal and it didn't seem like he was really holding up much better. His eyes seemed blank as they looked at the map. Was that a flash of something there? Realization perhaps? Before I could ask why it looked like he recognized this *thing* in my book he spoke up, shaking his head to snap himself out of whatever trance he was left in.

"Wanna see where it leads?"

This is laughable at best now. "You're telling me that the first thing you think to do when seeing a creepy total replica map of

our surrounding area is to follow the not so recommended trail into the, oh I don't know, heavily unregulated forest grounds?"

"Oh come on Mil, you know we've been in the same house since mom passed, I'm sure she had left the map for us and dad had just been too busy with his work to tell us before then."

"Then how do you explain the fact that I haven't seen it in the almost ten years I've been reading the damn thing then?"

"Because you're careful Mil, the pages could've stuck together without you putting much thought into it knowing the pages aren't exactly in the best condition. Besides, I know very well you really didn't like my original plan of driving to the beach when we both clearly hate the ocean and its contents. Not to mention the amount of people that may just end up showing up. A crowded beach is definitely one of the worst crowded places to be in."

I kinda just sat there, both a bit frustrated and flustered. How could he think I wouldn't notice this? Or how could he think this little last minute extravaganza was anywhere even near a good idea? I must have been staring blankly too long as he does a half fake cough to get my attention.

"Go with me or don't, but I'm going to find out where this thing leads, isn't that what you wanted? To find out exactly what we were dealing with here?"

I hate how he always used my words against me and knowing my stubbornness generally overtakes my better judgment when it comes to satisfying my curiosity.

"No you're right, I did say that, fine. This is going to be way easier to pack for anyways."

He smiles a bit at that, the first I've seen in practically months, my heart aches a bit at this for reasons I don't really know nor understand. I guess since if you paid attention the smile had looked a little forced, but maybe I was reading too much into his features.

"We leave at sunrise, best to get a head start so we don't have to spend the night there."

I just nod at this, knowing fully well I wasn't exactly mentally prepared to say anything more. And just as quickly as he came he was gone, out of my room with the click of the door and the fading of large footsteps. Guess I better get packing and get some rest for the sake of tomorrow.

I fold the map carefully and place it back into its camouflaged pocket, closing the book gently and placing it into a careful backpack with a metal water bottle and some travel snacks. I dug through my dresser and pulled out an outfit for tomorrow and set my alarm for a regrettably early six in the morning rude awakening.

I quickly shift into comfortable pajamas and find myself cocooning into my blankets, not really caring that it was earlier than usual to be going to sleep. Knowing fully well it'd take me hours to fall asleep, even if I was dead tired most nights.

I was uneasy after what I saw anyways, and sleep came anything but swiftly. I ended up staying up a long while, simply scrolling through my phone's endless social media apps and spiraling down a dark path of search engines just to try and cope with what I was feeling.

Turns out I'm not the only one creeped out by seeing something out of place. Go figure. You know it's honestly kind of funny the bullshit people are trying to get away with posting. What from *a Mummy crawling out My lawn* to *Oh no I think a ghost is in love with Me*. I'm honestly soon left laughing to myself almost forgetting what I saw, almost. It's, at the least, a distraction for a little while and I can't help but be grateful for it as soon enough sleep comes much easier to me than it did prior to my search

expedition. I can only hope things will be this blissful come morning.