

ASHES OF LAVENDER

Fantasy / Romance / Dark Fantasy

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Content Warning: This book contains themes that some readers may find distressing, including self-harm, violence, and mature themes. Reader discretion is advised.

A quiet life shattered by a stranger...

In a quiet mortal town, Harlow has carved out a simple, content life working at a cozy café. But when a mysterious stranger walks through the door, her world begins to unravel. Ikaroz is unlike anyone Harlow has ever met – hauntingly beautiful and heartbreakingly fragile. As they spend time together she learns the truth about him: Ikaroz is a Fae prince who fled his kingdom to escape the crushing weight of his existence. Haunted by despair, he came to the mortal realm seeking an end – but meeting Harlow changed everything.

A World of Magic, Despair, and Unseen Bonds...

Drawn to the hope she awakens in him, Harlow is thrust into a world she never imagined when he asks her to return with him to Lestle, the Fae kingdom he left behind. To survive in this unfamiliar world, she must train under Savryn, the brash and enigmatic young king of Idenstadt. But every moment spent with him stokes an inexplicable, violent urge to kill him – an instinct she must fight to control. As Harlow wrestles with this dark compulsion, she also battles to keep Ikaroz from succumbing to his own despair.

A Hidden Secret That Will Change Everything...

As the shadows threaten to consume her whole, Harlow is faced with a central question:

Can love truly save someone, or will it destroy them in the end?

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PROLOGUE

As the fire devours the earth, I can feel it ignite within me. I'm standing in a field, looking out over ash and emptiness. All the trees and all life have burned down to the ground. But it's not empty because I am standing here, existing, breathing, thinking, feeling. Everything I am is here, so how can it be empty? How can any place, where I am, be empty?

When everything within me flows and sounds. I remain silent, even though I've never been silent in my life. I say nothing, my mouth doesn't move. But I am never silent. I hear my breathing. As soon as I begin to notice how it sounds, I try to regulate it. Control it. It roars in my ears. The match trembles in my hand, and I grip my wrist with my free hand, but it doesn't help.

It sounds, it burns. Inside me, around me. Should I move? Should I run? Why? Fire isn't dangerous, yes, like all elements, it can be if misused. But humans are the same. They can be dangerous if misused. So why should I run just because it exists? Because it makes noise, forcing me to face its existence?

It burns inside me, the heat starts in my fingertips and quickly spreads up to my cheeks. Someone is walking on the other side of the field. I can only see the contours of the figure, but it's tall, almost too tall to be human. Over two meters, without a doubt.

The closer the figure comes through the flames, the more it burns in me. Should I run now? I don't know why that impulse doesn't hit me, why my common sense has abandoned my brain cells and no longer grabs hold of me, just like the fear that usually tightens

around my neck. I don't want to run. Instead, I let my hands hang loosely by my sides.

The figure is close now, too close. I panic somewhere between the last meter and half-meter, but not because of the man standing in front of me, but because of the flames. The flames are now playing with my fingertips. The pain slowly spreads up to my wrists.

The man grabs my ankle before I can open my mouth to scream from the pain. I look up properly from the ground, drenched in ash. He is younger than I expected. His eyes have no end, I desperately search for something to grab, but all I see is white.

He places my fingertips against his dark pink lips, and I feel a soft breath before I fly up from the bed and grab the sheets. But instead of the smooth cotton, I usually wake up in, I look down at my hands and discover that I have grabbed a handful of ash.

CHAPTER 1

The morning light filters softly through the window, and I wake slowly, my mind still clouded, as though I've emerged from a thick fog. The warmth in my cheeks feels strange as if the fire from my dream had somehow lingered on my skin, but I push the thought away. It was just a dream, I remind myself, nothing more.

I turn to the right side of the bed, and the warm sheets wrap around my legs, giving me a second of comfort as I wake up another early morning. Outside the window, I see the first light of the day, the day that summer turns into fall.

My favorite day of the year.

