



Sore Throat, Slight Fever

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Description: At three a.m. in a desolate Texas gas station, a gunshot rips through the silence—Calliope, a witch, lies bleeding out on the grimy floor, her life slipping away.

Rory, the night clerk, watches from behind the counter, unfazed. He's a vampire and no stranger to death.

But this time, death knocks differently. With Calliope's life teetering on the edge, Rory is forced into a choice: let her die or condemn her to an immortal fate by turning her into one of his kind. He opts for the latter, whisking her away to his secluded lake house amidst twisted oaks with ghostly veils of Spanish moss.

Beneath the suffocating embrace of a sweltering East Texas summer, a bond begins to form—two damaged souls finding solace in each other. But the peace they've built is fragile, haunted by the mysterious and menacing creature that lives at the bottom of the lake. Rory and Calliope must confront the monsters not only outside, but also within—as secrets buried in their pasts are clawing to the surface, threatening to pull them under.

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In Blood-Drenched Circumstances

Rory

There are two customers in the Go-Go Gas at three o'clock in the morning when the gun goes off. The noise rings in Rory's ears. From his vantage point behind the plexiglass barrier, he watches as the bullet slices through the torso of the woman who had only just turned to make her way up to the cash register, bottle of water in hand.

The bottle slips, crinkles against the floor as she stumbles backward, sliding down the freezer door in shock. Her hand clutches her stomach, white t-shirt already turning red with her blood.

An unmistakable mineral tang mixed with crushed hyacinth petals reaches his nostrils, sunlight-warm, and his gums feel tight in response, his teeth aching.

A gnawing hunger overtakes him. He clears his throat. "Excuse me? Could you take this outside?"

The other customer—the one with the gun—looks at Rory over his shoulder, startled. The woman lies crumpled on the floor, her blood framing her figure in a crude, too-bright puddle.

The man turns around to face Rory, aims the gun, hand shaking. He's younger than Rory thought he would be based on his height. His cheeks are still round in youthful

excess. His chin is scruffy in a sad, patchy sort of way and does little to hide his spotty complexion. He is young enough that the frustration and anger pulsing around him is more tragic than fearsome.

Just a kid, really, thinks Rory. He tries to guess his age but fails to pick a number with any certainty. He lands on early twenty-something.

“Give me all of the cash in that drawer,” Kid demands.

Rory sighs. “Yeah, fine. Whatever, Kid.”

Kid frowns as he moves closer, stabbing the gun in Rory’s direction, as if to emphasize the seriousness of the threat. There is a small hint of surprise in the whites of his eyes. His eyelids blink rapidly over the dark pools of his irises. Rory isn’t sure if the surprise is because he followed the command with little hesitation, or if Kid is shocked at his own audacity.

“Put it in a plastic bag,” Kid adds, his voice shaky, yet gaining confidence with each step closer to the sales counter. Rory does as told, taking extra care to shake the plastic bag open so that it is ready to accept the requested contents.

All \$135.56.

As Kid comes to stand right in front of the sales counter, Rory catches a whiff of fear; it rolls off him like mold in the edges of a room. Probably hasn’t shot a gun before tonight, Rory thinks, let alone held one.

Or, at the very least, Kid has most certainly never pointed a gun at a person. Rory glances at him out of the corner of his eye. Has probably at least aimed a gun at an empty beer bottle, if nothing else. Now there’s a dead woman by the soda fountain, and he’s swinging his gun around like he’s watched too many old Westerns. A child

pretending to play cops and robbers.

Except Rory isn't a cop and the woman's blood fills his nostrils, rushes down his throat, tears at the inside of his veins.

He closes the till with a snap and faces Kid, studiously avoiding the gun and keeping his eyes trained nonchalantly on his face. The front of the gun dips lower. If it went off now, the bullet might ricochet off the barrier.

Or it might go through the plastic and hit Rory in the belly. He's not sure the shield is actually bullet-proof, despite the claims of the sticker peeling off in the corner.

That wouldn't be so bad, he thinks. At the very least, it would end the gnawing emptiness he feels, if only for a few minutes. He should have eaten earlier during his thirty-minute lunch break. He never takes the break, though. His diet is sparse and he'd like to keep it that way.

Kid motions for Rory to pass the bag of money. Then, he uses the back of the hand holding the gun to wipe his forehead. For a moment, the gun is no longer trained on Rory. A rookie mistake.

The bag doesn't fit through the space cut out of the plastic barrier, meant only for lottery tickets and change, and, at most, a pack of cigarettes. For a minute it looks like Kid's face is going to crumple in frustration. He raises a hand to the top of his head and clutches at his limp, greasy strands before saying, "Just walk around and hand it to me. Slowly." He adds the last bit spontaneously and looks quite pleased with himself for thinking of it.

Rory does as told, taking slow measured steps. He raises the latch on the door and the barrier swings open. He reaches through the opening, bag of money outstretched. Kid leans to grab it, eyes darting from the bag to the still vacant lot outside.

This is when the gun goes off.

The bullet lodges in Rory's stomach, which does indeed remove the painful gnawing for a minute. However, his gums feel uncomfortably tight, his teeth aching and sharp, his mouth suddenly dry. It is a feeling with which he is well acquainted, but here, at his place of employment at three in the morning, his shift almost complete and the rapidly cooling body of a woman by the soda fountain still to be disposed of, it sends a smooth current of anger through his body.

Rory looks up at Kid, who is glassy eyed in fear. The gun is shaking visibly in his hand.

"This whole thing has gotten a bit out of hand," he says, fists clenching at his side as he takes a step forward. There is something fouler than just body odor coming off the twitchy, gangly body and he has the sudden urge to learn why.

He extends his hand with a preternatural speed and clutches Kid's neck, dragging him forward so he can look into his eyes. There is a short, choked whine and the gun clatters to the ground as Kid scratches at his captor's hand.

Rory doesn't bother with questions. Just lets his mind reach forward through his touch, sending out a command for Kid to stand still. There is little in the way of mental fortification and Rory slips easily into Kid's memories, rifling through his most recent moments. They play out in front of his eyes, superimposed on the gas station shelves like a movie projector.

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It takes only seconds for Rory to see the hard-edged cruelty that lives in his heart. Certainly, there are circumstances that have planted that cruelty there and there are some small hints of possible redemption, deep down in the fissure of his soul. But it is so submerged, so hidden, that Rory isn't sure Kid would ever be able to find it, even with a century of soul-searching.

Should he give him a century to try, at least? Does he deserve that gift?

No, Rory thinks, his mind full of crude and violent thoughts from the Kid. It leaves a sour taste in the back of his throat. He's known men like that; with the luxury of time, they don't improve. They almost always become rotting, monstrous things. As he flickers through Kid's life, a thin mist of red seems to crowd his vision. There is a high-pitched ringing in his ears, echoes of past lives, the phantom heartbeats against his tongue haunting him still, centuries later.

The red mist is an old friend, unwelcome though it may be. He hasn't been around this much spilled blood in at least three decades and his restraint is hard-pressed to stay intact. He can feel it fraying at the edges, unraveling by the second.

Later, he will tell himself that his body made the decision for him—that he barely knew his own mind when his left hand joined his right in a painfully familiar movement. A soft twist made with barely any effort.

The thought will do little to comfort him, but now, with blood in his nostrils and his teeth aching to feel flesh, it provides him the absolution he needs to do what he, regrettably, is quite good at.

Ophelia in Water

Rory

Kid's lifeless body falls to the ground, his head lolling to the side in a sickeningly unnatural way. The gun rests innocently beside him and, belatedly, Rory realizes he's lucky it didn't go off again when it was dropped. Not that it would hurt him. The bullet hole in his stomach is already healed, the spent metal falling to the ground as his muscles knit themselves back together again.

The only real consequence is the destruction of the once pristine white t-shirt he is wearing. He grabs his flannel shirt from his cubby hole underneath the register and buttons it up. One problem solved.

The Go-Go hasn't come out of this altercation unscathed, though. The blood from him and the woman will be a pain to clean up. He's not sure the supply closet will have enough bleach to completely erase the traces of it. It'll smell like blood in here for a week, he thinks. At least the security camera in the corner broke a while back and hasn't been fixed yet. One less thing to worry about.

With a resigned shake of his head, he kneels and picks Kid up, maneuvering the body over his shoulder as he stands. He pauses before stepping outside, but his pupils dilate quickly.

The darkness hides nothing. The lot is still vacant, as it almost always is at this hour. The road is equally deserted. The diner next door closes at nine o'clock and its neon sign sits silent, a blue indistinct shape against the night sky. The sign for the motel down the road is lit, casting an orange shadow across the inky black snake of the road as it stretches beyond into the nothingness of the horizon. The rooms are dark, motel

guests snug in their dirty beds.

There's not a soul outside or awake at this hour. Rory can hear the silence even before he opens the door, can hear the lack of breath and heartbeat. It's one of the reasons he likes working the night shift; he appreciates the complete and utter lack of life.

Rory makes his way out of the store, digging his keys out of his pocket. The air is sticky-sweet with summer. The worst time of the year. But at least it's still just him. It's almost picturesque, actually: the soft darkness, the sparkling sky, the bulging white moon above. He supposes that the dead body slung over his shoulder ruins any beauty in the view, though.

He unceremoniously drops it into the open trunk of his beat-up Oldsmobile and it lands with a heavy thunk that rattles the shoddy suspension. The smell of copper hits the back of his throat again. He considers what to do next. His teeth sharpen even more, the gnawing hollowness returning and spreading to his veins. His muscles ache with tension. Just a bit longer, he tells himself. Then, drink.

There aren't many places to bury a body around here. The wetlands to the east are an obvious choice, which is why he decides against them immediately. Much too popular with campers and birders. There is another wooded area, Willow Lake Park, that is only a few miles from the Go-Go. The forest itself is rather small, especially compared to the wetlands. Skirting the edge of the trees is a man-made body of water called Graeme Lake, besides which sits the house he lives in. It's uncomfortably close, he thinks.

But the trees there are dense and the trails undeveloped. The land is protected jointly by Willow Lake Town Council and the Glenn County Preservation Society. Camping permits are rarely approved or even requested.

It isn't a very scenic bit of land. The perimeter of Willow Lake Park ends about a hundred feet from the edge of his lake-side property, and if he buried the body even farther than that, deep into the trees, perhaps it would remain undiscovered. Certainly, it would stay hidden during the freeze in December, maybe even until next spring when the ground opens up with mushrooms and worms.

By then, any forensic evidence on the body would surely be tainted and he, a random bystander, would have no connection with the unidentified human remains. It's not perfect, but it'll do.

He checks his watch. He has an hour and forty-five minutes left of his shift but wonders if he can get away with leaving a few minutes early, if his replacement arrives before five as they sometimes do. He can smell the body already, cells breaking down—imperceptibly, really, but not for him—in the late summer heat rising from the asphalt.

He runs a tired hand through his hair as he makes his way back into the store, swapping the buzz of cicadas with the sizzle of electric lights. The red mist and the high-pitched echo in his head have receded back into the past where they belong. He is feeling pretty good about his plan when he almost stumbles over the woman by the soda fountain—the woman he had completely forgotten about in the wake of his own altercation with Kid. There is a grotesque trail where she flopped over on her side.

He muses idly about what led Kid to shoot her in the first place. Did he know her? Did she offend him in some way? He remembers the cruelty in the boy's heart. It's entirely possible that he just felt like shooting someone.

Rory thinks back to before the gun first went off. He hadn't been paying much attention, but he recalls her walking in, smiling distractedly at him, her boots clicking as she made her way down the aisle. He clocked the sway of her hips in time to the clicking of her shoes, but didn't look otherwise, her face obscured by a bushy mane

of brown curls.

What was she doing when she was shot?

Right—she was making her way up to the counter to purchase a bottle of water when Kid turned and the gun went off. The bottle rolled to the sales counter, wedged in the corner next to a forgotten lottery ticket and some bits of broken glass.

If Kid had waited another minute or two, the woman would have been gone—and maybe things would have happened differently.

Maybe Rory wouldn't have already been annoyed and hungry with the scent of blood against his tongue when Kid turned toward him.

Maybe, even if Rory had been shot, he wouldn't have killed him with so little thought. Maybe he would have quelled his instincts long enough to scare him a bit and send him on his way. But to do what, exactly? Shoot someone else? Beat up a girlfriend?

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These musings are pointless, he knows. His mere existence is proof that magic exists, but despite the wealth of his centuries-long experience, he has never found something that can rewrite time. So, Kid shot her and now her blood is pooled on the linoleum tile and Rory is hungry, grumpy, and ready for this shift to just be over.

Probably not the first time this tile has seen blood, he thinks. He scrubs his face with his hand as he kneels, trying to decide the best course of action. He may get away with disposing one body in the woods, but two is pushing it.

The lake, perhaps, would be a better choice for her. It seems fitting, in a twisted sort of way, as the woman's face is hidden by a mass of curly hair, golden honey even in the artificial lights, and it spreads out across the floor like Ophelia in water.

He suddenly feels a bone-deep weariness and he almost considers just leaving—just getting in his car and driving away with not so much as a resignation letter taped to the door. He's become unaccustomed to spilled blood in recent years. He can't remember the last time he slipped into someone else's head, and, with his empty veins, he's feeling the strain of pushing himself. He had forgotten how heavy death can be. He feels the weight of it in his bones. If he had a soul, it would feel just as heavy.

She deserved more than a dirty linoleum floor, he thinks. The soothing, cool depths of the lake are the least he can give her. He doesn't like the idea of putting her in the trunk with the boy who took her life either. The back seat, maybe? There's a spare flannel shirt he can cover her with. It's not perfect, but it's better than leaving her pale skin exposed which somehow seems like a violation. He stays kneeling for a moment longer, cataloging the scene before him, delaying the inevitable—perhaps,

even attempting to honor her life by remembering the details of her death.

He gently brushes the hair away from her face, the tips of his fingers barely touching the strands. The soft curve of her cheek is pale with blood loss, her mouth slack. Her eyes are closed and if it wasn't for the stain spread across her torso, she could just be sleeping. One hand needlessly clutches her stomach, where the bullet entered her body, while the other hand rests on the floor. There's no ring on her left hand. Her nails are neat and trimmed, long and elegant, even with her blood staining them. She's wearing a long floral skirt, which is now bunched up around her knees showing off her pointy black boots. Her white sleeveless t-shirt hugs her curves and shows off a thick scar that circles her upper arm.

There's no purse, as far as he can tell, but she had been holding a slim leather wallet and it rests beside her. He opens it, rifles through, thinking vaguely of taking the cash but ultimately leaves it be. He could use it, but he's not that callous. Her photo identification says her name is Calliope Jane Grey. She is thirty-three years old and an organ donor. He feels a little sad about that one, knowing her final wishes won't be fulfilled. Finally, pushing the weariness aside, he leans forward to pick her up—and yet, as soon as he touches her arm, he feels her heartbeat.

He jolts back as if he'd been stung.

She's still alive, he thinks dumbly. Her skin is cold, colder than his own even, but her heartbeat is there. Shallow—faint—but there.

Her eyes open then, blearily, confused, like she's blinking against the sun after being inside for too long. Her lips move, trying to say something. She raises her hand in an awkward beckoning motion. A puppet with her strings cut.

He leans closer to hear her words. She moves her mouth again, and when she speaks, the sound is a raspy caw, a parody of her voice, which he assumes is lovely and

bright under normal circumstances. It must be. It has to match the soft dip of her lips and delicate tilt of her chin.

The same for her eyes, which he thinks must be closer to emerald green in the sunlight, but are black now, not even reflecting the fluorescent lights overhead.

“Help—I don’t—to die,” she says, words scraping against her chapped lips.

His gums feel hot and painful, his teeth even sharper than before, and he presses his tongue against one of them, as if testing the sharpness of it.

There is a way to save her—but he shouldn’t.

She is so close to death. She is disoriented from pain and blood loss. She doesn’t know what she is asking of him. She doesn’t know what he is.

Her lips move faster now. Her fingers, so cold and shaking, wrap delicately around his wrist. Her blood is still warm, sticky. Crushed hyacinth petals. Rosemary. Dew. He breathes it in, his instincts curling around the smell like a fist grabbing at silk.

“Help.”

He’s not even really sure she says that final word. Later, he’ll worry that he heard it in his head, that he made it up to help him feel better about the decision he has already made. Because even without her plea and her surprisingly strong grip on his wrist, he was already leaning forward, he was already shifting her so he could see her neck. He pays little mind to the blood on the floor soaking through the knees of his jeans as he lifts her up and cradles her against his chest. Her head lolls back as if in offering, pale splatters of blood coating the smooth column of her neck like freckles. Her eyes have fluttered close, and she squeezes his wrist again as if to say, “Yes, I’m ready.”

He brushes her long hair back over her shoulder and pauses, licking his lips. He stops short of looking into her mind. It doesn't matter if she is worthy of saving, it doesn't matter what darkness is inside of her. He doesn't want to kill anyone else tonight.

Hadn't truly wanted to kill Kid, to be frank, but old habits die hard.

He gives himself another second to consider the consequences of this. If he does this—if he saves her with the thing once gifted to him, centuries ago—he will be tying his existence to hers, however briefly, while she recovers. She will need to be looked after while she adjusts to her new circumstances. The gift he can give her could turn fetid at any moment, her savior becoming her jailer, or worse—her executioner.

It doesn't really matter what I want, he thinks. His mind is already made up. And anyway, shouldn't this be a point in his favor? He has seen—and caused—enough death to last him an eternity. He has secluded himself in this remote town to live with his guilt alone, surviving off the bare minimum in his own attempt at contrition, poor though it may be. He ignores the soft, crooning voice in the back of his head that reminds him the salvation he offers is not a true life. She will be neither living nor dead. She will straddle the two, just like him, with a curse of eternal damnation coursing through her veins.

But if he does this, he will be, for once, giving instead of taking.

That's what he tells himself as he licks his lips again, letting his eyes travel down to the exposed column of her neck, as milky-white as the moon he knows is sinking in the sky right now. He bends over until his mouth is so close to her skin, she would be able to feel his breath, if he still needed to take air into his lungs.

Then, he bites into her neck.

A Good Luck Gremlin

Rory

Most documented vampire attacks throughout history and even now, in more recent times, are from youngling vampires left unfettered. There was a time, of course, when such behavior was acceptable, even encouraged, from vampires of any age. Rory himself was once known to have such a reputation; he was once a fierce warrior and prominent figure in the more unsavory vampire communities.

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But that was thirty-years ago, before the weight of death sat so heavily upon him, before the bloodlust broke him in half and he fled. He traveled aimlessly for many years, denying himself his wants, reducing his diet to mere drops in hopes that he could rebuild his soul. It wasn't until three years ago that he realized he would never be able to put his soul back together again: it was gone, disintegrated into ash. He settled in Willow Park shortly thereafter. He spends his days in quiet, wretched contemplation and his nights working at the Go-Go Gas for a measly six dollars an hour to help keep the lights on in his house. His hands have been tarnished by spilled life from the day he was Turned; he supposes it was only a matter of time before he found himself with blood on his hands again.

Cleaning up the floor takes less time than he anticipates. His replacement shows up five minutes after he stores the mop in the supply closet. If she notes the strong, acrid smell of bleach, she doesn't comment, allowing Rory to leave quickly.

He returns home just as the sun is creeping over the tops of the trees. He moves quickly, carrying the woman—Calliope, he reminds himself—into the house, cradled against his chest like a lover fallen asleep on the couch.

The curse of his blood is working its way through her body. Physically, she will remain in stasis as her cellular structure rewrites itself into something new. Some say that a vampire's biology is more efficient than a human's inner-workings, that vampires are the alchemized epitome of what existence should be. Rory isn't sure of this, but his opinion on the matter doesn't change the fact that it works. After biting her neck, he dripped his own blood into her mouth, forcing the magic down into her throat, and he watched as her breathing stilled and her heartbeat quieted.

Soon, she will be neither living, nor dead. She will be a youngling vampire, a creature of pure instinct. The transition hits like adrenaline and only lets up after a few weeks of adjustment. Her emotions will be raw, untamed storms in her mind, erasing any amount of self-control and conscientiousness that she possessed before her transformation. Unless, of course, she is taught how to control her heightened strength and her unquenchable thirst.

So, Rory does what anyone would do in this situation: he chains her up in the basement.

The chains are iron, left over from the previous tenants of the house, but it's not the material that matters most; it's the symbols etched into the cuffs. He doesn't know what they mean, though. He found the manacles in the spare room in a box labeled To contain a vampyre or otherwise powerful immortal. The previous occupants of the house were witches, so he's inclined to believe that they will work.

The symbols flare briefly when he clicks the manacles into place, leaving orange lines across his vision. He blinks the light away and tugs on the chain, satisfied that the cuffs are secure. He glances around the basement. The walls are solid stone, at least three feet deep. Even if the cuffs fail, she won't be able to force her way out. There is perhaps a better way to do this, he knows. Something gentle with some hand holding and soft murmured explanations. A bedside vigil until she wakes up and he can explain. But he can hear her heartbeat slowing and soon, it will stop altogether. She will become conscious again, with sharp teeth and red eyes and an uncontrollable thirst for blood, and he still has to dispose of the other body, preferably before the sun gets too high in the sky.

For once, someone or something is on his side. Not God, per se, but perhaps a lesser deity—a good luck gremlin watching from the rafters—because she stays unconscious as he stands and backs away from her, taking the steps two at a time until he is back in the kitchen.

He begins to hammer a metal panel to the door frame and a matching one to the door itself, snaking an iron chain in between them. A similar symbol that adorns the cuffs is carved into the panel on the door and it flares into life when he clicks the lock into place.

There is a soft displacement of air just above his shoulder, a wayward wisp of his hair ticking the shell of his ear, and he feels the pinch of bird claws soon after as his housemate, Kane, lands on his shoulder.

“Are you sure you made the right decision?” asks Kane, a small squawk added on the end for punctuation.

Rory doesn’t need to see the bird to know that his oil-slick feathers are ruffled with disapproval. He stands and drops the hammer on the table with a loud thud. “It was that or kill her.”

“And what about the man in the trunk of your car?” asks Kane, nipping at Rory’s ear.

Rory, well-versed in Kane’s habits, doesn’t flinch, but he does give him a sideways look accompanied by a scowl. “That was necessary. Besides, he’s the one that shot her in the first place. If anything, I saved her.”

“Is that what we’re calling it, these days?”

Rory grunts in response, knowing that Kane doesn’t really want an answer to his question. They both know Rory’s justification is flimsy, yet neither of them wants to admit the glaringly obvious reason why Rory would spare her. Because how can a vampire explain that he’s sick of bloodshed, especially after he seemingly recklessly killed someone? Even that excuse feels paltry to him.

Then again, Kane has never been known to keep his opinions to himself. “You just

thought she was pretty,” he says graciously, golden eyes flashing with amusement.

“Is she?” Rory asks, eyebrow raised. “I didn’t notice.” This is not entirely true of course. He had noticed but it’s not the reason he bit her, and he’s sure Kane knows that. He can’t help but think that Kane is being oddly charitable.

Kane pushes away from Rory’s shoulder to land on the small kitchen table. His feet click against the wood. “What happens if she escapes and kills someone?”

“That’s what the chains are for,” says Rory, glancing out the window and to the lake beyond. The sun is just beginning to rise, and the placid surface of Graeme Lake reflects the trees like a mirror. From the outside, the house on Graeme Lake is a three-story, three-bedroom Queen Anne Victorian cottage set upon the western shore.

A set of twelve or so stone-hewn steps extend from the back patio and reach down to the water, gently sloping earth on either side. The house is framed by gnarled, ancient oaks and tall, skinny pine trees. There is only one way on or off the property: a dusty dirt track that stretches through the trees to meet-up with the paved road that snakes its way around the nature reserve and out of Willow Park.

The house was commissioned by him sometime in the 1890s, though the exact date escapes him now. The lake was there at the time, but the name came much later; both the house and lake were named Graeme, after the surname of the coven Matron who bought it from him in 1953.

Little has changed of its external appearance since then. With its wraparound porch and shingled turret still intact, the various peaks and points of the house are at once ostentatious and yet still modest in their lack of decoration, painted in muted teals and brick-reds.

Inside, however, the house seems to stretch beyond its physical construction,

dimensions and measurements never quite adding up. By all accounts, there shouldn't be a basement level—there wasn't one when he sold it to the coven.

Of course, it wasn't just the house he let go of at the time. He let go of everything—his family, his wealth, his home—as his choices left him with the gaping maw of guilt resting against his sternum. He's spent decades running away from this deficiency, ignorant of its true meaning, only to realize that the emptiness could only be solved from within. That the pain inside of his heart could never be cured.

So, he stopped moving.

Rory purchased the house back three years ago from the last remaining member of the coven. The witches lived in it for all that time, infusing their magic, perhaps even inadvertently, with the very foundation of the cottage. It's probably where the basement came from, he thinks.

He wishes they thought to add an air conditioning unit as he unbuttons the wrists of his flannel shirt to roll the sleeves up to his elbows, eyes still trained on the smooth surface of the lake. "Anything happen while I was gone?"

"A small disturbance," replies Kane, hopping onto the windowsill. He taps the pane with his beak. "Whatever it is, it's eating all the fish."

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Since Rory arrived three years ago, the lake's only inhabitants have been fish and the occasional snapping turtle. The surrounding trees are not without their own inhabitants, which occasionally find their way to the lake, wood ducks and warblers and even a Cooper's hawk once or twice.

But beyond the fish, nothing truly lives in Graeme Lake—until two days ago, when Rory, fresh home from the night shift at the gas station, watched the sun rise over the top of the trees, and, as the light spread to the lip of the lake and beyond, saw a slight disturbance in the facade of the water. Just a hint of something, really, a ripple of a shadow beneath the water, but it was enough to make him worry. He asked Kane to fly overhead, hoping the bird's eyesight could penetrate the murky depths of the lake, but to no avail.

The creature remains a shadow.

Rory turns from the window and reaches for a blue bottle from the refrigerator, breaking the wax seal on it as he pulls the cork. He doesn't bother with a glass, taking a swig directly from the bottle.

"Didn't get enough from her?" Kane asks.

He gives the bird a curt shake of his head. "I didn't drink her blood."

What he truly means is that he didn't drink enough to satisfy his hunger. After all, it's not the bite or even the consumption of a person's blood that incites the Turn; it's reciprocity, as the person who is bitten consumes the blood of the vampire who is doing the biting.

He closes his eyes as he takes another sip, the blood flowing down his throat with a burn like whiskey. When he settled down in Willow Park, he knew he needed a reliable, discreet source of food and was grateful to find a farm a few miles to the east whose owner cares more for money than explanations. Animal blood will never be as good as human blood, but Rory has worked hard to reign in his appetite, and he finds the chicken's blood palatable, if not somewhat pleasant.

Kane is eyeing him curiously, head tilted to the side. Rory challenges him with a raised eyebrow, but the bird just looks out the window again.

Rory knocks back the rest of his drink and then places the empty bottle in the sink. "And we're sure it's not just another gator?" he asks, even though he knows the answer.

"We're sure," says Kane. "I can feel it."

Kane's background may be as murky as Graeme Lake, but if there's one thing Rory can trust, it's Kane's ability to sense other creatures like him: cursed spirits, so twisted by magic that they've forgotten their true form.

That's really all Rory knows about Kane, though.

The great-tailed grackle showed up at the house shortly after Rory, looking for the last witch who lived here. When Rory informed him that she retired to a senior citizen community down south only to succumb to a sudden case of pneumonia shortly thereafter, he expected Kane to take off again. He hadn't though. Instead, he cawed out some excuse about the quality of frogs nearby and suggested that he could pay for his rent by ensuring that no small rodents infiltrate the house.

Rory pointed out that he's never seen any rodents scurrying about the house. Kane ensured him that maintaining the same level of rodent-to-vampire ratio will be top on

his list of priorities should he be selected for the role.

Rory still hasn't seen or heard any rodents in the house, so, in a way, he supposes that Kane has made good on his promise.

"I don't like this," says Kane. "First the creature in the lake and now..." He glances back at the door that leads to the basement.

"It'll be fine," Rory says with more confidence than he feels. "Watch the door. I'll be back soon."

* * *

The air is thick with moisture, the sun already making its way over the tall, skinny oak trees, ineffective against the humidity. He marks a route that avoids direct sunlight, preferring to stick close to the trees and their shadows.

The sun isn't as detrimental to his kind as various cultural and literary references will have one believe, yet there is some truth to the myth, of course: vampires who stay too long in the sun can sometimes succumb to sun sickness, like how humans fall prey to heat stroke. The difference, however, is that sun sickness in vampires can set in after only a few hours of direct contact.

So, he sticks to the shadows, his sleeves unrolled and buttoned firmly at his wrists. The heat is uncomfortable, and made doubly uncomfortable by the body, cold and rigid, slung over his shoulder. The shovel he carries scrapes against the dried brown leaves that cover the ground, hiding the halfhearted trail. He finds a spot beneath a tree where a yarrow plant is making a valiant attempt at life.

He gently places the bundle of blanket and body against a nearby tree and begins to dig. The slide of rusty metal against hard-packed earth is a song he wishes he didn't

already have memorized. With each thrust of the shovel, he tries and fails, as he so often does, to not recall tears streaming down dirty cheeks, mouths open in terror, words—random and embarrassing—tumbling out in an attempt to change his mind, to prevent his hands and his teeth from taking.

As the cavity in the earth gets bigger and bigger, he thinks about the last time he buried a body. The cries of battle had faded, the war was ending, and he had reached his breaking point. An image of his brother's eyes flashes in his memory, and he tries not to compare the smooth wood handle of the shovel to the stake he once held to his brother's chest. He tries not to remember the smell of the ocean, and the coppery tang of blood.

When the hole in the ground is deep enough, he drops the body in and begins to cover it up, asking for forgiveness from a nameless deity—maybe even that good luck gremlin who must be looking out for him. When he is done, he lets the shovel fall with a clatter and realizes that his hands are shaking, the regret and guilt hanging over him like a gray veil.

He shouldn't have killed the Kid.

Because that's all he was: just a kid.

A lost child. There's a niggling, rotting thing in his chest that whispers scathing rebukes, telling him that Kid was going to turn his life around, that he would do good things. Telling him that the woman will hate him for Turning her. That he should have just called the cops like a human. That he is evil, and he's taken one life and ruined a second.

And what else is new? He fell into a habit, a trap of his own making. It's a reminder that the darkness is inside of him and hiding out in the middle of nowhere will do nothing to bring light to the dark.

He stuffs his hands in his pockets, only to find a forgotten pack of cigarettes and a cheap, plastic lighter. He pulls out a cigarette, lighting it without thought. It's a terrible habit, acquired sometime in the seventies while squatting in New York City. The nicotine does little to his body, but the ritual of it is soothing. He blows out a steady stream of smoke, tasting a hint of sweetness on the tip of his tongue as he looks down at the mound of earth, freshly packed.

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The air is wet and heavy.

A bird calls from overheard.

He snubs the cigarette out on the bottom of his boot and stuffs it back in his pocket. He grimaces at the freshly concealed grave and then turns, making his way back to house on Graeme Lake and a youngling he very much hopes hasn't awoken quite yet.

4

Suspended in Ether

Calliope

When Calliope Grey opens her eyes, she worries that she's gone blind. She blinks a few times, but soon realizes it's not that her eyes are no longer working, but, simply, that there is nothing to see. She is surrounded in impenetrable darkness. Floating in nothingness. Suspended in Ether.

The familiar smells reach her, a hint of rain and stone and the burned herbal scent of magic. Her skin is pebbled with cold, blue veins thin and delicate spreading across her shoulders and arms and down to her toes.

The Ether is a welcome surprise. She hadn't known she could still access it—hadn't known she still had her magic at all. She was born a witch, gifted with ancient magic passed down from generations before her, but she thought that gift had died, withered and faded as her husband—ex-husband, she reminds herself—took more than he

gave. Is she healed now? Is her magic back? She searches for its warmth, a spark in her fingertips. Not quite, she thinks.

But she is here, and that must mean something, even if her memory of why is beyond her grasp for the moment. Her grandma told her that the Ether was created by the First Witch at the Beginning, centuries ago, when light and darkness twisted together into a spark of potential. It was meant to be something of a promised land, an escape from persecution, and before Calliope had first found herself there when she was thirteen, she always imagined it as an oasis, dew-drenched waxy green leaves and trilling bird calls and snakes dripping off trees. Instead she found it dark and empty, almost as if the First Witch had cleared out a room but never got around to decorating. Her grandma always said it looks different for everyone, but that it doesn't matter what it looks like. It's comforting enough that it exists, at all.

