

The Afterglow

Pages: 90

Format: pdf, epub

Language: English

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THE AFTERGLOW

There's a man hidden under the shroud of falling dusk, feet sinking so deep into the trenches of snow that he stumbles, presses two grasping handprints into the sheer whiteness. He doesn't worry about the cold, doesn't worry about how he wears it around his neck like an albatross.

He's been surging forward since he left warm sun behind for harsh winter, had no real idea or plan for where he was headed. Just knew the end of the earth sounded right, wanted to force himself to toe the line until he had the courage to step off.

He stumbles past the line that marks the beginning of the wood and the trees loom high above his head, silent giants sitting in judgment. He knows he's human but can't vouch for the noises he's making, the deep aches inside of him finally bursting forth into the world. The tears come fast too and he's gasping, the frozen pain stuck and blinding as he staggers on. There's nothing but cold, coarse earth beneath his feet, pulsing as he presses hard into it.

Fenrir. He barely remembers his own name, only the taste of corrosion and blood and bile. He falls onto his knees and sways on the spot, his heart rattling against the frailty of his ribcage. All his bones are broken, his heart too, his soul split and half taken to the underworld. Woodchips press into his clothes and gather at his ankles as he falls forward, jagged lines carved into his cheek when he settles on the ground.

The world shifts as the snowstorm grows stronger and David Mack sobs, the icy wetness gathering under his fingernails as he claws at it. The pain swirls above his head, taken flight in the real world as black grasping wisps born to lay him to waste. The sky opens up with choking thunder and Dave writhes, the black mass growing larger now and pinning him to the ground. A bleak manifestation of his own fear, only rabid and dripping with decay.

He knows what it's like to be unmade, to have your heart torn from your body, and something dies in him when the darkness covers his eyes and crawls inside his mouth. It scales down his throat and he gags, chokes as his humanity is ripped away, the pain and suffering taking hold to rest there. He wants it to take him, wants to be gone but his body fights, squirming as flakes of skin fall away. Bones twist and crack and he screams, flaying his own throat from the inside out.

He isn't a man anymore but a great animal, something wild and grief stricken and dark as night,

howling there in the middle of the woods.

There's only an echo of what he once was, caught in a certain light and hidden in between the trees. They stand tall and sway in the storm, wondering about what's coming next.

There's a town where the world comes back together and the children whisper about his shadow, the towering wolfish nightmare of him just beyond the trees, in the cabin in the woods. Every year more voices carry fearful words about the monster looming so close to where they are, hollow moans of grief stripped raw, so loud in the dark of night that some of the townspeople wonder which of them will step up to face the monster once and for all.

But their fear overwhelms them and terror lives in their hearts as each new year passes, the great wolf close and dark enough to end them all for good.

The teenager behind the desk at the motel leans on his elbow, too busy writing in his notebook to look up when Alexander Hughes approaches. He heaves his bag up on his shoulder and clears his throat, the harsh air from outside streaming in whenever someone steps out of the lobby.

"You need something?" the clerk asks, eyes still cast down on his pencil scratching across the page.

Alex hasn't heard a question that loaded since he last saw his ex-wife Suzette, and even now he can't remember the last thing she said to him once the divorce papers were signed and filed away. All he remembers is a clear, high-pitched siren going off in his head and bleeding down into his chest where some kind of pain had been living for years already, flaring up and pulling him somewhere he never thought twice about before. And now, only here in this horrible moth-eaten motel, can he hear himself think again. And he doesn't know what to think of that.

He doesn't need much anymore. Needs the last few years back, needs a time machine to stomp out mistakes before he can make them. But now, he just needs to check out and move on. "Room 236. Heading out," he says, hoisting his bag up again and nodding to himself.

"Did you enjoy your stay?" the clerk asks, still not making eye contact.

Alex scoffs, raising his eyebrows. "Yeah. Time of my life."

The teen nods and finally glances up, adjusting his glasses on the bridge of his nose. "Alexander Hughes, right?"

"That's me," Alex says, managing a halfhearted smile. "All set?" He's anxious to move out of the stifling smallness of the lobby, knows a moment more might send him directly to his boiling point. "I got to head out, start on a hike before the sun goes down."

The clerk gives him a once over and nods, closing his book and leaning back in his chair. "Be careful out there. Heard some stories, like if you go too far into the woods--"

"Been around the block, kid," Alex says, tapping his hand on the desk and letting his fingers skim over the water-stained wood. "Think I can manage."

His feet hurt after about twenty minutes of walking but he keeps on, trudging through dirty mounds of snow and whatever passes for sidewalk in this godforsaken place. He breathes harsh through his nose and soon he's left all human life behind, drawn on and on by the tight feeling in his chest.

He can hardly focus but keeps going, moving out of town and into the wilderness.

Alex knows he's a bad man but he doesn't know if he deserves this, an icy homestead at the end of the world. But it's been all he could focus on since Suzette moved out and took the girls with her, the only image in his mind during silent nights and half-eaten TV dinners. It was almost like someone had planted it there, plucked it out of some grainy old documentary about bush people. The picture had always been the same, the trees amongst blankets of snow, the sky with a touch of dusk and something else, a feeling that he couldn't put his finger on. He steps over an upraised root and knows he's getting close to whatever it is that's drawing him in.

Alice hadn't even been able to look at him in the end, and the last image he has of her is through a tinted car window. She wasn't looking and he knows it must have been purposeful, the blonde waves of her hair pulled up into a ponytail on the back of her head. Maddy had been sitting in the front seat and Suzette pulled out into the road and split his life right down the middle.

He thinks of them now as the cold nips at his nose and sends a shiver down his spine, wonders if they'd even come looking if he didn't make contact for a couple of weeks. He weaves between two trees and reaches up to swipe away a tear, still too prideful to let even dank skies see him cry.

He's usually sure-footed but he stumbles, his knee buckling under him before he can regain his footing.

"Damn it," he mutters, looking down at his boots and holding one foot up to inspect the bottom, coated with dirty snow. He stands and pants on the spot for a moment, peering around at the acres of trees and dark skies settling over the land. He doesn't know where the hell he is but the pull in his chest is almost painful now and he starts walking again, trying and failing to find a spot in the distance to aim for.

He can still see but barely, the moon shining down like a spotlight and catching the shine in the snow. He knows it's too dark already, he's only been out here for a couple hours and it's too dark, but his chest hurts and he feels like his legs might give out if he stands still for too long.

He slips again after a moment, the ground beneath his feet icy now, and he straightens up quick before sliding down again. He falls and trips over another gnarled root, stumbling down a pile of snow that crumbles under his weight. He slides down a hill that the dark had concealed and he tries to reach out as he falls, grasping at the bark of a tree before it slips out of his fingers. He doesn't know how long he falls but he feels the crack and snap everywhere in his body even though it's his leg doing the breaking, and the pain is so sharp that stars bloom in his eyes. He grits his teeth so hard that he feels like they might pop out of his skull and finally he comes to a halt, his head banging hard on a rock so ragged that it looks like human hands have molded it.

Following a series of tragic events that leave him broken and filled with remorse, David tries to make a fresh start far from home but when the sins of his past finally catch up with him, he finds himself in a peculiar predicament and seeks sanctuary deep in the woods bordering a remote town.

Just when he thought he had become accustomed to his life of solitude, David comes across a stranger who settles himself quickly into his life and fills it with hope and love once more. However, David fears that his newfound happiness will be taken away from him if his companion learns the terrible secret he hides.

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