I love summer and the tan it brings to my skin. The freckles and the olive tone bring a certain light to my face, making me feel like my personality appears less cold.

I also love the beauty of doing nothing and having no obligations, which summer *sometimes* has the courtesy to allow you. This isn't the case today, I have work. So I force my eyes, even if all I can think about is digging my face deeper into my mattress. Instead, I try to sit up and trigger my body into functioning, but I end up letting out a frustrated groan and falling back onto the pillow.

Summer presents a curious paradox. It pressures you to be productive while urging you to relax and enjoy the slower pace. It lures you in by making you think your world is about to change. You will meet exciting new people, always be out on adventures, and share your deepest, darkest secrets with a stranger in a bar. But towards the end, nothing has changed, and it leaves you feeling deceived and empty.

I think that's the real reason people always get so depressed when summer ends and fall comes knocking on the door. Because summer gave them the impression that they would be reborn and magical things would start happening, then they never did.

Fall, however, brings you a feeling rare to be given by anything else. It feels as if it possesses a constant mystery. The musk of the trees in the cold air and the soft wind make me feel as if anything can happen. Every year fall arrives, your life could change.

There's a quiet magic in the season, a sense that everything is on the cusp of change, that something unexpected could sweep in with the first gust of wind or the crackling sound of a fire. The feeling of standing on the edge of possibility, like the universe is whispering that now, right now, is the moment for something new to unfold.

Not that anything special had ever happened during my lifetime of falls, but the hope of it all is as thrilling as the potential of something potentially happening. It doesn't pretend to be something it's not. Fall leaves it to me to build my world within reality and live there for as long as it sticks around.

I wake from the mental image and rise from my bed, the remnants of the dream still clinging to my mind. As my feet hit the floor, I notice the ash. My hands are covered in a fine layer of grey dust. The same ash I thought I had washed away after waking up in the night, as though the dream had never left me.

I stare at my fingers in disbelief, the memory of the fire flooding back, but I can't seem to shake it off. I rush to the bathroom, scrubbing my hands under the cold water, trying to erase the feeling, but the ash only lingers, stubborn and unyielding. I shake it off, though I can still feel it under my skin.

My hands reach for the nameplate on the desk by the bed, the small silver tag that reads *Harlow*. I reject any remaining thoughts of the strange dream, put on my clothes, take my things, and head out the door to the bus. It leaves in seven minutes, and it's only a one-minute walk from my door, but I always enjoy having a few more minutes to spare.

Silence rests in the air when I step outside. No matter the clouds, it's still bright and I'm enjoying the silence as there are not many people around at this hour. This light makes me feel like it's still summer even if it's the beginning of September. That's when I like the world the best when summer tips over to fall. As if summer is dressing up as fall or fall is going to a party disguised as summer. In either case, it's my favorite costume.

I watch the two people around, aside from me. An old man waiting at a different bus stop, his posture hunched, eyes distant, as if he's waiting for something. A truck worker steps out of his vehicle, flicking open his lighter with a practiced motion, the small flame illuminating his face before he inhales deeply from the cigarette.

I walk past them up a different street, but I still feel as if someone is present in my surroundings. Yet, there's nobody in sight. The empty street stretches ahead, quiet except for the soft tap of my shoes against the pavement. I don't feel unsafe or scared, more confused. A shadow lingers at the edge of my awareness, an unshakable sense that I'm not entirely alone.

The hairs on the back of my neck prickle slightly, and I glance over my shoulder, half-expecting someone to be there, but there's only the stillness of the street and the sound of my footsteps echoing

back at me. I shake my head because I'm too tired to read too much into it. I haven't even had my first cup of coffee yet.

As I stop to sit down at the bus station, the feeling lingers. I keep closing my eyes to see if the feeling is only inside my head, but no. It feels as if someone is watching me. Sitting down on the bench, I take some deep breaths, the feeling easing off slowly.

When I reach for the book in my back, it returns, causing my chest to clench. The presence in the air translates as a threat, but I try to keep my nerves in check. I focus on the lines in my book as I wait for my bus. The sting at the back of my neck intensifies.