Regardless of how the Ether looks, it is still an untamed place, almost a wild thing itself with sparks of magic in the far recesses of the darkness, crackling like a distant thunderstorm. She's only ever been here when something big happens, like that first time—she slipped off a tree branch, plummeting to the ground from fifteen feet above. She came out of the Ether to find her grandma wrapping her arm in gauze as her rough gravel-voice asked her repeatedly to come back. Just come back, darling, you're safe here now.

The last time she found herself in the Ether was the night before her wedding. Looking back, she realized much too late that the Ether had actually pulled her there, as if trying to warn her about her decision to marry Maddox Grey—as if trying to keep her safe. And of course, the Ether had been right. Marrying him was an awful mistake.

Something big happened, she thinks. She can feel the niggling memory of it, so strong her fingers itch to grab it. It remains elusive for the moment, but it doesn't matter because right now, the Ether feels like a hello. Like walking through your

front door after a long journey away. She even thinks she smells freshly baked bread, black coffee, and her grandmother's hand cream with its notes of jasmine and rose and a bit of menthol for her joint pain.

Her grandma's voice calls out, faint, so far away. Just come back, darling, you're safe here now.

Calliope isn't certain which her grandma's voice is referring to. Does she mean the Ether? Should Calliope stay hidden in the cool depths of this murky, magical place? Should she run towards the sound of grandma's voice and join her in the darkness?

But her grandma died years ago and wherever she is calling out from...well, Calliope isn't sure she's ready for that. She scrunches her eyes closed, willing the Ether to slide away from her, unclouding her vision, returning her to somewhere that is just as cold and dark, but real enough.

She is surrounded by the smell of damp, her back against a wall, wetness dripping down her bare shoulder. She looks down and sees a dark stain marring the whiteness of her shirt.

She has no clue how she got here. Her mouth feels too tight, like she has cotton balls stuffed into her cheeks, like they do when you're at the dentist. She opens her mouth to slide her tongue against her dry, chapped lips. There is something metallic at the back of her throat, as if she's swallowed a penny.

A small sound escapes her, and she freezes, listening to her own voice echo against the stone. She is alone, at least, which is some small measure of comfort as the memory of last night slowly comes back to her in bits and pieces, flashes of colors and sounds.

She shifts her hands, feeling the weight of metal press into her wrists. The magic in the cuffs flares briefly, and she can see the edges of the basement room in the soft glow of the symbols. She has the niggling thought that she should recognize them, but they're just blurry lines.

The memory of blood comes, and she raises her hand to her belly, the manacles making the movement stiff and heavy. There was a bullet. A man. Green-yellow lights that buzzed too loud.

Blood, too red against the scuffed linoleum tile.

Herblood.

And her voice, so soft, asking to be saved.

Help.

And the cashier. Middle-aged, pale, with day-old scruff lining his jawline and dark, graying hair curling around his ears. A larger man, not the slimmest, and certainly not as lithe as the few vampires she's met before. It's why she didn't initially realize what he was.

She hadn't seen his teeth either. She hadn't glimpsed the too long, too sharp canines, when she made her request, but she remembers them now, sinking into her neck.

The realization of that request hits her, and she jumps against the phantom of the memory, the chain rattling ominously in the dark, manacles digging into her skin.

She reaches up to feel her neck, scared but needing to know what's there. The manacles slow her movements, but her fingers connect with smooth skin. Too warm. Does she have a fever? Is she sick? She attempts to take a deep breath, but there is an

absence in her chest. She takes another breath, expanding her chest muscles, but again, there is nothing there, no air, no heart beating frantically in her ears, no tingling feeling in her fingers.

“It’s okay,” says a masculine voice in the dark—but there is something off about it, a crackle at the end that doesn’t sound quite right. Not quite human.

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She stills, pressing her back against the damp wall, as if she can blend into the concrete. She reaches for the Ether; the ease with which she can access it is reassuring.

“It’s okay,” the voice says again. There is a ruffling sound that is familiar, though she can’t quite place it. “Here, let me help you.”

There is a clunk of metal falling, a chain being unlinked, and then the creak of a door as it opens, spilling a sliver of pale light from beyond. The sliver widens, falling on her like a spotlight. She blinks against the sudden intrusion, holding her hand up awkwardly to block the light. A small dark creature hops forward and down, onto the top step of the stairs that lead up and out of this damp, dark place.

She takes some comfort from the notion that whatever it is, she is much bigger than it, but she still presses herself against the wall, fists clenched in front of her should she need to defend herself. The light is startling after the darkness, but her eyes adjust quick enough for her to glimpse the oil-slick feathers of a bird, a small one, like the ones she used to chase as a kid while waiting for her grandma in front of the grocery store. He is airborne with a few flaps of his wings then he is perched on her bent knee. She jumps when he lands, but he tightens his grip. She can feel the sharpness of his claws through her skirt, and she’s sure there is a small tear in it now.

The bird cocks his head to the side, yellow eyes beaming brightly, and says, “You are scared, but not as confused as you should be.”

She swallows, finding her voice. “I’m a witch,” she says quietly. Her throat feels like it’s on fire. She swallows. “And you are cursed.”

“Indeed,” says the bird—a grackle, she recalls—tucking his wings close to his body. “But you have it slightly wrong. You are no longer a witch.”

Her fists clench, and she brings them close to her stomach, remembering what the stain on her shirt is. Her fingers dig into the fabric, stiff with her blood. “What do you mean?”

“You are just as cursed as me now,” says the bird, with a click of his beak.

Before Calliope can respond, a gruff command comes from the doorway. “Kane!”

The sudden sound makes her jump and Kane’s claws grip her knee harder, the nails sinking beyond the thin fabric of her skirt and into her skin, as he twists his head to look at the source of the command, feathers puffed up. Calliope can just see the silhouette of a man before he descends into the basement.

5

One Kind of Magic

Calliope

She didn’t know it was possible for a grackle to look suitably chagrined, but Kane somehow manages it. The man kneels in front of Calliope and swipes at Kane, forcing the bird to hop off her knee and down onto the ground “I told you to watch her, not start a conversation,” he says, not unkindly.

Calliope shifts closer to the wall, feeling the concrete snag on her shirt. Her arms come up to her chest, fingers ghosting over the scar on her arm as she instinctively shields herself. Not that her arms will protect her much, because now that the man is in front of her, she recognizes him as the sales clerk at the gas station.

The vampire.

Up close, his eyes are unnaturally gray and his skin almost translucent in the dark. His aquiline nose hints at ancient royalty and yet there is a small hint of a beard that is oddly endearing on an immortal being such as him.

“You’ll probably want to rinse your mouth out,” he says, handing her a glass of water. “The aftertaste takes some getting used to.”

She looks warily at the glass. “Aftertaste...?”

Instead of explaining, he sits the glass down on the dusty concrete floor and shifts so that he is sitting cross-legged in front of her. “I’m Rory,” he says, with a smile so ill-used it comes out more like a grimace. “Do you remember last night?”

“You bit me,” she says, steady and emotionless.

He nods. “I didn’t know what to do—you asked me—you were—”

“I was dying.”

He nods again, his eyes never leaving her. He seems poised for an attack, shoulders stiff, aware of her every movement.

“You saved me,” she says, softly.

He hesitates, a line forming between his furrowed eyebrows. “I did what I could.”

“What’s the aftertaste from?” Her voice is shaky in the dark. She plucks at the small tear in her skirt. She yearns to draw herself back into the Ether, to pretend this isn’t happening.

He runs his hand through his hair before replying. “You were dying. I bit you, then made you drink my own blood.”

“You fed off me?”

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“No,” he says harshly, his voice echoing against the stone walls. He glances away briefly, before turning back to her. “I didn’t—I wouldn’t—it wasn’t feeding. I drank only what I needed to begin the process.”

“You Turned me?” she asks, giving the process the capitalization her grandma always gave it. Her teeth feel sticky with the word.

“It was the only way to make sure the bullet wound healed properly.”

“The aftertaste?”

“My blood. Vampire blood. It’s how vampires are made.”

She purses her lips as she looks at the glass of water, reaching out with shaky hands, dirty fingernails crusted with blood. Her blood. Or his blood. Or maybe even both.

“It’s cold,” he says, watching her bring it up to her lips. “It’ll probably feel good on your gums, at least. But don’t swallow it.”

She raises an eyebrow, cheeks puffed out with water.

“Just spit it back into the glass,” he clarifies.

She does as told and grimaces at the red-tinged water. The relief is marginal. Her mouth still hurts as if she has been grinding her teeth in her sleep. She’s beginning to acknowledge the red-raw pain in the back of her throat, too, as it pulses down to her clavicle and against her sternum. It feels like there is something she needs to cough

up, like she swallowed poison, and it burned her throat all the way down only to sit, like lead, in her lungs.

“Why am I chained up?” She holds her hands in front of her, showing him the heavy metal of her bindings.

“Youngling vampires are unpredictable,” he offers hesitantly. “You’re not a prisoner, but—” She gives him a sharp look “—I need to keep you contained until...everything is complete.”

She lets her head dip back until it rests against the wall. “I’m a witch. I know about your kind.”

Rory’s scowl deepens, and he seems to be wrestling with something, unsaid words rolling around in his mouth. She tries to remember if there are any rules against Turning other supernatural creatures. Who makes the rules for vampires these days? She hasn’t had contact with any other magical communities since she got married.

It’s Kane who replies, however, hopping forward and cocking his head to the side. “You’re not a witch anymore. You’re a vampire.”

“Can’t I be both?”

Kane flaps his wings twice, flustered. “You can only have one kind of magic in your blood, Calliope,” he says, gently. “The curse of a vampire is always dominant.”

Instinctively, she reaches again for the Ether and finds its coolness at her back, like the concrete wall behind her and yet more welcoming, pliable, ready to accept her. She’s not sure how to explain the Ether to them. Vampires can’t do magic—not like witches can—and the Ether is unknown to them; it is a witch’s most sacred secret.

She looks down at her hands, clenching and unclenching. She can feel Rory looking at her, his apprehension almost like a physical thing being placed upon her shoulders. “You can unchain me. I’m not going to go on a killing spree.” She looks up at him, daring him to contradict her.

A lock of hair, dark but streaked with gray, falls across Rory’s forehead as he looks at the manacles around her wrists. The symbols flare orange with a soft sizzle. “I think you should drink first.”

“I’m not thirsty,” she says evenly. “You can’t keep me chained up down here.” She clenches her fists again, chains rattling.

Rory’s mouth is set in a firm line. “It’s only for a couple of weeks or so, until you get a handle on your cravings. Then you can do whatever you want.”

“I don’t have any cravings.”

He raises an eyebrow, his expression mildly challenging. “I don’t want you killing anyone,” he says, firmly.

She pushes away from the wall and leans closer to him. “You can’t keep me here against my will.”

He sighs deeply, which she finds curiously charming in its lack of necessity. But then his eyes flash back toward her, and he leans forward to match her gaze, so fast her eyes can’t track the movement. When he talks, his voice is pitched low, almost a whisper, and his words are far from charming. “Is your throat on fire? Do your teeth ache?”

She swallows, pursing her lips with a retort. But he continues talking, leaning so close to her, she can feel his words in her belly, feel them against her cheek like ice.

“That’s called hunger. And it will consume you until it tears you apart. And when that happens, you willache—” A shiver runs down her spine, “—acheto feel another’s heartbeat in your mouth and you willlaughas their life spills down your pretty little skirt.”

A quick flash of the gas station. The bang of a gun. Pain. His mouth against her neck. He leans closer, so close she wonders how his words don’t touch her lips, and she can smell him, the same vetiver and wood smoke that sits at the back of her throat. Because of his blood.

She drank hisblood.

Her mouth goes dry, and her eyes flutter down to his neck, marveling at the smooth skin. She leans closer, marginally, licking her lips. Her head feels fuzzy. Her eyesight narrows. His neck—and what lies underneath his skin—the sole focus of her mind. She knows he doesn’t have a heartbeat, so what is that noise in her head? The pulsing beat against her sore throat, the rushing of liquid in her ears? Her gums ache. For amoment, the coppery aftertaste lifts, and she remembers the rush of his blood down her throat, coating her teeth like honey.

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She shakes her head, the fuzziness receding. “I won’t—” she begins to protest.

“Exactly. You won’t. Because I won’t let that happen.” He stands, brushing the dust off his jeans. He’s still wearing clothes from earlier, her blood staining the knees of his jeans.

“Is that a promise or a threat?” she mumbles, half to herself. She stands as well, the movement slow as she unfolds her legs. She wonders how long she’s been in this basement. Hours? A day? He’s holding out a hand to her, but she can’t tell if it’s to help her stand or push her back down. He doesn’t seem too sure either. She steadies herself against the wall instead.

“Both,” he replies, eyebrow arched. He considers her with a scowl, stuffing his hands in the pockets of his worn jeans. “Is there someone you’d like to call? A coven? Let them know your whereabouts? There’s a phone upstairs.”

She teases the edge of her teeth with her tongue, finding the sharpness unsettling. She shakes her head almost absentmindedly. “No one to call. But that’s beside the point. I won’t kill anyone.” She puts more confidence in her voice than she currently feels.

“She’ll be fine,” agrees Kane.

“And how do you know that?” asks Rory.

Kane hops up onto her shoulder and cocks his head to the side in contemplation. He grabs a wayward lock of her hair and tugs, as if the strength of will-power is evident in the strength of hair. She swats him away, chains rattling, but he holds firm, claws

digging into her shoulder. “I can tell.”

Rory scoffs. “Oh, well, if you can tell.”

“Kane’s right,” she says. “Please. You can’t keep me locked in this basement. I won’t—” Without thinking she reaches out and touches him, her fingers circling his wrist.

She only has a moment to note the temperature difference between them—her skin so hot against his, which is cold like the concrete at her side, as cold as the Ether, really—before a loud scratching sound echoes around them, followed by the crunch of metal and glass, the creaking of wood, the groaning of something large moving with great effort. Dust and debris fall on their heads as the walls shift, the ground vibrating beneath them.

Kane takes flight immediately, disappearing into the dark. Without thought, Calliope reaches out, grasps Rory’s shoulders, the closest solid thing, and he gathers her in his arms, shielding her head from the debris falling around them.

She is burning in his arms, her whole body on fire and she presses her cheek against his chest, feeling a momentary relief from the pain in her jaw, like packing a wound with snow.

And then the house stills.

The silence that follows is heavy, and it stretches around them languidly, like a large cat unfurling after a nap. Calliope raises her head, and Rory’s arms slither away from her.

“What was that?” she asks, blinking away dust.

There is a flutter of wings, and Kane perches on Rory's shoulder. "The house agrees with me," he says, preening a bit of dust from his wing. "It made a room for her."

6

A Shadow-Wraith Come

Calliope

The mid-morning light pools on the scuffed wood floors and Rory frowns. "Why is the floor so scratched up? This room didn't even exist before."

Calliope watches as he tests the floor with the toe of his boot, then returns her focus to the casement window. Obscured glass delicately etched with flowering vines hinders her view of what lies beyond, and she swings the window open, allowing a burst of tepid breeze to filter in. The lake below shines diamond-bright, the trees on the adjacent shore a dark shape against the clear sky.

Looking directly downward, she can see the side of the house and the small stone patio she glimpsed earlier, only briefly as Rory led her out of the basement and up the stairs to the new room. Decorative railing runs the length of the curved slab of stone, stretching beyond Calliope's view. A flower bed, such as it is, runs along the railing, softening the hard edge.

She feels Rory move behind her and a second later, the slight chill of his body is at her side. She has the mounting feeling that she is drowning, so overwhelmed with the tightness in her gums and the bright, clear sky and this room, a miraculous bit of magic that her brain, still fuzzy with the transition, can barely comprehend. She gives Rory an askance look, his shadow at her side eerily reminiscent of the one she left in the dark of night three days ago—her husband. She remembers the prone figure of the man, one leg hanging off the side of the bed, his boot just touching the rug. He won't

find me. I am safe. I am free, she tells herself. Despite the manacles. The chain rattles as she slips a finger underneath the wrist cuff to rub gently at the fledgling irritation from the rough iron pressing into her skin.

Kane lands on the windowsill with a bitter squawk. “The house has never given me a room.”

Calliope isn't sure how to respond, so she doesn't. She lifts her shoulder in a vague apology. Placing her back to the window, she takes in the remainder of the room, marveling at the emerald green built-in shelving units overflowing with books, leather spines interspersed with trinkets and strange arrangements of metal and glass that are reminiscent of science apparatuses. They remind her of her grandma's kitchen, cauldrons and glass vials and metal armatures to aid a witch in her Craft. To her left, is a velvet blue couch, overflowing with pillows and knit blankets. “I thought vampires didn't sleep?”

Rory runs a distracted hand through his hair, attention still on the lake below. “We don't. But rest is...helpful. Sometimes.”

“Well, this is all very nice,” she says, fingering the corner of a pillow, “but I best be going now. Perhaps you could take these off?” She holds her arms out, looking pointedly at the cuffs.

Rory scowls and shakes his head. “You need to drink.”

“I'm not thirsty.” She takes a step closer, shaking her wrists for emphasis. “I feel fine.”

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“Do you?” he asks with an arched eyebrow. “Because those blood shot eyes and fangs tell me otherwise. And anyway, even if you do feel fine now, it won’t last.” He crosses his arms over his broad chest and shifts, his figure framed by the window. “Never does,” he adds a beat later, more to himself than anything.

Even as some finely-honed instinct in her body tells her that she should leave—that this large dark figure is actually a shadow-wraith come to carry her away, or worse, that he’s just as black hearted as her husband—she holds her ground, spine straightening in defiance, chin slightly raised. “So, I am being held prisoner.”

“You’re not a prisoner.”

She huffs lightly and lets her arms fall in front of her. “That’s bullshit—”

“I told you, it’s just for a couple of weeks or so.”

“Or so? That’s not very reassuring.” Her voice is rough with emotion, and she blinks back tears. “Fine. I understand why you need me to stay here for a bit, but the chains are unnecessary. Not to mention, kind of uncomfortable.” She pauses, arranging her features in as neutral of an expression as she can manage for the moment, trying to calm the sudden roaring in her head. “I understand that you saved me from dying.” He gives her a sharp look. “But I’m really okay now. I’m not thirsty.”

He tilts his head to the side, shifting his weight almost imperceptibly. What was once forbidding, is now vaguely indifferent, if not reassuringly calm. It’s almost impressive how he manages to wrangle his emotions into submission. She still feels a simmer of something wild inside of her, a subtle growl at the back of her thoughts.

She wishes she could breathe, because a deep breath would be soothing now.

“The chains stop you from overpowering me,” he tells her, simply.

She lets her eyes trail down his body, taking in his broad shoulders and long limbs. He’s a head taller than her, brawny and heavy-looking. She hadn’t noticed his size at first, because in contrast to the immovable nature of his presence, his step is alarmingly light. Regardless of his size, vampires are supposed to be strong, if the stories her grandma told her are to be believed. And if he was the same size as her, or even smaller, he could overpower her with ease by virtue of his vampiric nature.

“Youngling vampires are stronger than older vampires,” he adds. He seems uncomfortable with her inspection, and he shoves his hands in the pockets of jeans, eyes trained somewhere above her head. “The...magic...will level out over time, but that initial impact can be...rough.”

She raises an eyebrow at his stilted explanation. “So, you’re saying I could overpower you.”

Relief washes over his features—or at least, something she has decided to define as relief; she’s already noticed that his facial expressions tend toward brooding, and the small shift is as close to relief she thinks his brow and downturned mouth can accomplish. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. Which is why the chain is necessary. But only for a little bit. When you have more control, I’ll take it off.”

She considers the manacles, brushing her thumb across one of the symbols. Then, she shakes her head. “I don’t think—”

He suddenly seems fed-up with the argument. He extracts his hands from his pockets and takes a step toward her. The sudden change causes her to stiffen, shrinking away from him, that instinct borne from living with volatility and anger hanging over her

head for so many years telling her she needs to make herself smaller, just as much as she needs to create distance between her and this dark stranger.

He aborts whatever action he had been about to take, standing in front of her with a frown. He returns his hands to his pockets. “We’re wasting time. You need to drink.”

She finds the strength to push past the instinct, to rally something like indignation. “And what if I don’t? What are you going to do about it?” It’s a childish thing to say and even as the words leave her, she can hear her grandma clucking her tongue at her.

A muscle in his jaw feathers as they stare at each other. Then, his shoulders slump forward, just slightly. Again, she sees whatever anger he must feel unravel inside of him. But unlike earlier, it isn’t replaced with something non-threatening. Worse, his eyes darken with something she can’t quite define. She is suddenly heedful of the space—or lack thereof—between them. Did he move or did she?

Again, she marvels at how light his step is, despite his dark presence, as he invades the space, compressing it further, until it is but an inch wide and if she wanted to, she could reach out and touch the stubble on his cheek.

“Younglings are unpredictable at best. Blood-hungry killers at worst.” He leans down and she feels his next words on her lips. “Are you a killer, Calliope?”

She swallows, wondering where that instinct went—the one that kept her alive under the watchful gaze of her husband. This man is not my husband. She has the inexplicable urge to step forward. To challenge him. The manacles cut into her wrists.

He reaches out and caresses her lower lip with a calloused thumb. His skin is cool against her warm skin. She flinches as much from the sudden contact as she does from the shock of the temperature difference. He cocks his head to the side, silvery gray eyes luminescent even in the brightness of the morning sun. “You know that

taste of eating slightly raw meat? A steak cooked rare. Salty, with that slight metallic tang. That's what people taste like."

The pain in her gums increases. She teases the pointy edge of her tooth as the memory of the night before comes unbidden to her, tinged in red. Rory's lips against her neck, the sharp pain of his teeth breaking through her skin. The smell of her blood in the air, musky and brisk at the same time. Rory was bleeding too. She remembers the second gunshot now. That sound seems to echo in her head. That new smell that encircled her—was that his blood? Something crisp and delicate. Did it smell good? Her mouth waters with the memory. The roaring in her head has returned, gathering strength like an ocean wave readying itself to come to shore.

"You're not a killer," he says. "And I won't let you become one."

"Are you a killer?" She doesn't realize she's said it out loud until the look in his eyes shutters, like a door being slammed shut.

"I'm just asking for a little trust. Give me two weeks." His voice is still soft, though hoarse, like he's holding back a storm of emotion. "I expect you to be in the kitchen in two minutes."

He steps around her, his shoulder brushing past her so quickly she only has the brief impression of cold stone and then she is alone in her room. She doesn't know where Kane disappeared to and, at the moment, she's just grateful for his absence.

Because as soon as Rory turns the corner down the hallway, she lowers herself shakily to her knees, hand clutched at her throat as she fights against the acrid feeling at the back of her mouth. She squeezes her eyes shut, wishing for tears to spring forward and yet hoping they stay put, deep inside of her.

She can't fall apart yet. Soon, but not yet.

Snow

Calliope

Calliope stands by the kitchen window, looking out at the patio and the feeble remains of the garden that line its edge. She recognizes the dried husks of wild quinine, hyssop, and basil, and the withered petals of coneflower, milkweed, and nasturtium.

A witch's garden can grow feral if left unattended, she remembers her grandma telling her once, as they kneeled beside each other in the cool, soft grass and dug their hands into the soil. There's mischief that grows in between the roots and worms. Calliope almost turns around to warn Rory of this fact but decides against it. There's nothing he, as a vampire, can do to tend to such a garden.

She could do it herself—she was trained by her grandma, after all—but she won't be here long enough to really make any real progress taming the tangled, frizzled mess.

She does turn around though, to take in the rest of the room. Rory is leaning into a beige refrigerator that looks at least ten years older than her. The motor inside knocks against the metal casing in protest. She spies neat rows of blue and amber bottles with white labels inside. Rory reaches for a blue one and then straightens up. She watches as he opens the nearest cabinet filled with mismatched glassware and pulls down two recycled jam jars. The bottle is promptly uncorked and when he tips it toward one of the jars, she sees a glimpse of thick, red liquid, before turning away.

The cabinets that run along the walls are painted chalk blue and accompanied by weathered wood countertops. There is a lopsided wood table shoved against the far side of the room just under the window that looks out onto the lake. Two mismatched

chairs are pushed underneath on either side.

The worktable in the middle is topped with pale marble, veins of spidery grays spreading across the milky-white surface. The floor is more mundane, a squeaky, bouncy linoleum, though the diagonal checkerboard pattern gives it a more austere air than the material ought to, perhaps, have. The stove is dusty, the countertops bare. There are no pots, pans, or typical kitchen accouterments. She supposes this isn't truly alarming. She's sure a vampire and a grackle don't need to cook much, if at all.

Kane perches on the back of the chair and caws at Calliope, motioning with his beak to invite her to have a seat across from him. "It'll be good for you to drink," he says, head twisted to the side. "All younglings should establish a steady diet right away. It helps with the cravings."

"Were you a vampire once?" she asks, sliding into the chair. It creaks as she leans forward, palms clammy against the scarred wood surface of the table.

Kane is suddenly very busy preening himself. For a moment, she wonders if he hadn't heard her, but there is a glint in his eye and she's sure he's avoiding answering the question.

Rory places a jar of blood in front of her. "It's not as good as.... well, it's not as good," he admits. "But it's from a local farm. Cow's blood. The family who owns it takes good care of their animals."

The glass sits in front of her, dark liquid impenetrable and mysterious. She swallows. The soreness at the back of her throat seems to swell, pulsing through her gums and down into her teeth. Warmth suffuses her cheeks, and she reaches out a shaky hand to pick up the glass, which is alarmingly cold from being stored in the fridge.

She wraps her fingers around the glass but doesn't lift it. She brings a hand up to the

side of her neck and massages gently, reminding herself that she is no longer lying on the sticky floor of the Go-Go Gas at three in the morning—reminding herself that she verymuch hadn't wanted to die then and that this icy glass of crimson liquid holds her salvation.

“What happened to the kid?” she asks, suddenly, an image of the young man with red-rimmed eyes and spotty skin. He looked so surprised when the gun went off. That's mostly what she remembers, the wide-eyed shock on his face, and she thinks she must have looked the same, her mouth open in surprise, eyebrows knitted together in confusion. She doesn't have to clarify who she's asking about.

“He's gone,” she hears Rory reply, but for some reason, his voice sounds so far away.

She looks up at him, her hair tumbling over her shoulder. She brushes it away, glad to have a reason to let go of the jar. “Where did he go?”

Those star-bright eyes shutter again, a mental defense clamping down.

She tilts her head further, so she can see his full face. “Did you kill him?”

“Yes.”

There's a swooping feeling in her belly and she's not sure how she feels about this. He killed the boy, but saved her? Why? Because she asked politely? “And the body?”

“Gone,” he says. He leans over to push the glass closer to her hand, the smooth cold surface brushing against her fingertips. “Drink.”

She wants to ask more but with the increased proximity of the glass, she can now smell the contents.

It wafts its way up to her nose, twirling through her senses with a startling familiarity. Something rises behind her sternum—something acrid and bile-yellow, a vague sense of nausea. The warmth underneath her skin seems to grow, seeping up to the surface. She is on fire. She is thirsty. A roaring in her ears expands and, in the cacophony, she thinks she hears someone calling out, screaming. Is it her? No, she feels her lips, tingling and numb. They are closed, teeth clenched. She needs to drink. She doesn't want to drink.

She looks out the window. The lake. Cool shadows. Her eyesight blurs and she swallows, feeling a bubble of fire at the back of her throat. Her teeth ache. Have they all fallen out? She places her hands palm-down on the table to stop the room from spinning. "I don't feel so..." she begins to say.

Rory's pinched expression swims in front of her and she feels his hand, so cold, against her forehead. She leans into his touch. Glacial. The crunch of frost. "You shouldn't have a fever." His voice sounds so far away. The snow in her ears is dampening the sound.

The Ether, she thinks. I need to go to the Ether.

The last thing she sees before she descends into darkness is Rory's eyes, the same color as storm clouds filled with lightning.

8

Immortality And the Inevitable Ennui

Rory

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Rory can see the rapid movements beneath her eyelids and wonders what she's seeing, what she's dreaming.

She shouldn't be dreaming at all, he thinks. She shouldn't even be unconscious. She looks so fragile, lying on the tufted cushion, head lolling to the side awkwardly. Exposed.

Her hips are twisted to the side, shoulders turned just slightly. He presses a hand to her forehead, cursing softly under his breath as her temperature seems to be rising still. He considers covering her with a blanket but worries it will only make the fever worse. He's glad he had been standing so close to her, as it meant he was able to catch her before she fell out of the chair. Muchlike he did the night before, he gathered her up in his arms. But instead of carrying down the stairs to the basement, he made his way up to the room the house has so graciously gifted to her.

He kneels and angles his head to listen for her heartbeat, ear hovering just above her chest. There is nothing there, no beating of organs and no pulse. Blood rushes through her, but her heart does not push it. It means that the curse of his blood worked. Sheisa vampire.

He sniffs. The scent hovering about her delicately pale skin is all wrong though. Something floral and velvety, with a sweet, lithe layer of dew-drenched white flowers and the soft skin of fruit.

He shakes the image away, looking at Kane who is perched on the arm of the couch. "What did I do wrong?"

“She just needs rest,” insists Kane.

“She shouldn’t need to rest.”

Kane snaps his beak at Rory. “The Turn is complicated. Even with your years of existence, surely you know that there are things beyond what we understand. Not everyone reacts the same.”

He stands, still frowning at Calliope’s sleeping figure. “But—”

“Just let her rest.”

There is a moment of silence as Rory considers Kane with a furrowed brow, lips quirked to the side in thought.

Kane clicks his beak. “I’ll do some research, if it will ease your mind.”

Rory nods, as he glances at a clock ticking away on the wall. Time has gotten away from him, it seems, and he sighs deeply, a habit picked up after traveling among humans for the past three decades. “I need to stop by Clayton’s and put in an order. I’ll probably head to work right after. Can you keep an eye on her?”

Kane gives a short, throaty squawk. “Of course.”

“If she wakes up before I get back,” He points a finger at the bird, “you need to get her to drink.”

“I’ll do my best,” he says, dismissively. “Just get out of here. I’ll keep watch. Don’t worry.”

Rory nods again, shoving aside the dark, forbidding shadow of doubt that is growing

inside of him. It'll be fine, he tells himself as he leaves the room. Still, he can't help pausing to look at Calliope one last time. She shifts slightly in her sleep, turning her head toward the back of the couch and away from the sunlight.

Kane squawks again, chest puffed out. "Get along. You don't want to be late."

* * *

The tires of Rory's rusty car crunch against the dirt road as he turns onto the paved road, heading north toward the center of town. Soon, tall pine trees give way to open fields and squat houses in the distance and in a few minutes more, he knows those wide-open spaces will turn to blocks of storefronts as the road makes its way through the town square.

He will turn off before it gets there, but he remembers when many of those buildings went up, constructed with the hope that the town would soon be bustling with residents and tourists alike. They christened the town with the vaguely arcane name of Morphic, which always made Rory think of changelings and shapeshifters even though the nearest magical community was hours away.

Still is, thankfully.

As the town expanded, new roads were paved, buildings were built, torn down, then built again. The name was changed to Willow Lake though Rory isn't sure why, beyond the fact that it's a more pedestrian moniker. There are a few lakes in Willow Lake, but none of them are called Willow. Rory isn't even sure if willow trees grow in the area.

The biggest change, Rory noted when he moved back three years ago, is the addition of a freshly paved highway that skirts the edges of the wetlands and links up with the interstate on the opposite side. What had once been a promising town, growth and

development sprawling out from the center like a flower unfurling its petals, has faded, as more and more tourists skip over the town entirely and well-established families move to cities in search of fortune and opportunity.

And yet, despite the ebb and flow of life in WillowLake, some things never change—a fact that Rory is eternally grateful for as he turns onto the long dirt drive that leads to the Clayton Farm. Although the original owner of the farm, Warren Clayton, passed away in the late 1970s, his great-granddaughter, Martha took up the reins. When Rory first knocked hesitantly on the door to the farm, in search of a sustainable food-source, he was grateful that she remembered him and his previous arrangement with her long-deceased great-grandfather.

He parks his car just off to the side, next to a fenced area where cows graze contentedly. The air is dusty and hot. The sun beats down on his shoulders, and he regrets the long-sleeve shirt he changed into, sleeves buttoned firmly at his wrists. Reluctantly, he rolls them up to his elbows before retrieving the crate of empty, cleaned bottles from the backseat and closes the door with his elbow. Rory is making his way up the front steps when the door opens, and he can just make out the curvy form of Martha through the screened door. She holds the door open, and Rory enters the cool darkness of the farmhouse.

Martha smiles. “Just in time. I just took some brownies out of the oven.”

“I couldn’t,” he says, hand on his stomach. “I had a big lunch.”

