



Petty AF

Author: *Arden Steele*

Category: Romance, M-m Romance

Description: Scoring an invite to the swankiest party of the year is a networking dream for River Brighton. There's just one problem—humans aren't allowed without a supernatural escort. Desperate, he turns to MNSTR, an app that connects humans with shadelings for all of life's little paranormal dilemmas.

Enter Deaton Horne.

Over six feet of muscles and fangs, with a smile that promises sin, the werewolf makes him want things he shouldn't even consider. Still, it's just one night, and the objective is simple. Get in, mingle, and prevent River from doing anything embarrassing.

Too bad his date didn't get the memo.

Now, he has a warlock problem he didn't ask for, petty drama he doesn't want...

And a werewolf he'll do anything to keep.

Total Pages (Source): 29

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

one

~ River ~

Seated behind an antique desk at the back of the studio, I rubbed the eraser of my pencil over the gleaming mahogany surface. It was a habit I'd picked up in middle school, an outlet for nervous energy. Judging by the pale line where I'd worn away the finish, that energy could power a city block these days.

I glanced at my cell phone where it sat atop my planner and sighed. Again.

"You still haven't found someone?" Perching his bony ass on the corner of my desk, Otto Stillwater ran a hand through his short dark hair and smirked. "It's been forever."

"It's been a week," I countered.

"Like I said. Forever."

Rolling my eyes, I snapped my pencil down on the desk with a bit more force than I'd intended. "I hate you."

I didn't. We both knew it. Born two days apart, Otto and I had been inseparable our whole lives, but we'd been connected long before that.

Our dads had also been friends since birth, and they still got together on weekends to drink beer and burn steaks on the grill. And our grandmothers had been partners in

crime for over five decades.

“Fair,” Otto replied with a shrug, his golden-brown eyes twinkling with amusement. As he spoke, he casually plucked one of the hard candies from the ceramic bowl I kept there for clients, unwrapped it, and popped it into his mouth. “What about Alex?”

I shook my head. “No.”

Alex had been great, and our breakup had been amicable. Largely because the shifter hadn’t possessed a personality of his own. Rather, he mimicked whoever happened to be closest at the time. Which was kind of the problem.

If I wanted my own thoughts and opinions echoed back to me, I’d buy a journal.

“Ethan?” he suggested.

I wrinkled my nose as I flipped my hair over my shoulder. Sure, the elf was pretty, but he also had more red flags than a circus tent. Then there was the fact that he’d unsubscribed from our four-month relationship via a generic text message before ghosting.

And it would be fair to say that, six months later, I was still a little salty about it.

“Max?”

I shook my head again. “He’s out of town this weekend.”

“Chase?”

“Mated.”

“Vincent?”

I sighed and leaned back in my chair. “Mated.”

“Ian?”

“Also mated.”

Otto mirrored my frown. “Who does that leave?”

“No one.”

I had the coveted invitation—my golden ticket, so to speak—but as a human, I still faced certain restrictions. Namely, to even get through the doors, I had to be escorted by a member of the supernatural community.

Sadly, we had exhausted the lists of shadelings I knew well enough to ask for a favor. And with less than forty-eight hours until the biggest paranormal gala of the year, I had officially run out of options.

Like most businesses, I had come from humble beginnings, with only a handful of clients and a keen eye for detail. Over the years, I had cultivated relationships with tailors, boutiques, and local jewelry artists, all in an effort to bring my customers fashion-forward trends that didn’t break the bank.

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

Though proud of what I had built, the fact remained that it was still a small pool with limited resources.

Technically, I was a stylist. At least, that's what it said on my business cards. In reality, since its inception, The Silver Thread had been all about possibilities. And for me, entry to the Legacy Gala—a gathering of the supernatural elite—could open the door to countless ones.

New clients. New connections. New opportunities.

While shadelings from every all walk of life and every corner of the state would be there, humans almost never received an invite. Those who did had a hell of a lot more money and influence than me.

Without an escort, however, it didn't mean much beyond an artfully designed piece of stationery. Shiny but useless.

Otto pursed his lips and leaned back on the heel of his hand. "What about that werewolf you styled last month? The onewho insisted on wearing a minidress to her brother's formal wedding?"

I arched an eyebrow. "Seriously?"

"Yeah, okay, bad idea." He shrugged. "Oh, what about the vamp who wanted a tailcoat with a bustle?"

"That's Nadia," I answered, slumping back in my chair with a sigh. "She's the one

who gave me the invite.”

Otto perked up. “That’s perfect, right?”

Nadia leaned on the eccentric side, but she had influence, status, and a great sense of humor. Since she had also been the one to sweet talk me onto the guest list, she should have been an obvious choice for a sponsor. There was just one little problem.

“She’s not going.” Some family emergency in Romania, if I understood correctly. “Technically, she transferred her invitation to me.”

Otto straightened, squirming on the edge of the desk as he stared back at me, a gleam in his eyes I recognized all too well. He had an idea, and I was probably going to hate it.

“Well, there is this app—”

“Be fucking for real right now,” I interjected before he’d even finished speaking. I stopped short of rolling my eyes, but I couldn’t hold back my snort. “I’m not taking a Grindr hookup to the Legacy Gala.”

Technically, I could. No rule existed that prevented it. While I needed a chaperone to even enter the doors, the only requirement for my plus-one was that they had to be a shadeling. Wealth, status, influence—none of that mattered.

Just because I could, though, didn’t make it a good idea. It also didn’t mean there wouldn’t be judgment. Even the smallest slip-up could spell disaster, and bringing a stranger I’d met on the internet had the potential to nuke my reputation.

“Actually, I meant MNSTR.” Otto stared back, his expression flat, clearly unimpressed with my hastily drawn conclusions.

“Oh.” I pursed my lips and tilted my head as I twirled my index finger around the lock of hair that fell over my shoulder. Another nervous habit. “I don’t know.”

I knew about it, of course, but I had never used it myself. Otto had employed a task agent through the app a couple of times for emergency deliveries. A client had hired a witch to hex her ex-girlfriend with hiccups for three days. Hell, even my own mother had downloaded the app to pay a faery for an enchanted garden.

The flowers were beautiful, and despite her black thumb, they had been thriving for almost two years now.

The Magical Network of Specialized Task Resources offered a dizzying array of services, from the mundane to the arcane. Still, while there seemed to be a vetted agent available for just about everything, this felt...different.

“What other choice do you have?” Otto reasoned as he hopped down from the desk. “I mean, it’s that or Grindr.”

My fingers twitched as I fought the urge to reach for my phone. He made a good point, but I didn’t want him to know that.

“Where are you going?” I asked when he started shuffling toward the office door.

More importantly, why was he abandoning me in my hour of need?

“To get ready for my two o’clock.”

I glanced at the clock on the back wall over the bookshelf and frowned. Damn, I’d completely lost track of time.

Thankfully, I didn’t have anyone on the books for the day, allowing me to spiral

without interruption. In fact, there hadn't been a need for me to come into the studio at all, but hanging out with my best friend beat the hell out of sitting home alone.

Besides, there was always a chance I could pick up some extra business.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

Otto and I shared a studio, and we often partnered to give people a more holistic experience, but we each had our own skillset and customer base. I handled the wardrobe while Otto took care of hair and makeup. While the two often overlapped, not every client needed both services.

And some didn't realize they needed both until they arrived.

"Get the app," Otto insisted as he started backing away. "It doesn't hurt to look."

I nodded, but I still waited until he'd left the office before grabbing my phone off the desk.

Once I had downloaded the MNSTR app, I skipped the process of creating an account, arguing that I probably wouldn't need it. I just planned to look, research, maybe see what they had to offer. No big deal.

It took only a few minutes of browsing the popular categories to decide that had been a smart decision.

Spells, Charms, and Enchantments.

Hexes and Curses.

Personal Assistant.

Household Tasks.

Protection and Security.

I rubbed my temples. I had barely started, and it was already turning out to be more complicated than I'd anticipated.

I tapped the icon for Protection and Security, groaning when it loaded a new page filled with subcategories. A quick scroll revealed things like Negotiation Specialists, Discrete Transport Services, and even something ominously labeled Crisis Containment.

I immediately navigated back to the homepage and began scrolling again. The Personal Assistant category looked promising. Not exactly what I needed, but maybe close enough.

Before I could click the square icon, however, a chat screen popped up, asking if I needed assistance. Figuring it would probably be the quickest and most accurate way to find what I wanted, I typed in my request.

USER: I received an invitation to the Legacy Gala, but I'm human and therefore need an escort.

The cursor blinked, and for a moment, I wondered if I had been too specific for the chatbot. Maybe I should have just said I needed a plus-one for an event.

MNSTR: Congratulations on receiving an invitation to the annual Legacy Gala! I understand that rules regarding human attendees can be frustrating, but I'm here to help. Can you tell me more about your preferences?

I hesitated. I didn't need a real date, just someone to get me into the party. If they made it through the evening without crashing out or tanking my career, I'd consider that a win.

USER:No preferences. I just need a professional plus one.

MNSTR:Got it! Here are some top-rated agents in your area with experience as a professional plus-one. Take a look and let me know if you have any questions.

The chat automatically minimized, and my screen refreshed to show a stacked list of six MNSTR agents, along with a photo and a short introduction. As promised, all of them had excellent ratings, and I could click a link to read some reviews from other app users.

While I told myself that appearances didn't matter, my gaze kept straying back to the picture in the center of the top row. The male had a sort of devil-may-care look with a scruffy jaw, a mop of dark waves that brushed the tops of his ears, and a small silver stud in his left lobe.

Instead of the too-polite, professional smile seen in a lot of headshots, his lips were crooked into a roguish grin, and his dark eyes gleamed with the hint of challenge. Though he wore a plain black tee in his picture, I had no doubt he'd look amazing in a tailored suit, and having someone like him on my arm would definitely be a confidence booster.

According to his bio, he was a werewolf, a little older than me, and lived here in Circle City. He had immaculate reviews, with words like "discrete" and "comfortable" popping up in many of them.

I did peruse the other agents, just to say I'd done my homework, but truthfully, I'd already made my decision. While I still had some reservations about hiring a date from an app, I reasoned that he had the experience. Plus, I would be paying him, making this a business transaction rather than a personal favor.

Of course, I understood that didn't make it bulletproof, but after some consideration, I

concluded it would have to be an acceptable risk.

It seemed to take forever to create an account and fill out all the necessary forms, but I appreciated the thoroughness. Once I'd entered my payment information and outlined my exact needs, I took a deep breath, let it out slowly, and sent the request, jamming my thumb against the screen like it owed me money.

Within seconds, I received a push notification informing me that my request had been received. Now, I just had to wait to see if he would take the job.

Only a moment later, my phone chimed with another notification.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

I tensed. Logically, I knew any rejection would likely be from a scheduling conflict since my request had been last minute, but that didn't ease my anxiety. Taking another deep breath, I steeled myself before opening the message.

Task Accepted.

two

~ Deaton ~

I arrived at the Centennial, a luxury hotel on the city's upper west side, ten minutes before my scheduled meeting time with River Brighton. Instead of heading into the lobby, however, I entered the attached cafe and found an empty table on the narrow patio.

The wrought iron chairs had been built for function over comfort, but it was a pleasant night with a cool breeze blowing in from the bay. Mostly, however, I had chosen an outdoor location because, in my experience, it made people feel less confined, essential for a first meeting.

I'd learned the basics—human stylist looking for networking opportunities at the Legacy Gala—through his initial request, but that didn't tell me who he was as a person. Wanting to learn more about him, including his expectations for the evening, I had spent the last forty-eight hours exchanging messages with him through the MNSTR app.

I had found him to be surprisingly open and genuine in his responses, and he had a

quick wit that made talking to him a pleasure rather than a chore. He had admitted to knowing very little about paranormal customs and etiquette, and he had asked for help navigating some of the different aspects of shadeling social interactions.

There had been no arrogance in his words, nothing to suggest he considered himself above me, or anyone else, for that matter. If anything, he had been a little too self-deprecating.

His excitement shined through in his messages, but he continuously spoke of the gala with an undertone of disbelief. Like someone who couldn't quite accept that he deserved to be there.

From what I gathered, he had more than earned his place on the guest list, but I worried others would see his modesty as a weakness to be exploited.

I considered it my job to make sure that didn't happen.

Settling back in my seat, I tugged at the collar of my dress shirt and straightened my tie, subtly trying to ease some of my restless energy. The full moon that brushed the top of the skyline had me on edge, and a quick glance at my surroundings told me I wasn't the only one.

A female a couple of tables away kept crossing and uncrossing her legs, and a male in the corner had adjusted the cuffs of his jacket at least four times in as many minutes.

The movies had it all wrong. Shadelings didn't spontaneously lose control and turn into beasts every full moon. The desire existed, though, the innate need to shed our humanity and give ourselves over to our baser instincts.

