

YOUR HEART'S DESIRE

As the years had gone on in this new world, Messier Ninety had a realization that they spent more and more time amongst the unique flora and fauna of 3's Forest. Whenever they wanted to stop selling and take a breather, it seemed to be the right place for it.

They looked upwards to the canopy, watching the beginnings of a delightful autumnal ballet in the air as leaves dropped in soft wind. A familiar site for their current companion, Shady, a small shade cub tottering alongside them.

"I don't suppose you'll be foraging extra now?" Nindy let a smirk grace their unusually normal face. They had elected to take a simple dark skin tone with masculine eyes and striking face paintings, which garnered many a compliment much to Nindy's surprise.

Shady let out a small little grunt before he charged towards a glowing red mushroom, taking a sizable bite even before his paws managed to grip the rest of the snack.

"I've never seen Mycel's mushrooms look that, volatile..."

Nindy plucked what was left of the morsel from the grubby paws of Shady, who protested wildly as Nindy studied the strange new shroom. Without thinking first, Nindy gave it a soft sniff before realizing that they smelled something not on the mushroom, but in the air...

"Shady, this doesn't seem right..."

The little bear quelled his ramblings and looked onward into the forest. They both realized there was a shroud of murky red hanging over everything, getting more bright and thick as the forest continued. Shady shuddered and scampered over to Messier Ninety's leg to hug tightly.

“Shady, perhaps you should go back to Vinewander and head to the tent. I’m uncertain if this would harm you, so let them know you should be brought to Irin just in case that mushroom makes you sick, understand?”

Shady nodded before hurrying off into the brighter side of the forest, his snacks long forgotten. Nindy watched him until he disappeared, before turning back and pulling out an ornate lantern. Whatever this was, they weren’t going to sit and twiddle their thumbs wondering about it. They needed to find out what this was...

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As Ninety carefully hopped and scurried along the underbrush, the red became thicker and more oppressive with each step. It seemed everywhere they went the crimson was seeping into everything, twisting it and leading to a strange, diseased appearance in the forest.

Everything was beginning to take on a bloody hue, and it barely dawned on Nindy that they should cover their face or suffer the same.

As Nindy began to pluck a handkerchief from their pocket, a dizzy wave of nausea washed over them. It seemed the mist was already taking hold, and with shaking, fearful hands, Nindy began to wrap the cloth tightly around their face to shield their nose and mouth.

“I hope this is enough to stop it...” They muttered as they pulled a folding cane from their bag and set it, carrying on with wobbling steps. They hoped that Shady was okay back home...

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It seemed hours had passed on as they walked in the forest, at this point too weak to walk without bracing themselves on their cane like a crutch. They had no idea what the time was, or how long they had been trudging onward. All they knew was they were tired, and hungry, and thirsty, and hurting, and they felt smothered and hot. They ripped their cloth from their face, breathing deeply of the air as they staggered onward, the dizziness pressing on them harder than ever before.

"Red mist be damned, I can barely breathe with that cloth. I'm starving, where's water to drink? I need a cocoon to nest in. I want to scream so badly..."

As they spoke, a layer of vines began to curl and knit into a thick blanket along the floor beneath a willow. Nindy barely noticed as they took another step and fell into the mess of vines, at first terrified but then relaxing as they saw they fell on the leaves of the vines.

"Soft leaves, is Glume helping me? No, she hates everyone, but, they're so soft..."

Nindy stopped fighting the pull of sleep and curled into their usual nesting position, nestling into the silky leaves and feeling the heat of the air pull them into darkness. However, it wasn't long before they woke back up, throat aching and stomach in knots. They were too famished to sleep yet.

Nindy's eyes scanned the foliage like a predator and noticed a bush of blackberries, or were they raspberries? Nindy didn't care, they scrambled over and shoved berry after berry into their mouth like an animal, juice dribbling down their chin as they feasted. By the time they had gorged themselves on the fruits, the bush was nearly barren and their hands and mouth stained a deep wine color.

Their mouth pried open with needle thin teeth, a haggard breath rushing out. "Wwa, waterrr..."

More eyes began to form on their face in a haphazard pattern while they looked for a creek. They found a puddle and settled on that, crawling over and taking handfuls to gulp greedily from the murky water. Their hair grew and knotted, a segmented tail lashing against their back. It seemed they were changing without meaning to.

When they finally finished drinking their fill, they sauntered back over to the vines, thick clawed hands pulling them into clumps like a bed. They threw their forest jacket on the top and collapsed into the thorny embrace, stony skin protecting them as they finally fell into a deep, dark slumber.

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Messier Ninety looked around in the void, apathetic and cold. As they looked towards their hands, they saw nothing yet had no reaction. This is how it was, they thought. *I am nothing, and this is nothing.*

It felt like time didn't exist, or if it did eons passed as they existed there as a blank essence. They did nothing, said nothing. Was this all there was here?

From something akin to a spring inside of them bubbled a cold, dreadful feeling and for the first time they began to cry into this endless darkness. It felt like there was no meaning to this, there was nothing and they were nothing. What were they going to do? Would they be lonely forever? Why did they suddenly hate that thought? They always accepted this, why now?

A voice that rumbled spoke, an almost snide tone to it's words. "What do you want?"

They didn't know, did they? Were they sure of what they wanted? They wanted to, to be cared for. They didn't wanna be alone anymore...