It’s a well-practiced interaction, almost scripted at this point, and she shakes her head with a laugh, her golden hair bouncing around her face. “I’ll get you to stay for a meal one of these days,” she says, motioning for him to follow her into the kitchen. “You’re too skinny,” she adds over her shoulder with a smirk.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:30 am

The first time Martha said this to him, he found himself folding his arms across his chest in a vain effort to hide his bulk. His height and his breadth were both sore points for him as a child and continued to be so even after he was Turned. He's well aware that he is not as slim and attractive as most of his kind, and while he's since come to terms with his own physical failings, he is still aware of his body and the space he takes up.

Martha's comments bordered on farce, however, and with the slight twinkle of amusement in her eyes, he quickly learned that Martha's worry is closer to genuine affection, though tempered with a surprisingly wry sense of humor. So, he indulges in the scripted performance, taking mild comfort in the motherly undertone of her concern. The brownies do smell wonderful though and if he could consume anything other than blood, he would happily sit down at the kitchen table and let her mother him into a meal.

Martha leads him down a narrow hallway, floral wallpaper dotted with family photos, to the kitchen, where the brownies sit enticingly on the stove, rapidly cooling in the air conditioning.

Martha's husband, Bill, stands off to the side, phone handset cradled between ear and shoulder as he makes notes on a roll of paper affixed to the wall. Bill, of course, isn't a Clayton. He married into the family two decades ago and although Martha took his last name of Danes, everyone still thinks of Martha as a Clayton, Rory included. It helps, too, that the name of the farm has become too iconic to change. The Danes Farm just doesn't have quite the same ring to it.

Bill is as tall as Rory, though they are opposites in almost every other aspect of their

appearances. Whereas Rory is brawny and heavy, Bill is long-limbed and slim. His hair is russet colored, cut short on the sides and slicked back with Brylcreem. He's older than Martha, with fine wrinkles lining his smooth, shaven face and his closet seems to only hold plaid shirts and dark wash jeans, as Rory has never seen him wear anything else.

Martha moves around Bill, slipping under the tangled phone cord with ease so that she can stir something simmering on the stove. Bill's mouth quirks up in a tender smirk, his hand absentmindedly pressing against the small of her back as she passes him.

Rory watches the interaction with a faint pang in his chest, an almost-jealousy that's lingered in his heart for centuries. He hasn't felt that comfortable with another person in a very long time and while he would never begrudge anyone their happiness, he aches for companionship again.

Then again, the last time he was in a romantic relationship, several people died.

So, he averts his gaze, waiting patiently while Bill talks into the phone. Beyond the kitchen window, he sees the youngest Danes, Elijah, leaning over the hood of a tractor. Rory's only spoken to Elijah once since he started coming to the Clayton Farm; every other time he's seen him, his head has been bent over an engine.

Bill hangs up the phone and turns to Rory with a smile. "Sorry to keep you waiting. The usual?" He grabs an invoice from the stack on the counter and a pencil and begins to write.

Rory nods. "I was hoping I could have a little more this time. If it's not too much trouble."

He doesn't miss the shared look between Martha and Bill. This is a mistake, he thinks.

The Claytons may be willing to accommodate one vampire, but two? What if they find out that he Turned her himself? What if they start asking questions? Would they report him to the police?

“Might take a day or two to draw that much without hurting the calves,” says Bill, filling in the invoice with well-practiced strokes. He glances up at Rory. “Do you mind some goat?”

The clenched feeling of panic lessens its hold on his chest. “Whatever you got. I have—a friend—visiting. Just for a week or two.”

Bill smiles amiably as he erases the quantity and updates the total. “How’s the fish biting these days?”

It takes Rory a second to realize that Bill is referring to Graeme Lake; he has the vaguest recollection that they once talked about fishing when Rory first moved back. “Alright, I guess. I don’t fish much these days,” he says blandly.

“Elijah was out at Baldwin Lake the other day.” Bill looks up from the invoice. “Said there were no fish. Gotta be this heat. Nothing can live in it.”

“Yeah, must be it,” he agrees, but he can’t help but think about the dark shadow at the bottom of Graeme Lake and Kane saying, “It’s eating all the fish.”

Bill completes the invoice and rips off the top copy to hand to Rory, keeping the yellow copy underneath for his records. “I can get Elijah to deliver it when it’s ready. Maybe the day after tomorrow?”

Rory is counting out the cash, but freezes at the thought of young Elijah, with his lanky body and thin, fragile neck knocking on the door, only to have Calliope answer. “Ah, that’s alright, don’t want to be a bother.” He hands the payment to Bill.

“Especially since it’s already a large order. Just give me a call and I can come grab it.”

Bill shrugs, but agrees, slipping the cash in his back pocket. “Can do.”

Rory nods goodbye, returning Martha’s smile as best as he can, and begins to make his way back down the hall. Before he leaves, he sees Bill’s efforts to procure a brownie thwarted by a damp kitchen towel against the back of his hand. Martha scowls at her husband but he just presses a kiss to the top of her head with a light huff. That pang twinges again, like a stake is lodged in his chest.

Much like a vampire’s immortality, utility bills are unceasing. The unprepossessing slips of paper began to arrive a month after he moved back to Willow Lake. Cut off from his familial wealth and having spent the last of what little money he had on the house, when that first envelope showed up, he ignored it.

He ignored the second one, too. And then the third. It wasn’t until he was plunged in darkness, the ceiling fan slowly spinning to a stop, that he admitted he might need to pay attention to the bills marked Willow Lake Energy – Past Due.

The job at the Go-Go Gas Station was listed in the local newspaper and he accepted the night shift readily. The owner of the convenience store didn’t question his willingness to take the shift that no one ever wanted to work, for which Rory was grateful. No need to explain that he prefers the night shift because it doesn’t bring him into contact with too many people. No need to justify that he wants a paycheck but without any substantial amount of responsibility.

The Go-Go is a concrete box, plopped down unceremoniously on the side of the road, almost alarming with its bland modernism compared to the twisted, wild trees that sit on either side of the roadway. The bramble bush encroaching upon the concrete does somewhat soften the man-made aura of the building though, turning the cool steel

gray into a wild thing itself, particularly in the descending darkness, a skulking beast waiting to gobble up unsuspecting travelers.

Not that many people pass through these days, which, again, is why Rory likes it. He prefers the mundanity of it all, his nights broken only by the soft punctuation of the bell over the door as the occasional truck driver stops in for a pack of cigarettes. Even more rarely, though not unheard of, a group of kids will stop in for a six pack before they head to an illegal party in the woods. He wonders if Kid had ever stopped in. Did he sell him a pack of cigarettes once? An extra-large blue raspberry slushie and a pack of gummy worms would be more likely.

The lights buzz in the silence, and the smell of Calliope's blood lingers annoyingly in the air. He tries to distract himself by doing inventory, counting boxes of cigarettes and trying not to remember the pool of blood that graced the floor the night before. He cleaned it up well enough, but he can almost see it still, a red tinge to the yellowed linoleum. It means his thoughts keep circling back to Calliope, no matter how many cigarette boxes he counts.

Rory has never been overly concerned with the biological inner-working of his kind, but even he is aware that not all vampires are the same; the magic does create small variations that account for attributes such as fang variation or increased sun-tolerance. He knows that's what Kane was hinting at when he said that the Turn is complicated and that not everyone reacts the same to the magic.

But what Rory had been unable to voice earlier, in response to Kane's disinterested assertion, is that there are still some fundamental truths—absolutes—that make a vampire avampire.

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Like turning off a light in an empty room, internal organs are deactivated, heartbeats are silenced, breathing is halted. The body only derives nutrition from blood, be it human or otherwise. His brother once told him that vampires are alchemized humans—that the thirst for gold has been replaced with blood—and their vampiric nature should be celebrated. Indulged.

He even went as far as to say vampires represent the most efficient form of existence. On the surface, it's a reasonable assumption. In many ways, vampires don't suffer the same physical limitations as humans. They are fast, heal quickly, see in the dark. They can slip into the mind of another and compel them to do their bidding.

Rory once agreed, before he saw it for what it is: thievery. They survive off stolen life. The magic that created them plagiarizes traits from creatures Nature has already sought to encourage like speed and heightened senses. He supposes that the magic did do one thing right: accelerated healing, which has saved him many times over.

But for every benefit, there is, of course, a downside. With accelerated healing, for instance, comes the inability to grow and change. To age. Frozen forever in time. Immortal. A little overweight? Too bad. You forgot to shave that morning. Oh well.

And of course, the ennui is inevitable. It's true that nothing is permanent, but when eternity is within reach, things seem to move agonizingly slow in comparison. Boredom sets in every few centuries or so. Some vampires even have a name for it: the Unlust.

Calliope seems to contradict so many vampire traits already and it's only been twenty-four hours. The more he thinks about it, he doesn't agree with Kane. She

should be much further along in her transformation than this. She shouldn't be sleeping. She shouldn't have a fever. And she should be thirsty, so overwhelmed with bloodlust that she becomes a snarling mess of fangs and violence. She awoke, alert and able to form full sentences, and he isn't sure if that's a good thing yet. She even challenged him on the use of the cuffs. He must admit, she had been convincing. Just not enough to actually convince him, of course.

Maybe he's consigned her to a fate worse than death. Not quite a vampire, not quite a mortal, with nothing but the downsides of both. But if that is the case, and Calliope's transition went awry, what else may she be lacking when it comes to the vampiric side of her? And what mortal parts have stuck around instead? She healed from the gunshot, so he supposes he can put a tick in the healing column, at least.

The bell over the door dings and a customer walks into the Go-Go. Rory barely looks up from the clipboard, hearing the slurred request for "ten on pump two" and absentmindedly taking the proffered cash.

"Oh," says the voice, "and I can get one of those papers, too?"

Rory hands him the day's issue of the local paper, along with his change, and begins to turn back to his clipboard when his mind registers, belatedly, that he recognizes the picture on the front page. As the door swings shut, he ignores the puff of hot, petrol-laced air that hits his face and reaches for a copy of the paper. A sinking feeling swoops through his gut as Calliope's face smiles back at him in grainy black-and-white, ink already bleeding through the thin paper. It sits innocently under the headline: *Missing Woman Wanted for Questioning after the Death of Her Husband.*

"Fuck."

The Library of Graeme House

Calliope

Calliope hears someone calling her. She opens her mouth to answer but finds nothing but cold water rushing into her lungs, pain splintering behind her eyes, heaviness in her chest. She is on the cold floor, gritty from years of use, and her body is ice. She can't feel her legs, her throat is on fire—

Help.

She sits up in a rush, hand clutching her throat.

A dream. Just a dream.

The room is dark, and she fumbles with the small lamp until it clicks on. Brushing her hair away from her face, she looks around confusedly at the bookshelves with their leather spines and metal contraptions. Witch's tools, she thinks. The same kind that dotted her grandma's kitchen, though she barely knows what they do. She presses the back of her hand to forehead, finding it too warm and clammy. She tries to piece together the moments before she fainted, and a flush of embarrassment creeps up her neck when she remembers.

Calliope knows enough about vampires to know that they shouldn't faint at the sight of blood. Then again, she hadn't been a very good witch, despite her birthright, so it would be fitting if she made an even poorer vampire.

Not quite a witch. Not yet a vampire.

She teases the point of her canine tooth with her tongue as she stretches, her fingers ghosting over the scar on her arm as she rubs the stiffness from her muscles. She

takes stock of her body, catalogs her limbs one-by-one in the way her grandma taught her to do before beginning a spell.

She hates to admit it, even to herself, that Rory could be right, but she does feel the empty gnawing in her gut. She is hungry. Deeply starving. And the memory of the glass of blood comes back to her, a crimson apparition at the forefront of her mind that makes her gums ache.

Slightly panicked, she finds herself in the Ether, and in the cold, still darkness, she sees her hunger in front of her: a snarling, wolf-like beast with fire dripping from its fangs. She can see herself reflected in its many eyes. Its fur is raised up around its neck. Two ivory horns protrude from either side of its head.

She reaches out hesitantly, touching the tip of its ear. It bares its teeth further, but she doesn't heed the warning; she is safe in the Ether and, anyway, this creature is a part of her. She isn't afraid. She takes a step closer, trailing her hand to its neck, burying her fingers in its coarse, thick fur. It quiets, leaning into her touch. The snarl becomes a purr.

"Soon," she promises. "I'll drink soon. Rest for just a bit longer." She presses a kiss to the top of its head, and it blinks again, before settling low on its haunches, tail swiping back and forth.

She lets the Ether slide away and finds herself back in her room, her feverish skin burning away the ice crystals that formed along her eyelashes. That's new, she thinks, wiping away the gentle dusting of frost along her arms.

Soon, she tells her Hunger again, hand pressed to her chest. She makes her way to the door and tentatively leans out into the hallway, glancing right to left for signs of Rory. She isn't sure if she's relieved or worried when he isn't immediately present. She steps out into the hallway, listening intently for signs of

someone—anyone—moving about the place.

Again, she takes stock of her body. Her grandma always said that the best cure for anything is gin and a good nap. Calliope isn't sure if the house has gin, but after her nap, she feels oddly buoyant, even with her Hunger lying in wait behind the curtain of her mind. Feeling along the wall, she finds a light switch and the wall sconce retrofitted with a lightbulb flickers into life. The manacles are still on her wrists, the iron warming against her skin. In the light, she inspects the symbols further, chain rattling ominously in the silent hallway.

Rory asked her about a coven earlier, but she hasn't belonged to one in years—hasn't practiced magic in just as long. Then again, there were times when it felt that the only thing that made her a witch was her ability to slip into the Ether. No matter how many times she practiced, her elixirs were gloopy, her rituals awkward, and her scrying abysmal. Her language skills were even worse. She never understood how her grandma, who could lose her glasses on top of her head, could remember the Latin, Arabic, and French words twisted together to form the Common Tongue of Witches. And if a spell called for German or Welsh? Calliope was utterly lost.

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However, there was one aspect of being a witch that she excelled at: drawing. She could draw a perfect circle in salt on the floor. Her line work on her symbols was impeccable. Her visual memory was flawless, and appears to still be, because she recognizes the symbols now that she's seeing them in the light with well-rested eyes.

The spell construction is simple, but heavy-handed. Two tiers of supportive symbols—a pattern of two different lesser symbols repeating—linked with a master binding mark, *rata*. They've been carved deeply into the iron, the edges rough and pockmarked. She brings them closer to her face and sniffs, noting the unmistakable remnant of ox bile, vinegar, and the light lily-like scent of Solomon's Seal. The chain that links them is ordinary, just metal against metal; the strength of the cuffs themselves is enough to contain whomever (or whatever) wears them.

And yet there's nothing in them that prevents her from walking away.

She could just leave. The house feels empty, the air undisturbed and heavy. What's stopping her from walking down the stairs and out the front door? She could leave the taciturn, burly vampire and his bird friend, and make her own way. She's sure Rory has a car. She could steal it and hit the road, just like she planned to do before she was shot. Just her, on her own, finally living however she wants—

A low growl echoes in her head as her Hunger sits up, teeth bared. Oh, right. Sorry, Hun. Drink first, plan later.

There are four doors off the hallway, including her own, two on each side. At one end of the hallway, she sees the stairs leading down to the kitchen and a small living room. The opposite end of the hallway is adorned with a large landscape painting in

an ornate frame that reaches nearly floor to ceiling. She frowns at it. The ratio is all wrong for a landscape. Too narrow. The trees look like they are trying to break out of the frame. Of the four doors in the hallways, only two are open: the one in which she is standing and the one directly across from her, which is half-open allowing a cone of warm light to pour across the floor. She glances between the door and the stairs to her left.

Hun's tail thwacks back and forth. Drink first, then leave.

She steps forward intent upon the stairs, her pointy black boots sinking into the plush rug that runs down the middle of the hallway. The house creaks and for a second, the floor shifts, a slight change that happens so suddenly, she isn't quite sure what's happened. She blinks, finding herself much closer to the half-open door in front of her than she should be. She takes a sideways step in the direction of the stairs, but the floor...slides...and she hasn't moved.

But really what did she expect from a house that created a new room just for her? She relents, shouldering her way into the room, only to let out a tiny gasp a second later as she is faced with the full expanse of the library in front of her. The library of Graeme House spans the entire width of the upper level and yet, seems to extend beyond even that at times. The wall-to-ceiling shelves are the same style as the ones in her own room, but packed to the brim with books, spines gleaming in the low light of the room, some whispering promises and requests to be read even as she walks by, fingers brushing lightly against the leather and cotton covers. Near the center of the room, the shelves curve inward around a spiral staircase that reaches upto a small mezzanine level.

Beyond the staircase, Calliope just glimpses a large round window which looks out onto the inky black sky. She almost hears her grandma's voice in her head, admonishing her—lovingly—for sleeping the day away. Don't be a lazy lout, Cal. Go out and get your bare feet against some soil.

She can't remember the last time she went about barefoot, let alone dug her toes in the grass and soft dirt. Is it true that vampires can't go out in the sun? She hopes not. Rory didn't seem worried about it earlier, as he stood in the kitchen with the morning light streaming in through the open window—but did he avoid direct sunlight? Did the sun touch his skin? Did the sun touch her skin when she opened the window? As she sat in the kitchen? She hadn't really been paying attention.

In the center of the library, beside the spiral staircase is a cluster of reading tables, each with their own small lamp. Kane is standing on the table closest to the stairs, the lamp producing a puddle of light aimed at an open book. As she watches, he turns a page with his beak and then continues reading.

“Are you going to stand there all night?” he asks, without looking up. “The house is most obliging. I'm sure you could request whatever title may pique your interest.”

“Where's Rory?” she asks, wandering over to the window. She looks down, noting the dirt driveway that leads to the house, the oak trees on either side standing sentry over the entrance. There's a rectangle of scattered gravel where Calliope feels a car usually goes. It's empty.

A flutter of wings, a shuffle of paper. “He's at work.”

The Go-Go Gas. A rush of embarrassment steals through her as the memory of warm slick blood pooling around her comes back. The evidence is still on her clothes, and she can only imagine how much more ended up on the floor. She feels a strange compunction to apologize for what was surely an awful mess. She half laughs, wildly, at the realization that getting shot and bleeding out on a gas station floor has somehow become equivalent to having dinner at a friend's house and not offering to clean the dishes. So rude.

She turns back to Kane. “Does he always work at night?”

“Except for Wednesday and Thursday. Those are his days off.”

“Does he ever work during the day?”

Kane looks up at her, head twisted to the side. “Ask what you really want to ask.”

“Can vampires go out in the sun?”

Kane seems disappointed with such a mundane question. His tail fans out as he returns his focus to the book in front of him. “Why would they ever need to?”

“I don’t know.” She lets her fingers trail against the spines of the books as she walks back to the center of the room. “To go to the post office. Dentist appointments. Grocery shopping?”

Kane’s squawk is as close to a laugh as a bird’s syrinx can produce. “You’re a funny one, Little Witch.”

“I thought I wasn’t a witch anymore.”

“That remains to be seen.” Kane looks up at her. “I’m supposed to get you to drink.”

“I’ll be okay a bit longer.”

He cocks his head to the side. “What did you do?”

She shrugs. “I asked her to sit and stay.” She turns her attention back to the shelves. “Anything you recommend?”

The question is meant for Kane, but the library seems content to answer for the bird, who has since returned his attention to his own reading. A book falls from the shelf in

front of her, and she picks it up, fingers ghosting over the soft worn red leather cover as she reads the title out loud. “Carpe Noctum: An Account of the First and Second Blood Wars.” She looks up at Kane, who is surreptitiously watching her as she examines the book. “Vampire wars? Is this something I should learn? Because of...because I’m one of them now?”

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Kane returns his attention back to his own book, but his feathers look a little more ruffled than normal. “I suggest beginning with Chapter Five.”

Excerpt from *Carpe Noctum: An Account of the First and Second Blood Wars*, Chapter Five: Youngblood by Colette Sabine

[M]otivated by an insatiable thirst for vengeance, Aodhán Mac Eoin, then the Right Hand of the Fíor, endeavored to elevate a new figurehead in the conflict: his biological brother, Ruairidh “Rory” Youngblood.

Born as Artur Mac Eoin, Ruairidh Youngblood’s Turn occurred in the mid-fifteenth century under the Fang of Irina Dobrev, who typically favored lean, aesthetically pleasing individuals for Turning. Youngblood, however, deviated from this norm, with his dark, brooding features, aquiline nose, graying hair, and burly physique.

Speculation regarding Dobrev’s motives are many, with rumors circulating about a possible romantic entanglement and the existence of an immortal progeny, although such claims remain largely unsubstantiated. At the very least, Youngblood’s famed skills in alchemy were surely a benefit, even if they were not original motivation. Coupled with his strength and ruthlessness in battle, Youngblood’s alchemical experiments made him a formidable foe in the throes of war.

He is credited, in fact, with the creation a tonic that causes unimaginable pain to the drinker, a weapon that was employed often in the torture tactics of both sides of the war. Uniquely, the tonic, given the somewhat simplistic and yet hyperbolic name of *quiritatio tonicus*, led to a number of witch casualties as well. While the full implications of the First and Second Blood Wars in relation to the witch community

is discussed in more detail in later chapters, suffice it to say that Youngblood has more than vampire blood on his hands.

Indeed, renowned for his ferocity, it didn't take Youngblood long to emerge as a formidable combatant. Accounts depict him as a merciless adversary, purportedly engaging in acts of brutality such as the extraction and consumption of his victims' still-beating hearts. But what lies beneath the seemingly unscrupulous persona of Youngblood, is, by some accounts, a soft and gentle man, whose devotion to Dobrev guided him through the first round of the First Blood War. Youngblood parted ways with Dobrev when the vampiress purportedly turned her favor to a new youngling, Edward Vale, who quickly became somewhat of a rival for Youngblood, at least where Dobrev's affection was concerned.

What's more important to note, however, is that the dissolution of Youngblood's affiliation with Dobrev coincided with the Nicu Rebellion in 1452, preceding the orders sent by his brother, who had just ascended to throne of the Fíor, to suppress the uprising and execute its instigators.

This confrontation escalated into one of the bloodiest clashes among vampires to date, marking a notable chapter in the annals of vampiric warfare. Furthermore, Youngblood evaded prosecution for his actions aligned with the Fíor and in particular what occurred as a result of the Nicu Rebellion. It wasn't until both Wars had ceased that Youngblood's full role was unveiled. Unbeknownst to many, Youngblood acted as informant and spy for the Unaligned, passing along information that categorically saved hundreds of lives.

Youngblood, of course, went even further during the Second Blood War when he ultimately turned on his brother, who at the time was mad with bloodlust. Aodhán Mac Eoin was dispatched with a wooden stake, effectively quelling the conflict and dismantling the Fíor once and for all.

Following the conclusion of the Second Blood War, Youngblood receded from public view, save for a solitary sighting at the funeral of his slain brother, wherein he tendered a ring bearing their familial crest to his former sister-in-law, who cried one single tear and promptly struck him.

Public opinion of Youngblood's actions varies greatly. To some, he is a hero. To others, he is a traitor.

10

The Quintessence

Calliope

The front door slams, shakes the walls and windows, and Calliope jumps, startled away from her reading. The lights dim briefly, then flicker back into full strength.

There are no heavy footsteps rushing up the stairs, just Rory standing in the doorway, framed against the floral wallpaper of the hallway, a newspaper clenched in his fist. His hair is disheveled as if he's just come in from a gathering storm. She almost looks out the window, wondering if there is indeed a summer storm brewing.

"Are you a murderer?" he asks, voice pitched low.

The absurdity of the question takes a moment to sink in. She blinks. "What?"

He takes a step closer, just one, but she suddenly feels cornered. Trapped. It's so familiar—the overwhelming feeling of powerlessness—that she scoots back in her chair, the book clutched in front of her chest like a shield. The chain rattles, the sound jarring compared to the warmth and coziness of the library. The rough metal has no place here, among plush rugs and dark, glossed wood.

Her body is braced for an impact, but there has been no harsh growl of a curse, no beer bottles thrown at her head. The walls haven't been punched and, anyway, she's not entirely certain the house would let him treat it as such.

Instead, Rory is quiet. She's not sure if that makes it better or worse. She is conscious of his gimlet stare as he asks, his words slow and stilted, "Have you ever killed someone?"

"Would that make me less worthy of your help?" She grips the book tighter. "Because I think that'd be a bit hypocritical of you, Youngblood."

Rory's eyes darken and then trail down to the book, head tilted to the side to read the spine. "Don't call me that." The newspaper in his hand crinkles as he tightens his fist.

"Don't accuse me of something I've never done," she says dismissively, turning away from him. She waits, watching him out of the corner of her eye. He is still. Statuesque. He could be cold marble carved by the Greeks.

When he finally moves, he walks towards her, his heavy boots muffled by the rug. He tosses the newspaper down, and Kane squawks when it scatters near him, wings puffing up as he hops away. He takes refuge on the top of the nearest bookcase.

"I may have thought twice about turning you if I knew you were wanted by the police," Rory says.

She leans forward to see the newspaper. Her face smiles back at her, her top left canine slightly chipped because she fell a few weeks before. Smacked her tooth right on the concrete curb. Not chipped anymore, she thinks, her tongue teasing the sharp point of her tooth. She grimaces. "Goodness, what an awful picture of me."

She recognizes the picture, though. It's cropped from a photo of her and her husband

taken a month ago. It was the day after she received her much-coveted perm, which quickly became a regret. The curls look bushy and awkward, highlighting the roundness of her face in a way that she's always hated.

What's been cut out from the photo, however, is her husband standing next to her, arm wrapped possessively around her waist, a beer bottle and cigarette balanced in his free hand. She remembers the tightness of his grip, his dirty fingernails digging into the soft flesh of her side, snagging on the fabric of her dress. "Too soft. You need to lose some weight," he would say, his breath smelling of cigarettes and the yeasty aftertaste of beer. Despite his poor habits, his teeth were white, his skin smooth and unblemished, his smile annoyingly charming. She hated his face, but she hated herself more for giving him so much control over her body and her magic.

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“I didn’t know he was dead,” she says in a small voice. “Did you read it?”

“Yes.”

“And?” She looks up, shaking a curl out of her eyes. “How did he die?”

“Didn’t say.” He sighs deeply and, once again, she finds the movement so curiously quaint. She wonders if it is a learned habit, because she hasn’t felt the need to breathe since she was Turned. “Just says it was suspicious and they’re looking into it.” She can feel his eyes on her. “You’re not wearing a ring.”

“That’s because I threw it at him when I left.”

He runs a hand roughly across his face, the light stubble dotting his jawline scratchy in the lull of the conversation. “And you’re sure you didn’t hurt him? Before you left? You didn’t...throw the ring at his head and...”

“Knock him unconscious with a cubic zirconia? Yes, I’m sure.” She attempts to put some sort of humor into her voice, but her body is still taut with tension. She did indeed throw the ring at him, but what she doesn’t mention is that he had been unconscious when she did so.

She worries, now, that she had misread the situation. Had already been dead? She tries to remember if he was breathing, but the room had been dark, lit only by moonlight.

Rory isn’t fooled. His eyes narrow at her and she has the strange sensation that he’s

looking into her mind, that he can see her entire life story projected in her body language.

“Where did you get that scar?” His eyes flit down to the thick scar that encircles her upper arm.

She tightens her grip on the book. “It was an accident,” she says, the well-practiced words tumbling out of her before she realizes. Her voice is flat and unconvincing, and again, Rory can see right through her flimsy excuse. She’s not sure why she continues. “It’s the downside of marrying a warlock. Lots of...accidents.”

His jaw clenches again, fists tight, but she has the distinct feeling his anger is not aimed at her this time, but at her husband. And just as suddenly as Rory appeared in the doorway, interrupting her reading, his anger is gone, dispersed like ash on the wind. He sits heavily in the chair next to her. It takes some effort to release the tension in her shoulders, to bring her arms down, to rest her hands lightly on the table.

He runs a hand through his gray-streaked hair that curls around his ears and rests against the collar of his shirt. Calliope can’t help but think about how tired he looks. Sabine was right that his features are not typical of vampires, nor would they be considered classically attractive to mortals. But his presence is striking, formidable even, with his physique tending toward the more muscular side of brawn than a mere excess of weight. His nose is long and slightly hooked, a little crooked too. He’d clearly been punched a few times before Irina sunk her fangs into him. There’s even a small white scar on his cheek, cutting into the dark and silver stubble. She understands, in an abstract sense, that vampires can be made at any age but, regardless, Rory was clearly turned later in life than the few vampires she’s met, and the exhaustion that was etched under his eyes when he was human has stayed.

There’s a weight in his eyes too, so strong she wonders if that’s what the deep blue

flecks around his irises actually are. Just little spots of fatigue, like how freckles on skin are from too much sun.

“How do you do that?” she asks.

He arches an eyebrow. “Do what?”

“Switch your emotions around so quickly. Like flicking a light switch. Is it a vampire thing?”

He seems mildly uncomfortable—she’s beginning to recognize the slight flicker of his eyelids as he looks down and away from her. She hasn’t yet decided if it means he’s lying. “No. It’s just...years of practice.”

“How many years?”

Her challenging tone is enough to get him to look back up, his eyes connecting with hers with a small shock. “A lot,” he says evenly.

His mouth twitches. A smirk? Or a grimace?

The truth of the expression remains unseen as Kane, sensing that no more newspapers will be tossed at him, leaves his perch from the top of the bookcase. “It takes a lot of courage to leave a relationship like that,” he says softly. He nips at the tips of her hair affectionately.

She shrugs him away and finds herself doing much the same as Rory, eyes downcast as a flush of vulnerability washes over her. She reaches for the Ether, though she doesn’t slide into it. The feeling of its comforting nothingness—its potential—at her back is enough to lift her eyes from the table.

Thankfully, Rory doesn't let her wallow in her embarrassment or confusion or fear—she's not entirely sure how she's feeling right now. Unlike Rory and his tidy emotional organization, she seems to be roiling in all her feelings at once, never quite sure which one will face the front.

He nods toward the book. "There are a couple of histories about the Blood Wars. Which one is this?"

"Sabine," answers Kane.

Rory scowls. "Sabine's a terrible writer. Didn't bother to check her sources." He gives Kane a sideways look. "Why'd you let her pick that one?"

"I didn't. The library chose it." He cocks his head at Calliope. "The house seems to like her."

"Yeah, whyisthat?" Rory asks, folding his arms across his broad chest. She wonders how strong he is—and how much of that strength is vampiric magic. His hands are large and could wrap easily around her neck.

This man is not my husband, she reminds herself. "The house is magical?" she offers, thinking of the Ether. It makes sense to her that, if the Ether is accessible, then the magic in the house recognizes her as one of its own. Like calls to like, as her grandma used to say.

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She brings her hands into her lap as she watches Rory consider this. He hasn't made the same connection as she has. And why would he? She's sure he agrees with Kane that vampirism is always the dominant form of magic.

But the manacles cut into the delicate skin on the inside of her wrists, reminding her of the time she fell out of the tree and found herself in the Ether. She had to wear a cast for a month and the sweaty, itchy feeling of the plaster is not dissimilar to how the manacles feel on her wrists now, though with the added sense of a deep, steady vibration from the magic carved into the metal. She slips a finger beneath one and presses against a small patch of irritated skin, absentmindedly calling up the Ether, as if reassuring herself of its presence.

"It wasn't always," says Rory after a few beats of silence. "It used to just be a house, but there was a coven who lived here for a few decades. It hasn't been the same since."

Kane squawks suddenly. "What is that behind you?"

She realizes she had been leaning further back into the Ether than she thought, and she sits up straight, leaning forward as if to physically distance herself from it. The Ether isn't a physical thing of course, but the change in her body language is enough to ensure the coldness recedes from her fingers. "It's why the house likes me," she admits quietly. "I think so, anyway. How could you tell?" She aims the last part at Kane, her tone edged in accusation.

"I could feel the draft." Kane hops closer and twists his head to the side, yellow eyes boring into her. "It's the Quintessence, isn't it?"

She shakes her head. “I’ve never heard it called that, if it’s the same thing.”

“What are you talking about?” asks Rory, eyebrows knitted together.

“There is a place that only witches can access.” Kane hops around to look at Rory, his talons clicking against the tabletop. “There are many names for it. I’ve always heard it referred to as the Quintessence, though I’ve never been honored with an invitation. It’s a refuge for those in need.”

Rory leans back, eyeing her almost suspiciously. The urge to slip away into the darkness rises in her again, but she stays in the present moment, feeling Rory’s consideration trail over her body like a shard of ice being dragged along her skin. “She’s not a witch.”

“I can still go there, though. It’s a place only for witches. Made by—made by the First Witch.” She leans forward, bringing her arms up onto the table. The chain scrapes across the wood. “If the house answers to magic, then maybe I still have some? Why can’t I still be a witch?”