It didn't just affect shifters and weres either. Every shadeling reacted to the full moon to some degree. Magic users received a boost to their spells, but that also came with a

spike of anxiety. Vampires experienced increased thirst, and demons got pretty thirsty too. Just in different ways.

Worse, control didn't come naturally. It was a skill that had to be learned and developed over years, making puberty a real bitch for most paranormal kids.

I checked my watch and sighed. Barely three minutes had passed since I'd arrived.

As much as I wanted to blame my impatience on the moon, I couldn't deny that I felt a strange sense of anticipation—something that hadn't happened with a client in a long time. Yet, ever since my first exchange with River, I had been swinging wildly between professional obligation and personal curiosity.

The cafe's patio door swung open with a quiet swish as the rubber edge at the bottom scraped against the concrete. I instinctively glanced over, but it wasn't him.

Instead, a young woman with an oversized cup of coffee passed in front of my table, her movements stiff and her expression tight. She took a seat near the railing, her gaze flickering momentarily toward the sky before she visibly shook herself and began rifling through her bag.

A waiter passed next, his tray balanced precariously with mismatched plates that rattled against each other. A couple near the entrance laughed a little too loudly at a shared joke. The guy in the corner continued to readjust his cuffs. A younger male pushed a rolling suitcase along the sidewalk, his eye twitching every time the front wheel squeaked.

I sighed again as I repositioned in my seat. I wasn't typically so hyperaware of those around me. With my senses already on high alert, however, the fluctuating energy from so many supernaturals in one place couldn't be ignored.

Grasping for a distraction, I turned to thoughts of River, wondering what he would be like in person. Would he carry the same humbleness as he had in his messages? The same goodhumor? Or would he turn into an insufferable asshole without the buffer of a phone screen?

Not that it mattered since I had no intentions of making it personal. My job was to get him into the party, then blend into the background until he needed me. The fact that he intrigued me beyond what would be considered necessary for the task didn't matter.

It sure as hell didn't need to be acknowledged.

The patio door swung open again, and this time, I knew it was him before I even looked up, sensing it in the way his presence shifted the energy again. He stood off to the side, tucked into a shadowy corner as he scanned the tables, clearly looking for me.

Instead of motioning to him or calling out, however, I sat back, taking the opportunity to study him.

His dark suit molded to every slender curve, elegant without being flashy. A rarity in settings like the Legacy Gala, where posturing was practically an art form. When he turned his head, his dark hair gleamed in the string lights that stretched the length of the awning, the ends fluttering around his arms in the breeze.

He wore an expression of nervous resolve as he searched the patio, his body language rife with hesitancy. Not as if he thought he had made a mistake by hiring me, though. It felt more like someone wary of taking up too much space where they didn't belong.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

I extended my arm over my head and waved, smiling when he noticed me and began making his way to the table. Standing as he approached, I offered my hand in greeting.

“You must be River.”

His smile was quick but fleeting, a flash of warmth that crinkled the corners of his eyes. “And you must be Deaton.” He spoke calmly, but with an edge of unease beneath the polite exterior. “I hope I didn’t keep you waiting.”

“Not at all. I just arrived—”

The wind shifted, bringing with it an intoxicating scent that stilled the words on my tongue. Sweet yet sharp, it brought to mind cherry tarts cooling on a spring windowsill. Not a scent I had ever found particularly enticing before, but coming from River, it proved to be dangerously alluring.

My fingers tightened reflexively around his hand, and I had to force myself to release him and resume my seat. Off balance, I cleared my throat and forced another smile.

“That’s an interesting cologne you’re wearing,” I commented as he settled into the chair across from me.

His eyebrows drew together, and he tilted his head. “I’m not wearing any cologne. I was worried it might be too...offensive.” Pulling his hair forward, he brought it to his nose and sniffed delicately. “Maybe it’s my shampoo? Is it too much? Does it smell bad?”

“No, it’s nice,” I hurried to assure him, hating that I’d made him feel self-conscious.

I also knew the scent didn’t come from anything chemical or artificial. Asking about his cologne had been nothing more than denial, pure and simple. Whatever it was, I seemed to be the only one reacting to it, too, putting it solidly in the column of a me problem.

“So, tell me what the goals are for tonight,” I suggested, attempting to steer us back into more comfortable territory. “Are you hoping to pick up some new clients, or are you looking to make more business connections?”

“Both?” he answered, his voice lilting at the end. “Is that greedy?”

Ambitious maybe, but I wouldn’t call it greedy. It wouldn’t be easy, though. Shadelings could be mistrusting of strangers, and since he didn’t strut into the room like the world owed him its attention, he might be easily overlooked.

“Word of advice?”

He nodded immediately, his crystal blue eyes darkening with worry. “Yes, please.”

I leaned forward, a faint smirk tugging at the corner of my lips. “Stop asking for permission.”

While he hadn’t said the words directly, everything out of his mouth held the undercurrent of an apology. For being human. For having goals. For existing.

What I saw as cute and endearing, others would see as a failing, and they’d eat him alive.

He laughed, soft but genuine, and the tension in his shoulders eased a fraction.

“Harsh.” He leaned in, mirroring my posture. “But fair. I’ll work on it.”

He had the most striking eyes. Bright, alert, and such an unusual shade of blue I couldn’t put a name to it. Hell, they didn’t even look real. I stared a little too intently, looking for the gleam of the light or the visible edges of contacts, but no. His eyes were really just that blue.

“Have you been to a lot of these kinds of parties?” he asked, pulling me out of my thoughts and back into the conversation.

“A few.”

I mainly contracted with MNSTR for personal protection, but I knew my way around high-profile events. I’d been to the Legacy Gala twice before, and I had escorted clients to a handful of other events around the city.

River bobbed his head thoughtfully. “Well, I’m really glad you’re here.”

Me too, and not just because I was being paid for it. “Just be yourself.”

“That is the worst advice ever.”

“Why do you say that?” I teased. “I like who you are.”

He ducked his head, but not before I caught his shy smile. “Thanks, but that’s not—”

“You deserve to be here,” I interrupted, a note of finality in my voice. “You belong.”

He laughed again, though I didn’t think I had said anything funny. Before I could question him about it, though, his gaze flickered to the white limousine that had just pulled to a stop in front of the hotel. The back door opened, and a lavishly dressed

couple emerged onto the sidewalk.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

I took notice, but River held most of my attention, and I couldn't hold back a chuckle when he wrinkled his nose.

"Not to your standards?" I asked.

"It's...different."

Which sounded like a diplomatic way of saying the pair looked like a walking fashion disaster. "What would you have done differently?"

"Everything," he muttered, then immediately pressed his lips together, his eyes widening with panic.

"Don't worry," I assured him. "It'll be our secret." Leaning back, I held my arms out to my sides, inviting his gaze. "What about me? How do I rank?"

"Well, you're gorgeous, of course, so I imagine everything looks good on you. I like—" His voice died abruptly, and his face flamed about a dozen different shades of red.

Gods, he was fucking adorable.

I dropped my arms and bent toward him again. "What do you like, River?"

He coughed to clear his throat and fidgeted in his seat, his gaze firmly affixed to the table. "I like the black on black, and your tie adds color without being garish."

Honestly, I'd paired my suit with a black dress shirt because I had forgotten to pick up the white one from the dry cleaner. The icy blue tie striped with silver had been a gift from my sister, and nothing came with a designer label.

When I told him this, he rolled his eyes.

"Fashion isn't about labels, and money can't buy good taste." His eyes flickered toward the limousine still parked on the curb, though he refrained from saying anything else about the couple.

"That right there." I extended my index finger and pointed it at his chest. "Keep that energy tonight."

He arched an eyebrow at me. "What energy would that be?"

"Quiet judgment with the receipts to back it up."

Laughing, he moved to the edge of his chair and folded his arms on the tabletop. "You are a bad influence, Deaton Horne."

"Not yet." I grin, smooth and easy. "That cost extra."

Though the pink returned to his face, he didn't look away this time. Instead, he held my gaze, those blue eyes sparking with challenge.

"How much?"

Damn, I liked that. Maybe a little too much.

I adjusted in my seat to accommodate my growing erection, but when I spoke, I kept my voice light and teasing. "I guess that depends on how much you want to

be...influenced.”

The color in his cheeks deepened and spread to the tips of his ears. After a few seconds, he gave up the fight and dropped his gaze.

“We should probably head inside.”

I nodded because it was expected. In truth, I didn’t want to give up our time together yet, and I especially hated the idea of sharing him with a room full of people.

Stupid, of course. I knew better than to make things personal, but I couldn’t take it back now. I’d just have to be more careful going forward, do my job, and make sure I didn’t ruin this opportunity for him because I had been reckless enough to blur the lines.

“You’ll stay close, right?” he asked as he rose to his feet.

I dipped my head again as I joined him. “If that’s what you want.”

He fidgeted with his bowtie and shuffled closer, bringing with him that hypnotizing scent that tested all my self-control.

“Don’t leave me.”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

Though I knew he meant the party, those three little words awakened something inside me. Something I didn't understand and didn't know if I was ready to confront.

I glanced over my shoulder, looking toward the sky. Probably just the effects of the full moon, I reasoned to myself. Everything felt heightened because of it, and I'd be fine come morning.

Then River linked his arm through mine, pressing against my side, and my entire fucking body reacted like I'd been struck by lightning. My muscles tightened. My heart raced. A low growl built in my chest, forcing me to choke it back.

"Ready?" he asked.

I could only nod.

Fuck, it was going to be a long night.

three

~ River ~

From the lavish setting to the overly adorned guests, the Legacy Gala turned out to be nothing like I expected. Clashing colors, dramatic statement pieces, poorly tailored suits, and bold makeup—every guest stood out, and not necessarily in a good way.

Before arriving, I had been worried that I didn't belong, that I wouldn't fit into this upper echelon of shadeling society. Now, I knew I didn't. The difference being that I

no longer considered that to be a bad thing.

While I took no issue with artistic expression or audacious fashion choices, a lot of people in attendance seemed to make it their entire personality. Which I still preferred to those who strutted through the ballroom as if their very presence equated to a divine blessing.

“Smile,” Deaton said as he passed me my third glass of champagne.

I took the flute by its stem with an arched eyebrow. “Excuse me?”

“The volume might be turned down, but your face is still airing subtitles.”

Yeah, that sounded about right. Downing the contents of my glass in two swallows, I turned to my date with a bright, plastic smile.

“Better?”

The wolf shrugged. “Sure, if you’re auditioning for *Uncanny Valley: The Musical*.”

As I snorted out a laugh, I felt my features soften into something less robotic.

“There it is,” he commented, chuckling along with me.

Damn, I really liked him. Maybe I had fallen for a façade, and he just took his job that seriously. I didn’t care. He had calmed my nerves, stopped me from spiraling, and as promised, he hadn’t left my side all night.

Although, most of my panic had been about meeting him, not the party itself. He didn’t need to know that, though. Just like he didn’t need to know that I’d spent the past two days looking forward to his messages, then rereading them about a dozen

times while I giggled like a schoolgirl.

Deaton was intelligent, funny, and a genuinely kind person. I found it incredibly easy to talk to him, and I appreciated that he guided without coddling. The fact that he looked like a walking wet dream definitely didn't hurt either.

It kind of sucked that I'd never see him again after tonight.

Before I could think of something to say to keep the conversation going, the music shifted, the upbeat tempo flowing into a slower, more sultry rhythm. Deaton glanced at the dance floor, then back to me.

"I don't dance," I said automatically.

"Maybe you just haven't met the right partner," he countered, extending his hand.

I batted it away and rolled my eyes. "That was bad. I'm embarrassed for you."

He laughed, completely unbothered, and took my hand anyway. "I saw it in a movie."

"Watch better movies," I quipped, ignoring the way my skin warmed and tingled from his touch.

His shoulders shook as he chuckled again, a deep baritone that resonated through our little corner and sent a shiver of desire straight to my groin. Then all those happy, sparkling feelings evaporated like the morning fog when he began pulling me toward the dance floor.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

“I really can’t dance.”

“Everyone can dance.”

I had a TikTok account, so I could say with confidence that his statement was misleading at best. Could I stand in one spot and sway back and forth? Sure. I wouldn’t call that dancing, though.

Yet I didn’t pull away. Maybe because he could be infuriatingly persuasive. Maybe because the alcohol had dulled any sense of self-preservation and good judgment. Whatever the reason, I didn’t try to stop him as we wove through the throng of partygoers to the middle of the dance floor.

Once he’d found a semi-empty space, he turned to face me, his smile equal parts charm and trouble.

“Just follow me,” he said, his voice low and coaxing as he wrapped a muscled arm around my waist.

I swallowed hard, keenly aware of how little space existed between us. This hadn’t been part of the plan, and it damn sure didn’t feel like a paid service. When someone bumped me from behind, he pulled me closer, holding me tightly to his chest so that I felt every hard ridge of him pressed against me.

