

# MISTER IMPOSSIBLE

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# I

Ronan Lynch still remembered the worst dream he'd ever had. It was an old dream now, two years old. Three? Four? As a kid, time had been slippery, and now, as an adult, or as a whatever-he-was, it was downright slimy. It had happened *Before*, that was all that mattered. Ronan used to divide his life into the time before his father's death and the time after it, but now he divided it differently. Now it was *Before* he'd been good at dreaming. And *After*.

This was *Before*.

When the worst dream showed up, Ronan already had a vibrant catalog of memorable nightmares. What sort did you want? Perhaps the classic monster mash: talons, fangs, shaggy feathers dripping with rain. Public humiliation: in a movie theater trying to hide a runny nose, wiping endless snot on a ratty sleeve. Body horror? Scissors slipping and snipping right into an arm, the bone and tendons sliding free. Mind-fuckery was a perennial choice: entering a familiar room and being struck with a sense of hideous and unshakable wrongness that dug and dug and dug inside him until he awoke shaking and covered in sweat.

He had them all.

"Nightmares are lessons," his mother Aurora had told him once. "They feel wrong because you know what's right."

"Nightmares are bitches," his father, Niall, had told him once. "Let them smile at you, boy, but do not get their numbers."

“Nightmares are chemical,” his boyfriend, Adam, had told him once. “Inappropriate adrenaline response to stimulus, possibly related to trauma.”

“Talk dirty to me,” Ronan had replied.

Here’s what nightmares were: real. At least for him. Everyone else woke up with cold sweats and a racing heart, but if Ronan wasn’t careful, he woke up with everything he’d been dreaming of. It used to happen a lot.

And it was starting to happen a lot again.

He was starting to think maybe *Before* and *After* weren’t as clearly defined as he’d thought.

This was what happened in the worst dream: Ronan turned on a light and saw a mirror. He was in the mirror. The Ronan in the mirror said to him: *Ronan!*

He woke with a start in his old bedroom at the Barns. Spine, sweaty. Hands, tingling. Heart, kick-kick-kicking at his ribs. Usual nightmare postgame. The moon wasn’t visible but he felt her looking in, casting shadows behind rigid desk legs and above the stretching wings of the ceiling fan. The house was silent, the rest of the family asleep. He got up and filled a glass with water from the tap in the bathroom. He drank it, filled another one.

Ronan turned on the bathroom light and saw the mirror. He was in the mirror. The Ronan in the mirror said to him: *Ronan!*

And he twitched awake again, this time for real.

Ordinarily, when one woke, it was obvious the dream was a pretender. But this time, dreaming about dreaming . . . it had felt so real. The floorboards; the cold, chipped tiles of the bathroom; the sputter of the tap.

This time, when he got up for that glass of water, the real glass, the waking glass, he was sure to marvel his fingertips over

everything he passed, reminding himself of how specific waking reality was. The bumpy plaster walls. The rubbed-smooth curve of the chair-rail molding. The puff of air from behind Matthew's door as he pushed it open to see his younger brother sleeping.

*You're awake. You're awake.*

This time, in the bathroom, he paid attention to the moon slatted through the blinds, the faded copper stain around the base of the old faucet. These were details, he thought, the sleeping brain couldn't invent.

Ronan turned on the bathroom light and saw the mirror. He was in the mirror. The Ronan in the mirror said to him: *Ronan!*

And then he woke in his bed again.

Again, again.

Shit.

He gasped for air like a dying thing.

Ronan couldn't tell if he was awake or if he was dreaming, and he no longer knew how to interrogate the difference. He examined every part of both dream and waking and felt no seam between them.

He thought: *I might be doing this forever.* Trying to wake, never knowing if he had succeeded.

Sometimes he wondered if he was still in that dream. Maybe he had never woken at all. Maybe every impossible thing that had happened since that *Ronan!* in the mirror, all the outrageous events of his high school years, good and bad, had been in his head. It was as plausible an explanation as any.

The worst dream.

*Before*, he thought he'd always know the difference between dream and waking. What was real and what he'd invented. But *After*—

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“Wake up, white boy, we’re here,” Hennessy said.

Ronan woke as the car pulled to a stop, tires crunching gravel, brush scratching the exterior. He had been stretched in the backseat; now he sat up, pressing the heel of his hand to the crick in his neck. On the other side of the backseat, Chainsaw, his dreamt raven, scabbled inside her box, sensing they were about to get out. Automatically, he reached for his phone to check for texts before remembering it was gone.