His scowl deepens. “Smile.”

“Excuse me?”

He sighs again, gesturing impatiently. “Your teeth. Show me your teeth. They’re sharp, right?”

She purses her lips before smiling artlessly. “Yes,” she says between gritted teeth.

He squints. “And your heartbeat? Breathing?”

She rolls her eyes, slumping back impetuously. “Gone. All gone.”

“And your fever?”

She lifts a shoulder. “It’s fine. I feel fine.”

He raises an eyebrow and holds up a hand in a silent request. She nods tightly and he brings his hand down to her forehead.

“You’re burning up.” His voice rumbles through his chest, and she imagines the words vibrating through his palm and into her head. This close, she can smell a remnant of cigarette smoke on his fingertips, but it’s a different brand than the ones her husband preferred. Sweet and spicy, like a cup of ginger tea. The moment only lasts a few seconds. His hand falls away as he turns to Kane. “What’s wrong with her?”

“Nothing is wrong with me,” she says, chin raised.

Kane clicks his beak. “Perhaps she needs to feed to complete the transition?”

Rory’s nostrils flare as he looks at between Kane and Calliope. He settles on Kane. “You didn’t make her drink when she woke up?”

The bird hops backwards until he reaches the edge of the table. He takes flight, just a few pushes of his wings. He perches on Calliope’s shoulder, taking refuge behind the frizzy curtain of her hair. His nails bite into her skin, but she doesn’t blame Kane; there’s a current of anger in Rory’s face that she would hide from too, if it was aimed at her. “She said she was okay.”

Rory opens his mouth and then snaps it shut twice before, eventually, he just shakes his head. He shoves away from the table. The sound of the chair legs scratching against the floor sets her teeth on edge. “Kitchen. Now.”

“Can I maybe change first?” She looks down at her white tank top, dirty and stiff with blood. “Dried blood isn’t really a good color on me.”

* * *

Rory looks entirely out of his depth and only the memory of his recently faded anger keeps her from laughing. Arms on his hips, he looks around the dusty assortment of items that have seemingly piled themselves in the spare room. Then again, she wouldn’t be surprised if the house is a bit of a hoarder. Based on where the hallway ends, she’s sure this room has been magically extended to accommodate all the objects and furniture stacked precariously along the walls.

He makes an indistinct grunting noise in the back of his throat. “I’m sure there’s a dress or somethinghere, somewhere.”

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She lifts the edge of a jewelry box with the tip of her finger, dust puffing out around her as she tips the top back all the way. The pearls inside look pristine, ethereal in the low light of the room, and she reaches out to grab them.

Kane, still on her shoulder, nips at her ear. "I wouldn't do that. Can't you smell it?"

Calliope frowns and bends forward. Kane adjusts his grip, talons snagging on the strap of her tank top. The smell of burned rubber lodges itself in the back of her throat, and she coughs, taking a step back with her hand pressed in front of her mouth. "Cursed?" she chokes out.

Kane nods. She snaps the lid shut quickly, then gives him a sidelong look. "You haven't always been a bird, have you?"

Kane lets out a throaty caw.

"Don't bother," says Rory, rifling through a steamer trunk. The swaths of fabric draped over the edge look promising. "I've been trying to get him to admit that for years."

"But you'll tell me, right?" she asks, a small smirk hiding in the corner of her cheek. She strokes the soft plumage at the top of his head and his golden eyes close briefly in appreciation, before he lets out another squawk. "Fine. Keep your secrets for now, Cursed One, but I'll needle it out of you soon enough."

Another squawk and Kane's nails pinch her shoulder as he tugs one of her wayward curls about himself, settling down into a feigned nap.

She makes her way over to Rory who is frowning at a scrap of lace. “What’s that?”

He inspects the white lace, yellowed with age. “I think it’s a bridal veil?”

“Or just a scrap,” she says, wrinkling her nose. “There’s got to be something I can wear up here.”

Kane seems to have found his words again. “You could try asking the house.”

She rolls her eyes. “Sure. Hey, house, can I please have—”

A box stacked precariously on top of the chest of drawers to Calliope’s left topples over onto the floor. The sudden movement startles her, and she jumps, dislodging Kane from her shoulder as she grasps at Rory’s arm.

He frowns down at her, though she can’t tell if it’s annoyance that she’s clinging to him or concern because, once again, she is acutely aware of their temperature difference: his skin is cool as if he’s been standing by an open window on a crisp winter day, while she is warm, as if there is a fire simmering inside of her.

She redirects her attention to the box, as Kane flutters back into view and lands on Rory’s shoulder. A quick glance tells her that Kane’s suggestion has yielded the most promising results so far. The clothing is slightly out-of-date, the fabrics, patterns and collars reminding her of something her grandma would have worn when she was Calliope’s age now. Still, the garments are well-kept and smell freshly laundered even though they’ve surely been stored in this cardboard box for at least a few years.

Rory carries the box across the hall and drops it just inside the entrance to her room. “I’ll see you downstairs in two minutes.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” She holds her arms out, nodding toward the

manacles.

Rory is already shaking his head. “No. They stay.”

She holds her arms out straighter. “How am I supposed to change while handcuffed? Look.” She angles one of the cuffs so that the light catches on the edges of the master sigil. “The magic is in the manacles. Can you at least just break the chain in the middle?”

Rory looks askance at Kane, who is perched on his shoulder. Kane’s nod is small, almost imperceptible. “Fine,” he says gruffly. He grasps the iron chain with both hands and with barely a grunt of effort, he pulls. The iron snaps in half like dry rotted wood. “One minute, now.”

11

Something Cursed

Calliope

She stands in front of the mirror and sighs. The once familiar feeling of shoulders lifting and falling, chest expanding and deflating, is awkward and stiff. She misses it—the sensation of taking air in her lungs—and she wonders if she’ll start to miss her heartbeat too.

She won’t have a chance to miss her physical faults though. Her flat green eyes. Her slightly upturned nose that a schoolmate once called a “pig snout.” The dusting of freckles that adorn her cheeks like speckles of spilled paint. She’ll be stuck with those for an eternity. She knows that much about vampires, at least. They never age. They never grow. She opens her mouth and prods at her red, angry gums. She presses a finger just above one of her canine teeth, which is slightly more pointed than a

human's should be. She wonders when they will stop hurting. Her jaw aches as if she's been grinding her teeth for a week straight.

She holds a plain white cotton dress in her hand, but the clawfoot porcelain bathtub seems to call her name from where it sits, tucked into a corner she hadn't seen earlier. Her Hunger hums in her bones. I won't be too long, Hun, she thinks, pressing a hand to her stomach.

She draws the bath a little cooler than she would have a few days ago. Vials of oils in blue-colored bottles are lined up neatly on a small shelf next to the tub and she adds a few drops of lavender. The morning sun is quickly filling up the room, bringing corners and flecks of dust out of the shadows, when she finally slips in, feeling the tension ease from her muscles as the cool water claims her. She spends a moment cataloging her body, her awareness traveling from her sore throat and aching teeth, down the smooth column of her neck bearing no evidence of Rory's bite. She stops at her sternum, feeling the long expanse of bone beneath her skin and a small scar on the underside of her breast.

She moves on quickly to her stomach, which, like her neck, shows no evidence of what happened to her the night before last.

She can hear her grandma telling her about vampires. "They heal quick, so even if you manage to hurt one of them, it won't last long," she said with a knowing nod, though Calliope, even at six, knew enough to be certain that her grandma's seemingly extensive knowledge about other magical beings was not always accurate. But her grandma had at least one sentence for everything. Like, "Always leave a penny under your doormat so you have good luck whether you're coming or going," or "Never leave your shoes facing west lest you invite the devil inside your room."

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Or the infinitely practical, “Carry your keys in your hand so that you don’t have to fumble through your purse if someone tries to attack you in the parking lot.” Calliope has since learned that keys, held between fingers in a fist, also help in such a situation.

The ones about vampires were few and only a handful appear to be accurate.

They’re faster than a jungle cat. She thinks of Rory’s ability to appear suddenly at the top of the stairs without the sound of heavy footfalls.

They’re so strong they could uproot this entire house with just a flick of their hands. Rory broke the iron chain with zero amount of obvious exertion.

Vampires can only bite virgins. Patently not true. The bite may no longer show on her neck, but she remembers the feeling of his lips on her pulse, and she is no virgin.

The sun will as good as kill them. Calliope is still uncertain about this, but Rory doesn’t seem concerned about the sunlight, and Kane’s laugh from earlier leads her to believe that if not entirely false, it’s not entirely true either.

She adds Kane’s words to this list: The curse of a vampire is always dominant.

She closes her eyes briefly, feeling for the Ether, searching for the dark nothingness of it, and finds it a comforting presence at her back. The water in the tub begins to freeze. If the Ether, or Quintessence as Kane called it, is still available to her, then surely that means she is still a witch?

Her Hunger suddenly sits up, all patience lost. With ears perked and teeth barred, the beast snaps its teeth with a roar that shakes her rib cage.

Calliope rolls her eyes. “Yes, alright. Hold your horses. I’m getting out.”

* * *

Calliope can hear Rory pacing in the kitchen, as she pauses at the bottom of the stairs. She deposits her boots by the front door (where they belong, her grandma would say), and she walks barefoot down the hallway. Through the gap between the door and the checkerboard tiles, she can see Rory’s bulky shadow as it moves back and forth. She gently pushes the door open.

“Give her a moment,” Kane is saying. “She was mortal two days ago. She needs time to adjust.”

Rory runs a hand through his hair and mumbles something she can’t hear. Whatever it is, he says it twice, and she just catches the words the second time around, “This was a mistake.”

She clears her throat.

He turns, like a caught animal. For a moment, he looks vaguely surprised by her presence, but then his eyebrows knit together, and he angles his head toward the table, where two jars of blood wait.

She hesitates, biting her lower lip as she looks down at the red liquid. “Where...where did you say it comes from again?”

“Clayton Farm. On the other side of town.” Rory guides her closer to the chair, the coldness of his skin seeping through the thin material of her dress. The touch is brief.

She sits stiffly in the chair, hands folded in her lap. The window is open, and a gentle afternoon breeze dances its way into the kitchen. “And what...kind is it?”

“Cow.” Rory settles in across from her, the movement so incredibly domestic—just two people settling down for a meal—that she almost wants to laugh.

“Do you ever...” She nervously traces the lip of the jar, eyes lowered. “Do you ever drink hu—”

“Not if I can help it,” he says gruffly.

She looks up, eyes wide. “But what about...” The word seems to stick in the back of her throat. “Mine?”

Rory’s eyes dart to the window and then back to her. “I had to drink some, to start the transformation, but I didn’t—I would never—”

She nods quickly, ready to bring them both out of this awkward haze that has settled between them. “How often do you drink?”

“Twice a day. Sunrise and sunset.” He picks up his glass. “Stop stalling.” He brings it to his lips and takes a sip. She watches his throat bob.

Her Hunger is poised inside of her, claws digging into her consciousness, a current of want moving through her bones. The pain in her throat and teeth pulses as her lip touches the glass, ice cold against her febrile skin. Rory is taking another sip, but she can feel his eyes on her as she tips the jar back. Kane, who is perched on the windowsill, is watching her intently, too. She sees the slight ruffle of wings out of the corner of her eye.

Her Hunger, the many-eyed beast, is standing alert, tail swishing dangerously back

and forth. She closes her eyes as the liquid slides down her throat. The metallic taste is chased by an earthiness she can't quite place, a green flavor that is not wholly unpleasant. Palatable to an extent.

But the flavor is inconsequential to the feeling of it spreading through her chest like honeyed sunshine. The ache in her teeth subsides with each sip. She forgets her audience. She forgets herself as she knocks the glass back in one smooth motion, throat desperate for the relief the thick liquid provides. It coats her teeth, her lips. She licks the edge of the jar with eyes closed, feeling almost as if she's floating.

And then heat rushes up her neck and ears when she comes to, and the harsh reality of the hard wood chair brings her back to the kitchen in a vampire's house beside a lake, the rough-hewn metal of her manacles cutting into her skin.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:30 am

Rory is looking at her curiously, his gray eyes like diamonds in the afternoon sun. His mouth turns up into a smirk, briefly, before falling into a neutral white line. His hand is palm down on the table and his fingers jump slightly, as if itching to reach out and touch her again, to see if her fever is gone. “Feel better?” he asks instead.

A waft of summer air plays with a loose tendril of hair that’s escaped her braid, and she tucks it behind her ear before answering. “A little?” Her gaze bounces between Rory and Kane. “Maybe it takes a minute to kick in?”

Kane squawks in agreement. “Perhaps.”

Kane says something else, but she stops listening. There is a sudden high-pitched noise echoing around her. She grits her teeth, realizing the noise is coming from outside—from that small ripple in the middle of the lake. She just catches the movement as she squints out the window. And then, a moment later, it fades, and she shakes her head. “What’s in the lake?” she asks quietly, almost a whisper.

Rory’s frown deepens. “What do you mean?”

“I heard...” She looks out at the lake again, the surface smooth and undisturbed.

Kane hops down from the sill and onto the table. He takes a few eager steps toward her, head bobbing back and forth. “What did you hear?”

She shakes her head again. “I don’t know.” Rory and Kane share a look. “You know what’s out there.” She intends it to be a question, but it comes out as a statement.

Kane clicks his beak. “No, we don’t. But we know something is out there. Something cursed.”

“And that’s all we know,” interrupts Rory, sliding his chair back. “And unless it shows itself, we’re leaving it alone. Understood?”

She doesn’t answer, letting her gaze wander back to the view beyond the kitchen patio.

“I need to hear you say it,” insists Rory. She doesn’t turn, but she’s sure his arms are folded across his broad chest, frown lines carved deep into the stubble around his mouth.

“I understand,” she says, tonelessly.

He leaves his empty jar in the sink, and a minute later the sound of a door closing upstairs resounds through the house.

12

Dark and Mysterious

Calliope

She doesn’t know how many minutes have passed when she finally wrenches her gaze from the lake and observes the empty kitchen. The sun outside is stronger, yet the kitchen feels darker without anyone else in it.

She peeks into a few dusty drawers here and there but finds almost all of them empty. The few that have contents are decidedly mundane: spare bits of twine, a notepad and ballpoint pen missing its cap, a paper clip bent out of shape. She pushes through the

kitchen door and stands in the hallway. It provides her with three options: the living room, upstairs, or the front door.

Hun is curled up in her belly like a snake, satiated and sleeping soundly. She teases the point of a caninetooth, surprised to find it still sharp, though noticeably blunter when compared to how it was before her morning drink. Her earlier promise to Hun—Drink first, plan later—is before her, and she has no earthly clue where to begin.

Four short days ago she left her husband of ten years with only a vague notion of her future. She had been so bent on simply escaping her husband's clutches that she had only planned as far up to the tiny, roadside motel. She tasted freedom for only a few days and now, here she is, trapped again. He is not my husband, she reminds herself. He's only trying to help her—save her life, as she asked him to.

The manacles rub against her skin, and she observes the front door, reminding herself that there is nothing stopping her from leaving. But where would she go?

She grew up in a small magical community called Broom Hollow, but somehow, she can't see herself going back there. She tries to recall where exactly she, and the house, are. She left in the night, and hitchhiked, sacrificing a precise location for distance. The road sign by the motel marked the Louisiana border as two hundred thirty miles. Lyon's Cross is the closest magical city, if she remembers correctly, and the quaint coastal village is full of witches.

She could leave now—she sees the car keys on the small hallway table, right next to the phone. Surely, she could find someone willing enough to unclasp the manacles from around her wrists.

But what if Rory is right and Hun escapes her control? Could she live with herself if she killed someone? The thought of drinking blood directly from a person makes her

stomach turn. Heat creeps up the back of her neck, increasing the stuffy, uncomfortable fever that is still pulsing through her body. She flips her hair, already loose from her braid, over her shoulder and away from her neck.

She turns from the front door, for now, and toward the living room. The sparse room is as impersonal as the kitchen, though it still holds a smidgeon of warmth from the previous tenants. Most surprising is the piano, huddled in the shadows of the far corner. She lifts the fallboard, pushing an experimental key.

She's not sure which key it is, but she's fairly certain the resulting clanging noise is not the intended result. Maybe she'll teach herself how to play piano. For a moment, she feels time stretching out in front of her endlessly. She's spent ten years feeling choked off from that feeling, stifled by her husband and his rules. The possibilities leave her breathless. Her fingers tingle against the ivory keys. Yes, she'll learn piano. Or, at the very least, she will kill a few hours looking for a book in the library on how to play piano.

Upstairs, the hallway is empty, and, for a moment, she forgets the library. She is drawn to the painting at the end of the hall, rooted by its presence as she cocks her head to the side, wondering what exactly makes it so odd. It's true that the orientation is more akin to a portrait than a landscape. Is that it? Is it more of a portrait of trees than a landscape?

"I'll come back to you later," she says softly to the painting.

The door to the library is ajar, and Calliope pokes her head inside, only to find the room empty. The window at the far end of the room is open, and she makes her way over, leaning out to look for signs of Kane. The whine of cicadas is a gentle hum in the background as the trees that bend around the house sway with the wind. The air almost feels cool on this side, the tree cover casting shadows against the facade of the house.

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:31 am

She leaves the window open, assuming Kane is out for a flight and faces the library, arms akimbo as she considers where an instructional booklet on piano playing would most likely be shelved. She browses the spines closest to her as a gentle breeze trickles in through the window. It dances around her and settles against the newspaper from earlier, playfully lifting a corner so that her black-and-white smile bounces mockingly at her.

In a trice, she has the paper tucked under her arm, and she's closing the door to her bedroom behind her, all thoughts of the piano forgotten. She traces the words as she reads, as if afraid they will rearrange themselves, becoming falsehoods even as she mumbles the words out loud.

Local man, Maddox Grey, 43, was found deceased July 23, 1993.

She hates that she shares his last name. Maybe she could change it back to Croft? There is honor in being a Croft witch, her grandma told her as she urged her not to change her name the night before she took her vows.

But Maddox Grey had insisted—and when Maddox Grey wanted something, he always got it. Including her.

His courtship had been persistent and overwhelming. On paper, he had been a perfect match: a well-respected warlock in the community with a sizable amount of wealth. He peppered her with sweet words and lovely promises, gifted her flowers and amulets, and proclaimed his love of her freely.

But the thing about warlocks is that they are not born with magic in their blood. They

rely on outside sources to enable them in their Craft. Maddox's preferred tool was a wand—but wands and amulets and other instruments of a warlock's trade must be recharged. The magic burns up otherwise, leaving the user with a cold chunk of wood, stone, or iron.

She was besotted, drunk with affection, and so, when the first gentle request for a little help came, she thought, yes, of course, this is what wives do for their husbands.

The spell he used to harvest her magic is not for the faint of heart. She told herself the pain was worth it. And it would only be one time anyway. Just until business picked up. But one time turned into three, four, five.... When she left, the wand was still fully charged, and she was still magicless.

A knock on the door pulls her attention from the article and her memories.

"Calliope, I, uh—" begins Rory, voice muffled through the door. "I have to head to work." An awkward pause. "If anything comes up, the number for the Go-Go is next to the phone downstairs." She can see his shadow through the bottom of the door, and it leans to the right as he shifts his weight from foot to foot nervously. "Cal—"

She opens the door to see him frowning, hands shoved in the pockets of his faded jeans. There's a hole in the right knee. "It would be best if you stayed inside while I'm gone," he finishes, eyes searching her face for something.

She looks up at him, fiddling with the cuff on her left wrist. The dangling bits of chains clink against each other. "Sure. Fine."

His eyes narrow and a muscle in his jaw clenches. He looks like he wants to say something, but a second later, his mouth relaxes, and he merely gives her a curt nod. "I'll be back at sunrise," he says before turning away.

She shuts the door and returns to the newspaper article, listening for the vague noises of a car starting in the background, followed by the crunch of gravel as he drives away. She reads through the whole article twice, finding it exceedingly vague. The author continually skirts around the finer details, such as his cause of death, how he was found and by whom. Because she disappeared just before his body was found, she supposes it makes sense that she's wanted for "questioning."

He won't actually be dead, she thinks. He always said he had contingencies in place for this kind of thing, but she does wonder what led him to fake his own death. Maybe a business deal had gone sour, and he had to go into hiding? A cold dread washes over her as she considers, maybe, that his death is related to her. And if he has gone off in search of her, did she cover her tracks well enough? Can he find her here, in the middle of nowhere? Would Rory protect her if Maddox Grey came for her? Could Rory even protect her?

The shrill cry of the phone interrupts her thoughts, making her jump until her brain catches up with her ears. Curious, she pokes her head outside her room and sees a small table in the hallway, upon which a pink telephone sits. That most definitely wasn't there earlier, she thinks, instinctively picking up the cradle. "Hello?"

"Oh, hello," says the feminine voice on the other end. "This is Martha Clayton. I'm calling for Rory?"

"He's out at the moment. May I take a message?" She looks around for a scrap of paper and a pencil, her curiosity piqued. Up until now, she assumed Rory lived a life of solitude with Kane as his only friend.

"Oh, yes," Martha is saying, her voice crackling with static, "thank you. Could you let him know that his order is ready for pick-up?"

She makes the connection a second later. Martha Clayton, as in Clayton Farm. This

must be who he gets his blood from. “Sure.” Pad of paper and pencil found in the small drawer of the table, she wedges the phone between her ear and shoulder and writes down Martha called - order ready.

“Thank you,” says Martha. “And to whom am I speaking? If you don’t mind me asking.”

“I’m Calliope,” she replies. “I’m Rory’s...” The manacle digs into her wrist. Prisoner? Blood-thirsty Roommate? Youngling Vampire? “Friend. I’m just visiting for a week or so.”

Martha sounds delighted by this news. “How lovely! You know, me and Bill worry about him, up at that lake house all by himself. You two will have to come over for dinner while you’re in town. We’d love to meet one of Rory’s friends.”

“Sure. Yes, we’d—we’d love that. I’ll let Rory know you called. Thank you.” She hangs up before Martha can respond and cringes at the phone, silent and innocent in its cradle.

She’s not quite sure what she’s done but she has a feeling it wasn’t the right thing to do. Rory is still pretty much a stranger to her, but she’s fairly certain that he would not fancy dinner with the Claytons. Then again, it’s not like she truly made any promises of such. It’s just a thing people say, like “Oh, let’s catchup sometime,” or “I’d love to grab dinner, let me know when you’re free.” Furthermore, she reminds herself that she won’t be here much longer. There’s nothing keeping her here in this dark, musty house.

The hallway lights flicker in protest. She touches the wallpaper briefly, tracing the slightly raised petals of a rose. “Sorry. I meant mysterious. Such a dark and mysterious house.”

13

Vampiric Entities

Rory

Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:31 am

The rattle of cicadas surrounds him as he stands on the gravel drive smoking a cigarette. He looks up at Graeme House and sighs. His work shift had dragged on, as worries and thoughts about Calliope swirled in his mind. He was anxious to get home, to see how she's been faring after her first drink, and now that he's here, he's stalling, feeling a little like a stranger in his own home.

Is it still my house, he wonders, if it answers to her? He could leave, of course. There's an itchy feeling in his bones that whispers to him that it's time to do so. He's stuck around long enough. It's risky, after all, to stay in the same town for too long when you don't age. The memory of mortals may be flawed but it still prefers change; it feels most comfortable when the shadows travel with the day, when leaves turn colors, when hair grows longer. It tends to dwell on things that stand too still.

But Rory has only been still for three years. He'd be foolish to leave now, especially with the ease of his arrangement with the Claytons. Of course, while he's fine with one to two glasses of blood a day, a new vampire on such a sparse diet is a risk, even if said young vampire insists she is not thirsty. The sun is rising quickly, and as the day fills with light, each moment brings them closer to what he considers to be the inevitable degradation of Calliope into a blood-thirsty fiend.

He takes one last drag of the cigarette before snubbing it out on the side of the empty plant pot by the front door. He lets himself inside, head turned as he listens for any movement.

But the house is silent, save for Kane's fluttering heartbeat. Not that he expected much else. He knows at least one thing went right during Calliope's transition and that's the fact that her body no longer needs a beating heart, no longer needs to

absorb oxygen. She is silent in that respect.

Yet perhaps he expected to hear her rustling about the place? The swish of fabric, the soft click of a door being opened, the gentle patter of bare feet against the wood floors. Maybe he even expected her to greet him at the door with a peck on the cheek, asking him how work went.

He's been alone for too long.

As it is, Kane is the one to greet him at the door, by landing on his shoulder, nails snagging on his shirt, one of the few he now owns that isn't stained with blood.

With a click of his beak, Kane says, "Don't panic."

Rory arches an eyebrow. "Word of advice, Kane. If you don't want someone to panic, don't tell them that."

"Just...come see for yourself." Kane pushes away from Rory's shoulder and flies up the stairs, Rory following quickly.

The bird leads him to Calliope's room, and when he pushes open the door, he spots her lying on the couch, head lolling to the side, and his stomach plummets.

"What happened?" He rushes into the room, knees folding against the floor with a thud. He presses a hand to her forehead, and he almost snatches it away. Her body is still far too warm, the fever still roaring inside of her.

Kane perches on the back of the couch and looks down at her. "She's just sleeping." He flutters his wings. "I think."

His eyes flash at the bird. "You think?"

“I hope.”

Rory’s nostrils flare as a muscle in his jaw clenches. “How long?” he grits out.

“A few hours.” A squawk. “I was checking on our shadow friend in the lake. When I came back, she was...” His feathers puff out. “Unconscious. But I can still smell her. She hasn’t perished.”

“Oh, well, if you can smell her,” he mutters. But Kane is right. Rory considers her with a deep scowl, watches her eyelids flicker with sleep. Her lips part as she shifts, nuzzling deeper against her pillow.

Rory swears under his breath, wondering idly if her transition went so wrong simply because she’s too stubborn to let it go right. He wouldn’t be entirely surprised. She’s been impossible, headstrong, and challenging since he brought her to the house.

Still, that’s not how the magic works, and he swears under his breath, brushing a curl away from her cheek under the guise of feeling for her fever again. The line between her eyebrow eases as the coldness of his touch relieves some of the heat smoldering below her skin.

“What did I do wrong?” He looks up at Kane, a feeling of helplessness stealing through him.

Kane clicks his beak toward Rory. “Maybe nothing. I’ve found something you should read.”

Excerpt from *On the Nature of Vampiric Entities*, Chapter Thirteen: Dhampir and Other Breeds by Margravine Isotta

As we’ve established in previous chapters, vampirism is, at its core, a unique strain of

a curse passed down through Bite (see figures 3.4-5.6).

We have already examined the intricacies of the most dominant strain. In this chapter, we will look further at variations of the curse, contraction methods, and the myriad of ways the curse may manifest.

The Dhampir

The dhampir is the result of a union between a vampire and a human. This is typically a male vampire and a female human, though there are some documented cases of the reverse. The latter is particularly rare, as the very nature of the vampiric curse makes it quite difficult for a female vampire to carry a child.

Whatever the source of the progeny, the resulting child is often a mix of the two parents, inheriting some vampiric traits while retaining a measure of humanity. Curiously enough, this isn't always a 1:1 ratio. For instance, a dhampir may be blessed with eternal life, yet require more than blood for substance, or perhaps a dhampir lives as a mortal, but can compel others to do their bidding. In some cases, a female dhampir may even be able to reproduce with either human or vampire.

This, of course, opens the world of vampirism in a remarkable fashion, potentially ushering vampires into an evolutionary chain that heretofore had been denied them by their very nature. While viewed as an abomination by some in the vampire community, it is this author's opinion that the hybridization of vampirism will ultimately win out; that as our races intermingle socially and culturally, so will our bloodlines, ushering in a new, vibrant age of vampirism. The dhampir are just one display of this inevitability, but they remain the most poignant example.

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There are several documented cases of inherited vampire traits that are worth mentioning here, described below as Subjects L, O, and Z.

[...]

Conversely, Subject Z's inheritance is unknown. Subject Z was a foundling left on the steps of the Daughters of Cadohr Convent (London). The records indicate that the child, who first appeared in the Convent records in 1886, quickly exhibited behaviors outside of what one would expect from a mortal child. The Daughters of Cadohr, of course, were well-equipped to handle the creature, Cadohr being the much-lauded Patron of the Fae, Curse-Eater, and Beast-Fighter.

From the Convent's records, I have compiled a list of Subject Z's paranormal behaviors. The full list is provided in Table 112.3 (p. 456); however, I have synthesized the most notable behaviors below, organized by age.

Age 0-2

Craving for blood, though still able to consume milk

Age 3-9

Sensitivity to sun. Teeth begin growing; Canines exhibit a notable sharpness

Age 10-16

Able to complete basic spells; thirst for blood notably increased. Unable to consume

other foods or liquids.

Age 17-[unknown]

Growth stopped at roughly 18 years of age. Daily intake of blood increased to three pints a day.

While Subject Z's death is not mentioned in the Convent records, a brief interview with an inside source revealed that Subject Z was "no longer." It was furthermore heavily implied that Subject Z perished, though not of natural causes. It is my belief that if Subject Z had not met with an unnatural end, then they could have lived an alarmingly long time. Indeed, they could have even been completely immortal, in the vampiric sense of the word.

Kane marked the page with a dried leaf, and as Rory leans back in the chair, he fiddles with the impractical bookmark. Although they're in the library and Calliope's door is closed, they talk in hushed tones.

"You think she's a dhampir?" He rubs his chin in thought. He's only met a dhampir twice in his long existence. The first had been a child, almost angelic, with no tolerance for blood and only an aversion to sunlight as a vampiric trait. He doesn't know what eventually happened to the child. Maybe they're still alive, even.

The memory of the second, however, leaves a sour taste in his mouth. Antoinette's mother had been a witch, but her father was a vampire. While she was a vampire in every sense of the word, there were two things she inherited from her mother: her second-sight, allowing her to see the future, and her ability to be compelled.

Aodhán had been desperate to gain an advantage in the First Blood War and when her failings were discovered, he slipped into her mind and stayed there. He kept her like a pet, throwing her scraps of raw meat in exchange for what Rory always considered

half-truths. He tries to remember what happened to her after the First Blood War ended, but can't recall anything with certainty. Did she flee to Spain? Go back to Brittany?

"I think Calliope has a dhampir in her family history," says Kane. "I think Isotta is right in saying that the hybridization of vampiric magic is a part of a great evolutionary change. That it's possible to create a witch-vampire hybrid like Calliope, if the right conditions are met."

"A history of vampirism...how does that explain her Turn? Why she still has a fever? Why she's sleeping, for Hades' sake?"

"If she has a history of vampirism, then some form of that magic must live in her blood. The vampire magic has different strains. Whatever she was born with, it combined with your strain of the curse to create...well, something new. She might have some mortal traits, like sleeping, but she's still a vampire in other ways, in much the same way as a dhampir. In fact, I think Subject Z is very close to what we're witnessing here, with Calliope."

"What does this mean, exactly?" he asks, looking over at Kane who is perched on the back of the chair next to him.

Before the bird can respond, the lights above flicker, and Rory looks up to see Calliope leaning against the doorframe, arms folded.

"It means there's nothing wrong. I'm just another version of me." She pushes away from the doorframe and walks over to Rory and Kane. He watches the casual sway of her hips and wonders if she's really as carefree and disinterested as she appears.

Not quite, he decides. Up close, her expression is strained. "I'm sorry," he offers, though the words feel paltry once he says them out loud.

She raises an eyebrow. “For what?”

“I didn’t know it would be like this.”

She huffs. “Neither did I.” She looks down, inspecting her fingernails, or perhaps she’s seeing the space where her wedding ring used to sit. “I am grateful, though. I don’t think I said that earlier. I didn’t want to die, and you did what you could. This is unexpected, but...” She lets her fingers trail along the side of the open book, just shy of Rory’s hand. He can feel the heat coming off her in waves. “I don’t mind being a little different.” She looks up at him and smiles softly. “I’m glad I still have the Ether, at least.”

“And sleep. I would kill for a nap,” he says, running a hand through his hair. “How are you feeling?”

“Fine. Well rested.” She shrugs. “So, we think I have some vampire in my family history? Did I hear that right?”

Kane squawks an affirmative. “Maybe on your father’s side?”

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“Maybe. I’ve never met my father. Or my mother. I was raised by my grandma. She always told me that she didn’t even know about me until my mother showed up one day with a baby, left me there and took off again.”

“So, it’s possible,” says Kane, neck twisted in a seemingly impossible way to peer up at her.

“I suppose so.” She smiles slyly, looking down at Rory through her eyelashes. She pokes his shoulder and says, sweetly, “Since I’m not a typical vampire, does that mean we can take the cuffs off?”

“Not yet,” he says gently.