This close, with his face cast in prisms of light from the chandeliers, I realized his irises weren’t black or even dark brown, but a deep shade of green with flecks of amber near the pupils. And right then, he had those penetrating eyes locked on me,

gleaming in a way that promised all sorts of sinful things.

He began to sway, and with our bodies pressed so closely together, I had no choice but to follow, my heart pounding in time with the music. Fuck, he was so warm, so virile, and the scent wafting off him had me seriously debating why inviting him back to my place would be a bad idea.

I had met a lot of people in both my personal and professional life, and I had felt instant physical attraction on more than one occasion. Never had I experienced such an intense and visceral reaction to someone, though.

Deeper than just surface-level temptation, I felt a magnetic connection to this man, a pull that had taken hold and wouldn't let go. Nothing about it felt safe or familiar, but that didn't seem to matter. In fact, it only made me want him more.

"What are we doing?" I asked. The answer scared me, but I had to know if this only went one way.

"We're dancing." Calm. Steady. Maddeningly unhelpful. Then his hand slid up my back and beneath my hair to settle on my nape. "For now."

I exhaled sharply, my head spinning with relief and confusion. "So, it's not just me?"

"No, River." My name on his lips wrapped around me like a caress, hitting harder than it had any right to. "It's not just you."

"Deaton Horne," came a deep, unpleasant voice from behind me. "Didn't think I'd see you here."

I stiffened, and a shiver rippled through me at the vocal equivalent of being doused in cold water. At the same time, I felt a twinge of irritation, not just at the rudeness of

the interruption, but at the condescension dripping from the asshole's tone.

Deaton, however, didn't flinch. Maintaining a passive expression, he repositioned me so that I stood next to him, but he kept me pressed to his side with an arm around my waist.

"River, this is Joss Weller, the Warlock Regent of Circle City."

He said that last part as if it should mean something to me. It didn't. While it sounded impressive, I didn't know what a Warlock Regent actually did, if anything.

And as far as first impressions went, he made a fairly underwhelming one.

Standing a couple of inches shorter than Deaton with a lean build and honey-blond hair that brushed the tops of his shoulders, I would consider the intruder conventionally attractive. Beyond that, I didn't have anything else positive to say about him.

The stark white suit did nothing for his pale complexion, and the floral kimono draped over it was just confusing. Both of which could have been forgiven if not for the disdainful smirk on his lips.

I hadn't come to make waves, though, and more importantly, I didn't want to put Deaton in an awkward position since he clearly knew the guy. So, I rearranged my expression into something I hoped appeared pleasant and offered my hand.

"River Brighton. It's nice to meet you."

A voice in the back of my head that sounded suspiciously like my mother scolded me for lying. Then again, she would also be the one to remind me that two wrongs didn't make a right. And maybe something about birds in a bush. Or in her hand? Whatever.

Birds had definitely been involved.

Joss glanced down at my hand, but he didn't take it, making the situation uncomfortable for everyone. Score one for him.

Curling my fingers against my palm, I dropped my arm back to my side and braced myself for whatever verbal diarrhea spewed from his mouth next. I had been unfortunate enough to meet too many people like him in my life—bullies who had decided to make their insecurities everyone else's problem—to think it would end there.

“A human, Deaton? Really?”

He said it with a strange mixture of indulgence and disdain, like I was a cute puppy but definitely not allowed on the furniture. I also couldn't tell if he had been aiming to offend me or my date, but as far as insults went, it felt kind of weak.

Page 9

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

“I see you came alone,” Deaton responded, his tone conversational, all things considered.

“And I assure you, the company is immeasurably better.”

I rolled my eyes. “If you’re going to talk about me like I’m not here, you could at least be original.”

His gray eyes narrowed, and I could tell I’d struck a nerve.

“Tell me.” He reached out to run his fingertips along the backside of my lapel. “What gives you the right to speak to me?”

“I mean, just off the top of my head? The fact that I’m not wearing my grandmother’s curtains seems like a good one.”

Deaton’s arm tightened around my waist, and I immediately pressed my lips together. While I had meant every word, I hadn’t meant to say them out loud.

Damn, maybe I shouldn’t have had that third glass of champagne.

Joss stepped away, one side of his mouth curved into a crooked grin and his eyes sparkling with delighted menace. “So crass. You can’t even control yourself.”

“Ouch,” I quipped back. “That hurt. I mean, I think I pulled something trying to give a fuck.”

My eyes widened, and I slapped a hand over my mouth. What the hell? Okay, yes, I had been thinking it, but I had meant to keep it in the vault. Why was the vault open without my permission?

I lowered my hand, intending to offer an apology. Maybe blame the alcohol on my unhinged behavior. Instead, my mouth decided to double down and make everything worse.

“I’m not drunk. I just don’t like you.” I recoiled at my own outburst with a quiet gasp, suddenly and painfully aware that something had gone terribly wrong. “Why did I say that? Why do I keep saying the quiet parts out loud?”

Joss flicked his stupid kimono out behind him like some cartoon villain. “You wanted to be seen and heard, right?”

“Wait, you did this to me?” I waved my hand toward him, vague yet somehow encompassing. “With your warlocky woo-woo?”

His face split into a broad, smug grin. “I believe it’s customary to express gratitude when receiving a gift.”

The asshole had hexed me, and he wanted me to thank him for it?

“What gift would that be?” Deaton asked, a touch of a growl in his voice.

“Pure, unfiltered authenticity.”

“You wouldn’t know authenticity if it crawled inside the tacky suit with you,” I shot back.

And immediately wanted to die.

What the actual fuck? Not only did I suddenly lack a filter, but there didn't seem to be an off switch either. As soon as an uncharitable thought entered my head, it exited through my mouth, whether I wanted it to or not.

“What do you want?” Deaton asked.

There appeared to be an entire conversation going on between them that I didn't know about, but since I couldn't be trusted with words, I kept quiet and let Deaton handle it.

“An apology.” Joss folded his hands together at his waist and tilted his head. “And he has to mean it.”

The breath I'd been holding rushed out, and I sagged like a deflated balloon. I mean, I didn't love the idea, especially since I hadn't done anything wrong. My little dig about him being more original with his insults had been pretty tame, and I'd simply been defending myself against his disrespect.

Right then, right and wrong didn't matter, though. Forget bodying my career. I had much bigger problems if I couldn't regain some semblance of control. Two words. I just had to say two words, and everything would go back to normal.

I took a deep breath and gave him my most charming smile. “I would literally rather throw myself into oncoming traffic.”

The instant the words left my mouth, I closed my eyes, my smile vanishing with a pained groan.

No. I could do this. I just had to trick my brain into believing I meant it.

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

“Wait. Let me try again.” Okay, so I had the capacity for normal speech. Good to know. I stood straight and fisted my hands at my sides. “I’m sorry.” Yes! “That you are an asshole who dishes out criticism but can’t take it.”

Damn it!

Deaton tightened his arm around me again. “Maybe you should stop now.”

“I’m trying!” I hissed back.

“Try harder.”

“Easy for you to say. You’re not the one who got cursed.”

“River.”

I heard the warning in his voice, but I truly couldn’t help myself. “What? So, this is my fault now?”

“Please stop talking.”

“I’m trying!” I repeated, my voice quiet and desperate. “It just keeps happening!” Did he really think I wanted this? “Do something!”

“What do you want me to do?”

“I don’t know. Bite him.” What? No. Fucking hell. Yeah, it would be satisfying, but

we didn't need an assault charge on top of everything else. "Never mind. Don't do that. He probably tastes bad anyway. Like turnips and regret."

Did turnips taste bad? I'd never actually eaten one. The more I panicked, however, the pettier my thoughts became, and the faster they spilled from my lips.

Joss arched an eyebrow at me. "Did you just call me a turnip?"

"No, I said you probably taste like one. Gross," I added, just in case that hadn't been clear. "You know, you're kind of pretty, which sucks since you're such a dick." Oh, my god. What the hell was wrong with me? "I hate you."

Wonderful. Super mature. Loved that for me.

"We need to leave now."

I jerked around to gape at my date. "What? No. I can't leave like this. He has to fix me!"

"I'd listen to him," Joss interjected, and he sounded almost bored, as if he had lost interest in the game.

Only, to me, this wasn't a game. "You listen, you arrogant, entitled, st—"

Deaton grabbed me by the back of the neck and spun me around, slanting his mouth over mine to end my tirade. The sudden press of his lips sent a jolt through my entire body, silencing the destructive chaos inside my head.

My anger, the warlock, the fact that hundreds of people stood watching, it all vanished from my mind as I leaned into him, giving myself over to the moment. I had already broken all the rules anyway.

One more couldn't hurt, especially when it felt so damn right.

four

~ Deaton ~

While I had been thinking about kissing River all night—as well as all the reasons I shouldn't—I hadn't planned it. Sure, I could have gotten the same results by placing a hand over his mouth, but at that point, I had been acting on pure instinct.

My gods, what an absolute clusterfuck.

To be fair, a part of me wanted to let him keep going. Under different circumstances, his colorful and creative comebacks would have been funny as hell. It had also been damn satisfying to see Joss Weller taken down a peg or two.

The warlock had spent years hiding behind his regent title. He intimidated and manipulated, or in River's case, weaponized magic to get what he wanted.

Sometimes, he did it just to be an asshole.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

I knew plenty of people who felt the same way about him as River did, but no one dared to call him out to his face for fear of reprisal. Unfortunately, my date had learned the hard way what the rest of us already knew. And all because he had refused to be treated like a second-class citizen at a party he had been invited to.

The hex itself wouldn't hurt him physically, but it did have the potential for some nasty consequences if River mouthed off to the wrong person. We all had unkind thoughts from time to time, especially when provoked. We just had the good sense and common decency not to say them out loud.

River, for the foreseeable future, no longer had that safeguard.

Worse, the enchantment didn't really seem to accomplish anything. It had been cast purely out of spite and pettiness.

Sadly, I didn't know how to help him. I couldn't force Joss to reverse the spell, and while decking him in the face might make me feel better, it wouldn't change what had happened.

Staying wouldn't accomplish anything either. River couldn't talk his way out of this, and as devastating as the curse had to be for him, it could have been worse. I had seen firsthand the kind of power the warlock wielded, and by his standards, this had been lenient.

That worried me because mercy only lasted for so long.

Then River had flipped the switch from unfiltered snark to true anger, and I had

sensed the change, the subtle but undeniable shift in the atmosphere.

I hadn't paused to think or consider my options. I had simply reacted.

With my arm still locked around his waist, I'd turned him toward me and palmed the back of his neck as I'd covered his mouth with my own. It had been a means to an end, a tool to both silence and distract. In that moment, I had only wanted to prevent him from damning himself further.

I hadn't been prepared for what came next.

Our lips met, rough and demanding, cutting off his diatribe while also opening another line of communication. One that couldn't be expressed with words or even actions. The kind that went deeper and defied logic, an instinctual give and take that happened without deliberate thought.

There was no realization, no slow dawning of understanding. The moment I kissed him, I just knew.

My heart stuttered, then hammered against my ribs. Every muscle tensed, and the hair on my arms stood on end as currents raced across my skin.

I felt the slight twinge as my eyes shifted, bringing the room into sharper focus with brighter, more vibrant colors. That sweet scent with just a touch of tartness grew stronger, drowning out everything else.

The din faded, the thrum of music and conversation becoming muted. Yet I could hear the frantic beating of River's pulse, the soft whoosh of every inhale. My entire world narrowed, focused, erasing everything else until only River remained.

Mine.

The word whispered in the back of my mind on a constant loop, growing louder and more insistent with every repetition. I welcomed it, embraced it, and with that acceptance came a kind of freedom that rendered everything else unimportant.

I couldn't pinpoint the exact moment when my instincts had shifted from protective to possessive, but I could no longer feign ignorance. He belonged to me, just as I belonged to him.

At the same time, I could feel the weight of the room pressing in, the muted chaos surging at the edges of my awareness. My senses swelled and receded in waves, making it hard to focus, but I forced myself to pull away.

As I took deep, steadying breaths, trying to regain some semblance of control, I caught the flicker of longing in River's gaze. It was fleeting, gone as quickly as it had appeared, but it gave me a measure of hope.

"I—" he started, but his voice cracked, and he looked away, his shoulders tense and rounded.

"Don't say anything," I warned, but I didn't let him retreat.

Instead, I softened my grip on his waist and neck in silent reassurance. Yes, I understood, and yes, we needed to talk about what had just happened. Given our current predicament, however, this was neither the time nor the place for that discussion.

River caught his bottom lip between his teeth and dipped his head.

"We need to leave." My gaze briefly slid to Joss. "Now."

Again, River nodded, and he seemed to be making a huge effort to keep his focus

solely on me. He turned, deliberately angling away from the warlock, and though he didn't meet my gaze, he kept his eyes trained somewhere near my collarbones.