With the feeling of someone's eyes piercing through. It's a particular spot on the side, set on fire. But I refuse to look up from the words on the page. I focus on them obsessively.

The bus turns up on my street and when I'm seated next to a window, the feeling is finally gone. For the rest of the bus ride, I read my book in peace. But at my final destination, thirty minutes later, I realize I haven't made it past the page that I was reading whilst waiting for the bus. My eyes read the same line repeatedly.

Sweet fall of what once was, to bloom into all that now is us.

I blame it on my lack of coffee.

When I step into the café where I work, my eyes quickly find the ones of my boss. I love his smile. In a platonic way. His smile is just really nice. Like *nice*, nice, as in you feel safe, like you can nap in it and know you will wake up feeling rested.

I smile back, and he asks me how I slept. I say, "Fine." Then I ask him how he is, and he replies, "Good." I scan the counter for a coffee cup, and before I can grab one, he hands it to me. He pauses,

his eyes landing on the pin on my jacket, and before I can explain what it is, his fingers reach for it.

I tell him it's from my high school, but I don't mention why I still wear it. He nods and smiles again, the kind that doesn't ask any further questions. Then, without missing a beat, he returns to his chores while I walk over to fill my cup.

As I pour the hot brown liquid, I'm hoping today's work demands will distract me from the burning on the side of my neck, which had returned the moment I stepped inside the café.

I look around the venue. So far, there's only a girl at the table next to the exit. She's writing something on her computer and my heart flutters a bit, witnessing the passion flowing through her as her fingers hit the key table.

I do, however, judge her for choice of seat, considering the café is huge, with so many options all laid out as possibilities. She could have picked anywhere, yet she chooses the spot right by the door, where the draft always slips in and the noise from the street never fades. It's as if she didn't even consider comfort, or maybe she simply enjoys being close to the exit.

My fingers wrap around the warm cup and I close my eyes, breathing in the smell of coffee. The warmth of the mug is a simple comfort during slow mornings.

Something or someone hits my shoulder with a sharp jolt that makes me flinch. I quickly open my eyes, expecting to see the person who brushed past me, but there's no one there. Just the quiet hum of the café, and the odd sense that I wasn't completely alone a moment ago. I take the first sip, ready to stop blaming my odd sensations on a lack of caffeine.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Ashes of Lavender is my first true baby, the first real long piece of work I ever wrote. It started so spontaneously, so urgently, and with so much passion during the summer of 2022. It's as if the story had always been there, just waiting to pour out of me. In less than two months, I was completely consumed by it, writing as if the words were already formed in my mind.

The title arrived just as quickly, and that summer, I couldn't escape lavender. Everywhere I went I saw it, whether in the wildflowers by the roadside or on the shelves in stores. I snapped pictures of lavender every time it crossed my path. It became a sign, a constant reminder that this story was meant to be told.

Harlow is the first female character I've ever properly developed. She is as much me as I am her. And Savryn is just as much a part of me, too. These characters are shaped from pieces of my soul, and through them, I explored parts of myself that I hadn't fully understood before. For me, it was important to write about a morally gray female character. Too often, women are expected to fit into certain boxes, but I wanted to create a woman whose heart is complex, dangerous, and unpredictable. It felt vital to me that the men in the story were the ones yearning, with their hearts on their sleeves.

Ikaroz's character came from a deeply personal place, an exploration of the complexities of love and the weight of responsibility we sometimes place on those we love. When someone expects you to carry their mental health, their well-being, it becomes a delicate dance

of caring for yourself while trying to be there for them. It's a dangerous thing to put that weight on someone, and I wanted to highlight that, along with the complicated struggles that come with mental health. The balance between what we call "sane" and what society deems "unstable" is, to me, a part of the human experience, something that we all navigate in our own ways.

I hope you receive this story with as much ease as I did when I wrote it, and that it resonates with you the way it holds such a special place in my heart.

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