“Oh, almost forgot.” She rifles through the pockets in her skirt and produces a piece of paper. “Martha called while you were out. Your order is ready.”

“Right. Thanks.” He stuffs the message in the pocket of his flannel shirt without looking at it. Martha can wait. “First, we need to get some blood in you. Come on.”

14

An Agreement Is Struck

Rory

Rory pops open a bottle. He can feel Calliope’s hungry gaze on him as the smell of blood blooms in the air, but when he turns around to hand it to her, her facial features

are impassive, almost dismissive of his offering.

She accepts the glass, but doesn't move to drink it. Instead, she looks up at him through lowered eyelashes and smiles sweetly, the corner of her mouth just tucked into a delicate dimple. "Can I sit on the stairs for my...meal?"

They're sitting outside on the back porch, protected by the small bit of overhanging and shade from the tall oak tree that stands to the right of the porch. Rory sits on the rickety metal chair, and arches an eyebrow at Calliope. "Sure."

Even before he finishes speaking, she's making her way down the steps, her hair bouncing around her shoulders.

"Not too close to the lake" he calls after her. "And don't sit in direct sunlight."

She pauses on the middle step and looks back, eyebrow raised.

"It makes us...sick," he offers. "Direct, prolonged exposure at least. You won't burst into flames, but..."

She nods. "Understood." She then slides to the right so that she is in the shade of an oak tree, looking up for his nod of approval. She sits primly on the step, folding her dress underneath legs, before twisting at the waist, so that she can look easily between the lake and Rory.

He sips his drink as he looks out at the smooth surface of the water, his thoughts, as they have done so often of late, returning to its cool, dark depths and the shadow that rests at the bottom. The cow's blood slides down easily, though it tastes a little earthier than he'd prefer. In the distance, he sees Kane flying circles around the lake. But then his gaze wanders down to Calliope. The Spanish moss hanging above her sways with a hot breeze, as he watches her drink. She does so delicately, holding the

jar with the tips of her fingers as if it's porcelain, and raising it to her lips like a cup of tea. She dabs politely at the side of her mouth.

From this angle he can see the thick scar that circles her upper arm. He doesn't buy the accident excuse one bit. He saw the tension in her shoulders, the spark of fear in her eyes as he approached her in the library yesterday morning, his own fear grumbling out of his body like anger. She was afraid, but not necessarily of him. It was a conditioned fear, a learned response, and he found his own emotions deactivating quickly, like wiping away dust on a counter.

It's interesting that she noticed his ability to do so, though. It's a skill he's always had, even before he became a vampire: picking and choosing his emotions. It's just taken centuries for him to be able to pick the most appropriate emotion for any given situation. He quickly cataloged the fear in her body and changed what he could about himself so that his actions, at least, would not factor into that fear.

She looks up at him, only to give him a questioning look as he stares dazedly at her.

He jumps slightly, clearing his throat and blurting out the first thing that comes to his mind. "Why are accidents a part of being married to a warlock?" The words have barely left his mouth when he cringes. His emotions may be in check, but his mouth is another entity altogether, it seems.

For her part, Calliope takes the question with a grace he doesn't deserve, in his opinion. "What do you know about warlocks?"

"Are they not the same as a witch?"

"No." She shakes her head, her frizzy mane framing her face and trailing down her back. "They aren't born with magic. They use tools and artifacts that do have magic though and, in some cases, they harvest the magic from other...sources." She glances

out at the lake and, if he wasn't a vampire with preternatural hearing, he wouldn't catch what she says next. "My husband, Maddox Grey, is...was...a warlock. The scar is a ritual. A sacrifice. He asked for help and I...helped."

"He did that to you. Willingly?" He doesn't realize he's curling his hand into a fist until he hears a small crack, and he quickly sits the jar down on the table before he smashes it to bits.

She looks back at him with a humorless smile. "It was incredibly naive of me."

"Doesn't matter. You didn't deserve that."

"How do you know?" She flicks her hair over her shoulder and twists further, so her shoulders are facing him. "I could be an awful person."

He laughs; he can't help it. The claim is so absurd.

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For a second, he's afraid he's offended her, but then she smirks. "Well, hex me, he does know how to laugh." The smirk slides away and she adds, still with genuine warmth, "No need to be sorry. You didn't do it. And I offered to help him. Which was stupid, I realized very quickly after. All he wanted was my magic. And well...other things." Her cheeks flush with the implication, and she turns back toward the lake.

Rory looks out at the lake again, as a stilted silence falls between them. I'm not any better than her good-for-nothing husband for Hades' sake, he thinks, running a hand through his hair. No wonder she had been so adamant about removing the cuffs. No wonder she saw this as imprisonment from the start.

"Two weeks," he says suddenly, wincing from the loudness of his own voice. She turns back to him, face upturned as he stands and makes his way down. She rises to meet him and when they are on the same step, he repeats himself. "Two weeks and not a second longer. After that, we'll take the manacles off and you're free to do—go—wherever you want. You have my word."

She holds her glass, now empty, against her chest with both hands, and nods. She bites her lower lip, her eyes calculating, and then she holds out her hand. "Thank you."

Her hand is uncomfortably warm when he clasps it in his own, shaking it as if this is an everyday sort of business deal. A small spark of something crackles underneath his skin with the touch. The handshake is fleeting, however, and she steps back quickly, once again clutching her empty glass to her chest.

He points to it, if only to have something to do with his hands which suddenly feel too large and too warm. “Are you done?”

“Oh, yes. Of course.” She hands him the empty glass, but when he turns to head back inside, she trails after him.

He glances at her as he holds the kitchen door open. “I have to pick up that order, so I’ll be gone for an hour or so. Will you be okay by yourself?”

“Of course. And anyway, I won’t be by myself. Kane is here...” She glances out the window, where the blue sky is so bright, it’s almost blinding. “Somewhere.”

“If something happens, the number for the Clayton Farm is here.” He pushes back the door that leads to the hallway, pointing to the phone sitting on a small side table. There’s a notepad next to it, the edges of the paper curling with humidity. “I’ll be back before I head to work, though.”

She nods. “Clayton Farm. Got it. Do you—”

Suddenly, Rory freezes, holding up a hand to Calliope in a silent warning as he listens to the quickly approaching crunch of tires against dirt.

Someone is coming.

15

A Cup of Tea

Rory

In the past three years, the only car Rory has ever heard approach the house is the

mailman. But the mailbox is at the entrance to the driveway, and this car continues down the drive, acorns popping as the wheels turn, maneuvering around the large oak tree that's been encroaching upon the dirt path for a few years now. The soft rumble of an engine continues to approach and when the brakes squeal, he gently ushers Calliope back into the kitchen.

As the door swings shut, the visitor knocks. Rory pauses for a handful of agonizingly long seconds, before taking a few loud steps, opening the front door and feigning breathlessness as much as he can. He is confronted with the view of a uniformed police officer, bearing the shield of Glenn County PoliceDepartment. He doesn't bother to hide his alarm; it's perfectly reasonable to be on edge if law enforcement shows up on your doorstep without previous warning, after all.

The officer smiles disinterestedly, flicking a badge in Rory's direction as he says, "Good morning, I'm Officer Burton. Do you have a few minutes to answer some questions?"

Officer Burton is the same height as Rory, although his body is slimmer. He has a runner's build, lean muscle acclimated to physical exertion. There's a gun holstered at his side, and he rests his hand lightly against it, as if to subtly highlight its presence. His close-set eyes dart around the entrance to the house, landing on everything in sight except for Rory himself.

He desperately wants to close the door, cutting off Burton's wandering gaze, and only the certainty that doing so would make Burton suspicious stops him. For the moment, Burton is dutifully aware of his surroundings, yet presumptuous in that notion that whatever he is looking for, he won't find it here.

Instead, Rory tilts his head to the side, brow furrowed in general concern. "Is everything alright, officer?"

Burton's eyes finally cut back to Rory, and he smiles, though the movement is so quick, it doesn't quite reach his eyes. "Just doing some door-to-door inquiries regarding a missing woman." He pulls a flyer from his back pocket and hands it to Rory. That skill that Calliope mentioned earlier—about switching emotions—comes in handy as he registers the smiling face surrounded by frizzy curls. It's the same photo from the newspaper. Rory's frown deepens.

"Now, you might have seen the headlines, but she's not in trouble," Burton continues. "We're worried about her welfare and are asking locals to keep an eye out." Burton smiles, head turned just enough so that he can continue his inspection of the house behind Rory. The movement is just as stiff, just as noncommittal as before, except Rory can hear the man's heartbeat increase in speed as his eyes land on something just inside the door.

Shit, he thinks. Is there more to this? Did Calliope lie? Is she a wanted killer?

"I'll definitely keep an eye out, officer," he says, a small wave of relief when Burton's eyes reconnect with his own as he hands the poster back. "Thank you for stopping by."

Burton shifts his weight to the side in a casual stance, hand still resting lightly on his holstered gun. "You work at the gas station, right?" The smile widens and Rory can see a glint of something behind his eyes.

Again, that finely honed ability to shove emotions to the side to be examined and organized later—like pushing everything in a closet to clear a room—keeps his voice light. Respectful, even. "Yes, sir. The night shift."

"Thought I recognized you." He shifts his weight again, taking a step closer. "You know, the last known sighting of her was near the hotel down the way. Maybe she stopped into the store at some point?" He shoves the poster back toward Rory.

“Maybe you want to take another look?”

Rory looks down at the photo again and shakes his head. “We get a lot of people coming through the Go-Go, but not a lot of people overnight, when I work. I think I would recognize her.”

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Burton chuckles. “She is a looker, that’s for sure.” Burton’s eyes dart down to the threshold and Rory realizes what he had seen earlier. “You live here alone?”

Rory knows Officer Burton spotted Calliope’s boots by the door, one turned over on its side and showing off its feminine heel and pointed toe. Since he’s standing right next to them, it’s also painfully obvious that they are too small for him.

“I live here with my wife,” Rory says, the lie forming so quickly on his tongue that he barely realizes what he’s said until he hears his own voice adding, “It’s just us two.”

Burton’s eyebrows go up, emphasizing his sweaty forehead. He’s not as young as he looked at first, deep grooves of age showing along his sallow skin. “Is she in? Maybe I could ask her a few questions. Show her the picture.” He smiles again, wider than before. Rory supposes it might be charming to anyone but him.

“Of course,” he says calmly, his mind already running through various scenarios. It’s been at least fifty years since he’s had to use his compulsion for anything major, like erasing a memory. Slipping into a mind is one thing, but altering it takes more skill, more energy. A bigger meal.

Can he do that now? Grab Officer Burton and force him to forget coming here? Replace the memory of the house with something else?

Rory steps back and lets Burton pass him, pointing toward the kitchen door. “Just through here,” he says, fingers clenching as Burton walks down the hallway.

He reaches out, but too late—the kitchen door has already swung open, and Burton

takes a step into the kitchen, introducing himself to Calliope.

Rory follows, and, for a moment, as the kitchen door swings behind him, tapping against his back, he wonders if he's going a bit mad. Too much time alone. Because the woman standing in the kitchen, preparing a pot of tea, is not Calliope.

Or, Rory realizes, catching a whiff of her scent overlaid with the frozen herbal layer of magic, she doesn't look like Calliope. If he twists his head to the side and lets his eyesight go fuzzy, he can see the faint shimmer of the illusion she's somehow conjured. She is a witch, he thinks dumbly, taking in the differences between his Calliope and this one, who introduces herself to Burton as Violet.

Burton's smile is much wider than he has thus far displayed, and Rory is sure it has something to do with Violet and her curvy hips and tiny waist. The window is still open and the gentle breeze rustles her sleek, chin-length bob. Her skin is tanned and smooth. She looks like she should be lounging on a beach in the Mediterranean and not in this dark, dusty kitchen. She offers Burton a cup of tea and Rory blinks at the delicate silver bangles adorning her wrists.

Burton declines the tea but does see fit to place a hand on Calliope's arm as he does so. "I appreciate the offer, ma'am, but I don't want to take up too much of your time."

"Oh, of course. How can we help you?"

Rory watches as Burton hands Calliope the poster and a small line forms between her dark eyebrows while she considers the photo of herself. She looks up at Rory, who quickly acknowledges the look and closes his mouth before Burton glances over his shoulder.

"I haven't seen her," says Calliope. "Could she have stopped in at the station, dear?"

“No, darling. Like I told Officer Burton, she doesn’t look familiar.”

“Is she in trouble?” asks Calliope, handing the poster back to Burton.

He slips it back into his pocket. “Not all, Violet. We’re just worried about her welfare.”

“Who reported her missing? Her family must be so worried.” Calliope presses a hand to her chest, shaking her head. The emotion is overdone, but only Rory can tell. Burton seems to be eating it up.

“Indeed they are, ma’am.” The officer nods solemnly and the fact that he’s only answered one of Calliope’s questions does not go unnoticed. Rory narrows his eyes at Burton’s back. “We just want to see her reunited with her family. If you happen to see her, or remember seeing her, please don’t hesitate to give me a call.” He hands Calliope his business card. Rory clenches his fists as Burton once again squeezes her arm as she takes the proffered card.

“Of course, officer.” Calliope takes a step backward, holding the card in front of her like a weapon. Rory doesn’t miss the stiffness of the movement, but Burton does. “I do hope you find her.”

Another burst of air trickles in through the open window, and even as the moist, earthy smell of the lake fills the room, Rory catches a whiff of Burton’s scent, woodsy and spicy and very much human.

It’s a smell that Rory is accustomed to, of course, and he knows well how to temper the thirst that rises as Burton’s heartbeat seems to echo louder in his head. He’s had centuries of practice, after all.

Calliope, on the other hand, has been a vampire for all of two days and when the

scent hits her, she tenses noticeably, her nostrils flaring. The illusion flickers and Violet falls away in front of Burton's eyes.

Burton, for his part, seems unable to comprehend what has just happened. Even as he blinks rapidly, mouth open to comment on Calliope's changed appearance, she bounds forward, her hands on his neck before Rory can intervene. He smells Burton's blood as she bites into his skin.

Fuck, he thinks. And then for good measure, he says it out loud, the sound barely sliding through gritted teeth. Rory's hand is on her shoulder in an instant, the manacles ensuring that his strength reigns supreme. He pushes her away roughly and grips Burton's shoulders.

"Look at me," he says to Officer Burton, grasping the man's chin so that he can see into his eyes. He slips into Burton's mind, overwhelmed, momentarily, by a lustful thought about Violet. His hand tightens around Burton's face as he feels a pulse of anger, the red mist forever at the back of his mind whispering death in his ear. It takes some effort to lighten his grip. "Everything is okay. Just...wait." Rory steps back, letting his hand fall away. Burton's pupils dilate with Rory's command.

Calliope's lips are smeared in blood, like poorly applied lipstick. Her hand is at her throat, and he can see her fingers trembling.

There is a gentle caw from the windowsill. "It would be a good opportunity to test our theory. That she may not possess all of her vampiric traits," Kane suggests. "Perhaps Calliope could try compelling the man's memory away?"

Rory meets Calliope's gaze and nods encouragingly. "You can do this. Physical connection helps. Make eye contact. Tell him that we couldn't tell him anything."

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Her returned grimace is shaky, uncertain. “And what about the...?” She swallows, unable to look at Burton’s neck and the two, barely there, puncture wounds.

“Don’t worry about those just yet.”

She takes a wobbly step forward, tilting her chin up so can see Officer Burton’s eyes. She places her index finger against his cheek. The man blinks at her but doesn’t react. “I’m so sorry that we couldn’t help you.”

Burton blinks again, but rapidly this time, and Rory can see the compulsion fading from his mind, his awareness flooding back in. Just as his mouth twists in alarm, Rory steps in, once again telling him to stay calm. “Everything is okay.” He nods encouragingly at Calliope. “Try it again.”

She reaches out a shaky hand, covering the side of his face. Her voice is stronger when she speaks. Forceful, with that head-strong bite to her words that almost makes him proud. “We don’t know anything. We haven’t seen the missing woman.”

Again, Burton’s eyes blink, his pupils shrinking down as he comes back to himself. Rory steps in, fingers digging into Burton’s chin as he roughly pulls his attention away from Calliope. “We haven’t seen the missing woman. You had a nice cup of tea, and now you’re going to leave.”

Burton’s mouth flounders for a beat, his voice coming out as a stuttering whine as Rory’s command works its way from his brain to throat. Then, he says, “Thank you for your time.” He smiles at Calliope. “And the cup of tea. I best be on my way.”

“I’ll walk you out.” Rory keeps his hand on Burton’s shoulder, steering him out of the kitchen.

16

A Reasonable Task

Calliope

As soon as the kitchen door swings shut, Calliope collapses in the chair, feeling the last of her magic seep from her fingertips and down onto the tiles, dispersing back into the Ether where she pulled it from. A fine layer of frost lines her fingertips. She buries her hands in the skirt of her dress to warm them up.

It had been pure instinct that led her to craft the illusion, a burst of self-preservation wrapped up in a spark of magic.

She sinks into the chair, knees shaking with something like shock. Or adrenaline? Can vampires produce adrenaline? She hears the front door close, and Rory walks back into the kitchen.

The feeling of her mouth on a stranger’s skin, the foreign warmth, the tapping of his pulse against her lips, comes back to her in flashes. She reaches a shaky hand up to her mouth, feeling the smear of blood drying against her lips. Fear and shame and regret steal through her. Hun had been so loud, maw dripping fire, claws sharpened on the stone of her instincts. It was all she could hear—all she could feel. Now, Hun sits cowed, with her tail lowered and ears flattened. I’m not mad at you, Hun, she thinks, hand pressed to her belly.

She looks up at Rory as a breathy, desperate huff of a chuckle escapes her. He gives her a puzzled, wary look. She shakes her head, unable to remember words, let alone

decide which ones to use, then she bursts into tears.

She hears a muttered curse from Rory and his hesitant footsteps coming closer to her. Her face is buried in her hands, heedless of the tears coating her cheeks. Her shoulders are shaking. The manacles bite into her skin and for once, she is grateful for them. They are a reminder of what she is now—what she could have become if not for the magic inside of the iron.

She understands Rory's fears.

With another muttered curse, softer, almost sweet, Rory abandons whatever reserve he had been wrestling with. She hears the scrape of chair legs against the tile and then he is gathering her in his arms. His embrace is cool, smelling of vetiver and neroli and a hint of spiciness from the cigarettes he smokes. His hand snakes through her hair to cradle her head against his chest, while his free hand traces tiny circles in between her shoulder blades.

She has only been conscious in his embrace one other time, when the house created a room for her, and she clutched at him as he protected her from falling debris. It feels the same now, strong arms blocking out the world as she crumples into him, knees bent, legs half in his lap. She should be embarrassed, but she doesn't care, pent-up emotions spilling from her chest, the walls around her heart broken.

She cries, and he mumbles words of assurances against her temple. His lips are cool snowflakes as his words kiss her skin. "It's okay. He'll be fine." The stubble on his chin slides against her forehead, sending shivers down her spine.

Time slips between her fingers, which are far too busy clutching at the front of his shirt. She looks up—minutes or hours later—with dried tears stiff against her skin. She swipes at her cheek and is alarmed when her hand comes back covered in blood. She looks down to see Rory's shirt stained in blood, as well.

“I’m so sorry,” she says, though she’s not sure what she’s apologizing for more: getting blood on his shirt or almost killing a police officer.

“It’s okay,” he says softly. “An unfortunate side-effect. Vampires don’t, uh, cry very often, so not many people know about it.” He gently brushes a thumb across her cheek, a futile attempt to wipe away the remnants of her breakdown.

“I wanted to kill him,” she says. Her voice sounds too loud in her ears. What she doesn’t explain—what she’s sure she doesn’t need to explain to him—is how she wanted to rip that man apart. She wanted to tear into his skin, feel his blood against her gums. She feels sick to her stomach, dizzy with fever.

Rory loosens his grip around her shoulders, but his hand continues tracing a path in between her shoulder blades. “But you didn’t. There was barely a scratch on him. He’ll think it was a mosquito bite he scratched at too much.”

She looks up at him, tears still forming in the corner of her eyes.

A soft click of a beak draws their attention to Kane, who has moved closer to them, nails clacking against the kitchen table. “It happens to all younglings. Sometimes, it isn’t something you can control. But there’s something else that’s more worrying. The illusion was impressive, but we already knew you must still have some magic. You pulled it from the Quintessence, didn’t you?”

Calliope affirms with a nod, curls bouncing around her shoulders.

“It’s the compulsion that worries me,” continues Kane, “Or lack thereof...”

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Rory leans back and runs a distracted hand through his hair, though he keeps the other on Calliope's back. "Compulsion can be difficult even for older vampires. She just needs practice."

"Perhaps," admits Kane. "But I wonder if we could try something?" His golden eyes bounce between them. "If she does indeed lack compulsion, I wonder if she also lacks the inherent mental shield that prevents vampires from being compelled in turn?"

Rory frowns and tightens his arm around her shoulders as if trying to protect her from the mere assumption. She wishes she could curl up into his arms again, hide away from—well, everything.

"You want me to try to compel her?" Rory asks.

Kane nods. "Yes, just something simple. If you don't mind?"

Calliope bites her lip. "What does this matter?"

"It would mean that other vampires can control you. And I don't think it would do the world any favors to have an immortal being who can do magic and whose mind can be controlled by another."

She looks at Rory, who is still frowning, deep lines on either side of his mouth.

"Alright. Let's try it." She tries to give him a reassuring smile, but she's sure she falls short of her intentions, her skin still stiff with dried blood. She keeps her eyes trained on his, marginally aware that his touch against her back has gotten slowly, softer. She

suppresses a shiver, his fingers like ice against her feverish skin. She watches as his pupils dilate.

When he speaks, his voice seems to snake out from between his lips. Like a wisp of smoke, the words curve their way into her brain, and she hears his voiceechoing in her head.

Stand up.

A simple command. An easy command. Her body knows the movement so well—has been doing it for ages now, standing up and sitting down and standing up again. Yes, it knows how to do this and it's happy to oblige with such a doable,reasonable task.

It's just past noon and the sun slants harshly through the window, casting their shadows against the tile floor, the checkerboard awash in shades of pale blue. She has the odd sense that she's just a marble chess piece being moved across the board and it's only Kane's alarmed squawk that cuts off the incessant echo of Rory's honeyed voice inside of her mind. She blinks down at Rory and Kane, taking in their matching looks of worry.

* * *

Calliope sits at the top of the stairs, watching the water as it laps gently at the last step, crusted in shiny green algae. She has scrubbed her face and changed into a fresh dress, the pale blue cotton reflecting the color of the summer sky above.

She looks up at Rory, who's sitting in his chair on the porch. He's changed, too, once again wearing his worn pair of jeans with the hole in the knee and another flannel shirt, sleeves rolled up to his elbows. She wonders how he manages to wear long sleeves all the time. Even with the threat of sun sickness, the temperature is punishing, especially to her, with her fever. Kane is perched on her shoulder as she sips a glass

of blood. She hadn't been thirsty, but Rory still insisted that she top up, so to speak.

"But there are no other vampires here," Calliope is saying in between sips. She had barely tasted Burton's blood but even then, she's glad she still finds the cow blood palatable. She almost prefers it, cool against the ache in her throat. Hun releases a low, satisfied purr deep in her belly. "Does it even matter that I can be compelled?"

"There are no other vampires here now. But you won't always be here," Rory says into his glass. He motions toward the sliver of sunlight that's made its way to her. "Sun," he warns.

"We don't even know if I'll get sick from the sun," she mumbles to herself, even as she scoots back with a huff.

"Better safe than sorry," says Kane gently. He clenches her shoulder to avoid being dislodged with her movement.

She softens her frown and rubs the top of his head. "So how can I protect myself?" She takes another sip.

"You could build a telepathic shield," says the bird.

"How do I do that?"

Kane nips at a wayward curl, already escaping from her ponytail. "We'll do some research. It's been a while since I've had to construct a psychic wall."

She looks at him out of the corner of her eye. "And I suppose you're just going to drop that little tidbit and then suddenly forget how to speak?"

He squawks.

She laughs lightly. “Thought so.”

A companionable silence falls between them, and she gazes absentmindedly out at the lake below, a steely blue in the afternoon sun. A high-pitched ringing begins to grow in her ears as she observes the dark shadow in the center, swimming in slow, almost lazy, circles.

Kane pinches her skin, a distraction enough to keep her there, to stop her from slipping into the Ether. He has found his words again. “Can you see the creature?” he asks.

“No. Not any better than you, anyway.” She takes another sip of blood, letting the coolness of the liquid coat her gums before she swallows. “How is your research going?”

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“It’s been frustrating,” admits Kane. She feels his wings flutter against her ear. “I wish the shadow would reveal itself, even just a little.”

“Why are we so worried about it again?”

Rory answers, calling down from his spot on the porch. “Because it’s clearly a magical creature. And the only thing keeping...unsafe, is that we are the only magical creatures in Willow Lake.”

“We’re keeping a low profile,” adds Kane, in as close to a whisper as a grackle can make.

“Oh, yes. Indeed,” she replies, *sotto voce*. Another sip from her glass leaves it empty, and she sits it on the step, stretching her legs out in front of her. “Are there any grimoires in the library? From the coven who lived here before? Maybe they would know about something that would live in this lake.”

Kane cocks his head to the side. “Thank you. That’s a good idea. Perhaps we could work together this afternoon? You could help me select some grimoires and I will find a book on mental shielding for you.”

She nods. “I’d like that.”

When the house created Calliope’s room, it seems to have taken anything witch-related and stuffed it onto her bookshelves. Rory has left to pick up his order from the Clayton Farm and she and Kane retreat to her room upstairs in search of a helpful text to solve their shadow-creature problem. They find a row of grimoires there, just

underneath the haphazardly stacked cauldrons of various sizes and materials.

Kane flies into her room with a small hardcover book clutched in his feet and deposits it in her lap. Calliope fluffs up the pillows and settles in to begin her reading, as Kane takes over the side table next to the couch.

The Art of Psychoshielding: Practical methods for the construction and maintenance of mental wards by Cassius Fiorintini is slim, and the introduction emphasizes that it is meant to be only a primer for those looking to engage with basic mental shielding. A list at the back provides additional resources for the experienced psychoshielder.

She begins to read, losing herself in Fiorentini's words.

Excerpt from *The Art of Psychoshielding: A practical primer for the construction and maintenance of mental wards* by Cassius Fiorentini

[T]he mind is a wondrous thing, resilient and elastic, though so many assume otherwise. The art of psychoshielding is, in effect, quite obscure, though the basics of mental magic are nothing new. There is a long-standing tradition of psychical exchange among witch tribes of Europe and occasionally, a coven in the Americas will make use of such a technique. Vampires are a good example of psychical exchange as well, as they inherently possess the ability to incite the transfer of mental energy, though it is always a unidirectional exchange.

The most effective method for psychoshielding lies in forming an impenetrable thought-structure within one's Mind's Eye. Most people think of a library or a filing cabinet. Some find success with the image of a house or a long hallway with many rooms. Whatever the governing paradigm, the construction of this thought-structure is imperative. One cannot shield something that doesn't exist, naturally.

There are two speculative approaches when it comes to thought-structures. Some

believe that they are inherent. That is to say, that we are born with our unique thought-structures, and we do not create them, but, instead, discover them. Others believe that thought-structures can be created and formed.

The latter is particularly interesting, as it leads to a reasonable assumption that the final form of a thought-structure can be affected by any number of factors, including (but not limited to) age, religion, culture, economic status, and education.

However, I would say that my own studies regarding the creation and nature of thought-structures would seem, at least in part, to support the former, though more research will need to be taken to come to a firm conclusion.

Regardless of which side of the theoretical argument one leans toward, the crux of the matter is that a reliable, well-developed thought-structure is imperative in making any sort of headway in the field and art of psychoshielding.

Further, an adept psychoshielder will find even greater success in subverting mental attack with more than fortitude. They must throw up diversions, though what form those diversions may take is highly unique to the individual and, indeed, the final form of the thought-structure.

For instance, a long hallway with many rooms may have locked doors. A book may be misshelved in the wrong section. Why, even a [...].

17

The Forest

Calliope

It isn't until Rory clears his throat that she realizes he's returned. She glances up from

her book, blinking against the shift in light. When she began reading, the room had been lit up with afternoon sun, but now the room is shrouded in the weak light of burgeoning dusk.

Rory stands in the doorway, hands stuffed in the pockets of his jeans. “How’s it going?”

She shrugs, closing the book. “There’s a lot of talk of structures and diversion.” She shifts, patting the spot beside her.

Rory sits down, close enough that she can feel the coldness of his body, like she’s standing by an open window on a crisp autumn day. If only, she thinks, looking longingly at the window, through which the only breeze she feels is hot, heavy, and entirely ineffective against the stifling summer weather.

Turning back to Rory, she opens the book and points to a particular passage. His fingers brush lightly against hers as he takes the book.

““Thought-structures must be entirely defined before they can be used to ward against attack,”” he reads out loud.

“So, the first thing I need to do is define my thoughts—my mind and the way it works—and form it into something tangible. Something I can see clearly in my Mind’s Eye.” She leans closer, pointing to a particular paragraph. “The problem is that I don’t know what that should be. Fiorentini suggests long hallways or libraries, but that doesn’t feel quite right for me.”

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His eyes scan the words quickly. “He also suggests a long road. Would that work?”

“Is that what you saw?” She ducks her head to catch his eye. “When you compelled me earlier?”

He frowns, leaning back against the couch. “I didn’t see anything. I just...pushed the words to you. I didn’t look inside your head.”

“But you can look inside someone’s head, right?” She pauses, waiting for his nod before continuing. “Fiorentini thinks that we all have an inherent thought-structures, something we’re born with, and to shield my mind, I just need to discover what that structure is.” He raises an eyebrow as she shifts closer to him, placing a warm hand on his forearm. “Could you look inside my head and tell me what you see?”

He seems hesitant, which doesn’t surprise her. The idea of dipping into someone else’s mind, no matter how temporary, feels oddly intimate. She almost blushes with the thought. But Fiorentini’s writing is clear that this is a necessary first step in protecting herself, and surely Rory’s desire to see her protected from compulsion outweighs his reticence.

He does eventually nod, letting loose a deep sigh as he turns to face her fully, resting his arm on the back of the couch. His free hand reaches up and slides behind her head, his cool touch entangled with her unruly hair. She feels a slight pressure at the base of her skull, encouraging her to lean closer, which she does, indulging, momentarily, in the depth of Rory’s grayish blue eyes, the flecks of gold so pronounced at this proximity it feels a bit like looking at the sun.

Dark spots bloom across her vision, and she feels his presence inside of her mind. She is surrounded by his magic, which is cold and dusky, sliding over her thoughts like black water. It feels entirely different from the witch magic to which she is accustomed, although it almost reminds her of the Ether—nothing and everything all rolled into one.

She feels just as safe, too, with Rory's presence wrapped around her like cool silk. She is drowning, falling, even as she sits upright on the couch, even as she feels his thigh against her own and the hot breeze from the open window.

And then, like sunlight cutting through fog, she is suddenly standing in a forest. She is alone, though she can still feel Rory's presence with her, entangled in her very thoughts and consciousness. The forest looks eerily like the one just outside the window, though with an odd arrangement of flora and fauna that she's sure does not exist just outside of Graeme House.

The clearing she is standing in is edged with spindly pine trees and ancient oaks dripping in Spanish moss. But in between the towering trunks, she can see fields of wildflowers and unruly vines. She spots the sparkle of water in the distance and a winding dirt trail that cuts through the forest and stretches into the distance, obscured by a ghostly pale fog. The soft call of frogs and cicadas twirls around her as a butterfly flits across her vision.

It feels so real, the sun shining down on her shoulders, the dampness of the mist that hides her bare feet. She flexes her toes against the soft soil underfoot, feeling the sudden urge to spring into tears. This place is inside of her. This is the physical representation of her consciousness—her soul, even—and the knowledge slots into a place in her heart that she hadn't even realized was empty.

She reaches out to trail her fingers against the rough bark of the nearest tree, but when her fingers connect, the soil shifts and she is falling again, into a memory,

Rory's presence falling along with her. She recognizes the room immediately as the memory of Maddox Grey solidifies in front of her. Lit by candlelight, she stands in the middle of his laboratory. Taking up the basement of their house, the rough-hewn stone floors of the lab are carved with symbols that hurt her bare feet as she takes a step backward. Maddox's voice echoes around her. I don't want to hurt you, Cal, but it's the only way.

It was a lie, though she didn't see it at the time. Even when the knife pierced her flesh, she thought she saw sadness in his eyes. She held him after, her arm stiff with a hastily applied bandage. In the memory now, Maddox stands in front of her, ceremonial dagger in his hand and she feels an acute sense of panic rise in her. He lifts the knife—

She blinks, finding herself back in her room at Graeme House, eyesight cloudy with tears. She wipes at her cheeks, looking away from Rory.