As I led him through the crowd and out of the ballroom, he kept his head down, his long hair falling around his face to create an additional barrier between him and everyone else. Hushed murmurs and curious glances followed us through the room, but thankfully, no one tried to stop us.

“Ugh!” River shouted when we reached the lobby, the guttural sound bursting from him like an explosion. “I hate him.” Jerking away from me, he punched and kicked at the air, releasing his pent-up frustration. “I want to mash his stupid smug face!”

For all his bravado, however, I could see the cracks in his armor, the tension in the lines of his face that made his mask of indignation imperfect. Fear bubbled just beneath the surface, hidden behind righteous anger, but he wouldn't be able to suppress it forever.

Page 12

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

More than a punishment for a perceived slight, the curse was an attack on his sense of self, a calculated way to strip him of agency. Not to silence him, but to turn his own voice against him, making it a liability.

Watching him wrestle with that realization gutted me.

Outside on the sidewalk, I caught him by the elbow and turned him to face me. “River, I’m sorry.”

“Why?” He tilted his head, his eyebrows drawn together to form a crease across his brow. “You didn’t do this.”

“No, but I should have...” I trailed off, unsure of exactly what I should have done.

Seen it coming? Prevented it? Never allowed him within twenty yards of Joss Weller in the first place?

While those things sounded good in theory, it seemed vaguely conceited to think I had that kind of control over other people. Additionally, anything I might have done afterwards in an attempt to rectify the situation would have only made things worse for him.

River shook his head. “This isn’t your fault.” Pulling his wrist free of my grip, he took my hand instead and squeezed it. “If anything, I should be apologizing to you. I’m sorry I dragged you into this.” He sighed and carded his fingers through his hair. “I should have kept my stupid mouth shut.”

We could go back and forth all night, divvying up the blame, but it wouldn't solve anything. In reality, neither of us had done anything wrong. That didn't make it feel any less shitty, though.

"It's probably fine," he added with a forced smile. "I'm sure it's temporary. I mean, I'll probably wake up tomorrow and be back to normal."

I didn't believe that for a second, and deep down, he likely didn't either, but I'd let him hold on to that hope for now. Especially when we had other matters to discuss—like that kiss—and in this case, his lack of filter might actually be beneficial.

"So, we should probably talk."

"Agreed, but just so you know, I'm very okay with being mated to you." His face flamed, and he closed his eyes with a quiet groan. "Sorry. I didn't mean to just blurt that out."

Okay, fair, and I had sympathy for his embarrassment, but while he hadn't intended to say it, I had needed to hear it. Though not naïve enough to believe that a fate bond meant the same thing to him as it did to me, knowing he didn't hate the idea eased some of my worry.

In my experience, humans tended to have weird hangups about things like fate and destiny. Rather than a gift, they decried it as an intrusion, an attack on their free will, whereas shadelings took a more balanced approach. To us, a fate bond felt as instinctual as breathing, but we also understood that it took more than a spark to light a fire.

The fact that he had felt it and recognized it for what it was, however, surprised me. "You know?"

“Not at first, but I felt drawn to you ever since I first saw your picture on the MNSTR app. I was super nervous about meeting you, and I’ve wanted to climb you like a tree all night.”

His face turned so red that I legitimately worried that he might pass out right there on the sidewalk. He didn’t stop there, though.

“The kiss kind of sealed the deal because it’s not rational for me to want to claw someone’s face off for looking at you.” He took a deep breath that expanded his chest and let it out in a rush. “I would also really like to stop talking now and find somewhere to curl up and die, but that doesn’t seem to be possible.”

I had never heard someone speak with such raw truth, and while I hated the reason behind it, it would be a lie to say I didn’t enjoy hearing it. Still, no one should be forced to make those kinds of confessions. Just because he felt it didn’t mean he’d been ready to voice those emotions.

I made a silent promise to be more careful and precise with my questions in the future. At least until we could figure out how to uncure him. Right then, however, I could at least offer him the same honesty in return.

“Just so you know,” I said, echoing his words back to him with a smirk. “I am very okay with being mated to you as well.”

I could have left it at that. River likely wouldn’t have protested, but it also wouldn’t be fair. Realizing that didn’t make it any easier. I still struggled against my natural predisposition to shield myself from vulnerability, driving home how difficult this must be for him.

Taking a calming breath, I squeezed his hand and pulled him closer, letting his nearness and his scent ground me. “I’m sorry for how our first kiss came about, but

I'm not sorry that it happened. I've been thinking about kissing you all night, and I've felt possessive of you from the moment you walked into the cafe."

His eyes darted to mine, his expression softening as he swayed toward me. "Really? You're not just saying that? You're really okay with being mated to me?"

"Yes," I answered without hesitation because I'd never been more certain of anything. His openness demanded my own, and in this moment, I wanted him to know exactly where I stood. "I don't believe fate forces us into something we don't want. It just gives us a little nudge in the right direction." I grinned, closing the last bit of distance between us. "Right now, I like where it's pointing."

"Me, too," he murmured, his shoulders sagging with obvious relief. "So...what now?"

The idea of being parted from him made me unreasonably angry, but thankfully, I no longer had to come up with clever excuses to keep him with me. "Are you hungry?"

"Starving!" He groaned dramatically. "Don't rich people eat?"

Laughing, I threaded our fingers together and headed down the sidewalk, away from the hotel. River fell into step beside me, and we walked in silence for a few minutes, the noise of the city a steady hum in the background.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

The glow of streetlights and neon signs painted his features in colorful hues as we navigated the streets, and I caught myself stealing glances at him. It still seemed impossible that this amazing person belonged to me, and even more unbelievable that he seemed to be okay with it.

“I’m guessing you’re not in the mood for anything that requires a translation guide to order,” I teased as I scanned the storefronts for a suitable option.

“Definitely not,” he answered, his laughter warm and genuine. “I want comfort food. The greasier, the better.”

“How about there?” I asked, pointing out an unassuming diner with a sign that promised the best burgers in town.

River’s eyes shined with approval as he bobbed his head. “Perfect.” Then he glanced up at me, his expression filled with earnestness and the barest hint of uncertainty. “I like this.”

I raised an eyebrow in question.

“Us,” he clarified, his voice nearly inaudible over the thrum of traffic. “It feels...easy. Natural, I guess.”

My chest swelled, even as my shoulders relaxed, his words sinking deep into the space I hadn’t realized I’d reserved for doubts. “I know exactly what you mean,” I admitted. “It feels right.”

The way we had met didn't fit into a tidy little box. It had been messy, chaotic, and maybe even a little ridiculous.

And I wouldn't have had it any other way.

five

~ River ~

As it turned out, the curse had not been temporary.

Every morning for the past week, I had awoken with the hope that this would be the day. That the magic would lift, and I would get my life back.

Or at the very least, my filter.

A couple of times, I even fooled myself into believing it. As I had come to find out, however, the hex only activated around other people. Alone, I didn't spontaneously narrate my every thought, but as soon as I had an audience, all bets were off.

My mood didn't seem to matter, either. Angry, excited, horny—it all came spilling out at the most inappropriate times. Which had led me to another uncomfortable truth.

Those two certainties in life? Yeah, there were actually three.

Death, taxes, and the possibility that I would absolutely say something unhinged every time I opened my mouth.

Desperate, I had even turned to MNSTR, hoping to find a witch or a warlock to undo the spell. It seemed the news of my encounter with Joss Weller had spread through the

magical grapevine, though, because every request had been denied without explanation.

Not trusting myself to engage with civilized company, I had canceled my appointments for the week and rearranged my schedule to avoid leaving my house too often. I hated it, but honestly, removing myself from society practically counted as community service at this point.

That didn't mean I'd been completely alone, though.

Through it all, Deaton had been right by my side. He had kept me from losing my mind, and he didn't take offense when I said something outrageous. I truly didn't know what I would have done without him.

He had also helped me draft messages to Otto and my parents, explaining why I would be unavailable for a little while. The fact that I couldn't even text without my inner monologue being on full display was a whole new level of pettiness I hadn't anticipated.

It didn't end there either. I couldn't watch a movie, play a board game, or seemingly exist without it becoming a problem, which made finding ways to spend time with Deaton challenging. Though he repeatedly assured me he didn't mind my outbursts, it had to be exhausting.

Hell, I stressed myself out, and I lived with me.

Still, we had found ways to occupy our days that didn't end with me wanting to melt into the floor. Cooking together seemed to be okay since I didn't really give a damn how he chopped onions or seasoned our steaks.

Basically, I tried to avoid anything I had strong opinions about and opted instead for

activities that required minimum commentary on my part. Which had somehow led to us giving my tiny front yard a spring glow up.

It had sounded like a good idea at first, but as it turned out, Deaton and I had very different ideas of what constituted “gardening.” I had been envisioning a quiet afternoon of planting colorful flowers and maybe pulling a few weeds.

Not trimming trees, edging the lawn, shaping bushes, and spreading new mulch.

Page 14

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

It was hot. I had dirt under my nails and sweat in my ass crack. Muscles ached that I didn't even know existed, and the sight of Deaton shirtless and glistening in the midday sun was stupid distracting.

So, of course, I'd had to voice every single one of my complaints. Loudly. Vividly. In mortifying detail.

My yard did look amazing, though.

"I hurt in places that shouldn't hurt," I griped as I trudged into the living room after the longest, hottest shower of my life.

"Poor baby," Deaton teased from his spot on the couch.

While I had offered to scrub the dirt from every inch of his muscled body, he had politely declined, deciding to shower in the guest bathroom instead. Considering how painfully awkward I'd been when I'd said it, I couldn't say I blamed him.

But now I had a new problem.

I wanted him, and I knew he felt the same way. I just didn't know how to convince him that, even though I wouldn't typically be so blunt, I really did mean it.

"Come here, diva." Swiveling around on the sofa, Deaton patted the cushion between his legs. "Let's see if I can work out some of those knots."

Not about to pass up the opportunity to feel his hands on me, I hurried across the

room and settled down between his powerful thighs. “Do you want me to take my shirt off?”

“Behave,” he said, laughing as he tugged at a lock of my damp hair.

“Where’s the fun in that?”

His hands settled on my shoulders, his thumbs pressing firmly into the tense muscles at the base of my neck. I groaned before I could stop myself, the sound eliciting another teasing chuckle from my mate.

“Tell me,” Deaton said, his voice light on the surface but edged with something sharper. “Do you always overthink things, or is it part of the spell?”

That didn’t exactly sound like a compliment. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re doing it again,” he said, leaning in so his warm breath tickled the shell of my ear. “You’ve been driving yourself crazy all day, overanalyzing everything I say and do. I’m really not that complicated, though.”

He continued to knead the muscles in my neck and shoulders, the knots melting beneath his touch despite my growing anxiety. “Stop being cryptic and just telling me what you mean.”

“You think I don’t want you,” he said bluntly. His lips ghosted up the side of my neck, just a soft whisper that sent an involuntary shiver through me. “You’re wrong.”

My heart stopped, flopped over in my chest, then resumed at a frantic rhythm that made it hard to breathe. For some reason, my neck seemed to be connected directly to my groin, and every brush of lips sent a pulse straight to my cock.

“Then why didn’t you want to shower together?” I asked, unable to hold back the question.

“Oh, believe me, I did.” He chuckled again and slid a hand down my chest, his thumb raking over my nipple through my shirt. “It’s all about timing.”

“It’s because I was being a bitch, isn’t it?” My voice was quiet, shaky, and I trembled as I arched into his touch.

“You weren’t being a bitch.” He snorted out another laugh. “You were just a little cranky.”

“Okay, I get that.” I really wanted to shut up, but of course, that didn’t happen. “I’m pretty sure you could have fucked the bad mood out of me, though.” Closing my eyes, I sank against him with a groan. “I hate this stupid curse.”

“Then maybe we need to find a better way to occupy your mouth.”

Gripping my chin, he turned my head, claiming my lips and igniting the embers that had been burning between us all week. His tongue traced the seam of my mouth, seeking entrance, and I opened for him with a quiet moan of invitation.

His grasp on my chin tightened when he plunged inside, pulling a needy whimper from deep within my chest. Rolling toward him, I managed to turn without breaking the kiss, and he repositioned, making room for me in his lap.

He continued to nibble at my lips as he slid his hands beneath the hem of my shirt and pushed it up my chest. I pulled away then, just long enough for him to strip the cotton off over my head before diving in to attack his mouth again.

Every breath became harsher, shallower, and I rocked my hips, rubbing my swollen

cock against his stomach.

“I love kissing you,” I blurted. “Fuck, you feel amazing. I need you, Deaton. I need more.” The words tumbled out in a rush, every horny thought going straight from my brain to my mouth. “I’ve been hard all week, and I can’t wait anymore.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

Any concerns I had that I was being too demanding evaporated when Deaton responded with a sexy growl, his fingers tightening around my hips.