"What do you want."

"I don't know, I want out of this, I want to be happy..."

"What do you *want*?"

"I want to feel, I want to be loved, I want to feel..."

"What do you **WANT??**"

Nindy shrieked as they answered. "I don't know! I don't know! What do I want? Why must you torment me? Why must I suffer? Why is this all I have?"

**"WHAT DO YOU WANT WHAT DO YOU WANT WHAT DO YOU WANT WHAT DO YOU WANT"**

Nindy opened their eyes to the void and with a vicious snarl, screamed with all their might.

"I WANT TO BE!"

Nindy woke with a start, their breathing shallow and harsh as they scanned their surroundings. The red mist hung heavier than ever around them, like smoke in a house fire, clinging to everything. Nindy turned and felt the give of vines under them and peered down in shock as they realized the vines had grown so thick they formed a cocoon of thorns and roses, with Nindy inside.

Carefully, with smaller claws that felt familiar, they tugged and brushed away vine after vine until they could crawl out. A triple set of pale moth wings beat softly as they hopped out, and they hovered to the ground.

"Why does this feel, like me?"

Nindy searched for the puddle they vaguely recalled from before and wandered over to it slowly, uncertain of what to think about this feeling. As they peered down into the water, it cleared and revealed Nindy's current form.

A matte rose gold face with three large ruddy eyes stared back up at Nindy, large fangs peeking out from a mouth pressed close in almost grim fashion. Thick, bronze, and messy hair, crimped with occasional braids, hung thick around Nindy's whole body while only just avoiding the ground. They had feathered extremities in white with gold accents, and each digit held a small golden hook for a claw. Their three wings each had a pattern of red and gold along all edges of the wing except the very top.

Nindy had never felt so complete before. Every form they took had fit with the situation, or how they felt, but was never *them* at least that they could feel. But this, *this* was Messier Ninety.

"I'm, me... this is me? I..." Nindy passed a finger over a set of gold freckles, noticing their skin's texture being akin to sandstone. "I'm beautiful..."

Nindy took a few moments to drink in their tiny details. Their skin was a lot like Visindy's, yet they had antennae above their temples instead of ears. Each one had a shaft of stony flesh before white tendrils fanned out towards the air. They only had one pupil that passed between each eye wherever they looked, but saw perfectly. Was that an extra eye on their browbone? They had no eyebrows either, it seemed.

Nindy smiled wide and revealed thick cones of teeth that curved only just so, forming a zipper of a smile with two massive fangs jutting out, and they giggled as they hopped into the air hugging themselves tightly. They found out what they were, and they could hardly believe it!

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Nindy cautiously fluttered through the trees heavy branches, occasionally stopping to listen for signs of nearing the main forest. Their wings made for a unique levitating method of flight, but required extra care to avoid injury, so they had to make sure they did this safely.

They heard in the far distance a call from a familiar friend.

"Ninety! Ninety? Are you there, Ninety?"

"Magdalene, what's she doing out here? Wait, how long was I asleep? Oh no..."

Nindy dropped low in the air and tried to weave through the clearest paths towards the sound. The mist had dissipated behind them a little ways back but they still worried for Magdalene's safety! They finally saw the familiar river hog and smiled, but didn't swerve hard enough to miss a branch and fell heel over head into the ground right in front of her, grumbling as they unstuck their head from the dirt.

"N-ninety? Is that you?"

"Maggie! Uh, ye-yeah, it's me. I'm, well, I'm me?"

"You sound dreadfully confused, do you need a moment?"

Nindy stood and brushed away the remaining dirt before flexing their fingers and toes, delighted to find out they worked like cat claws, but then shaking their head clear of debris. "I found it Maggie!"

Magdalene's face warmed as she put the pieces together. "Is this, your true form?"

Nindy could only squeal as they flapped their hands hard in front of them, nodding furiously and hopping in place. Magdalene pulled Nindy into a warm hug and they held tightly to one another as they both grinned wide with glee.

As they parted, Nindy took the time to explain the red mist and how concerned they were, the effects it had on them, and how in the end they felt as though they were fighting until they woke in the current state. All the while Magdalene lead them back to the usual clearing for the locals' homes, nodding as she thought about everything.

"I don't know if that mist is a good thing, because Trout's turnips have withered and died, but perhaps you winning was a great enough victory to unlock something within you. Though I would prefer if you stay far from it next time, I worry old friend..."

"Of course Maggie, I shouldn't have rushed in anyway. I just wanted to discover what was happening, just in case Shady got sick, since he ate a weird mushroom that was soaked with the red energy."

"Ah, about that-"

A shriek was heard from a pet, and both turned to find an angry shade bear screaming as Irin flew with a basket of food away from the belligerent cub. "No, no more! You've eaten enough!"

"If the mist reveals what you want most..." Magdalene started.

"Then Shady just wants to eat..." Nindy dropped their face in their hands, grumbling.

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Nindy had dragged Shady back to the tent and the little bear slept, somehow sleeping off the mist and returning to his normal amount of hunger. As he munched on some actually safe mushrooms, as well as some cranberries and roasted pumpkin, Messier Ninety took a quill and began to write what was going through their head. They were pleased they found their true form, though they weren't certain if they were ready for anyone beyond 3's Forest to see who they really were.

At least, not yet, but one day they would be brave enough. One day...