"Sorry," she hears him say. "I didn't mean to—"

She shakes her head. "It's okay. It was my fault. I didn't mean to...pull you with me."

"Was that...?"

She looks up with a sniff and nods, feeling uncomfortable under Rory's unreadable scrutiny. She worries what he will think of her now. She so easily and naively gave up her power for a man who didn't deserve it and it took her years to fully see it. That she had been unaware of Maddox's true nature at the time—that she loved him—doesn't change the fact that she had been incredibly foolish to trust him with her body and her magic. The regret lingers, acutely, like a knife shoved through her rib cage.

“Anyway,” she says, hoping to diffuse the heat of his gaze, “I know why I couldn’t visualize a road. It’s a forest. Guess I better get to work felling some trees.”

* * *

It doesn’t take long for Calliope to realize that simply felling a tree is not the way to block a psychic intrusion. She learns this the next day when Rory compels her to stand on one leg. While his voice echoes around the forest, she envisions the nearest tree falling and when it does so, disturbing a flock of mockingbirds in the process, it falls to the ground with a loud crack—but does nothing to stop Rory’s voice. When she comes to, she is balanced precariously on one leg, and she promptly falls over. She stays on the kitchen floor, hands covering her face.

She feels Rory bend down beside her and his light, cool touch against her shoulder. “It took you longer to obey this time,” he says encouragingly.

She lowers her hands and gives him a wry smile. “Still ended up on the floor, though.”

He tilts his head, silver-streaked hair falling across his forehead. “Maybe you should take a break.”

She agrees, and a few minutes later, she settles in on the couch in her room, intending to read a novel Kane found for her in the library, only to find her attention straying toward the Fiorentini book, still open on the side table.

The last Fiorentini chapter she read emphasized that thought-structures, no matter how detailed, still need to be mapped out for the shielder to effectively guard and manipulate them. She isn’t sure how literal Fiorentini is when he uses the word “map,” but seeing that she hasn’t stepped beyond the circular clearing that she’s come to mark as her entrance point, she supposes creating a map, however informal and

abstract, couldn't hurt.

So, she slips back into her Mind's Eye and begins to explore. She soon learns that not only do the trees hold her memories—as evidenced by the accidental fall into one of her most painful memories (and with Rory observing no less!)—but everything in her forest is tied to something, whether it's an emotion, thought, or memory. The flowers that bloom at the foot of the trees hold her feelings in their pollen and petals. The moss that covers the ground is filled with her thoughts. The air is heavy with humidity and her fears.

Walking farther in, she finds that she's not as alone as she previously assumed. A few steps into the thick brambles and she finds Hun, tail wagging in excitement. The beast jumps up, balancing two large paws on Calliope's shoulders and licks her face.

Calliope laughs and gently pushes Hun back down to the ground. With one hand buried in the soft fur atop Hun's head, Calliope continues walking, marveling at the mushrooms that grow with each step. When Hun bounds forward with a growl, she stops in front of a cloud of tangled weeds, wilting leaves crying ichor as black as night. Curious, she reaches out, only to realize that infested plant is the memory of her biting Officer Burton. She pulls her hand back quickly, before the sensation of her teeth against the man's skin comes back to her.

“Well, this won't do,” she says to Hun, who huffs in agreement.

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She grabs the dark shape tightly, stuffing it down into the dirt, burying it as deeply as she can. It takes some time, as the memory keeps seeping out, like foul sewage bubbling up from underneath the ground. She is tamping down the soil with a flat palm, when the earth shifts and she finds her consciousness pulled out of her Mind's Eye and back into the physical world. A thick line of blood oozes from her nose.

She presses a hand to her face. Hun's growl reverberates against her temples. It's a warning that she is pushing herself too far. Even the house agrees, as the lights above flicker in distress and an ominous creaking resounds through the walls.

She doesn't even hear Rory's footsteps but there he is, standing in front of her, hair mussed with the speed he used to get up the stairs. "What happened? What's wrong?"

She holds the back of her hand to her nose. "Just a nosebleed."

The line in between his eyebrows deepens as he provides her with a bandana from his back pocket. "I thought you were taking a break."

She presses the bandana to her nose, inhaling the sweet smoke and vetiver smell that she's readily accepted as his. Her voice is muffled by the blood-soaked cloth when she speaks. "I just wanted to try something."

He looks worried as he sits down next to her. "I'm sorry if I made you feel like this was urgent. You don't have to master anything just yet. You still have a few more days here. And..." He runs a hand through his hair, averting his gaze. "You don't have to leave after the two weeks are up, if you don't want—if you're not ready to."

She lets his words sink in, but doesn't reply. Isn't sure how to, if she's being honest. Her nosebleed has stopped, and she twists the cloth in between her fingers. "Do you know how to play piano?" she asks suddenly.

Rory's eyebrows rise in surprise. "I know how. But knowing how to do something and being good at it are two different things," he says mildly.

"Could you teach me?"

"Maybe later." Her hesitant smile falls slightly. "I told Kane I'd walk the perimeter of the lake for him, to see if I can find any animal tracks that could help us identify our shadow-friend."

"Oh, right. Of course."

He stands and stuffs the bandana in his back pocket, where it hangs out like a grotesque flag. Rory doesn't seem to mind, but she supposes he must be used to having blood-stained garments. She's ruined at least two of his shirts so far and possibly a pair of jeans. "The house responds to you. Maybe you could ask it for something to do? Like a hobby."

She smiles and nods at him, the corners of her mouth tucked neatly into her cheeks. It's not an entirely disingenuous facial expression, but she's sure he can tell that his suggestion didn't quite ignite a fire in her. She softens the look with a nod.

She waits until she hears the back door open before she stands and looks out of the window, watching the top of Rory's head as he trots down the steps to the shore of the lake. She walks over to her bookshelves and reads a handful of the titles. But she's been knee-deep in Fiorentini's words, and she doesn't much feel like reading anymore. Instead, she takes Rory's words to heart, and she turns to an empty section of wall, tracing the outline of a flower in the wallpaper pattern as she whispers,

“What should I do with my time, do you think?”

But the house is silent, nary a creak or light flicker or even a slowly opening door. She frowns, fighting against a sense of rejection, before turning around and promptly tripping over an oddly shaped wood box.

She lands heavily on the floor, the rug doing little to cushion her fall. “That wasn’t very nice,” she says out loud. The light above burns brighter, then recedes back to its normal output. She takes this as an apology and pats the floor in forgiveness.

Inspecting the wooden box, she realizes that it’s a portable easel. She opens it up and finds a selection of paint brushes and a few sticks of charcoal. There’s no paint, but there’s a large bottle of honey and a jar of gum arabic sitting next to the easel, which she takes to mean that the house wants her to make her own paints. Luckily, it’s something she used to do with her grandma when she was little, and she wonders if the house could tell, as if the tiny dust motes floating around have infiltrated her memories and are relaying information to the wood and brick and stone.

She’s not sure if that’s creepy or comforting.

Next to the easel is a small swath of canvas, enough for at least a dozen paintings, if she keeps them relatively small. She’ll need to make frames, of course, to stretch the fabric over. The window swings back and an unusually cool breeze from the lake wafts through the room. Outside it is, she thinks, gathering herself to her feet.

She finds a fallen tree branch just a few steps into the tree line that circles the house. It takes some effort to pull it out from the underbrush and to the small clearing by the lake. The axe, found leaning against the side of the house, is heavier than she realizes, and she lifts it with a grunt, only to have it snatched out of her hands so forcefully that she falls backward.

Rory's strong grip steadies her, and she lets herself rest against his chest for a second, before straightening up. She turns, arms crossed. The manacles clink together in a way that sets her teeth on edge. "What was that for?"

"You're going to hurt yourself," he says gruffly.

"Well maybe if I didn't have to wear these cuffs, I wouldn't even need the axe." She holds them up for effect, but Rory remains unmoved. Her arms drop to her sides. "And won't I just heal anyway?" she adds with a small shrug.

"If you cut yourself, yes." He angles his head in thought, before adding, "Most likely, anyway. But I'd rather not test out whether you can regrow limbs." He looks around her at the tree on the ground. "What are you trying to do anyway?"

"I want to make some canvases." She motions toward the front porch, where her scraps of canvas fabric rest on the steps, their raggedly cut edges swaying gently in the breeze.

He shakes his head. "Go back inside the house—"

"No."

His jaw clenches, then unclenches. He opens his mouth to say something, but Calliope can't hear him. Her own indignation is like a fire roaring in her ears. Hun stands alert inside of her. Calliope's skin feels warmer, the prickling heat traveling up her arms and across her scalp. "I'm not a prisoner," she reminds him. "And you can't stop me from—"

"From what? From hurting yourself? Isn't that what we agreed? You stay for—"

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She huffs, disbelieving. “You insisted on the two-week deadline so I could show you that I won’t become a blood-hungry killer.”

His eyes flash at her. “Yeah, and you sunk your teeth right into the first human you came across.”

Her mouth drops open at his reference to Officer Burton, his words hitting her like lightning. “That’s hardly fair,” she begins to say, even though she doesn’t quite believe it. “You said he was fine.” Although the memory of her biting Burton is still buried, she can still feel its weight inside of her mind, and the soil covering it is soaked in shame.

“Maybe we should amend the agreement. You’re staying here until you can prove that you won’t bite a non-consenting human, and you won’t hurt yourself in the meantime.”

The word non-consenting seems to echo in her head and there it is again, the seeping mass of weeds pushing through the soil. Shame bubbles up inside of her, and she blinks back tears as she pushes past him, feeling a small twinge of satisfaction as the house slams the door behind her.

She races up the stairs, annoyed that she hasn’t gained the graceful speed that Rory possesses, and collapses on the couch in her room, burying her face in her hands as she cries. She sobs, heedless of the noises wracking their way out of her throat, her whole body on fire with a cureless fever.

She cries until she feels wrung dry, and with blood-tinged cheeks, she unpeels her

clothing and slips into a chilly bath. In a moment, she will immerse herself in her Mind's Eye and begin the arduous task of, once again, burying the memory of Officer Burton, but, for now, she leans back, cataloging her body. Her awareness travels down her torso, to the tips of her fingers, her knees, her toes.

There is a hesitant knock on the door.

“Hey. Calliope,” Rory begins. She hears him shift nervously and imagines his hands going to his pockets—his go-to stance when he's nervous about something. Nervous about her. Is he really that afraid of her? “I'm heading off to work. I poured you a glass. It's in the fridge. Can you—if you need anything, you know where the number is.”

She knows he had been about to tell her to stay inside. That he changed tact at the last second does little to lessen the sting of his words from earlier. She doesn't reply and a few moments later, she hears the sounds of his car starting, tires crunching against the dirt as he maneuvers the hunk of rusty metal away from the house.

Then, she slides underneath the water and begins reburying the memory of the time she sank her teeth right into the first human she came across.

18

An Invitation Accepted

Calliope

Night has truly descended by the time she finds Kane in the library. Officer Burton is buried deeper this time, and she presses a hand to her chest in hopes that it stays that way.

Kane is sitting in a pool of light cast by the reading lamp, an open book in front of him. “He didn’t mean it, you know,” he says, turning the page with his beak. “You are not a killer. And I think you’ve proven well enough that you are unlike any other vampires out there. He’s a natural born worrier, so to speak.” He turns another page. “And anyway, I would say his actions are more important than his words.”

She tries to take Kane’s words to heart, but even with the memory buried, there is still a lingering sense of it, like an echo of a thought. She fingersthe corner of a book, a ruby-red cotton cover with a silver symbol pressed into the spine. The iron manacles slide against the table, leaving a thin white scuff mark.

“Why did he Turn me?” she asks quietly—so quietly that she’s worried, and yet half-hopeful, that Kane might not have heard her.

Kane turns another page. “He thought you were pretty.”

It’s not the answer she is expecting, and she looks up at the bird, startled. “And he goes around turning every pretty girl that crosses his path, I suppose.”

“I should say not,” replies the bird. “As far as I know, he hasn’t turned anyone in centuries.” Kane looks up, head cocked to the side. “I don’t know that he’s Turned anyone since...well, I’ll let him tell that particular story.”

She narrows her eyes. “And you know all this...how, exactly?”

“There are a handful of mentions of him in various histories of the Blood Wars and at least one unauthorized biography.”

“Does he ever talk about them? The Blood Wars?”

“No,” admits Kane sadly. “But I’m sure he would tell you, if you asked.”

“Why? Because I’m pretty?”

“Yes,” Kane replies, simply.

She scoffs, realizing that she won’t get much else out of Kane. She changes the topic.

“How can I help you?”

Kane clicks his beak in the direction of the red book. “Start reading.”

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“Do we have a list of possible suspects for our lake dweller?” She pulls the book closer and opens it up, scanning the title page. *Grimoire of Griselda Jones - 1890-1891.*

“I have a list,” begins the bird. “After reading through all of the grimoires from the coven who lived here before us, I’ve been able to rule out water sprites, including kappas and nixies. And it’s definitely not a merrow, as they prefer deeper water. One of the grimoires did mention an infestation of grindylows in 1973, but they’re small and I don’t think a herd could coordinate to move as one like the shadow in the lake does.” Kane clicks his beak toward the stack of books. “So, I’m looking through some older texts, like our friend Griselda here, who I think lived in a small cabin not too far away, though how her writings ended up here, I’m not sure.”

Calliope takes in the stack of books, each of varying size and color, though all with worn edges, clearly well-loved. “All these belong to her?”

Kane squawks an affirmative. “As far as I can tell, anyway.”

“I’ll get to reading then.” But she’s barely made it through the first page when the phone rings. She and Kane share a look before she reaches for the handset that has suddenly appeared on the table.

“Hello?” she answers, hesitantly, tangling her fingers in the cord as she listens.

“Oh, hello. Calliope, isn’t it? It’s Martha. Martha Clayton. I was hoping to catch Rory before he left for work.”

“I’m sorry. You missed him. Can I take a message?” She scans the table, looking for a scrap of paper and a writing utensil.

“Oh, no that’s alright. Actually, I’m glad I caught you instead. Do you prefer chicken or beef?”

“Oh, um...” she begins, wondering how much Martha Clayton knows about Rory and his—their—particular diet. Do vampires need to keep their existence secret? She can’t remember. Witches, in general, do not try to hide their true nature, but neither do they shout it from the rooftops. It’s perfectly reasonable to find a witch living among non-magical communities, as long as their magic use is kept to a minimum and away from prying eyes.

Calliope has always thought that sounds a bit lonely though. Who wants to hide such an important part of themselves from so many people? This is one of the reasons so many witches tend to congregate together, building entire townships where frequent use of magic is encouraged and even expected. Hiding in plain sight, her grandma used to say.

Martha must know something of vampires, if she supplies their blood though, right?

“For dinner,” Martha clarifies, after a few beats of silence. “Bill and I would just love it if you and Rory came over Saturday night.”

“Oh, I don’t know—”

“Now, I won’t take no for an answer—”

“I wouldn’t want to impose—”

“Oh, it’s no trouble. You know, I’ll prepare a couple of options. See you Saturday at

seven!”

The call disconnects and Calliope is left with the dial tone and a sinking suspicion that she’s been manipulated by someone she has never even met.

“Did you just do what I think you did?” asks Kane, golden eyes trained on her.

“If you think I accepted a dinner invitation on behalf of Rory, then, yes? I think, maybe?”

“He won’t be pleased.”

She feigns indifference with a casual flip of her hair over her shoulder. “Well, he’ll just have to deal with it, won’t he?”

Kane ruffles his feathers indifferently and returns to his reading. She watches him idly as she twirls a strand of hair in thought. The worry she feels grows more acute as she replays the conversation with Martha in her head. Kane looks up after a few minutes later, noticing her vacant expression and he nips at the tips of her fingers. “I thought you were going to help me.”

She tuts. “Don’t be a bossy-boots.”

Still, she returns her focus to the book in front of her and they settle into a companionable silence, broken only by the click of Kane’s talons and the shuffle of pages being turned. The conversation with Martha fades, momentarily, while she absorbs the words in front of her, finding a rhythm in Griselda’s inner workings. Her grimoire—at least, the one Calliope is reading—is a combination of spells broken up into three main categories: incantations, rituals, or potions. Within these, Griselda has gone even further, labeling the corner of each page with a subcategory, such as medicinal, or a classification defined by colors. There’s no key, but it’s not really a

stretch of the imagination to link white with good, black with dark. The other colors are a bit more subjective, she thinks. Surely finding a lost object is more of a yellow than a purple?

Slipped in between these are illustrated pages of bestiary and herbarium glossaries, and idle musings. She finds a reference to Graeme Lake, though it is referred to as the Unnamed Lake. A few pages further, she finds a vague reference to thesanguivores who have moved into the recently constructed house. The word is written in red ink, and she traces her fingers over the letters as if she can discern some hidden detail in the fibers of the page. Surely, Rory is one of thesanguivores. But who is the other? Irina, perhaps, she thinks. Was this their home?

She continues, hungry for more about Rory and the mysterious co-owner of Graeme House but finds no other mention of thesanguivores.

* **

The moon is high in the sky when Calliope sits back, rubbing the back of her neck. She moves to stand by the window, looking at the silvery orb behind the spindly tendrils of the trees.

She hugs her arms closer to herself and leans forward until her forehead is resting on the window. From this angle, she can just see the front porch steps and the corner of the door, along with the squat terracotta pot that houses the remains of a rosemary shrub. Should do something about that, she thinks.

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Hun, sensing her change in position, raises herself up with a reminder that Rory had left her a glass of blood in the refrigerator. Alright, she tells Hun, I'm going. She leaves the library and makes her way down the stairs, feeling her way instead of turning on the hallway light—which she regrets when she trips over the dark bulk of something at the foot of the stairs.

The house takes pity on her and a light flickers on. As Calliope rubs her shoulder, which took the brunt of her fall, she looks at the pile of freshly chopped planks of wood that she tripped over.

Actions, indeed, she thinks, marveling at the precision of the cuts.

* * *

When she hears the crunch of tires coming down the driveway, she quickly pours a glass of blood, and she carries it to the front hall to welcome Rory home.

She's pinned her hair up and changed into a white linen dress that her grandmother would have approved of as a "good Church frock." She smooths out an invisible wrinkle as she hears the car door close and Rory's soft, light steps approach the front porch.

When he opens the door, he stops, looking at her warily. "What's happened?"

"Why do you think something's happened?"

"Are you hurt?" He's clutching a brown paper bag, and it crinkles as he takes a step

forward, eyes roving over her for signs of an injury. “Where’s Kane?”

“Everything’s fine.” She holds out the glass. “This is for you.”

He accepts the glass with a furrowed brow, inspecting the dark liquid as he holds it up to the light. He gives her a sidelong look. “Why?”

“Just...” She lifts a shoulder. “Just wanted to.”

He considers her for a moment and then shoves the paper bag in her direction. “I got these for you. To make up for yesterday.” A deep sigh. “And for what I said. You’re right, it wasn’t fair to you.”

She peers into the bag, finding a small notepad and a pack of finely sharpened pencils. Something soft and tender blooms within her. She tucks the feeling in a moonflower to examine later and before she fully realizes what she’s doing, she leans up on her toes to press a kiss to his cheek. When she pulls back, she bites her lip, a movement that is both nervousness regarding what she’s about to say and an attempt to quell the tingling from his cold, stubbled skin.

“There is something that’s happened,” she begins, clutching the bag to her chest.

A muscle in his jaw feathers as he arches an eyebrow.

“I might have—” she continues, “—accidentally, agreed to have dinner with the Claytons tomorrow night.” She says it quickly, words jumbling together and then braces for the impact. When his expression remains unchanged, she continues cautiously. “I know I’m a liability, but maybe I can try using some of my psychoshielding to...” Her words fade away as his jaw clenches and unclenches. His eyes seem to darken. She takes a step backward.

“No,” he says simply. “I’ll call and cancel.”

He really is afraid of me, she thinks numbly. “Why? It’s just dinner. Maybe a pot roast and a glass of wine, some small talk and—”

“You can’t eat pot roast.” He shoulders past her and pushes the kitchen door open with so much force, it bangs against the stove loudly.

She follows him, setting the paper bag on the kitchen table. “How do we know—”

He wrenches open the pantry door and tosses her a dusty jar of peach preserves, which she barely catches. “Go on.” He leans against the counter, arms folded across his broad chest. “Try it.”

“What is this proving?”

“You can’t eat pot roast. You can’t eat food, Calliope.”

“Fine. Let’s see, shall we?” She opens the jar and scoops some out with her fingers, stuffing the jam in her mouth spitefully. She swallows and gives him an icy smile. “See?”

He continues to look at her sternly, facial expression unmoved. And then, she feels the muscles in her stomach clench painfully. She barely makes it to the sink before the jam comes back, acrid and burning the back of her throat. She chokes, hands gripping the edge of the sink as the floor seems to swirl, her legs shaking. Another wrench, and more comes up, the sweet smell of peaches mingling with the coppery scent of blood. She hears the rustle of Rory’s shirt as he unfolds his arms, and then his cool hands are pulling her hair from her face, pressing against the back of her neck.

“This is why we don’t eat pot roast,” he mumbles, not unkindly.

She nods, head still bent over the sink. “I just thought it’d be nice to do something different. Get out of the house for a minute. Practice my control.” She straightens gingerly, hand covering her mouth. “Also, Martha steamrolled over me when I tried to decline.”

A light huff of amusement. “That sounds like her.”

She steadies herself against the counter, free hand pressed to her stomach, muscles still clenched in protest. Hun’s tail swishes back and forth smugly. Alright, I get it. You don’t like food, she tells the creature. She glances at Rory. “Why do you have peach jam anyway?”

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“Boss’s wife made it. Didn’t have the heart to throw it away.”

“Well, you made your point. I can call—”

He lets loose a deep sigh and shakes his head. “It’s okay. We can go. Just...don’t eat any food.”

19

A Good Blue

Rory

Calliope looks too pale, haggard, though he would never say so to her face. Her shoulders are bare, her hair pulled back in a loose braid that is threatening to come undone any second now. His earlier lesson was unnecessary, he knows, but his mind is still reeling from the implications of dinner with the Claytons tomorrow night. Pot roast, he thinks with a shake of his head.

But the dinner is just a distraction from the real thing that’s rolling around in his head: the distracted kiss she pressed to his cheek when he handed her his measly gifts, both purchased from work on a whim, a small act to make up for being so cruel earlier. Even now, an hour later, he feels the softness of her mouth against his skin, like an imprint of her lips has been burned into him. It’s why it took him a minute to realize what she said, so shocked by the physical contact and the affection in the action.

She was right; it wasn't fair to bring up the incident with Officer Burton. And anyway, this whole entire thing is his own fault. He's the one who imposed the two-week limit. He's the one who chained her up. He's the one who bit her in a sorry attempt to save her life. And deep down, if he's honest with himself, he doesn't truly feel as if what he's given her is salvation. He can't fault her for what happened with Office Burton. It's instinct. He knows better than most how hard it is to act against that need, that hunger. He knows how startling it is to realize that you can no longer live by the same moral rules you've grown up with. Vampires are not considered human in any sense of the word, after all, and their sense of morality is measured against different standards.

That Burton still walked away from Graeme House relatively unharmed is a point in her favor. After he pushed her away, she could have lunged forward again. She could have attempted to overpower him and rip Burton's throat out.

But she hadn't. She stood, pale and panicking, rooted to the floor. She saw the gruesome possibilities play out before her and she refrained from further action. That calm reaction took him centuries to perfect, and she's done it in less than a week.

He watches her as she sits on the porch steps, in a small triangle of shade, a glass of blood on the step beside her. She's sketching the view of the lake below, the scratching of the pencil melding with the sound of the pigeons cooing overhead. In the distance, the tiny black speck that is Kane flies in tight circles above the lake. He wonders if she's adding Kane in her drawing, too. The manacles on her wrists keep dragging across the page, smudging her handiwork.

If they are to have dinner with the Claytons, he will have to remove the cuffs, or explain why she's wearing them, neither of which he wants to do. He has a feeling once he takes them off, Calliope will smile sweetly up at him and ask that they remain off—and how is he going to say no to the woman who was dying and he selfishly brought back into a half-life, forever straddling the line between life and

death because he didn't want to see anyone else die that night? And if she gives him a kiss on his cheek again? He will be completely and utterly lost to her whims, he's sure of it. I already am, he thinks, rubbing his hand roughly across his face.

It wouldn't be the first time he found himself growing inordinately attached to a woman. He knew Irina Dobrev for all of five days before he let her bite him—and he made good on his pledge of devotion until Edward Vale came along and usurped him.

He's read Sabine and other accounts of the Blood Wars in which he features. In some, Youngblood is but a footnote, but in most he's peppered throughout, and, in rare cases, he has an entire chapter to himself. Regardless of the number of words dedicated to him, there is always one thing that is consistently reported: that he and Edward were rivals. The truth is that their rivalry was remarkably short-lived and, if pressed, Rory would be more likely to call Edward a friend than he would Irina. He wonders briefly where he is these days. Maybe they'll cross paths, and he can introduce him to Calliope? He shakes his head. That'd be a nightmare, especially if Irina was still sniffing around. And anyway, Rory reminds himself that Calliope will be gone soon. She never did respond to his offer to extend her stay here.

His thoughts stray back to Irina and Edward. He had been angry at the time of course, but he was already knee-deep in battles and war plans. It was only later he realized that the tumultuous end of his relationship with Irina impacted how he fought.

And it was at least three centuries later when he realized that it wasn't just the end of their relationship that was tumultuous. Every moment they spent together had been tinged in viciousness.

Her words were as sharp as her fangs, and she knew where to strike for optimum hurt and bloodshed. She told him that's what love is, a twisted rebellious thing that must be wrangled into submission.

He was a fool to let Irina Turn him and an even bigger fool for letting her convince him that his brother deserved power—that his family deserved power. She whispered poison words in his ear, and he fell for it all. Deep in his thoughts, he doesn't immediately register when Calliope turns to ask him a question.

He blinks at her. "What?"

"I said, could we go for a walk?"

He feels a jolt in his belly at the use of the word we.

"The house gave me everything except paint," she adds, "and I was thinking we could collect some flowers and leaves to make some."

We.

"Sure." He finishes his glass of blood and points towards hers. She nods and swallows the rest, eyes closed briefly as it slides down her throat. He takes both glasses and leaves them in the kitchen sink.

It's not even mid-morning yet but the sun is strong. He grabs his baseball hat from the hook beside the kitchen door, along with the wide-brim sun hat that most certainly was not there before. "Good thinking," he says, feeling a little foolish for talking to the house. He is marginally comforted when the lights flicker in reply.

In a trice, Graeme House is receding from view as they walk into the forest, a basket swinging in the crook of Calliope's arm.

"Keep an eye out for any brightly colored flowers," she tells him. "I would love to find a perfect blue for the lake. Larkspur would make a good blue. I don't know if it grows out here though. And perhaps a nice yellow, like dandelions."

“Would berries do?” he asks, pointing to a tree with dark black fruit. “Plenty of mulberries out here.”

“Perfect.” She smiles and holds the basket out as he drops in a handful of freshly picked berries. They continue, Rory sticking to what little of a trail there is while Calliope walks parallel, deep in the underbrush winding its way around the oak trees. She’s wearing a long white dress that reaches down to her ankles, tucked in at the waist with a blue ribbon. He can see the brightness of it out of the corner of his eye as she leans down to gather a few sprigs of wild rosemary, a beacon amongst the dark browns and greens of the forest.

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“Did you, uh—did you do this with your grandma when you were a kid?” he asks, kneeling to examine a leafy green shrub dotted with bright magenta flowers. He rubs his fingers along the leaves, smelling the citrusy fragrance of bee balm. He snaps off the flower, thinking that Calliope might like the dark pink color for a sunset.

“Yeah.” He can hear the smile in her voice. “She raised me to respect the earth and appreciate what it can give us. The earth has all we need, she’d say. If we ask politely.”

They take a few more steps into the forest, Calliope veering off to the left. She is momentarily hidden by a tree trunk. That’s when the smell hits him, the unmistakable stench of decaying flesh with freshly turned soil. It’s been less than a week since he buried Kid, and he curses silently that he had forgotten about it. What good is his guilt if he can’t even remember to feel it?

“Calliope, stop,” he calls out, his voice carrying just a hint of compulsion.

She obeys—has too, of course—her knees locking in place so quickly she holds out her arms to balance. His heart clenches with the accidental command as she tosses a wide-eyed, hurtful look over her shoulder. Yell at me for that later, he thinks—prays, almost—I deserve every bit of it, but please, just listen this time, Calliope.

“We should go back the other way,” he says, as evenly as possible.

She turns, and in just a few short steps, he can feel the heat radiating off her limbs as she looks up at him. Her frown deepens, and he feels the sudden urge to smooth out her brow, to run his thumb against her cheek.

“What’s down there?” she asks. Her emerald green eyes search his face. “Who’s down there?” she amends, when he doesn’t answer right away.

The sun breaks free from a cloud and a shaft of light shines down on them. He takes a step into the shadow, feeling rough bark against his back. She steps forward, too and he clenches his teeth as her gaze sears across his face.

“Why did you kill him?” Her voice is quiet, no louder than the rustle of leaves above their heads.

There’s no need to clarify who she’s talking about. “I don’t know,” he replies. He looks away. “He wasn’t a good person. He hurt more people than just you, and he was just going to keep doing it.”

Now that the words sit between them, he realizes the true meaning hidden in their depths, like unlatching a hidden compartment in a box. It’s all an excuse—a fable he tells himself and if he unravels the paragraphs and dismantles the sentences, it all falls back to his brother. He wasn’t a good person. It’s exactly what he thought about Aodhán. It’s the flimsy excuse he clung to—continues to cling to, like a raft in rough waters, barely keeping him afloat as he drowns in remorse.

It seems he will forever circle back to that one moment, and while individual variables may change, he, himself, remains constant, cast in repeating parodies of his brother’s murder, throwing out meager attempts to right his past mistakes, only to find himself back at the beginning. Two brothers. Headstrong, each fueled by their own sense of righteousness. It will always end with blood.

He stands in front of Calliope, his actions laid bare in front of her. He knows she can’t see into his mind, but he hopes she can read his eyes, see the regret, the shame, the loathing. Will she come to the same conclusion about him and his actions? Does she see that murder has no justification, and he can repeat the excuses until the end of

time but they won't do any good. He can attempt to warm his soul with their reassurances, but death is cold and unyielding.

Her fingers ghost along his cheek, his jaw, then rest on his chest. "Do you regret it? Killing him?"

He covers her hand with his own, marveling at the sense of warmth that spreads through his chest. His answer comes out faint, scraping against his mouth, wobbly with emotion. "Yes." He lets loose a deep, weary sigh as a cold tear slides down his cheek.

She wipes it away. "Let's go back the other way, then." She steps around him, but catches his hand, gently pulling him along in the opposite direction.

* * *

The afternoon wears on and, along with it, the air turns sour with heat. The sun begins to travel, angling through the trees, their bare branches barely able to block the shift in light. Entire sections of the forest are now in full sunlight, and Rory feels the same way.

It's as if he had been standing in the shadows only to find himself suddenly at the mercy of the light, his entire being unfolded in front of Calliope. He feels raw, vulnerable even, but it doesn't sit on his frame like the ill-fitting shirt he thought it would be. If anything, it's more like a small hole has been patched up. Just a few stitches, but it's enough for now.

The actual sunlight bearing down on them, however, is worrisome. He squints up at the sky.

"We should wait a little bit before walking back."

Calliope looks up too, one hand holding her hat in place. She agrees and begins to sit at the base of a tree, but Rory holds out a hand to stop her. She looks up expectantly.

He removes his long-sleeve flannel shirt, revealing a cotton raglan underneath. He fans the flannel out on the ground. “Don’t want your dress to get dirty,” he says gruffly.

She smirks. “You know there is a nifty little appliance called a washing machine.”

“Is that what that hunk of metal in the basement is?” He rolls up his sleeves to his elbows as he sits down on the ground.

She laughs and settles down on the shirt, tucking her dress around her legs. Together, they lean against the tree. The coolness of the damp soil rises up and the cry of cicadas ripples around them. Overhead, a blue jay flits from branch to branch. Calliope pulls out her new notebook and a pencil from the basket and begins to sketch. It doesn’t take long for him to realize that the subject of her drawing is him and he shifts awkwardly, hyper aware of his size.

She gives him a stern look for fidgeting and he stops, raising his hand up, palm out in surrender before letting it rest on his bent knee.

“So,” she says, eyes darting between the page and his profile. “I know about the sun thing. And now the eating thing. But the never aging. That’s true?”