Spurred by his reaction, I scrambled off his lap and shed the remainder of my clothing. Then I hurried over to the end table to retrieve the lube from the top drawer. Turning back, I froze, my mouth falling open when I found Deaton standing behind me, completely and gloriously naked.

Damn, he was gorgeous. And big. Each hard brick of muscle flexed with every breath he took, and his thick cock jutted proudly from a nest of dark curls. The tips of his canines protruded beneath his top lip, and his dark eyes flared, glowing with a faint, silver light that seemed to penetrate to the depths of my soul.

“You keep lube in the living room?” he asked, arching an eyebrow in question.

“It doesn’t hurt to be prepared,” I snapped, pushing at his chest until he sank onto the couch cushions.

I also had a bottle in the kitchen, both bathrooms, and the garage. Just in case.

Climbing back onto his lap, I flipped the cap open and dribbled the gel over his cock, smearing it along the rigid length with my hand. Deaton growled, his glowing eyes tracking my movements as his fingers bit into my waist.

“Slow down, River.”

I shook my head. “I can’t. Not this time. I’m sorry.”

I didn't need seduction, flowery words, or poetic declarations. I just needed him.

"Don't be sorry." His hold on me gentled as he helped guide me over his hard length. "Take what you need, baby."

The breath exploded from my chest as I sank onto him, taking him inside me with less care than I probably should have. "Christ, you're big," I groaned, my head falling forward to rest against his shoulder when I bottomed out. "Oh, god, I can feel your heart beating inside me. Holy fuck."

The burn was intense, spreading a wave of heat across my skin, and I trembled as I tried to force my muscles to relax. The bite of pain did nothing to lessen my desire, though. If anything, it only fanned the flames, pushing my need to a fever pitch that seared away all my inhibitions.

Sitting up again, I moved gently, rocking my hips in small increments. After a couple of false starts, the discomfort subsided, leaving only a deep, aching pressure that continued to build when I increased the tempo.

Leaning over him, I grabbed his face in both hands, drinking down his groan as I crushed our mouths together. My tongue moved in tandem with my hips, plunging between his lips to taste and explore. At the same time, I set a relentless pace, rising and falling, taking him deeper with every descent, driving us both toward the edge of no return.

"You are so fucking tight," Deaton growled. "You feel too good. I'm not going to last."

"Me, either," I agreed, feeling the familiar tingle of impending climax. "So close. Fuck me, Deaton."

Snarling, he locked one arm around my waist and gripped the back of my neck, pulling me down on his cock as he arched his hips. Hard and fast, he drove into me, his grunts and groans joining my cries, pushing us both toward a goal that felt just out of reach.

I sensed it before I felt it, a shift in the air, a change in the vibrations of his tone. If I hadn't seen it with my own eyes, I probably wouldn't have believed it.

His chest swelled, broadening beneath my hands, and the arm around my torso hardened into a steel band. My legs were pushed wider as his thighs expanded, and when I looked up to meet his gaze, I found his eyes level with my own.

"Don't be scared," he said, his voice a dark, sexy growl.

Shaking my head, I reached between us and fisted my erection, jerking myself in time to his demanding thrusts. "I'm not scared."

With an answering nod, he tangled his fingers in my hair and attacked my mouth in a fervent kiss, nipping my bottom lip, then soothing the sting with his tongue. I wrapped my free hand around the back of his neck, clinging to him, trying to anchor myself, but it was no use.

My stomach tightened, waves of electricity raced down my spine, and I jerked my mouth away to gasp for breath. The next thing I knew, I was falling, drowning, dragged beneath a wave of pleasure so intense I feared I'd never surface.

Tossing my head back, I cried out, my voice echoing through the room as ropes of hot cream jetted from my slit. It coated my hand, my wrist, and splashed over Deaton's stomach to paint his skin.

His arms tightened, holding me immobile as he pistoned his hips, pumping hard and

fast through his own release. Then, with a resounding roar, he stilled and buried his face against the side of my neck, his body rigid as he spilled a river of molten lava into my clenching depths.

Sated and exhausted, I fell against his chest with a contented sigh.

“Wow,” I breathed a few minutes later. “That was intense. And what the hell just happened to your body?” Now that the high had passed, he seemed to be shrinking, returning to his normal size in real time. “Is this a werewolf thing?”

“It’s never happened before.” He sounded slightly concerned about that. “Is it okay?”

I burrowed deeper into his arms and grinned. “It doesn’t hurt you, right?”

Page 16

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

“No, it doesn’t hurt,” he confirmed as he stroked my hair.

“In that case, it is very okay.” I turned my head to peek up at him, my mind filled with all kinds of deliciously dirty thoughts. “Want to try again? For research purposes, of course.”

Deaton chuckled, but his cock twitched inside me, swelling with renewed interest. “You are trouble.”

“That doesn’t sound like a no.”

“Behave,” he said, smacking me lightly on the butt. “You’re already going to be sore as hell tomorrow.”

“Fine,” I huffed and settled against him again.

I could wait, but I was nothing if not persistent.

six

~ Deaton ~

The annual Concert on the Square event was in full swing with hundreds of people filling Circle City’s downtown plaza.

Some had brought lawn chairs or blankets, while others posted up on the brick retaining walls. Doors of nearby shops had been opened wide for the night, and even

passersby would pause for a few minutes to enjoy the free music before continuing on to their destination.

The scent of garlic, melted cheese, and vine-ripe tomatoes floated on the humid night air, while melodic guitar chords harmonized with the drone of conversation. Many of the local restaurants offered deals every Saturday night throughout the summer to capitalize on the event, but the pizza paired with a bottle of wine had always been a clear favorite.

To keep things fair, nowhere took reservations on those nights, so River and I had arrived early to secure a patio table at Giovanni's. I knew he was nervous about being out in public, but he couldn't hide forever. It had been over a week since he had left his house, and the self-imposed isolation had already started affecting his mood.

Despite being surrounded by people, I still considered it a low-risk venture. He held mostly neutral opinions about food and music, and we had a semblance of privacy at our little table. Even if his mouth did run away with him, I doubted many would hear it over the din of the square.

He sat with his elbows propped on the table, idly tracing the rim of his wine glass. It might have appeared casual if not for the tension in his shoulders, or the way his gaze darted over the crowd as if searching out potential landmines.

"River, relax." Pinching his glass by the stem, I carefully moved it aside and took his hand to stop his fidgeting. "No one is even paying attention to us."

His fingers curled around mine, and he shook his head. "I know. I just don't want to embarrass myself."

I couldn't promise that wouldn't happen, but I'd do everything I could to minimize the likelihood. At the same time, I couldn't blame him for thinking he might be

ambushed at any moment. After all, he'd already been minding his own business when this whole mess had started.

"How do you know Joss?" he asked, his tone brisk and agitated. Though he winced, he didn't offer an apology or take it back. "I know he's the Warlock Regent or whatever, but at the party, it just seemed like something more."

It was a fair question, and one I didn't have a problem answering, but I wondered what had provoked it. "How long have you been holding that one in?"

He shrugged. "Just now. I said I didn't want to embarrass myself. Then I started thinking about ways that could happen." Lifting his free hand, he waved it carelessly, barely missing the top of his glass. "Typical spiral stuff."

"Naturally," I said, chuckling at his dismissive tone. I still didn't see how the two thoughts related, though.

"Which made me mad because it wouldn't even be an issue if it wasn't for that stupid warlock," he continued. "That made me think of the gala, and I remembered that he had greeted you first." He paused and took a deep breath, his shoulders rising and falling with the action. "So, I started wondering about how you knew him, and the question just kind of fell out of my mouth."

I stared at him, unblinking, marveling at the way his mind worked. When laid out like that, it made sense. It also sounded kind of exhausting.

"I actually don't know him that well," I answered. "I worked security at a couple of parties he hosted. That's about it."

"Well, you must have left an impression because he certainly remembered you."

The huffiness in his voice amused me, as did the way his mouth twisted as if he'd tasted something bitter. "Jealous?"

His eyes snapped up to meet mine. "Obviously. And I hate it."

It would have been funny if not for the implications of that statement. "You don't think you were hexed because of me, do you?"

"No." Deflating, he exhaled slowly and shook his head. "I think I was hexed because Joss is a dick." He slumped back in his seat, but he didn't pull his hand away. "And maybe because he wants to get in your pants."

Page 17

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

That time, I did laugh. I couldn't help it. "Even if that's true, I assure you, the feeling isn't mutual."

"Good." He turned to look out over the crowd again. "I'm the only one who gets to see you naked."

"Duly noted."

He seemed to settle after that, appearing more relaxed as he bobbed his head along to the music. "The band is pretty good," he offered, unprompted. "It's not really my type of music, but this isn't bad."

The words came out thoughtful rather than blurted, making me think it had been an intentional statement rather than effects of the curse. I took that as a good sign.

"Not a fan of country music?"

I flinched inwardly, belatedly realizing my mistake in asking him to voice his opinion. While I wanted to hear the answer, however disorganized it might be, I hadn't meant to bait him.

River shrugged as he returned his attention to me. "I don't have anything against it. It's just not my favorite."

"Perfectly reasonable." Smiling, I slid my thumb back and forth over his hand. Partly to comfort, but mostly because I just liked touching him.

His eyes glazed over, soft and unfocused. It only lasted for a moment, but the reaction intrigued me.

“Everything okay?”

“Yes.” He ducked his head, no longer meeting my gaze. Then he bit down on his bottom lip, clearly trying to hold something back. It didn’t work. “Stop smiling at me like that. It makes my dick hard.”

His response caught me off guard, and laughter puffed from my lips. I should have been used to it by now. The fact that he hadn’t even blushed at the admission proved just how often it happened.

It always surprised me, though, probably because most people weren’t usually so blatant, particularly when it came to their desires. With that said, I had to admit that being so openly wanted was a heady feeling that I thoroughly enjoyed.

As a bonus, if I had his full attention, he didn’t have to worry about accidentally offending anyone else.

“Like what?” I asked, purposely prodding him this time. Tilting my head, I relaxed my mouth so that it barely curved at the corners. “How am I smiling at you?”

His hand twitched inside mine as a quiet groan rolled off his lips. “Oh, my god, that’s even worse. Stop it.”

Releasing his hand, I brushed my fingertips up his forearm to cradle his wrist. “Just when I smile?”

Goosebumps broke out across his skin, and his gaze locked on my hand as if it was the most fascinating thing in the world. “No. Just you existing is kind of a massive

turn-on.”

I chuckled again, the sound rougher this time as my own body began to respond.

River jerked his head up, his eyes narrowed. “You are evil, Deaton Horne.”

His words lacked any real heat, though. And he hadn’t told me to stop.

I tightened my hold on his wrist, possessive without being demanding.

His gaze returned to his arm, his eyes wide and a little unfocused.

I could practically see him coming undone in real time, the tangle of thoughts and emotions unraveling, quieting. The rigid set of his shoulders relaxed, the stiffness melting away as he swayed toward me from across the table.

“What about this?” I asked, speaking just loud enough to be heard over the music.
“Do you like this?”

He bobbed his head. “I’d like it more if we were alone and naked.”

Normally, I would agree, but there was something deliciously satisfying about the tension building between us. We weren’t being overt or scandalous, but teasing him this way, knowing neither of us could do anything about it, only made the anticipation more palpable.

“What else do you like?”

He laughed, the sound soft and breathy, and it sent a thrill through me that made my fingers twitch against his wrist.

Page 18

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

“Believe it or not, I like it when you tease me mercilessly,” he admitted, tone playful but threaded with sincerity.

I softened my grip and traced my thumb across the soft skin of his inner wrist in slow, deliberate circles. “You can stop me anytime you want.”

The corners of his mouth twitched, and for a moment, he looked torn between a grin and a scowl. “You and I both know that’s not going to happen.”

The heat in his gaze burned bright, sending a jolt of lust straight to my cock.

Before either of us could say more, our server arrived with the pizza. The spell broken, River blinked and pulled his hand away, sinking back into his seat with a flustered laugh.

I smirked, letting the silence settle between us for now, allowing him this small reprieve. But I hadn’t finished with him yet.

In fact, if I had my way, we were just getting started.

seven

~ River ~

Againstmybetterjudgment,I returned to work the following week.

Did I think it was a good idea? Absolutely not. I had bills to pay, though, and even

loyal, long-time clients wouldn't wait around forever for me to get my life together.

I had also been slowly coming to the realization that I had no idea how long I'd be stuck with this...condition. Maybe it would wear off in a few weeks. Maybe it would be something I had to deal with forever.

Either way, I couldn't outrun it, so I might as well start figuring out how to live with it.

Spending the day with my best friend at the studio, despite not having any clients on the books for the day, seemed like a good way to start. Otto and I rarely disagreed, and he didn't need a curse to be openly sarcastic.