Outside, the cold afternoon had turned to a warm, golden evening. Flat-roofed buildings huddled around a commercial parking lot, the gutters gilded fondly by the late-day light. It was the sort of complex that looked as if it ought to have school buses parked in front of it, and sure enough, Ronan spotted a faded sign: WEST VIRGINIA MUSEUM OF LIVING HISTORY. An unhindered tree-of-heaven grew around the sign, and tributaries of overgrown cracks ran through the parking lot. End-of-season leaves curled auburn and purple wherever the breeze couldn’t reach.

The Museum of Living History looked like it had been dead for decades.

Just the kind of place Bryde usually brought them. In the weeks since they’d fled from the Moderators on the bank of the Potomac, Bryde had directed them to collapsed houses, empty vacation rentals, shuttered antique stores, vacant airport hangars, disused hiking shelters. Ronan couldn’t tell if Bryde’s preference for the decrepit was grounded in secrecy or aesthetic. It felt like *secret* didn’t have to be synonymous with *abandoned*, but Bryde nevertheless brought them to places that few human hands had touched in recent memory. These lodgings always lacked creature comforts, but Ronan couldn’t complain. The three of them were alive, weren’t

they? Three dreamers, wanted by the law, still standing, bristling with piss and vinegar as they climbed out of their dreamt car.

Bryde said, "Listen. What do you hear?"

He said this every time they got someplace new.

Ronan heard the dry hiss of the wind through trapped leaves. The distant roar of trucks on the highway. The murmur of an unseen airplane. A dog barking. Some kind of buzzing generator far away. The soft whoosh of Chainsaw's wings. Watching the black-feathered bird rise above the three of them in this strange warm place filled him with a feeling he couldn't describe, one he'd been feeling more and more since they'd fled. It was like a fullness. A presence, a realness. Before, he had been hollow, drained. No, *draining*. Becoming empty. And now there was something inside him again.

*Listen*, Bryde said, and Ronan listened. What did he hear? His pulse in his ears. The stir of his blood. The movement of his soul. The hum of the thing that was filling him.

It couldn't be happiness, he thought, because he was far from his brothers and from Adam. He worried about them, and surely he couldn't be happy if he was worried.

But it felt a lot like happiness.

"When the last human dies, there will still manage to be a plane whining over the empty forest," Bryde said.

Although he was complaining, his voice remained measured. He was, in most ways, the polar opposite of his mercurial pupils. Nothing startled him nor sent him flying off the handle. He did not laugh hysterically or burst into rageful tears. He did not swagger or self-abase, indulge or self-abnegate. He simply *was*. Everything about his posture announced him not as an apex predator, but rather as something powerful enough that he could

opt out of the predator-prey scenario entirely. All of this without a tousled lock of tawny hair out of place.

*He's sort of a dandy*, Hennessy had said to Ronan privately, on the first day. *Like, a super-dandy. He beat all the other dandies and now he's the boss-dandy, the one you have to defeat to get that button-down shirt of his.*

Ronan didn't like the word *dandy*, but he understood what she was trying to say. There was something light and insubstantial about Bryde, something dissonant with the weight of his purpose. Ever since he'd met Bryde, in person, Ronan had thought there was something surprising about him, a mismatch, a weird join-up of the wires in Ronan's brain, like he was thinking of one word but saying another. It meant that every time Ronan looked at Bryde for long, it felt as if a shapeless question formed in Ronan's mouth.

But what could the question be? The answer was always just *Bryde*.

Bryde asked, "What do you feel?"

Hennessy launched into a dynamite monologue. She was a tape that had always been playing fast, and since they'd gone on the run, she'd shifted into fast-forward. "Feel? Feel? What do I feel? I feel West Virginia. You might be forgiven for thinking you feel Virginia. It's close, so close, but it's got a bit more of a leather perfume to it. I'm tasting—what am I tasting?—I'm getting a bit of a banjo mouthfeel. Mm. No. Dulcimer. That's the one. I knew there were strings involved. Something else is coming through. Is it kudzu? Hold on, let me let it breathe. Is that a note of sulfur?"