“Yeah. I’ll always look like this.” He runs a hand over his chin, and she tuts at him for moving. “Unfortunately,” he adds quietly to himself.

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Calliope lowers her sketchbook, looking at him with her head cocked to the side. “The gray suits you. And you have a very striking profile. You look distinguished.”

He snorts.

She pokes his side with the eraser end of her pencil. “It’s true. I would never lie about that.” She returns to her sketch. “Do you think I’ll live forever?”

“Your body healed after the Bite. I think it’s a reasonable assumption that you will. Let’s not test it though, okay?”

She smiles. “Deal.”

The blue jay has moved on and a mockingbird has replaced it, letting out a sharp trill above them. A squirrel scurries down the branch of a nearby tree, rustling the leaves.

She uses the side of her pinky finger to smudge something on the page. “I was trying to remember what my grandma told me about vampires. She used to try to teach me about different magical communities, which is silly looking back. She never went any farther than our own little town.”

“Where’s that?”

“Broom Hollow. When I was growing up, I hated it there. I felt suffocated. When I got married, we moved to the city, and I hated it there even more. Never thought I would long for the smallness of the Broom. I even missed going to church on Sundays, though I didn’t see the point then, grandma with her pink cotton dress and

hat, always with a flower tucked into the brim. Even in winter, when the only flower in bloom was cyclamen, which she absolutely hated. She never went without a flower.”

“You could go back,” he says hesitantly. He wishes he could see her face.

“Grandma died a few years back. I went to her funeral. I don’t think there’s anything left for me in the Broom.”

“There’s always Lyon’s Cross, over on the coast.”

“Maybe.” She continues drawing, turning her head to the side, and biting her lower lip in concentration. She’s removed her sun hat and the smooth column of her neck and bare shoulders look luminescent in the sunlight.

A breeze filters through the forest, bringing the delicate scent of their surroundings: dry leaves, the heavy promise of rain, and a hint of peach-soft hyacinth petals from Calliope.

“I cut ties with a lot of the vampire community after the Second Blood War,” he finds himself saying after a few moments of silence. “Some people thought I was a hero, for finally ending it. But some never saw past the betrayal, even with the two sides coexisting. I wasn’t welcome in most places.”

She looks down at her notebook, hair falling loose from her hair clip. It flows over her shoulder and hides her face. “My grandma told me that the First Blood War never really ended. And what we call the Second Blood War is just a continuation of the first.”

“That’s mostly true. When the first one ended, no one had noticed that I was passing along information to the Unaligned. I had every opportunity to come clean with my

brother. Even after the First War ended. But somehow, I knew it would start again. I just...I couldn't let another war happen. Only I was too late."

"I think it was very brave," she says. She reaches over to squeeze his hand reassuringly before turning back to her drawing.

Rory smiles at the smudge of graphite that she leaves on his hand.

"Besides," she adds, "and I hope you don't mind me saying this, but your brother sounded like a real jerk."

He laughs, startled by her honesty. "He was, very much so."

Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Calliope drop her notebook and he turns, assuming she's finished drawing. Her focus, however, is on the plant sprouting up from the ground between them.

"Indigo," she says, fingering the edge of the nondescript leafy plant. "How odd. I didn't think it grew out here."

"That's good though, right?"

She smiles up at him. "It's a very good blue."

20

The Phantom of Graeme Lake

Calliope

Calliope grinds her foraged petals with a stone mortar and pestle. Rory sits at the

table, eyes trained on the newspaper spread out in front of him as he sips a glass of blood. Every moment or so, she can feel Rory's gaze on her back as she grinds the petal into as fine a powder as she can, but whenever she glances over her shoulder, he's focused on the newspaper spread out in front of him.

She's not quite sure what to make of his attention. Did she share too much about herself? Maybe it's not her. Maybe he regrets sharing too much about himself? Talking about the Blood Wars. Maybe it's because of what he did to the man that shot her? He's probably waiting for her to bring it up again, to needle the argument until it's ground down to its constituent parts, like the bee balm flower in her mortar right now.

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The truth is that she doesn't much care about his past, but she does, however, feel a twinge of grief for the man who shot her. But even then, grief doesn't encompass the entirety of her feelings on the matter. It's a complex feeling. An apple with too many sides, her grandma would call it. The phrase never did make sense to Calliope, but she supposes that's the whole point of it.

The man had shot her, after all, and anger still courses through her at the thought. It was entirely unprovoked. She just turned around and there he was, holding a gun in his wobbly grip. Maybe he had mistaken her for someone else? Regardless, she could have died on the cold dirty floor with the too-bright fluorescent lights, if Rory hadn't been there. So, perhaps that resentful, angry side of her feels Rory's actions were justified.

And anyway, Rory seems to be feeling enough guilt for the both of them. As much as he seems capable of switching his emotions faster than he can change his socks, he sure does seem to hold onto them. She imagines his emotions as a great big pile of socks, growing bigger with each new emotion he discards. She wonders how long it'll take for him to suffocate under the weight. How many more centuries does he have before his guilt breaks him? When it comes down to it, though, she can't dismiss the fact that vampires are natural-born killers, with instincts that support this biological imperative. After all, she has felt it even within herself.

She pours the bee balm powder into a small dish and moves onto the dried gum arabic. She's not sure where it came from or how old it is, but she's not surprised to find it in a house previously owned by witches. It was a staple in her grandma's kitchen too, used in medicinal syrups and tinctures.

She continues grinding, the slip of pestle against mortar oddly soothing. Her grandma used to tell her that she wasn't discerning enough—that she too easily forgives others for their indiscretions. It was one of the reasons she was so willing to marry Maddox. Unlike her grandma, Calliope is willing to look past the rigid binary of morality. Life is fluid and so are people, she would tell her grandma. She brushed away her grandma's concerns, overlooking the signs that her husband-to-be was power-hungry and manipulative. Even after the wedding, when the honeymoon faded away and he got down on his knees, eyes glistening with unshed tears and begged her for help. Just a little bit. To keep the business going. We won't be able to pay the bills without it.

She grinds the gum arabic harder, teeth set on edge by the friction of her foolishness.

Kane flies in through the open window and she hears a soft flutter before he lands on her shoulder, talons pinching the strap of her dress. "Is it something tasty?" he asks.

She smirks. "Only if you like eating paint."

"I do not," he replies haughtily. He pushes away from her shoulder and lands on the table, nipping at the newspaper until Rory lowers it with an annoyed, "What?"

"Can you get me some chips when you go to work tonight?"

Calliope smiles to herself at Rory's long-suffering sigh. "Sure," she hears him say. There is an indignant caw, and out of the corner of her eye, she sees Rory ruffling the soft feathers on Kane's head. "Regular or Onion flavored?"

"Both," is the reply. There is another rustle of feathers as Kane leaves.

"Not even a thanks," mumbles Rory, but when Calliope turns around, she sees the corner of his mouth twitch up, ever-so-slightly.

She smiles too, turning back to her task at hand. Perhaps she should be following her grandma's philosophy now, but even with the mistake that was Maddox Grey behind her, she still trusts her feelings. Two weeks, Rory told her. In a few short days, she will be free to leave Graeme House. Yet, she doesn't want to leave. That soft tender moonflower of affection that's growing at the base of a tree: she could nurture it, encourage it, let it spread across the forest floor.

"You okay?"

She jumps, surprised to see Rory standing behind her, and then laughs breathily. "We should put a bell on you."

The corner of his mouth ticks up slightly. "I said your name but you seemed miles away."

She sits the mortar and pestle down, wiping at a stray curl tickling her cheek. "I'm just a little tired, I think."

"It's probably the sun. We spent a lot of time outside today." He places a cool hand on her forehead, and she lets herself lean into the touch, to feel the coldness spread against her skin.

"That feels nice," she whispers, eyes closed. She feels his hand slide down to the side of her face, thumb tracing the curve of her cheek, ghosting along her jawline.

"You're burning up."

She opens her eyes slowly, looking up at him beneath thick eyelashes. "I'm always burning up."

His face is so close, she could drown in his irises. His hand falls away and his frown

deepens. “I can pick up some ice packs from the Go-Go, if you want. Might help.”

“Oh.” She blinks. “Right. Okay. Thank you.”

* * *

Calliope stands on the porch, eyes darting between her notebook and the lake as she compares the two. She makes a small adjustment to the trees, adding just a little bit of shading until she has the perfect shape of the tree line in front of her.

Her paints will have to cure overnight, but her canvas is stretched and ready to be adorned. With the sketches she’s working on now, she’ll be ready to paint first thing in the morning.

The sun is just beginning to set, and Calliope is working fast to sketch the lake view before she loses the light to sundown and the gathering storm on the horizon. The air smells of ozone and dirt. The clouds have turned angry, tinged with purple, and she tries to capture the contrast in graphite.

The manacles clink as she works, making her movements awkward and jittery. When the edge of a cuff drags across her notebook, she swears under her breath at the rip in the paper and begins to turn to the next blank page. The pencil slips from her hand, tumbling over the edge of the step. Calliope is reaching for it, when a shrill cry suddenly breaks through the rain-heavy air. The notebook slides out of her hand and she covers her ears, teeth gritted against the pain echoing inside of her head. But it’s not just inside of her head, banging against her temples. It’s bouncing against the trees, it’s rippling through the lake. It’s ripping through her throat and out of her mouth.

She needs it to end.

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She pulls herself into the Ether and the cry is cut off. She opens her eyes to the darkness, pressing a hand to her forehead, swallowing against the hoarseness at the back of her throat.

Beside her, Hun sits, head cocked to the side as she looks curiously at a faint green light pulsing in the distance. Calliope buries her hand in the thick fur on top of Hun's head. "It's okay. We're okay."

Hun huffs and points her muzzle to the light. Calliope cocks her head to the side, squinting in the distance. "What are you?" Her voice echoes against the darkness. She takes a step forward—

And then she is blinking against a sudden burst of light as Rory's hand on her shoulder brings her back to the present.

"Calliope?" he says, his voice startling loud in the quiet of the evening. She has the impression that he's been saying her name repeatedly since she slipped into the Ether.

Rory's grip around her arm is firm, and looking down, she sees why: she is one step away from the water.

"There's something wrong in the lake, I'm sure of it," she explains, blinking away the rapidly melting frost from her eyelashes. She looks out at the circling shadow, the steely blue water rippling as it twists and turns. "It's so sad, I can feel it. Like droplets of rain or the sun shining down on me in the middle of the day."

Kane flutters down and lands on her shoulder. "Did you see what it is?"

“No, but...” Her words trail off into the dusty dark. She shakes her head.

“I have to leave for work soon,” says Rory. “Since we don’t know what it is, you need...can you try to stay inside while I’m gone? Please?”

She nods distractedly, squinting again at the lake. She wonders if that faint green mist hovering above the surface is real, or if she’s beginning to see things.

* * *

The storm breaks that night, air heavy and sizzling. A boom of thunder shakes the walls, startling Calliope from her sleep. The wind picks up, bending the trees around the house, as if they are leaning in for an embrace. A tree branch scratches at the window, like a cat asking to be let in. She stands to look out the window, but thinks it feels more like the trees are trying to swallow up the house and everything and everyone inside.

She tries to busy herself with a sketch of the interior of the living room, with its piano in the corner and landscape painting in a gilded frame on the wall above the worn brown couch that dips a bit in the middle. The pencil refuses to cooperate with her hand and she tosses it aside, frustrated.

She presses a key on the piano. She presses another one. Then closes the lid with a snap.

She makes her way to the kitchen, which is dark and forbidding, but soon warms up after she switches on the small lamp on the counter. It provides just enough light if she wants to continue her sketching. She doesn’t reach for her notebook and pencil though. She stares out at the darkness beyond the house, as the rain lashes against the window, and she squints to see the lake.

Yes, it's still there—the faraway cry. She knows it's a call for something or someone but isn't sure she's the right person to answer. It's enticing though—the mystery and the sadness. As the rain gets louder, the cry follows suit, straining to be heard over the crack of lightning and the heavy rolling thunder.

Perhaps, if she just got a little closer—maybe just stood on the back porch—perhaps then she could hear it better. She could discern the meaning and help the poor thing. She reaches for the door, but there is a flutter of wings and Kane is on her shoulder, talons piercing her skin.

“I don't think you should do that,” he says.

She shoos him away. “I'm just going to the porch. It'll be fine.” She opens the door, pushing against the surprising force of the wind. Leaves and twigs are bandied about and scratch against her legs as she takes a step outside. Even with the overhanging of the porch, her skin is quickly coated in a fine mist of rain, like tiny needles against her shins.

The cry is indeed louder tonight and as she blinks against the rain, brushing her hair away from her face, she can see that glow in the center of the lake. It is soft against the harsh rain, yielding compared to the sharp bend of the trees and the pebbled surface of the lake.

She takes another step forward, trying to get a better view, trying to get closer to the sound. But she is too close to the stairs and her foot finds no resistance, the surprise of which sends her toppling forward.

She lands halfway down the stone steps. If she still had breath in her lungs, she's sure it would have been knocked out with the impact. The rain is pelting against her face, clouding her vision. She lies still, letting the cool water soak through her dress and her hair. The wind is louder down here. She wipes at her face and blinks up at the

house, the orange kitchen light like a beacon in the dark. She thinks she sees the shadow of Kane in the open doorway, but her attention is once again drawn to the lake, where a loud cry pierces through the sound of the storm. So close. She picks herself up and kneels, squinting against the rain and the dark.

Is that the creature in the lake? That small dark shape cresting slightly above the wave? She leans forward, hands gripping the slick stone. The creature is so close—the answers to what has been haunting their lake so very near. If only she could just get a little closer. Her hand slips from the step, and she finds herself plunging into the inky depths of Graeme Lake. The water is cold, almost as cold as Rory's touch. Her body takes over and before she really comes to terms with the fact that she's in the water, her arms and legs are working to keep her afloat.

Something brushes against her leg, and she kicks, instinct once again pushing her to move. But the manacles weigh her down, making it hard to swim, to keep her head above the water. She curses herself for not listening to Kane. For not listening to Rory. What will he do when he comes home and she's not there? She suddenly feels an urgent need to get back to the house. The moonflower vine grows stronger. Hun growls. The creature skims along her bare feet, and she kicks her legs, arms flailing, scrabbling to get her back to the steps. The wind is strong, the current carrying her farther away from safety. The green light is brighter now, and she closes her eyes as she feels the warmth of the creature's breath on the back of her neck.

21

A Rare Beast

Rory

Rory hunches over the sales counter at the Go-Go, squinting at the tiny television set, as he flips through the channels. He lands on the local news and turns up the volume

a few clicks.

The image on the television set is framed in static and slides to the left every few minutes or so. The news anchor's face is temporarily dismantled and put back together again as he talks solemnly about a recent plane crash that took the lives of over sixty passengers.

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The story ends and the news anchor moves on, but Rory tunes him out. He had only been watching to see if they cover the suspicious death of Maddox Grey and, subsequently, the disappearance of Calliope Grey. It's been at least three days since the local news last ran the segment though. Authorities have since declared her husband's death as accidental, and Calliope's disappearance is no longer cause for alarm, or, at least, not cause enough to run news segments on. More likely, they're just bored of the same old story.

Not for the first time, he wonders if he should update her about her husband's death. Does it matter? He knows she grabbed the newspaper from the library. It was vague but left no question that Calliope's disappearance was suspicious. There were even a few thinly veiled accusations that she murdered Maddox Grey and then fled.

He wonders if she did have something to do with it. Based on the brief memory he accidentally saw, Maddox Grey certainly had it coming. He could feel her fear in that moment, a cold dread skittering across his arms as the glint of steel inched closer. The memory was tainted with her emotions for her husband. She loved the man so much that she was willing to face her fear in order to help him, and Maddox Grey used that to his advantage. For Hades sake, Rory would have gladly killed the man himself, based on that one memory alone. Any yet, he can't see Calliope as a killer. Not really.

The real question circling behind these thoughts is when will Calliope leave? At the end of next week, like they agreed? Her husband is dead. She had nothing to do with it and the authorities are no longer looking for her. Once she masters her cravings, she is free—and it seems like she already has, if he's being honest.

Atapping at the door draws his attention back to the present moment. He looks up from the small television set behind the counter, and his eyes flash when he notices Kane. There's only one reason Kane would venture this far from the house, particularly in this weather.

He doesn't even bother to let the bird in, just curses under his breath as he grabs his keys. He flips the "Closed" sign and lets the door slam shut behind him.

"She fell," says the bird, chest puffed out in worry. "It was too dark and with the rain, I couldn't see. I think she fell into the lake."

"Why the fuck didn't you tell her to stay inside?" He kneels to scoop Kane up into his hand before ducking out into the rain and slipping into the car.

"I did," says Kane, hopping down to the passenger seat. "I can't help it if she doesn't listen to me."

"And you have no clue what's in the lake?" asks Rory, darting a look at Kane as he fumbles with his keys. The engine roars into life and Rory turns the wheel too sharply as he maneuvers out of the parking space. The tires slide dangerously against the tarmac. He tightens his grip on the steering wheel.

Kane clicks his beak. "I have a list of possibilities..."

Rory slams his palm on the steering wheel, gritting out another curse between clenched teeth. "She can't drown." He glances at Kane. "Right?"

"Most likely not. She doesn't need her lungs to breathe after all."

"But whatever the creature is..." Rory's voice fades. His thoughts are filled with images of her bloodied and broken, body ravaged by an unknown beast.

“I don’t want her to die,” says Kane, quietly. “I like her.”

“Me too.” He presses harder on the pedal. The car lurches forward, tires protesting.

* * *

Finally, after what feels like hours later but is only a few minutes, he turns abruptly into the driveway of Graeme House.

He flings the door open and jumps out of the car, his boots slipping on the dirt drive which is now turned to mud. He feels water seep into his socks and his clothes stick to him as he runs around the side of the house. He pulls himself onto the steps with ease. He blinks, eyes and ears strained for any sign of Calliope, wishing desperately for a flash of pale skin in the dark. Instead, he is greeted by a strobe of lightning, hot-white above him and the sound of thunder echoing low against the earth, so close he feels the vibrations in his chest.

His mind is frantically trying to recall what she was wearing earlier, when he left. Was it the cream cotton dress or the blue sundress that tucks in at her waist? Maybe it was the long white one with the floral pattern and the sleeves that flow down to her elbows? No, it was sleeveless. White. Linen.

Fuck, he thinks, taking the steps two at a time. The rain has done the lake well and the shoreline just touches the rough-hewn steps. By morning, the lake may even be close to full again, the stairs halfway submerged.

He can’t see her from the steps and there is no evidence of her on the shore. He calls out her name, but his voice is snatched away by a crack of lightning. He looks up at Kane, who is hiding on the porch, feathers soaked. Kane opens his beak and Rory thinks he, too, is calling Calliope, though only the sound of the rain and wind roars in his ears.

So, he does the only other thing he can do: he jumps into the water, pausing only to slip off his boots. He dips his head below, his focus pulled by the faint green light pulsing in the center of the lake.

He begins to swim. As he approaches, he sees a white blur and his stomach swoops with relief when he recognizes Calliope, her hair fanning out around her like rays of sunshine. She's clutching to the remains of a canoe that was wrecked and abandoned there a decade ago at least and staring into the green glow. When he reaches her, her features are relaxed, almost in awe of what she sees. She looks like a river nymph, green light casting an ethereal hue against her pale skin, white dress swirling around her slim body. He grabs her hand, and she turns, startled to see him.

But then she points toward the light and smiles, mouthing something that Rory hopes is, "It's okay."

She lets go of the canoe and tugs on Rory's shirt as she kicks upward. When they reach the surface a few seconds later, it is to the fine mist of a fading storm, the soft pitter-patter as gentle as a lullaby. A sizzle of lightning resounds above them as they tread water, and Rory pulls her along back to the stairs.

Kane is on the steps as they approach, hopping from side-to-side. Rory helps her up, his broad hands encircling her waist. The dress is clinging to her, tangling around her legs. Even from behind, he can tell it's somewhat see-through, and he averts his eyes awkwardly.

She doesn't seem to notice as she wipes at her hair plastered to her forehead. "I know what the creature in the lake is."

"You shouldn't have gone investigating like that," says Kane, nipping at her elbow. "It was dangerous."

“I’m sorry,” she says sincerely, wiping at the water dripping into her eyes. “But there’s a creature out there who needs our help.”

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Rory is squeezing out his shirt. “Come on, inside.” He scoops up Kane, whose feathers are still wet, and he keeps a hand hovering near Calliope’s lower back as he ushers her up the stairs and into the kitchen.

He deposits Kane on the table and disappears through the living room, only to reappear a minute later with the blanket that usually hangs off the back of the couch.

He wraps it around Calliope’s shoulders, mapping the parts of her he can see, looking for signs of injury or distress. He cups the back of her neck, thumb tracing a pattern behind her ear. “Are you hurt?”

She shakes her head, eyes softened at the tender display of his worry. “I know what’s in the lake, though, and it’s hurting a lot.”

“What is it?” asks Kane, hopping closer to them, head cocked to the side.

She looks over her shoulder at the window. It’s still dark and her own ghostly reflection stares back at her. “It’s a kelpie.”

Kane’s neck twists even further to the side. “Kelpies don’t stay in lakes like this. At least not for long.”

She looks down at the bird, her lips pale and shaking. “They have if they’ve lost their bridle.”

* * *

The sun dawns with renewed strength, but none of the residents of Graeme House seem to notice. All three are ensconced in the library, surrounded by books, tiny motes of dust swirling around them as the sky gradually lightens.

Rory had gone back to finish his shift at the gas station, and the three remaining hours passed by agonizingly slow. He wracked his brain for any knowledge of kelpies, but he's never seen one, let alone met one.

Even when the Blood Wars intruded upon other magical communities, Rory would often find himself fighting against witches, warlocks (he had been unaware that they were not the same as witches at the time), and even the occasional shifter—but never the Fae. They rarely get involved in such earthly squabbles. Probably for the best, he always thought. The Fae are notoriously tricky to deal with, capricious and unreliable.

When he returned home, he joined Calliope and Kane in their research on kelpies. They sit in silence as they read, marking pages of significance and, even, occasionally sharing interesting sections out loud.

When Rory does notice the lightening of the sky, he closes his book and leaves the room, returning a few minutes later with two glasses of blood.

“So, kelpies are water demons that can shapeshift,” begins Calliope, in between sips, “but more often than not, their true shape is a horse. I knew that, and that they’re very protective of their bridle, but so far, I haven’t learned much more. There’s a lot of speculation and not so many facts.” She takes another sip and licks her lips, pressing a thumb to the corner of her mouth to catch a fallen drop. “Actually, there are a lot of contradictions even among the three books I’ve read through so far.”

“Same,” says Kane, nails clicking against the table. He pecks at the book in front of him. “This one does mention a few important tidbits. The author, PhillipaLedbetter,

spent time with a kelpie tribe in Ireland. One of the last tribes, it seems. The kelpie population has since dwindled. I think that's why you might be finding so many contradictions. They seem to be more solitary creatures these days."

Rory pulls Kane's book closer and inspects the cover. The second edition of *Rare Beasts* by Phillippa Ledbetter is a hardcover printed in 1984. The cover image is a painting of a dark skeletal horse-like creature with glowing red eyes. The beast's legs melt into darkness.

"So far, I've learned that kelpie tears can purify any body of water," continues Kane, "and that they mate for life."

Rory flips to the inside flap of the dust cover where a black-and-white photo of a woman smiles up at him. Phillippa Ledbetter, as her bio proclaims, is "the number one authority on Fae heritage and culture currently living in the United States." Her first-person account of her time spent with the last kelpie tribe is a "shimmering, visceral story that is sure to quickly gain a place among the Fae lexicon." He flips through the pages. "So, the kelpie in our lake, how did it get here?"

Calliope lifts a shoulder. "I'm not sure. But the important thing is that she can't leave. Her bridle was lost. Or stolen. She didn't specify."

"She talked to you?" asks Kane.

"Sort of. It's hard to describe. I could hear her voice in my head. She was so...so sad. And in pain. It hurt."

Kane hops closer to her. "You felt her pain as your own?"

Rory, who had been flipping through chapters, reading snippets here and there, suddenly looks up. "Have you read this?" He shoves the book toward Kane. "The part

about a kelpie's bite?"

Kane squawks. "Yes, but—"

"A kelpie's bite is fatal to vampires."

"So?" asks Calliope. "Doesn't mean we shouldn't help her."

"It's too dangerous."

"She's in pain, Rory." Calliope leans closer, a hand pressed to her chest. "I'm in pain. I can hear her, even now."

Rory blinks at her, noticing, for the first time, her strained expression, eyes rimmed in red, and the rigid line of her shoulders. Her face is pale and the book she clutches is shaking slightly in her white-knuckled grip.

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He hadn't realized that she was still hearing the kelpie's cry. He can't hear it—has never been able to hear it, in fact. He sighs. "I'm sure there's a way to help her while keeping our distance."

She nods enthusiastically. "Yes. We can use a location spell to find the bridle. Once we have that, we can leave it somewhere she can grab it."

"Can you still do magic like that?" he asks, gently.

"Sorry, when I said spell, I meant potion. Which is really just alchemy. Right? Or, not really, but close enough, yeah?" She scoots forward, grabbing Rory's hand. "And you can do that, right?"

His fingers twitch against her grip and, feeling a surge of something like bravery, he interlaces his fingers with hers. It feels like he's reached into an open flame. The edge of a manacle digs into his wrist. "We'll do whatever we can to get that bridle," he assures her.

"Thank you," she says, pressing a kiss to his cheek, her lips warm as he leans into the touch. She pulls back, a small smile tucked into the corner of her mouth, her emerald eyes sparkling with excitement.

Kane squawks. "We can search the grimoires for a location spell."

Calliope looks away, though Rory can't help but let his gaze linger on her, storing the image of that smile, like a pebble in a pocket.

“I’m way ahead of you,” she says, reaching for a sage-green book. There is a delicate floral pattern gold-stamped into the front cover. “Our good friend Griselda has the perfect spell.”

Excerpt from the Grimoire of Griselda Jones - 1890-1891: For the Finding of Lost or Stolen Items - particularly if they are sentimental

Start with Common Base (see Appendix A).

Add—

A piece of the object you are searching for, or something from the owner, such as nail clippings, blood, or hair. If this cannot be acquired, one may find some measure of success with a representation of the missing object, though results may be lacking

Shavings from the horn of a minotaur, willingly given

Rosemary, cut with a silver ceremonial knife, tied with a piece of string soaked in thieves’ oil.

Petals of forget-me-not, ground up as fine as possible

Poke berries, pressed and strained

Cowslip—a small bunch, tossed in

Leave for three days to cure. Coat an adder stone. Follow.

Excerpt from the Grimoire of Griselda Jones- 1890-1891: Appendix A: Common Base

Purified water

Salt

Gum arabic powder

Neutral spirits

Bring all to a boil in your favorite cauldron. Remove from heat. The boil should die naturally. Use only once water has stilled.

22

The Grackles Are a Menace

Rory

The Clayton Farm stands before them in the gathering dusk, a soft white structure against the teal-blue sky with its sweeping arcs of pink. Beside the house, fading off into the distance, are rows of squat red barns and a system of fencing that separates cows and goats and even a few horses from the fields of produce. Beyond that, Rory can see the beginning of an orange grove. Bill once told him there's a few grape vines out there too, from which the somewhat illegal Clayton Farm Wine is made.

Behind the main house, just out of view, Rory knows there is a chicken coop, and off to the side, he can see the silhouette of Elijah, leaning over the engine of a beat-up Chevy truck. The automatic front porch light clicks on as the sky darkens, illuminating the brown door with its handmade wreath of sunflowers.

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Rory turns off the car and looks over at Calliope. She's wearing a blue dress so dark it looks like it was cut from the expanding night sky above. Her long curls are pulled back into a braid and, remarkably, seem to be staying put. In her lap, sits a small bunch of wildflowers left over from their sojourn in the forest the day before. Her lower lip is between her teeth, and he can just see the needlepoint taper of her canine tooth.

At first, he thinks her worry is anxiety about the kelpie. They've spent all day buried in kelpie lore after all and have only uncovered a handful of verifiable facts. One thing that was emphasized, across almost all the texts, is that a bridle is a kelpie's most sacred artifact. The longer a kelpie is separated from their bridle, the more physical and emotional anguish they will experience, as they slowly drift into grief-stricken madness. Every minute he and Calliope spend away from the library is another minute that the kelpie of Graeme Lake is suffering.

Rory is worried as well, of course. He feels it too: the minutes slipping through his fingers as the sense of urgency increases. But his worries are more focused on the small problem of procuring the ingredients for the potion. Before Calliope locked herself in her room to get ready for dinner at the Claytons, they bickered over where they could find the more obscure items, such as Minotaur horn powder (Rory is still on the fence as to whether a Minotaur is real, to be honest) and poke berries (which don't grow wild in Willow Lake and are unlikely to be stocked by the general store downtown).

In the end, Calliope won: they will travel to Lyon's Cross, the nearest magical town, to find an apothecary. It's not that he has a better idea on how to acquire the ingredients, but that he's been avoiding magical communities for a reason. He is

perhaps willing to face the consequences should he be recognized, but what about Calliope? Would she be a target by mere association? It's not something he's willing to learn.

But Calliope wouldn't budge, and he can concede that there are few alternatives. They are set to leave in a few days, when Rory doesn't have to worry about being back for work. Not for the first time, he questions why he's so willing to fold in the face of Calliope's determination. It's like something has shifted after their walk through the forest. She has absolved him from his past crimes, however subtly, and he feels he owes her. "You've got it bad," Kane told him while he waited for Calliope to get ready for dinner earlier.

He denied any understanding of the bird's cryptic words, and they left Kane with his books and a promise to return with pot roast, if that is, indeed, what is being served tonight. However, looking at Calliope now, as she twists her fingers in her lap, he can't help but think Kane's right.

"Feels weird being without them. So light." She wraps a hand around one of her bare wrists. The manacles were removed before they left the house. Out of curiosity, he suggested she try cracking one of the concrete pavers that line part of the driveway. It would seem his earlier worries are unfounded. The paver barely crumbled.

She's still looking at the house, wrist clenched in front of her chest. "If I lose control, you'll—stop me, right?"

Realization of Calliope's true worries washes over him and his own memory of how she reacted the last time she was around a human comes back to him. "You'll be fine," he assures her, thinking of her frozen in the kitchen, fear and regret writ large on her face.

"No." She turns in her seat so that she's facing him. "Compel me if I try to...well,

you know. Just promise.”

He looks at her solemnly, taking in her furrowed brow and pursed lips. She looks frantic, on the verge of tears. Not the best way to show up for dinner. “I promise,” he says quickly. “But you’ll be fine.”

“How are you so confident?”

“Because I trust you—” Her eyes flash at him, surprised, “—and because I can compel you,” he finishes, with a smirk. “But I won’t need to.”

She huffs lightly, looking steadier than before, and she nods. “Right. Okay. Let’s do this.”

They exit the car and make their way down the front pathway, her pointy-heeled boots sliding precariously against the gravel here and there. She’s clutching the bouquet in front of her like a shield.

Martha greets them before they even knock, the screen door squeaking as she holds it open. The smell of freshly baked bread and roasting meat spills out from the house, and it smells so welcoming—so homey—that Rory feels that pang of something quite like yearning. It’s a different homelife to the one he grew up in, which was cold and brittle, not to mention so many centuries ago, the idea of electricity and television would have been considered witchcraft. If his childhood was forged in iron, however, then Martha and Bill’s home is an heirloom quilt that he’d happily wrap around his shoulders.

“Come on in,” Martha says with a smile. “It’s so nice to meet you in person, Calliope.”

“You too.” Calliope smiles and holds out a bouquet. “I can’t thank you enough for

inviting us over for dinner.”

Martha places her hand over her heart, taking the bouquet with her free hand. “Our pleasure, darling.” Then, she turns to Rory and clucks her tongue. “Too thin, as usual. Let’s get you a drink.”

She motions for them to follow down the entryway, into the kitchen and then through the large archway that opens into the living room. Rory ducks his head as they pass through. He feels too big for the tiny living room, a dark hulking monster amongst the chintz loveseat and pastel floral paintings that adorn the white walls. It’s a familiar feeling though; he is forever hunching over to fit himself into spaces that are too small and he has long since made peace with it. Doesn’t stop him from noticing, though.

He can see Martha as she flits about the kitchen, arranging the bouquet in a recycled milk bottle before leaning down into the fridge. Rory is entirely prepared to hold onto a glass of iced tea through the evening, letting the condensation drip down his hand as he moves the glass around in an effort to make it look like he’s drinking it. But really, he should have known better. Bill and Martha know full well what he is, and he’s grateful that she hands him a small blue glass of blood without hesitation. Chicken, by the smell of it. Fresh, too.