More importantly, he didn't offend easily. So, even if I said something out of line, he'd probably just laugh and clap back twice as hard.

I found Otto in his office, leaned back in his chair, feet propped up on his desk with his laptop perched on his thighs. It looked uncomfortable as hell.

"Someone should invent a sturdy surface for a computer. It would be really convenient, don't you think?"

"Well, well," he sang, popping his head up and grinning as I entered the room. "Look who finally decided to be productive."

"Don't get used to it," I quipped back, dropping my messenger bag to the floor beside the door. "I'm just here for moral support and to remind you that you're still a disaster."

Closing his laptop, he dropped it onto his desk with about as much care as one might show a crumpled tissue and bounced up from his seat. "I'll have you know that this

disaster finally got his application to the Spellbound Expo accepted.”

“Shut the fuck up!” I shouted, my excitement bubbling over. “Are you serious?”

Otto rounded the desk, his smile beaming from ear to ear. “I just got the email.”

“Oh, my god!” Looping my arm around his neck, I dragged him into a crushing embrace. “I’m so proud of you!”

As the biggest convention in the magical beauty world, the Spellbound Expo drew both humans and shadelings from all over the world. According to Otto, it was also highly exclusive, with fierce competition for even the smallest table in a shadowed corner.

He had spent the past six years trying to get noticed, to get his foot in the door. He’d worked his ass off, and now, the right people had finally taken notice. While I didn’t understand anything about the different types of foundation or why it mattered, I recognized the importance.

“I’m really happy for you.”

Otto pulled back from the hug, his cheeks flushed and his hair slightly mussed. “Thanks, but now I have to figure out how the hell I’m going to pull this off.”

I leaned against the desk with a raised eyebrow. “What’s the problem? You’ve got the talent, the products, and most importantly, you have me. What else is there?”

“Time. Money. Enough caffeine to keep me alive for the next three months.”

Otto began to pace, gesturing wildly with his hands as his earlier excitement gave way to a sort of frantic nervousness. As someone who had lived it, I knew exactly

how he felt.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

I had been over the moon when I had received my invitation to the Legacy Gala. As the realization of my success started to settle in, however, that giddiness had slowly morphed into nearly crippling anxiety.

“And the expo is in Vegas,” he continued, his voice rising now. “Do you have any idea how expensive it is to ship enchanted cosmetics across state lines? Don’t even get me started on booth design. It has to be perfect. No.” He paused mid-step and shook his head. “It has to be better than perfect.”

“Okay, Otto? Relax. Take a breath.” I held my hands up, as if that alone could hold back the tide of anxiety. “You’ve been planning for this moment for years,” I reminded him. “We’ll make a list, then tackle it one thing at a time.”

“Perfect!” His gaze zipped across the office. “We need a whiteboard.”

“Whoa!” I grabbed his shoulders, forcing him to look at me. “We’ll get a damn whiteboard, but we don’t have to do everything right now. Tonight? We’re celebrating.”

He immediately started shaking his head. “I don’t have time to celebrate!”

The gleam in his eyes, however, suggested otherwise.

I waited, letting him come to the right decision on his own.

“Fine,” he relented. “I have a client coming at three, but it’s just a consultation.” His smile softened, becoming more playful. “Some of us don’t have the luxury of

spending all day in bed.”

I rolled my eyes at his obvious attempt to change the subject. “If you want to know about my mate, just ask.”

“I want to know about your mate,” he deadpanned. “Tell me everything.”

I was still working out how to describe him—or so I thought—when my mouth decided to just roll the highlight reel instead. “His name is Deaton. He’s a werewolf, insanely hot, and the sex is life changing.”

Otto’s cackling laughter rang throughout the office. “Ah, yes. The holy trinity of lasting relationships.”

“Shut up,” I grumbled. “I can’t help it.”

“You really went and got yourself cursed?”

I huffed and rolled my eyes. “No, I faked it for clout.”

“I don’t know.” Otto shrugged. “You sound the same to me.”

“Asshole,” I shot back, shoving at his shoulder. “Be careful in Vegas.”

“I don’t really plan to piss off any warlocks while I’m there.”

“Neither did I.” Joss Weller hadn’t even been on my radar until he’d decided to insert himself into my life. “Just promise me you’ll be careful.”

Otto nodded. “So, when do I get to meet this insanely hot werewolf?”

I glanced at the neon clock that hung on the wall over his desk, a grin tugging at my lips. “Soon. He’s coming to pick me up when he finishes with his MNSTR gig.”

A frown tugged at Otto’s lips, and worry lines marred his brow. “He’s still working for MNSTR? Are you okay with that?”

“It’s fine,” I assured him. “He’s just taking some elderly lady shopping. He’s not going to accept requests for date-type stuff anymore, and outside of that, what am I supposed to say? Don’t help people?”

Of course, Otto didn’t need all the details, but I had little control over how much information came out of my mouth. In this instance, it seemed to be just the right amount because his expression cleared, and he bobbed his head.

“All joking aside, are you happy?”

“Ridiculously.” I had never felt this way about anyone before, and despite everything still being pretty new, it went so much deeper than a silly crush or infatuation. “I think I love him.”

It took a moment for me to register what I’d said, and when I did, I slapped a hand over my mouth, my eyes wide and panicked.

“River?”

“No,” I moaned. “No, no, no.” Rushing over to my bag, I dug my phone out of the side pocket and shoved it toward Otto. “I need you to text him.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

“What? Why?”

I shook my head. “Text him and tell him that I love him.” Fuck! “No!” I shouted. “Tell him that we’re going out to celebrate and that I love him.” Oh. My. God. “Don’t tell him that! Just tell him not to come here!”

“River, what the hell is going on?”

“I love him.”

Otto snorted. “I know. You said it like five times.”

I closed my eyes and groaned. He really didn’t get it.

“And if he comes here, I’m going to tell him five times.”

“Oh,” he breathed. “Oh! Oh, shit!”

“Exactly.”

“Okay. This is okay. We can fix this.” He fumbled with my phone, growled, then handed it back to me. “I need your face. The screen is locked.”

We managed to unlock my phone and pull up my recent text messages with Deaton. Completely spiraling, I hadn’t considered what might be in them until Otto looked up at me, his eyes almost as wide as mine.

“Is that even physically possible?”

“Otto, please,” I begged. “We can talk about my sex life later, but I really need you to focus right now.”

“Calm down. It’s fine.”

“How is this fine?”

“I mean, it’s going to be fine,” he reasoned. “Right?”

“You’re asking me?”

“I don’t know!”

“Just text him,” I urged.

“Okay, okay. Quiet. Let me think.”

He had just started to type out a message when the bell for the front door of the studio chimed. We glanced at each other, then both turned toward the open office door. We didn’t accept walk-ins, and neither of us had a package scheduled for delivery.

“Your client?” I asked, hopeful.

He shook his head. “It’s too early.”

“River?” Deaton called, his voice ringing through the space.

My heart crashed inside my chest, my legs buckled, and if I hadn’t caught myself on the edge of the desk, I would have ended up on the floor. “What is he doing here?”

“Hide!” Otto hissed. “I’ll tell him you had to leave.”

“I’m not going to hide,” I snapped. “I’m freaking out. Not cosplaying as a toddler.”

It wouldn’t do any good anyway. Deaton would just sniff me out. Stupid werewolf.

“Back here!” Otto called, his tone bright and cheerful.

“What the hell are you doing?”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

He stared at me, his expression a mask of confusion. “You said you weren’t going to hide. I’m helping.”

Since I couldn’t refute him, I just glared and made a guttural noise in the back of my throat that I hoped fully conveyed how I felt about his brand of “help.”

“Just smile and nod,” he coached. “I’ll do the rest.”

“It doesn’t work that way. Trust me, I’ve—”

The words died on my tongue, and my breath caught in my throat when Deaton appeared in the doorway, a brown paper bag clutched in his left hand. The moment he saw me, his face split into a wide grin, and he crossed the room, striding right into my personal space as if he had every right to be there.

“Hey, baby,” he said, cradling the side of my face as he dipped his head for a quick kiss. “My client canceled last minute.” Straightening, he held up the bag. “So, I brought lunch.” Thankfully, he didn’t wait for a response before turning and extending his hand. “You must be Otto. I’ve heard a lot about you.”

“I...uh...” Eyes wide, mouth slack, Otto took his hand, his movements stiff and robotic. “Hi.”

I closed my eyes and prayed for a meteor strike.

“I’m not interrupting, am I?” Deaton asked.

“No, not at all.” Otto leaned sideways, bumping his shoulder against mine. “We were just discussing the Spellbound Expo. Right, River?”

It wasn’t technically a lie. I nodded cautiously.

Nothing happened. I didn’t spontaneously combust. The whole truth and nothing but the truth didn’t leak from my mouth.

Apparently, I had found a loophole.

Deaton tilted his head, a curious little smile on his lips. “Everything okay?”

“No,” I blurted, unable to stop myself this time. “I am completely losing my shit.”

Stepping past me, he placed the paper bag down on the desk. “Did something happen?”

“I love—”

“This weather!” Otto interjected loudly, sidestepping to stand in front of me. “We were just saying how nice it is today.”

“Is that so?” Deaton asked, his tone mildly conversational and nothing more.

“Yes.”

“No,” I countered.

Bless Otto. He was trying, and I loved him for it, but even his enthusiasm couldn’t override this stupid hex.

While I didn't necessarily have control, I did have a choice. I could have done as Otto suggested and hid. I could have sneaked out the back door. Instead, I had decided to stay, knowing full well where it would lead.

Now, I could ante up and tell Deaton how I felt about him, or I could keep loopholing my way around the issue until the truth was forced from me without my consent. Both options came with risks, but I'd rather face the issue on my terms than let some curse hijack the moment.

"Deaton?"

"Yeah?" he answered distractedly.

"I love you."

He grinned and pressed another kiss to my temple. "I love you, too, baby." Then he turned back to the desk and began opening the bag containing our lunch. "Did you want the chicken burrito or the beef?"

I stared at the back of his head, stunned, my brain completely short-circuiting. "That's it?"

"Those were the only options." His brow wrinkled, and his mouth turned down at the corners. "Do you want something else? I can go—"

“Deaton!”

His smile returned, warm and indulgent, and he reached out to caress my cheek with the back of his hand. “You sounded like you were panicking. I didn’t want to make it worse.”

“I’m going to go get ready for my appointment,” Otto muttered. “Good luck,” he added under his breath, squeezing my hand in comfort before striding out of the room.

Alone now, I stared up at Deaton, trying to figure out what to say. For once, nothing came to mind.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

No, not even a little, but he apparently already knew that.

“How did you...?” I trailed off, my eyes rounding as the pieces snapped into place. “How much did you hear?”

Winding his arms around me, he held me close and combed his fingers through my hair. “Does it matter?”

“No,” I sighed, snuggling against him. “Not really.”

“I considered leaving,” he admitted. “I didn’t want to force anything you weren’t ready for, but then it sounded like you planned to avoid me. That wasn’t happening.”

So, he had basically heard everything. I probably should have been more embarrassed about that.

“You’re right,” I murmured, lifting my head to meet his gaze. “I was totally panicking.”

“I know, baby, and I’m sorry, too. I probably could have handled that better, but there’s no handbook for this stuff. I just didn’t want to make it harder on you.”

“We’re kind of a mess, huh?”

Chuckling, he tucked a knuckle under my chin, tilting my head back so he could claim my lips in a kiss filled with quiet possessiveness. “I love you, River. You never have to hide anything from me.”

The sincerity in his voice washed over me, warming me and chasing away the last vestiges of uncertainty. “I’d really like to go home now.”

Interpreting my words for what they truly meant, Deaton answered with a low, rumbling growl. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” I answered with confidence. “I belong to you, Deaton.”

I had always known it, and now, I wanted the rest of the world to know as well.

eight

~ Deaton ~

Iloveyou.Ibelongto you.

River's words echoed inside my head throughout the short drive back to his two-bedroom bungalow. We didn't speak, communicating only in stolen glances filled with need and anticipation. Our joined hands rested atop the center console, my grip on his fingers firm as if he might vanish if I didn't cling tight to him.

Taut and palpable, tension saturated the air, making me hyperaware of every subtle change in him, every minute movement. His intoxicating fragrance—sweet, warm, and uniquely River—filled every inch of the confined space. Tinged with the scent of desire and nerves, it invaded my senses, flooding my veins with adrenaline that made my heart race and my cock throb.

When I pulled into his driveway, I threw the transmission into park and killed the engine. The silence that followed was deafening, snapping the tension, and I dove across the console, capturing his face between my hands and slanting our mouths together.

Fuck, I needed him. I craved him. His scent, his taste, his voice—they had all become an obsession, an addiction I couldn't break.

I tilted his head back roughly and licked inside his mouth, delving into the darkest recesses as if I could imprint myself on his soul through touch alone. His slender fingers encircled my wrists, his blunt nails biting into the skin as he leaned into me, his body vibrating in a silent plea for more.