Hennessy couldn't be stopped mid-swing, so Bryde waited ruefully and Ronan got his bag and his sword with the words *VEXED TO NIGHTMARE* on the hilt. He slung both over his back, adjusting the scabbard so that the blade hung neatly between



his shoulder blades. He wasn't going to bother with this particular game of Bryde's anyway; he already knew it was one he couldn't win.

When Bryde asked *What do you feel?* what he meant was *How much ley power can you feel?*

And Ronan had never been able to feel the power of the invisible ley lines that fueled his dreams. At least not while he was awake. Adam could. If Ronan and Hennessy hadn't ditched their phones on the first night to keep the Moderators from using them as tracking devices, Ronan could have texted him for some tips.

Well, maybe.

By the time they'd ditched their phones, Adam still hadn't answered Ronan's last text. *Tamquam*, Ronan had messaged, which was always supposed to be answered by *alter idem*. But Adam hadn't replied at all.

The silence sort of made this—the being away—easier.

*What do you feel?*

Confused.

"If you're finished," Bryde said drily. "The ley line. What do you feel?"

"There's some?" Hennessy guessed. "Bigger than a bread box, smaller than a lawn mower? Enough for Ronan Lynch to make a mess later."

Ronan flipped her a lazy bird.

"Flip your senses, not your fingers, Ronan," Bryde told him. "This division between your waking and sleeping selves is artificial, and I promise you, one day soon the space between them will not bring you joy. Get your things, Hennessy. We're here for the night."

“Just what I was hoping you’d say.” Hennessy groped around like a zombie. “I’ve lost Burrito. Ronan Lynch, tell me if I’m getting warm—oof, never mind.”

Burrito, the car, wasn’t truly invisible, because Bryde had cautioned against dreaming true invisibility. He didn’t like them to dream anything that was permanent, infinite, repeating, impossible to undo. He didn’t like any creation that left an invulnerable carbon footprint after its maker was gone. So the car wasn’t invisible. It was simply *ignorable*. Ronan was pretty proud of it. Bryde had specifically asked him for a discreet vehicle, and clearly had no doubts Ronan could deliver. It had felt good to be needed. Trusted. He wished the process of dreaming it into being had gone a little bit more elegantly . . . but win some, lose some.

As Hennessy shouldered on a sword that matched Ronan’s, apart from having a hilt that read FROM CHAOS, Ronan called up, “Chainsaw, we’re going in!”

The raven tunneled down through the air to him. Ronan turned his head just in time to keep from getting a faceful of talons as she landed on his shoulder.

Bryde pushed open the door to the museum.

“Was it locked?” Hennessy asked.

“Was it?” Bryde replied. “After you.”

Inside, the West Virginia Museum of Living History was unkempt and unintentionally hilarious. Cluttered, dim hallways led them past room upon room of life-sized dioramas with vintage props and faded mannequins. Here, students in overalls and/or pigtails gave rapt attention to a mannequin teacher in an old-fashioned schoolroom. There, a sturdy doctor examined a less sturdy patient in a field hospital. Here, women’s rights activists lobbied for votes. There, miners descended into a concrete

cave mouth. The mannequins' faces were cartoonishly simple. It all smelled, even above and beyond what one would expect from a building abandoned since the 1970s.

Ronan said, "This place is looking at me. What is that *reek*?"

"The West Virginia Museum of Living History provides an immersive experience through sight, sound, and smell." Hennessy had found a brochure and she narrated it as she stepped around boxes and furniture pulled out into the hall. "Over five hundred unique scents are piped into diverse'—Diverse? Really?—'scenarios. Students fall back through time in a one-of-a-kind outing they're sure to remember!"

"Give me a hand," said Bryde.

He had already dragged two mannequins into the hall and was going back for a third. He stood them shoulder to shoulder in the hall. He didn't have to explain what he was doing. In the dim light, the mannequins looked convincingly and confusingly vital, at least enough to give an intruder pause. A sham army.

Ronan was beginning to understand that Bryde's first instinct was always to play with his enemies' heads. He would fight if he must, but he always preferred having his opponents defeat themselves.

"You just gonna stand there?" Ronan asked Hennessy as he and Bryde dragged out a snazzy executive in a three-piece suit, a wartime housewife in a flowered dress, and three cadets in dusty uniforms.

"I can't touch bad art." Hennessy gestured to a sailor with unevenly painted eyes. "It will rub off on me. What a way to lose my powers."

Without malice, Bryde observed, "If I had the same policy about dreamers, you wouldn't be here."