We broke apart with a gasp, our hands fumbling with seatbelts and door handles as we both exited the cab. I met him at the front of the vehicle, resentful of the short separation, and lifted him into my arms.

He scrambled for purchase, his hands clutching at my shoulders as his legs locked around my waist. Holding him easily by the back of his thighs, I tilted my head up, growling when our lips met in another scorching kiss.

His long, silky hair fell around us, cocooning us in the illusion of privacy as we ate at each other, frantic and ravenous. Our tongues slid together and retreated, a pale mimicry of what we both truly wanted, but every glide sent a shock through my system.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

My canines elongated, the tips scraping against his bottom lip and eliciting a quiet, husky moan. Muscles swelled and tightened, my body responding to the sound with pure, predatory instinct. My cotton tee stretched, adjusting to the expansion of my chest, but my jeans didn't offer the same accommodations, trapping my cock painfully behind my zipper.

With River still balanced in my arms, I climbed the porch steps and kicked my foot against the door, too impatient to wait for him to fumble with the keys. The frame splintered with a resounding crack, debris littering the welcome mat as the door burst open.

I made it only two steps inside the living room before spinning to anchor him against the wall, freeing my hands to grope and explore. I touched his face, his neck, and traced the lean lines of his torso as our mouths continued to duel.

Irritated with the barriers that separated us, I stripped my own shirt off over my head and shredded his down the middle, revealing him to my hungry gaze. A deep growl rumbled in my chest as I stroked his bare skin, my hands splaying across the flat expanse of his abs.

"More," River panted, his face flushed and his eyes glazed. "Touch me. Kiss me. Fuck me. I don't know. Just give me more."

I growled again, dark and primal, as I leaned into him, grinding my aching cock against his groin. His breath caught, then exploded in a loud groan as his fingers dug into the tops of my shoulders.

It wasn't enough.

I wanted to own him, possess him, to burn away the remnants of everyone who came before me until only I remained.

"I want you," River groaned, his hips moving faster as he rocked against me. "I need to feel you pounding inside me. I want you to fill me. Stretch me. I want it rough and dirty." His warm breath panted from his lips, his voice vibrating with carnality. "Don't hold back, Deaton. Give me everything."

Though I knew he had no control over the filthy words that poured from his mouth, it did nothing to lessen my reaction to them.

Gripping one of his thighs, I locked my other arm around his back and jerked him away from the wall. Blinded by need, I carried him through the living room and down the short hallway to his bedroom.

Though I meant to only nudge the door open with my foot, it exploded inward, crashing against the wall and rebounding hard enough to slam shut behind us. Too far gone for finesse, I dropped him onto the bed and quickly divested the rest of my clothing. Following my lead, River discarded the tattered remains of his top, then stretched out on the mattress, arching his hips so he could push off his jeans.

Gloriously naked, he positioned himself in the center of the bed and fisted his cock, his eyelids fluttering as his hand moved along the rigid shaft. Gods, he was fucking beautiful. All long lines and lean muscles wrapped in a flawless complexion that glowed in the sunlight spilling through the open blinds.

"Deaton, hurry." His thighs tensed, and his back bowed, his hips rising and falling as he thrust through the circle of his hand. "I feel like I'm on fire. Fuck, please, I need you."

I dared anyone to resist such open and honest pleading.

The mattress dipped, and the frame creaked beneath my weight as I knelt at the foot of the bed. Crawling toward him, I covered his smaller body, sinking into the cradle of his hips with a muted growl.

“Oh, god,” he gasped as he arched into me. “You’re so warm. And big. I don’t understand it, but I love it.”

I didn’t understand it, either, but it had only ever happened with River, a physical manifestation of the bond between us. I wouldn’t consider the changes in my body significant, but they were certainly noticeable.

My thighs and arms swelled, growing in circumference, and my chest expanded, broadening at the shoulders. The corded muscles in my neck stood out in sharp relief, and my height increased a few inches.

While I could feel the changes, it didn’t hurt. In fact, it felt incredible. Powerful. But it did mean I had to take extra care with my mate, his petite body somehow seeming more fragile beneath my bulky frame.

Desperate, greedy, I slanted my mouth over his again, drinking him in with a deep groan when his taste exploded across my tongue. The energy that crackled between us was electric, almost painful in its intensity, like trying to hold on to a live wire.

River wrapped his arms around my neck and writhed against me, every slide of our skin together pushing my need for him higher. Driven by instincts, drowning in him, I took everything he gave and still demanded more.

Breaking away from his mouth, I skimmed my lips down the column of his throat, scraping my fangs over the sensitive skin at the apex of his shoulder. River gasped

and bucked up from the bed, a loud moan spilling from his lips.

“Fuck, I love the sounds you make. Don’t stop.” Deep, harsh, and filled with gravel, my voice didn’t sound like my own, but River didn’t seem to mind.

“Yes,” he hissed, his body trembling beneath my touch. “It’s so hot when your voice goes all growly like that.”

Who was I to deny him what he wanted?

I growled again, the sound a low, continuous rumble as I continued to tease and torment, kissing and stroking every inch of him as I reached for the nightstand. Finding the small plastic bottle with ease, I flipped the cap open and poured the contents into my palm. Then I reached between us, slicking my aching cock and coating River’s entrance with the excess.

I ringed his clenching hole with my index finger, coaxing the tight muscles to relax before pushing inside with just the tip. River’s eyes rolled back in his head, and he spread his legs, opening himself wider to the intrusion.

“I don’t need it,” he protested. “Just fuck me.”

I ignored him as I pumped my finger into his tight hole to stretch him. My arms and legs weren’t the only parts of my body bigger in this form, and I wouldn’t risk hurting him, even unintentionally.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

A delicate pink flush spread across his skin when I added a second digit, and a loud, needy groan echoed around the room. His stomach quivered, his cock jerked, and his nipples stiffened, tightening into hard peaks.

His cries rose in pitch and volume when I inserted a third finger, sawing into his heated channel with deliberate slowness. He was breathtaking in his desire, and I couldn't take my eyes off him.

Once I was confident in his readiness, I pulled away, smirking at his whined protests. I rolled off him and settled against the headboard, my shoulders pressing into the cold, padded leather as I dragged him onto my lap. I still didn't entirely trust the thin leash I had on my control, and allowing him to set the tempo felt like the safer option.

"Oh, thank fuck," River breathed as he straddled my hips and gripped the base of my cock.

Lining the crown up with his entrance, he took a deep breath and released it slowly as he sank over me, taking me inside him inch by torturous inch. He bottomed out with a ragged groan—his pert ass pressed flush against my groin—and stilled.

My answering growl filled the room, but I battled back the desire to thrust into him, giving him the time he needed to adjust to the invasion. Instead, I settled one hand on his hip and stroked his chest and arms with the other.

He was so fucking tight. So hot. His velvet walls contracted around my cock in rhythmic waves, massaging, milking, and driving me out of my mind.

I closed my eyes and held myself rigidly when he began to move, gritting my teeth against the onslaught of sensations. But every rise and fall, every smooth glide, threatened to snap my self-control.

“Deaton.” His breath fanned against my face, warm and enticing. “Deaton, look at me.”

I blinked, doing as he asked, meeting his penetrating gaze.

“You’re not going to hurt me.” He continued to ride me, his movements slow and careful.

I shook my head. “I’m not in control, baby.”

“Good.” His eyes flashed with challenge. “Unless you’re saying you don’t want me.”

Insulted that he would think that, I surged upright, my eyes instantly shifting to their lupine counterpart as my control slipped even more. Growling, I pushed his arms behind his back, gathering his wrists in one hand and wrapping the other gently around his throat.

“You have no idea the depraved things I want to do to you.”

His eyes widened, but not in fear. Raw, unfiltered desire shined back at me, and the pungent scent of his lust filled my head. His hips jerked, sucking me even deeper into his warm body.

The force of his need was overwhelming, searing away the last of my restraint. With a dark, possessive growl, I reversed our positions, rolling him beneath me on the mattress, our bodies still joined at the hips. Gathering his wrists again, I stretched his arms over his head, pinning his hands to the bed.

“You fight dirty,” I told him as I thrust hard and deep.

He cried out, his head whipping back and forth on the comforter. “Oh, fuck. Fuck.”

“Is this what you wanted, baby?” I surged into him again, pumping my hips faster. “Hard and rough? You like it when I take what I want, don’t you?”

“Yes!” he yelled, his voice ringing throughout the room. “Anything. I’ll give you anything.”

Lost in him, feral with hunger, I rutted against him, every punishing snap of my hips pushing him up the mattress. A string of incoherent babble spilled from his mouth, interspersed with throaty moans and shouted curses.

Teetering on the brink, straddling the edge of no return, our eyes met, held, an understanding passing between us, an acknowledgement that everything was about to change.

Then he turned his head, baring his throat in both surrender and invitation.

I struck hard and fast, burying my canines into the supple skin as I pounded into him, dragging us both toward the precipice. I didn’t linger, though. Guided by something outside of my control, I lifted my head, scoring the side of my tongue on the tip of my canine before slanting my mouth over his.

The moment our tongues brushed together, warmth exploded inside my chest, then radiated out to other parts of my body. My heart pounded like a war drum, and every muscle clenched tight as the threads of fate solidified into an unbreakable connection.

Crying out my name, River bowed up from the bed, his cock detonating, expelling ropes of hot cum that painted his chest and abs. Unable to hold back, I followed him

over the edge, my thrusts jerky as I spilled in waves, filling him with my release.

A growl ripped from my throat when the head of my cock swelled, lodging deep inside my mate. River cried out again, his breaths coming in desperate pants as another stream of semen spilled from his softening erection.

I rocked my hips gently, prolonging his pleasure until the knot finally receded. Then I eased out of him and collapsed by his side, pulling him into my arms as I fought to catch my breath. We were quiet for a long time, content to simply hold each other while we reveled in the peace of the afterglow.

Some semblance of higher brain functioning had just started to return when River jerked back with a hiss. At the same time, I felt a sting on my palm, a superficial burn that seemed to emanate from within.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

The discomfort lasted only a moment, but the lines of fate etched into our skin would never fade.

“It’s pretty,” River commented, using his index finger to trace the stark white lines of the mating mark on his palm. “Does it do anything?”

“We’ll always be able to find each other,” I explained. Even now, I had a new awareness of him that I couldn’t explain with words. “And I’ll always know when you need me.”

“Sucks for you,” he quipped, his lips parting in a soft smile. “I always need you.”

“Trust me, that’s not something I’ll ever complain about.”

He tilted his head up to brush our lips together. “I love you, Deaton, and I’m really glad you’re mine.”

“I love you, too, baby. You are my everything.”

And I’d destroy the whole fucking world before I let anyone take him from me.

nine

~ River ~

After talking a client out of a bright yellow mermaid dress by telling her she’d look like a soggy banana, I was officially over this curse.

She'd strutted into the studio on six-inch Louis Vuitton's with a picture of the ugliest dress I'd ever seen. So, yeah, I'd meant every damn word of it, but pre-hex, I would have at least tried to be more tactful about it.

Thankfully, she hadn't taken it personally, calling it "refreshingly honest." That had been pure luck, though, and it could have gone south so fast. If I had slipped up like that with the wrong client, I'd have been blacklisted before they even made it out of the shop.

I had tried. Really, I had. I'd done everything I could to reclaim some sense of normalcy, but I couldn't do it anymore. I just wanted my life back, or at the very least, to not have every private thought broadcasted to the world.

Deaton had explained that I could go through the proper channels to request a meeting with the Warlock Regent, but it would take weeks, maybe even months. I didn't have that kind of time.

While I had been prepared to beg, bribe, or write checks I couldn't cash to expedite the process, as it turned out, none of that had been necessary.

Though she didn't share my dislike of the warlock, Nadia had come through, using her influence and connections to negotiate a meeting. I suspected she also felt a sense of responsibility, and maybe even a smidge of guilt, since she had been the one to secure my invite to the gala in the first place.

Of course, I didn't blame her, but I was also desperate enough to use it to my advantage.

I'd donned a pair of black chinos and a beige V-neck for the meeting, aiming to appear presentable but as unassuming as possible. To combat the summer heat, I had tied my hair into a messy knot at the crown and opted for casual flip flops instead of

my usual loafers.

In reality, I probably could have shown up naked with a bell around my neck, and I wouldn't have gotten so much as a raised eyebrow from the warlock.

We met at a coffee shop in the city plaza, a public space with plenty of witnesses, both human and shadeling. I had also brought Deaton along for backup. Partly for comfort and solidarity, but largely to keep me on track and prevent the meeting from going off the rails.

I didn't know if it would make a difference, but I figured false confidence had to be better than nothing.

Decorated in shades of blue and chrome, with neon lights and digital displays, the space boasted a futuristic atmosphere that managed to feel inviting rather than stark. The utilitarian furniture that filled most cafes had been replaced with curving sofas and wide chairs with rounded backs situated around short, glass tables.

I sat in the middle of the steel-blue sofa, Deaton's steadying presence pressed against my side. Still, my pulse raced, quick and thready, and my entire body vibrated with nervous energy.

I didn't fear Joss in the strictest sense. Sure, he could probably turn me into a caterpillar if he wanted to, but I didn't think he would, no matter how much I pissed him off. Even for someone with questionable morals and flexible boundaries, that seemed a little extreme.

I didn't need him to like me, but I did need this meeting to go well. Considering my genuine distaste for the man and my current lack of filter, there didn't seem to be a high probability of that happening.

“Don’t try to lie,” Deaton reminded me, taking my hand and linking our fingers together. “You know you can’t, and it’ll just make things worse.”

Not trusting myself to speak without my voice quivering, I simply nodded.

While I didn’t advocate lying, I also felt like, in some situations, a kind untruth might be considered acceptable. I no longer had that capability. When I tried and ultimately failed, it only created panic and frustration. The more emotional I became, the more I lost control, and around and around it went, ad nauseum.

“You’ve got this,” my mate added, brushing his thumb over the back of my hand. “I’ll be right here the whole time.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

My smile wobbled as I leaned more heavily against his side. “Thank you. I just want this to be over.”

We waited in uneasy silence, our heads swiveling toward the front door every time a new customer entered. Every second that ticked by felt like an eternity, the anticipation building to nearly unbearable levels.

Finally, just when I had started to think he wouldn’t show, Joss Weller stepped into the cafe, bringing with him a significant swing in the energy. Conversations became muted or died away altogether. The air became thicker, heavier, and though everyone averted their gaze as he crossed the room, the warlock commanded their attention.

Unlike when I’d met him at the gala, today, he looked completely...ordinary. Almost approachable. His blond hair fell in soft, tousled waves around his face, and short stubble covered his jaw. Sporting a pair of dark jeans and a fitted heather-gray tee, he looked more like a suburban soccer dad than a powerful warlock.

Approaching our table, he paused beside one of the chairs, his gaze raking over me, then Deaton, lingering just a fraction longer on our joined hands. What he thought of that little detail, I didn’t know. His eyes gave away nothing, and only an enigmatic grin fluttered at the corner of his lips as he took his seat across from us.

“I’m here,” he announced. “Say what you have to say and be quick about it.”

“We wouldn’t be here at all if you hadn’t cursed me,” I snapped back, wincing when Deaton’s hand tightened around mine in warning. “I want you to unhex me.”

“Why would I do that?” he asked.

He spoke with a conversational tone, not provoking or condescending, which allowed me to maintain a certain degree of composure. I had also expected some version of that question, and the dozens of times I’d practiced the conversation with Deaton seemed to be paying off.

I still had no choice other than to answer with the truth, but with no real anger behind it, I could serve him the facts without a side of petty commentary.

“It’s ruining my life, and frankly, I don’t think I deserved it in the first place. You insulted me, and I responded.”

Joss leaned back in his seat and crossed his legs, his eyes flickering toward my mate. “To be clear, I was actually insulting Deaton.”

“By insulting me.” I took a deep breath and reminded myself to stick to the facts. No need to insert my opinion. “As if being seen with a lowly human like me was somehow beneath him.”

That odd, mysterious smile returned. “You’re right to think I was provoking you,” he confessed. “You’re just wrong about the reasons.”

I hadn’t expected that, and as such, I didn’t have a strategy for it. Under no circumstances had I thought he would actually admit to any wrongdoing. Floundering, I ended up blurting out the first thing that popped into my head.

“Then what the hell was the reason?”

“That’s my business.”

“Is it because you have a hard-on for my mate?”

He stared back at me, his expression unreadable, and didn’t answer.

Though curiosity ate at me, I decided it really didn’t matter. Whatever his motivations, the result had been the same. Still super annoying, though.

“No more games,” Deaton demanded, speaking for the first time since the warlock had joined us. “Are you going to undo the hex or not?”

“Sure.” Resting his elbows on the arms of the chair, he splayed his fingers and brought the tips together in front of him. “As soon as he apologizes.”

I shook my head. I had expected this stipulation, and I already had my answer ready.

“I can’t do that because I don’t think what I said was wrong.” If anything, I had shown remarkable restraint...until he’d cursed me. “I can thank you, though. If it wasn’t for you, Deaton wouldn’t have kissed me to shut me up, and we might never have realized we were meant to be together.”

I hoped we would have eventually figured it out on our own, but I couldn’t know that. Meeting him had been one of the single most important events in my life, and I didn’t want to imagine my life without him.

And for that, I had only gratitude.

The warlock’s eyes flashed, a small, subtle movement at the corners, but I could tell my answer surprised him. Beyond that tiny tell, however, he gave away nothing, and he took his time, stretching the silence between us, before he responded.

Dropping his hands, he leaned forward and tilted his head, a cocksure smile curving

his lips. “Not even a little apology?”

For some reason, instead of irritating me, the question made me laugh. Unfortunately, I couldn’t hold back my retort, and of course, I answered with brutal, stinging honesty.

“I’m sorry that you have the emotional intelligence of a caffeinated raccoon at feeding time.”

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

And the Warlock Regent of Circle City fucking laughed.

Not darkly. Not fake. A real laugh filled with warmth, indulgence, and actual humor.

“I think I like you, River Brighton.” Then he pushed up from his chair, adjusting the hem of his shirt as if preparing to leave.

“Wait, what does that mean? Are you going to unhex me?”

His gaze fluttered to mine and Deaton’s intertwined hands again. “Congratulations on your mating.”

Then he turned and walked away, ignoring my frantic calls for answers.

“It’s okay,” Deaton soothed, releasing my hand to curl an arm around me instead. “We both knew it was a long shot, but we’ll find another way.”

I still couldn’t believe the asshole had just walked away like that. Why had he even agreed to the meeting if he’d known it wouldn’t change anything?

But I didn’t say those things out loud. They didn’t burst past my lips in a flurry of indignation. Vibrating with anger and frustration, my entire inner monologue should have been ringing throughout the cafe, but I hadn’t said a word.

My breath caught, and something flickered inside my chest, a spark that felt suspiciously like hope.

“We might have to travel, maybe even overseas, but we can—”

“Ask me something,” I interrupted, spinning in my seat to face him.

Deaton frowned. “Are you okay?”

“Yes.” But I actually believed that, so it didn’t count. “Ask me something spicy.”

He stared at me for a long time, thinking, searching. Then slowly, his brow unknitted, and a cautious smile pulled at his mouth.

“The female at the counter. What do you think?”

I glanced toward the spot he indicated, easily finding the woman in question. I hadn’t seen her enter the shop, which kind of surprised me since she looked like a clown. That wasn’t me being facetious either.

She wore combat boots and a sparkly tutu over rainbow leggings with a tie-dyed crop top. Add the long, pastel pink wig and the harlequin makeup, and there was just a lot going on with that entire situation.

“She seems confident,” I said, deliberately choosing each word. “The wig is pretty.”

Deaton’s eyebrows winged toward his hairline. “River?”

“Yes!” Grinning so broadly it made my cheeks ache, I threw my arms around his neck and hugged him tightly. “Oh, my god. I can’t believe this.” My heart hammered against my ribs, and relief flooded me, making me feel weak and shivery. “It’s really over.”

“I’m proud of you, baby.” He untangled my arms from his neck and sat back to look

me in the eye. “However, just because you can hide your thoughts and feelings from me now, that doesn’t mean you get to.”

“To be fair, I’ll probably hide some of my thoughts from you.” He didn’t need to know every errant thing that popped into my head. “How else am I supposed to plan a surprise birthday party for you?”

Chuckling, he tilted my head up to claim my lips in a chaste kiss. “Fine. I guess I can make some allowances.”

“That’s very generous of you,” I teased back before becoming serious again. “I promise I won’t hide my feelings from you, though. Not ever. But that means you can’t hide from me either.” I arched an eyebrow at him. “Deal?”

“Deal,” he agreed easily.

“Even if I get on your nerves or piss you off.”

He shrugged. “Okay.”

“And especially when you’re hot and bothered. I definitely want to know when that happens.”

His laughter was deep, rich, and utterly infectious. “I think I can manage that.” Cupping the back of my neck, he leaned in, bringing his forehead to rest against mine. “You are the best thing that ever happened to me, and I’m going to love you so loudly you’ll probably get sick of it.”

Page 28

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

I knew without a shadow of a doubt that would never happen, but for the first time in weeks, words failed me. In his eyes, I saw a future I hadn't dared to hope for—bright, beautiful, and filled with possibilities—and I wanted it all.

Deaton had loved me when I had been at my worst. When I had given up on myself, he had still fought for me. Every day, even when it was hard, he chose me.

Then and there, I made a silent promise to ensure he never regretted that decision.

Epilogue

~ Deaton ~

Four Weeks Later...

The Circle City boardwalk felt like stepping back in time, a place filled with old-school charm and a touch of whimsy.

The scent of cotton candy and buttered popcorn filled the night, carried on the warm breeze that blew across the bay. String lights drooped between the tall posts, their amber glow glittering over the surface of the water.

Pops, dings, and whistles spilled from the game booths, the sounds intermingled with shouts of triumph or groans of disappointment. Big band music played over the loudspeakers, the upbeat rhythm a soundtrack to the electric energy.

There were no neon lights or fancy arcades. No digital game passes or codes to scan.

Just pure, wholesome fun, where people took their time, and the world seemed to slow down, if only for a little while.

Which made it the perfect venue to celebrate Otto's acceptance into the Spellbound Expo.

After hours of games, rides, and laughter, we had found an empty picnic table near the Ferris wheel to relax and refuel. Pink-cheeked and glistening with perspiration, River nibbled at a basket of French fries as he scrolled through the photos we'd taken during the night.

Across the table, Otto clutched a blue teddy bear in one hand—a hard-won prize from the ring toss—while he balanced a chili cheese coney in the other.

“God, I needed this,” Otto groaned before biting into his hot dog.

“Same,” River said, bobbing his head in agreement.

Both wore matching grins, and they looked more relaxed than I had seen them in a while.

Joss Weller didn't often change his mind. So, the fact that he had not only reversed River's curse, but had done so with a smile, hadn't gone unnoticed. News had spread like wildfire, reaching every corner of the city, and within days, River had been inundated with calls from shadelings wanting to work with him.

At the same time, Otto had been busy preparing for the expo, burning the candle at both ends to make sure this opportunity went off without a hitch.

“Are you sure you can't take a week off to come to Vegas?” Wiping his mouth with a paper napkin, Otto stared across the table, his eyes wide and beseeching.

River turned off his screen and placed his phone down on top of the table with a sigh. “I’m sorry. I’m booked solid for the next three months.”

“Yeah, I know. It was worth a shot, though.”

“Are you just looking for moral support, or do you need actual help?” I asked.

“Both, to be honest. There’s a lot that goes into hosting a table. Most people arrive with a whole team.”

“Why don’t you hire an assistant from MNSTR?” River suggested.

I nodded my agreement. “I can recommend someone.”

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking about it. I didn’t really want to do that because it’s so expensive, but I don’t think I have another choice.”

He wasn’t wrong. Hiring an agent for an entire week wouldn’t come cheap. Tack on travel fees and the insurance required for traveling out of state, and the expenses started to add up fast.

“Let me ask around,” I told him. “I can’t promise anything, but I might be able to pull some strings.”

Otto sat up a little straighter, his eyes brightening at the prospect. “Thank you. That would be a huge help.”

We talked about inconsequential things after that as we finished our meal, occasionally rehashing some of our favorite parts of the evening. As the night wound to a close, Otto gathered the empty wrappers and cardboard trays to carry them to a nearby bin.

Source Creation Date: July 7, 2025, 8:58 am

“Thank you,” River said once we had a moment alone, his voice quiet and earnest. “Even if you can’t help, thank you for trying. This means a lot to him.”

It also meant a lot to River.

Things had pretty much returned to normal for him once the curse had lifted. He was still sassy and sarcastic, but on his terms now. Times like this, however, when it was just the two of us, he didn’t hold back.

Good, bad, or indifferent, I never had to worry or wonder what he thought.

Without warning, River leaned in, pressing our mouths together in a brief but fiery kiss. “Consider that a down payment. If you pull this off, there’s plenty more where that came from.”

We both knew I’d do it without expectations of anything in return, but I’d also be an idiot to turn down such an offer. “Tell me more,” I said, pretending to consider it. “What exactly will you give me?”

His eyes danced with mischief in the flashing lights of the Ferris wheel, and his smile turned downright wicked. “Anything you want.”

Otto returned then, interrupting our playful flirting, but I didn’t mind. River never made promises he couldn’t keep.

And I already had everything I wanted right in front of me.