“I wasn’t sure which you preferred,” Martha is saying. She bustles into the living room with a glass of wine for herself, “but we’re having chicken tonight and it seemed a waste to not...use it all.”

“Thanks, Martha,” he says, earnestly, taking a sip. He looks over at Calliope, who is clutching her glass so tightly, he’s worried she’s going to break it. He takes a step closer to her, giving her a reassuring smile. She gives him a strained look in return, but her shoulders do seem to loosen as she takes a sip of her drink.

Heavy footsteps announce the arrival of Bill. He passes through the archway, carrying a bottle of beer. His presence is stoic but congenial, and Rory realizes he's never really had much of a conversation with Bill outside of placing an order and a few tidbits of a smalltalk.

Bill shakes Calliope's hand, introducing himself as "Mr. Martha Clayton," with a chuckle. "Bill," he adds. "Bill Danes. It's nice to meet you."

Calliope smiles and Rory notices that when she drops her hand back to her side, it stays there. Likewise, the hand clutching her drink is decidedly less tense as Bill's grin and endearing joke put her at ease. But no sooner does Bill stand back than Martha takes his place again, pulling Calliope's attention away to the side. They sit down on the loveseat, heads bent toward each other like old friends.

This leaves Bill and Rory standing awkwardly by the unlit fireplace.

"Sorry about this," says Bill, taking a swig from his bottle. "Martha's been dying to get you two over here. In a little while, she's going to ask you about her great-grandfather, by the way."

"Oh, yeah, that's fine." Rory takes a sip from his glass. "Can't say I remember him much..."

Bill shrugs. "She found some photos."

Rory makes a noncommittal noise and takes another sip of his drink.

“You smoke?” asks Bill suddenly, clearly relieved to have come up with something to take the edge off the awkward small talk. “I’ve got some cigars.” He looks over at Martha and Calliope who are deep in a discussion. “Let’s leave the women to it.” He waves toward the kitchen, ushering Rory out through the side door and onto the back porch.

The rocking chairs creak as they sit, and heavy smoke soon clouds the view in front of them as Rory alternates between puffs of cigar and sips of blood. The sun has truly set, and the darkness presses comfortingly in around them. The cicadas are a constant hum in the background, along with the gentle metallic clinks coming from around the side of the house, where Elijah works on his truck. Rory can see the glow of the flood light Elijah is using, but otherwise, the fields are a sea of dark before them.

Bill puffs on his cigar. “I saw Officer Burton the other day,” he says casually, the words tinged with smoke.

Rory’s facial expression doesn’t change, though he does tighten his grip on the glass.

Bill continues. “He had some nice things to say about your Calliope, though he called her something different.” He takes a swig of his beer. “I couldn’t help but notice some scabs on his neck. That from...” Bill motions vaguely toward the window, where the shape of Calliope’s figure can be seen through the lace curtains in the living room.

“She’s...” He takes a sip, searching for the right word. “Learning.”

“You have her under control?” Bill’s voice is soft, but not threatening. Almost fatherly.

Rory nods. The cicadas fill the lull in the conversation. “I like it here,” he adds at length. “I don’t intend to leave anytime soon.” I like it here with Calliope, he thinks.

“Good. We like having you here.”

The screened door creaks open, letting Martha and Calliope out onto the porch. Martha has a shoebox with old photos, including one of her great-grandfather at the local bar in town. Rory can be seen in the background, laughing with someone else just out of frame. Calliope leans over his shoulder to see the photo better, propping herself on the back of the chair.

“Looks like Carla’s old place,” says Bill, glancing over.

“The Grackle’s Nest,” says Rory with a smirk. The smirk fades, however, as he looks closer at the photograph. He can’t see the face of his companion, but he can see the ring on his hand and knows it’s his brother. The handwritten date on the back of the photo is June 1952, half a year before the Second Blood War began. He had forgotten that Aodhán had visited him. It was a brief visit, only a few days, and he spent the whole time rambling about revolution and honor.

“Warren Clayton figured us out early on,” he says. “But he never judged us. I liked him. He was a good man.”

“Do you remember my mother?” Martha hands him a photo of a woman who looks almost exactly like Martha, though her chin is pointier and her nose a little longer. But the cheeks are the same, the smile wide and unencumbered.

Yes, he thinks, but he only remembers when she died. So young. He recalls being sad

at the news, though his brother couldn't understand how or why Rory bothered to maintain friendly relationships with humans. "She was beautiful. Kind to everyone. Always said hello to me."

He's handing the photo back to Martha when the soft sounds of the night are interrupted by a loud crash from beside the house, followed by a string of expletives and fast approaching footsteps.

Elijah comes into view, a stained shop rag wrapped haphazardly around his hand.

Martha clicks her tongue. "What have you done now?"

The smell of blood fills the air. Not a lot though—a small quantity that Rory is perfectly capable of ignoring. It doesn't stop the hair on the back of his neck from standing on end and sharp twinge in his gums.

Calliope stiffens, taking a step out from behind the rocking chair, her eyes narrowed on the rag tied around his hand.

"Sorry, ma'" Elijah says. "Just slipped."

Out of the corner of Rory's eye, he sees Calliope lift her foot and take one step closer. Just one, but it's enough. He leans forward to push himself out of the chair, a hint of magic at the back of his throat, his command reading itself on his tongue, when a grackle comes out of nowhere, chest puffed up, wings flapping.

The bird's loud juddering cry pierces the night and Calliope stops, frozen in the middle of the porch with her hand on her throat and her teeth clenched.

Martha ushers Elijah into the kitchen and the door closes, cutting off the smell of blood.

Bill swats at the grackle. “The grackles are a menace out here,” he says with a curse.

“Same at the lake,” agrees Rory. “They’ll take the food right out of your mouth.” He shoots an apologetic look at the nearby tree where he’s sure Kane is keeping watch.

Bill chuckles. “Just the other day...”

As they listen to Bill’s story, Rory moves closer to Calliope, placing a hand on her lower back. Her hip bumps against his. He slides his hand to rest lightly on her waist.

He hopes his touch is reassuring.

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He hopes it tells her that she did good, and that he's proud of her, and that everything is okay.

He tries to send the thoughts to her in the same way he would send a command, only less so, because he's not reaching into her mind through his touch.

He's letting his own magic reach out to her, like a gentle knock on the door, a whispered encouragement. He's not sure if it works, but she does slowly relax, hip jutting against his side as she leans against him.

The feeling of her so close is distracting, and he struggles to pay attention to Bill's story, laughing a split second too late when Bill exclaims that the grackle stole the worm right out of his hand as he was trying to hook it.

They're laughing when Martha comes back, a heartfelt apology already forming between her lips.

"It's okay," says Rory, quickly, squeezing Calliope closer to him. "Will Elijah be okay?"

"Yes," she says with exasperation. "That boy will lose a limb one of these days, if he isn't careful."

The conversation continues, the ebb and flow of stories finding a sustainable rhythm. Rory's hand stays around Calliope's waist.

He turns braver as the night wears on, his light touch turning heavier, his thumb

tracing a pattern up and down the seam of her dress. He waits for her to move away, but she never does.

* * *

Later, when Rory is driving home, he glances at Calliope with a small smile. Her face is lined in red from the light on the dashboard, and she smiles back, reaching over to rest her hand on his thigh. When he glances over again, her eyes are closed, head bent awkwardly as she drifts to sleep.

When he pulls into the drive at Graeme House, he turns off the car and looks up at the dark house in front of him. The air is thick with humidity, the promise of another storm that may never come. The moon is low in the sky, a heavy waxing gibbous, almost a full moon.

He closes the car door as quietly as possible, to not wake Calliope, then makes his way to the passenger side. He scoops her into his arms easily and makes his way up the front steps. The door opens obligingly, and Rory mumbles his thanks.

The hallway light flickers on and then dims as he crests the top of the stairs, as if the house, too, does not want to wake Calliope. Easing open the door to her room with the toe of his boot, he makes for the couch by the window and lays her gently down.

He brushes her hair from her forehead and her eyes flutter open, still heavy-lidded with sleep.

“Why did you save me?” she asks softly, nuzzling into the pillow.

He tucks a curl behind her ear. “Because you didn’t deserve to die.”

“How did you know? How could you tell?”

“Just could.” He brushes his thumb against the soft curve of her cheek, wishing he felt confident enough to kiss her.

“Thank you for saving me,” she mumbles, sleep pulling her away again.

He leaves the room, closing the door with a quiet click. A moment later, there is a flutter of wings and Kane lands on his shoulder.

“That was a close one,” says the bird.

Rory nods. “Thanks for being there, by the way. Sorry about what I said...”

“It’s okay. I’m not truly a grackle, you know right?”

“Oh yeah?” Rory arches an eyebrow. “What are you then?”

Kane squawks, nipping Rory’s ear affectionately. “I’m a menace, obviously.”

23

Seaweed Caught in The Tide

Calliope

Calliope awakes to the sounds of a hungry sky, gentle thunder rolling across the top of the house. Several thoughts fill her head at once: the feeling of Rory’s hand on her waist, his thigh beneath her palm clenching as he pushes the brake, his words from the night before: you didn’t deserve to die.

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At the forefront, however, is the smell of Elijah's blood, an earthy, peppery scent that spurred the step forward—that step that repeats in her mind, Hun leaping up inside of her with a snap of teeth, on a loop, like a scratched vinyl record. She barely realized she had moved until Kane distracted her.

She covers her face with her hands, shame washing over her. A whimper echoes inside of her, vibrates through her joints. She slips into her Mind's Eye easily, reaching out to hold Hun, burying her face in fur, stroking the horns on either side of her ears. The whimper stills into a purr. "It's not your fault," she whispers. "I'm not upset with you."

She stays like that for several minutes until Hun is coaxed back to her seated position. "I'll get you some breakfast soon, okay?"

Hun's ears perk up, tail swishing and she bumps Calliope's hand with her nose before collapsing into a curled position, head resting on her tail.

Calliope turns to the other matter at hand: the prickly bush that has sprouted up overnight. It's choking the ground, its spikes growing much too quickly and much too sharp.

Ah, my embarrassment, she thinks, reaching out to finger a wilting leaf. She decides to do some pruning, snapping off unruly branches, extricating prickles embedded in the nearby tree. She spreads her palm against the damaged bark, raw and soft under her skin. When she steps back, the prickly bush is gone and the beginnings of a clematis vine are snaking their way up and around the tree trunk, the plum petals unfolding from bright green shoots.

When she opens her eyes, sunlight suffuses the corners of her bedroom. She stays there for a moment, listening for the sounds of Rory and Kane moving about the house. But the house is silent and, frowning, she rises from bed, changing quickly into a clean dress. She leaves her hair down and it fans out around her shoulders, an impossibly curly mess that almost reminds her of the prickly plant in her Mind's Eye. Downstairs, she finds Rory and Kane on the back porch talking in low voices. The air is still thick with the threat of rain, but the dappled sunshine seems to be keeping it at bay for now. She stands in the doorway watching the two as their hushed discussion dissolves into barely concealed, yet good natured, bickering.

Kane notices her first. "Good morning," he says, head twisted to the side.

"Morning." She steps out onto the porch. "What's all this?" She points toward a bundle of plants on the table.

Rory hands her a cup of blood. "Rosemary, cowslip, and forget-me-nots." He holds up a nondescript plastic bottle with clear liquid. "And for our neutral spirits, we have the cheapest vodka the Go-Go had."

She holds her glass with both hands and takes a sip. "Sorry, I slept so long."

Rory stuffs his hands in the pockets of his jeans (the ones with the hole in the knee—must do something about that, she thinks). He tilts his head and a lock of gray streaked hair falls across his forehead. "It's okay. You needed rest."

She nods, taking a sip. "Well, I'm up now and ready to help. What can I do?"

Rory consults the list he's made, Calliope reading over his shoulder.

Piece of object - ?

Minotaur horn powder - LC?

Rosemary - forest - silver knife

Thieves' oil - LC

Forget-me-not - forest

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Poke berries - LC

Cowslip - forest

Adder stone - Kane? Lake?

Purified water - Lake?

Salt

Gum arabic powder

Neutral spirits - Go-Go

“LC is Lyon’s Cross, yes?” She sees Rory’s nod out of the corner of her eye. She bites her lip as she scans the rest of the list, then looks again at the first item. “I can get the first bit right now.”

She moves too quickly for Rory, though that doesn’t stop him from trying. She feels his icy touch against the back of her arm, but she is already out of his grasp.

“It’d be safer to use a representation of the item,” he says, chasing after her, his boots oddly heavy against the stone steps. “You could draw something—”

“It’ll be okay,” she says over her shoulder. She stops on the bottom step and kneels, dipping her hand into the warm water, almost as warm as her. Eyes closed, she focuses on the Ether, a solid, dark presence at her back even as the sun shines down

on her face. She slips inside the nothingness easily, frost quickly gathering around her lips. She is there, by the lake, but also there, in the Ether, her limbs cushioned in nothingness. Just as before, the kelpie is a green glow in the distance.

“Hello?” she calls out.

It feels like a lifetime before she hears the kelpie’s reply, a soft whisper of a thousand voices, a hundred years of spirits stolen by the kelpie’s voracious appetite. The green light becomes stronger, gaining in strength as it approaches, and the creature slowly solidifies in front of her, the darkness siphoning away from the green light until there is a horse standing in front of her.

The horse is a little taller than her, with a smooth dark coat that ripples with emerald green energy. A swath of dark coarse hair trickles down between its ears, stark against its milky-white eyes that glow softly in the darkness of the Ether. The horse blinks at her, tail swishing back and forth like seaweed caught in the tide. The kelpie’s hooves are backwards, but it steps forward with a smooth gait, the expected clapping of its hooves muffled by the nothingness. Nose, eyes, and ears point straight at Calliope as it sniffs in interest at her. She feels a puff of its breath, cold and sweet-smelling, hit her face.

Who are you?asks the kelpie. As it speaks, the voicestrains down into a single note. Feminine, but old.

“I’m Calliope. Who are you?”

You may call me Effie, the kelpie replies.

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“I’m sorry about your bridle.” Calliope takes a step forward. “I would like to help you find it.”

Effie moves again, meeting Calliope with a nose bump against her cheek. Calliope flinches but doesn’t step away. You smell weird, Effie says. Why should I trust you?

“Because we are both born of magic. My fangs can’t change that any more than you can change...well, you’re a shapeshifter, I suppose you can change a lot about yourself. But we can’t change blood.”

Effie huffs again, nostrils flaring. I suppose you’re right, Fanged Witch.

“Will you let me help you?”

Effie pauses, sending another puff of air toward her face, as if she can smell Calliope’s trustworthiness. Then, she stamps her front foot with a shake of her head. Yes. Thank you.

“When did you last see your bridle?”

Effie’s head turns to the side, as if in thought. I awoke in the Lake after a storm that tore the waters to and fro.

“So, it wasn’t stolen? Just lost in the storm?”

Effie looks down and paws at the nothingness. No, not stolen. Lost in a storm that I should have been able to weather.

Calliope frowns, struck by the sadness in Effie's voice. Tentatively, she reaches out to stroke the side of her neck with the back of her hand. The horse replies with a nudge of her own, and Calliope feels the tension release from her body. Effie lowers her head, tilting to the side, moon-white eyes half closed.

"What went wrong?" Calliope asks softly. "If you want to talk about it, of course."

My mate is wounded, replies Effie, ears pricked forward suddenly, nostrils flaring as if, even now, she is searching for her mate's scent. I had wandered away from the herd when I felt their call. The storm had already begun. I was desperate to return, and I still am, but cannot move until my bridle is found. Do you understand, Fanged Witch?

Calliope nods. "Yes. I understand."

You would do the same for your mate, says Effie.

Calliope agrees. "If I knew my mate was injured, I would do whatever it took to help them, even if it meant putting myself in harm's way." Calliope fingers a strand of Effie's mane. "And I think I have a way to help you get back to yours."

* * *

When she blinks back into the present, it's to see Rory's concerned eyes, silver in the late-afternoon light. She moves slowly, limbs stiff from kneeling for an indeterminate amount of time. The ice lining her shoulders breaks off and shatters against the stone steps.

"See," says Kane from his perch on Rory's shoulder, "I told you she'd be fine."

"You were...gone. It's been hours." His eyes rove over her even as he brushes ice

crystals from her arms. “You’re shivering.”

The corner of her mouth ticks up briefly. “I’ll warm up quickly, trust me.” She wipes at her forehead, already slick with melting ice.

“What happened? Where did you go?”

“The Ether. I spoke to the kelpie. Her name is Effie. She agreed to let me take three hairs from her—but only three.”

There is a crack of lightning overhead as the lake begins to bubble. Rory jumps, pulling Calliope closer to him. Kane flaps his wings, readying to fly away. The water begins to recede from the steps, clearing a small stone landing previously hidden, slick with algae.

The water stills for a suspended moment of silence. Then, a nose breaks the surface. The nostrils flare, testing the air, and then the rest of the horse emerges from the lake. Effie pulls herself up onto the small stone landing, her backward hooves belying her Fae heritage. She brings with her a shower of water that forces Calliope and Rory to retreat farther up the stairs. Kane pushes away from Rory’s shoulder, flapping erratically in the air above them until landing on the porch railing.

Rory pulls Calliope back, and she is flush against his chest. His fingers dig into her waist as he clutches at her dress. She’s surprised he hasn’t picked her up and carried her away back into the house, though she can feel the strength and tension in his arms.

Perhaps he’s afraid of moving too quickly and scaring the kelpie?

Unlike Rory, Calliope isn’t worried. She had explained it all to Effie, who humbly agreed to provide whatever was needed. The Fae may be fickle, but they honor

agreements, as her grandma taught her.

“Hello, Effie,” she says, reaching out to touch the slick-wet mane cascading down the horse’s neck and ignoring Rory’s sound of protest. His grip on her tightens.

In the light of day, Effie’s eyes are a pale gray, though her coat remains jet black. Her nostrils flare again, then her lips curl up, exposing her teeth in something akin to a greeting. “Effie, this is my—friend, Rory.” Calliope hopes Rory doesn’t notice how she stuttered over the word friend. Is that what he is? As much as she likes the feel of the word on her tongue, it is foreign, ill-fitting. She points to Kane, still perched on the porch railing. “And this handsome fella is Kane.”

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Effie lets out a puff of indistinct sound, shaking her head from side to side. Water flings off her, spraying Calliope in the face. She laughs, wiping at her eyes. “Do you remember what I told you about the location spell?”

Effie bumps Calliope’s shoulder with her nose and lowers her head, neck arched. Calliope plucks threestands of hair from Effie’s mane, then leans her forehead against the solid mass of the horse. Rory’s grip is even tighter. “Thank you for trusting me,” she whispers.

Effie lowers herself back into the lake with a surprising amount of grace, her slip beneath the water nearly silent.

“That was...” Rory finally loosens his grip. He runs his hand through his hair.

“Beautiful?” supplies Calliope.

“Terrifying. One bite, Calliope, and you’d be dead.”

“She won’t bite me though. We’re helping—”

“You think the Fae give a damn if you’re helping them?” He’s standing on the step just above her, and with his height, he towers over her. “They’re not noble creatures. They’ll flip on anyone in a heartbeat.”

“I don’t think—”

“Fuck, Calliope. You can’t—”

“Excuse me?” Her voice is low and steady, and it steals whatever he had been about to say. She moves up, so that they are on the same step. His gray eyes look dark, stormy. Her eyes feel like bright, hardened gemstones. “You saved my life and I will concede to you in all things vampire, but that doesn’t give you the right to tell me what to do. I am an adult. A person. Not an animal to be commanded.” She can feel the Ether at her back, supporting her, rallying for her. Her fingers are slick with frost. Even Hun has perked up, fur on edge. “I have stayed here at your behest and I will continue to stay here until we help Effie. It would behoove you to remember that there is nothing else keeping me from leaving. You should not presume upon my obedience.”

A lie, her heart immediately reminds her. There is something else keeping her. There are two things, in fact, though one has only just begun to take root inside of her. Even as she stands in front of Rory, now, supported by anger and indignation, she feels the tendril of a moonflower vine still treading its way through the soil of her Mind’s Eye.

But what’s really keeping her at Graeme House, of course, is the relative safety it offers, both from the prying questions of law enforcement and the sulfurous magic of her husband’s trade. She knows, with a certainty she feels inside of her bones, that he is still alive. And he’s not one to let go of his witch so easily.

Rory’s jaw clenches and unclenches. She wonders what he’s thinking, what he sees when he looks at her. A foolishly young vampire? A witch with magic crackling at her fingertips? More like, he sees something in between. A weak halfling with a permanent fever.

The look in his eyes has gone dark, and then a split second later, they are soft. Open. It’s like she can see into his mind, for a brief moment, and what she sees spurns that moonflower to continue on its journey.

He nods, the movement stiff—curt, but not reluctant. Respectful. “I’m sorry. I didn’t

mean it like that.” In the full light of the afternoon, he looks even more tired, the shadows etched in thick smudges beneath his eyes. She can see the worried lines around his mouth, too, the ones that are usually hidden by poor lighting and the stubble that graces his chin. A gentle breeze lifts a shock of gray hair that’s fallen against his forehead.

Her lack of reply grows heavy between them and his frown deepens. She wills herself to speak, but her chest is tight with something she isn’t sure she’s brave enough to say out loud just yet.

He drops his head to his chest; it’s a subtle declaration, but it hits her like a knight kneeling before his lady. “Forgive me?”

The steely anger inside of her finally breaks apart. She brushes the lock of hair out of his eyes, her touch bringing his gaze up to meet hers. “Of course,” she says. Her fingers ghost over the rough stubble on his jaw. “Always,” she adds, so softly, it might have just been the wind.

24

When Lightning Strikes

Calliope

They leave for Lyon’s Cross the next morning. Kane is adamant that he should stay behind to keep an eye on things, but as they’re driving away, Rory tells her that it’s more to do with the fact that he gets carsick and doesn’t want to admit it.

The car rocks along the highway, creaks of protest from its chassis even as the asphalt becomes a smooth black snake in front of them. Calliope leans back, closing her eyes against the early morning sun, already simmering with August heat. Her grandma

used to tell her that August heat is different from July or even June heat. It's heavier for one, having been gathering for weeks by the time August rolls around. It seems to press down and sizzle with something wild and fierce. Soon, it will become too heavy, and the air will crack apart like glass, as summer bows down to autumn.

Even with her eyes closed, she can tell that Rory keeps glancing nervously at her, as the sun streams in through the passenger side window, leaving a triangle of shade on her left arm. His quick glances stop when they turn off the main highway and begin to cut southeast across the state, heading for the Louisiana border along the coast. Tall pine trees line either side of the road, keeping the full force of the sun at bay.

Rory fiddles with the radio when the station cuts out with static. He finds a classical music station with frantic violins and a soprano that Calliope assumes is singing about love. The car smells of the same spicy, heady scent of the cigarettes that Rory likes to smoke.

She keeps her eyes closed, oranges and purples swirling on the inside of her eyelids as they speed by trees and billboards and strings of electric wires. Her mind is burning with the worry that something will go wrong in Lyon's Cross. What if her husband is there, searching for her? What if a client of his is there and recognizes her? The worries roil about in her stomach. She hopes she doesn't throw up the blood she drank this morning.

What if someone cuts themselves? Or maybe, she'll lose control all on her own, blackout and sink her teeth into someone's neck because they stood too close to her. The memory of Officer Burton's skin against her teeth is still buried deep—or at least, she hopes so. She has the sudden, urgent need to be sure.

The AC in the car blows cold, mildewy air in her face as she slips into her Mind's Eye, the booming timpani drums scrunching their way out of the car speakers replaced by bird song. Her forest stretches beyond her. Golden light trickles down

from the canopy overhead, sinking into the leaves and the soft, damp soil under her feet.

She works on being present in both: the car and her Mind's Eye. A stabbing pain develops in her right temple, but after a few minutes of effort, she can still hear the creak of the car, the high whirring sound as it barrels through space, tires scraping against the roadway, and yet, her consciousness is perceiving the forest in her mind.

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Zippering around her is a hummingbird: her worries. It flies in her face, tangles in her hair, making it impossible to step forward, to see beyond its iridescent wings. She stills, waiting patiently for it to slow down, to hover in front of her with curiosity. Then, she scoops it up in her hands, and walks, barefoot through the forest, past the sinkhole that is her memory of Officer Burton—still buried quite deep—beyond the clematis that covers the scars caused by her memory of Elijah's blood.

Hun walks beside her, her many eyes holding the sunlight like tiny flames. Her large paws leave impressions in the soil that fill up with water, becoming tiny ponds with lazy koi fish and frogs hopping excitedly.

Calliope finds a tall, strong oak tree with a birdcage hanging from its lowest branch. She deposits the hummingbird inside and locks the cage. The hummingbird hovers in the air, eyes narrowed at her. It'll find its own way out eventually, she's sure of that, but, for now, she feels the ease spread through her. She opens her eyes as Rory turns into a gas station.

"Just need to fill up the tank," he says, maneuvering into a space beside one of the gas pumps.

She blinks at the clock. She was in her Mind's Eye for an hour and a half, though it felt like mere minutes. She gets out to stretch, the smell of gasoline and exhaust sticking to the back of her throat.

"Did you fall asleep?" he asks, looking at her over the top of the car.

She leans on the car, propping her head up with her hand. "No, I was working on my

forest, actually. I've gotten pretty good at navigating." She looks down, fiddling with a small chip in the paint. "I wanted to be prepared. To be around people, that is."

"Are you worried about that?" he asks, as he returns the pump to its cradle and replaces the gas tank cover.

"Yes. Aren't you?"

He rests his forearms on the top of the car. "Why?"

She frowns. "What do you mean?"

He tilts his head to the side. "Why are you worried?"

"Because..." She shrugs, hugging her arms around her torso. "Well, you know."

He looks around. The gas station he picked is right off the road, surrounded by nothing but empty land. There's not a soul around, except for the bored gas station employee inside of the white concrete building. Off to the side, is a small rest stop. He motions for her to follow and sits on top of the table, feet propped up on the seat.

"I have my own ideas," he says. "But that doesn't mean they're true. Tell me what you're feeling. Explain it to me."

"I'm worried that I'll...lose myself. Again. Like with Officer Burton and even Elijah."

His eyebrows knit together. "You didn't lose yourself. Instincts are sometimes stronger than logic. For any living creature, but especially for a vampire."

She shakes her head. "No, I get that. Both of those...incidents could have been worse.

If it wasn't for you and Kane..." She bites her lip as she looks out at the empty road. She looks back at him. "I know you can compel me, and I give you permission to do that if something goes wrong. I won't fight against it. But I guess I'm also hoping that if I can strengthen my shields, then maybe that instinct won't even have a chance to get out in the first place."

"And how are they now? Feeling strong?"

She makes a noncommittal sound in the back of her throat. "Sort of," she admits.

"Do you want to test them?"

She nods quickly.

He eases himself up from the table and comes to stand in front of her. "I'm just going to ask you to take a step backward."

She nods, chin down as she readies herself for his mental intrusion. When she looks up into his eyes, ageless and bright, she can see his pupils dilate, dark pools pushing away the shimmering gray. He tilts his head to the side and smirks, his tapered canine teeth just visible.

She is painfully aware of the physicality of him: of how his height and weight are so different from her own, and yet, his bulk is not awkward. How could it be when she can feel the strength buzzing under his skin even from where she stands? He is dangerous and wild and so very alluring. The thought sends a shiver through her body and she is acutely reminded that whatever tender, delicate thing she has been cultivating for him is not the same as the infatuation she felt for her husband. That was a flash of white-hot heat, a flame spent quick. This is gossamer-thin, pearlescent emotion. This is heavenly warmth pooling in her center, this is—

“Step backward.”

His words melt over her mind like honey—like her first drink of blood—and the command hits her with a strike of lightning, so strong, her throat burns with the force of it. Electricity seems to crackle in her head. She reminds herself of what they’re doing, the purpose of this exercise. Her grandma’s voice seems to echo in her head: Stay focused, Cal. Hun agrees.

She feels the electricity sink down into the earth of her Mind’s Eye—but instead of bracing herself against the impact and pushing it away, she embraces the energy. She lets it travel down into the soil and it tangles with the tree roots. She feels it disperse with a thin crackle as she very purposefully takes a step forward.

Rory repeats his command, slightly louder this time, the familiar syllables sliding off his tongue, caressing her skin like a kiss. She tries a different approach, this time. She clenches her teeth, willing her feet to stay firm. In her Mind’s Eye, she imagines her legs turning into roots, burrowing deep in the ground.

He says it again, his tone soft yet still demanding. Back.

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She is unrooted, upturned. Refusing to move at all hasn't worked, so she goes back to her first approach. She does the opposite again.

She is now standing in front of him, so close her fingers brush against him. It's accidental at first, slightly startling because even though her eyes are open, her consciousness is focused on her mental construct. She's not sure why she does it, but she lingers, fingertips seeking the coolness of his body, trailing along the smooth muscles of his arms. She's so warm compared to him that she wonders why he hasn't melted from her touch, like an ice cube in the sun. A chocolate bar left in a pocket. A snowflake kissing her cheek. She blinks and his visage is overlaid on her thought-structure like a half-exposed photograph.

He reaches up and his palm connects with her cheek. Her body is summer. August. A flame burning under her skin. His fingers drift downward, against the side of her neck, and she feels him take a step forward, his body pressed against her. So cold. Unyielding. January's frost. "Take a step backward."

She can smell the spark of magic in his voice, and she is so distracted by the overwhelming scent of vetiver and clove—of the closeness of him and the shock of desire that comes with his proximity—that she finds herself giving into the strange pull in her muscles that doesn't come from her, but his voice, like the curse in her blood, wiping her mental construct away as strongly as a fire in a real forest.

She calls up her mental construct as quickly as possible, but her foot is still midair when the forest flickers back into her consciousness, and she begins to fall backward. Rory grabs her quickly, but instead of simply breaking her out of the compulsion, she accidentally pulls him into her Mind's Eye with her.

* * *

Rory looks up and blinks, turning around in a slow circle. A rudely disturbed Hun rises and bares her teeth at the intruder. Rory jumps, hands clenched into fists as he warily watches the large wolf-like animal.

Calliope stands in between them, hands raised. “It’s okay,” she says hurriedly. “It’s just my hunger.” She turns and reaches out to Hun, smoothing down her ears and scratching at her neck. “It’s okay, Hun,” she tells the beast, glancing up at Rory. “Rory is a friend. He’s allowed here.”

Hun sniffs in Rory’s direction and then bumps Calliope’s cheek with her nose before settling back down into her nook between two large tree roots.

Even after Hun closes her eyes and seems to forget the intruder, Rory stays tense, fists clenched at his side. “Your...hunger...?” He seems to have forgotten how to speak. He looks around at the tall trees, the lush growth with an unreadable expression.

She suddenly feels entirely self-conscious. This is the metaphysical manifestation of who she is. What if he doesn’t like it? The thought causes a sudden eruption of mushrooms at their feet. Rory stumbles backward, eyes wide. She picks a deliberate path through the mushrooms, holding her skirt high so she can see where she’s stepping. She reaches toward him—

The horn from a truck jars them out of her Mind’s Eye, and they are back on the roadside, a belated hot puff of air blowing past them as cars zip down the interstate.

“That was...” Rory takes a step back. He runs a hand through his hair, pushing it away from his face only to have it fall across his forehead again. Her fingers itch to brush it away, but she doesn’t dare move closer until she knows what he’s going to

say. She can see the emotions morphing behind his eyes, and she isn't sure which one will rise to surface.

"That was...", he begins again. He takes a step closer. "Incredible. That wasn't—wasn't me slipping into your mind. You pulled me in, all of me. Or my consciousness or whatever." He takes another excited step closer, lowering his voice. "How did you do that?"

"I don't know," she says, shakily. She feels queasy, dizzy. She leans forward until her forehead is against his chest, letting the coolness of him soothe the pain pulsing behind her eyes. His hands tangle in her hair, then he presses his fingers against the back of her neck. She lets out a small appreciative sound as he gently massages her shoulders.

"Touch makes compulsion stronger," he says. She can feel the words rumbling through his rib cage "It might take a bit more practice before you can fight that off. It's probably not the best defense though, pulling someone into your head with you."

"Right." Her voice is muffled against his shirt. She looks up. "I didn't mean to. Pull you in with me, that is."

"It's my fault." He glides his hands up and down her arms, as if trying to warm her up, but instead, he's trying to cool her down. The act is so strangely intimate that it has the opposite effect. Her body seems to burn hotter.

"I pushed you too hard," he continues, wetting his lips as he looks at her, his gaze tracking a path across her cheeks, down the length of her neck. "Thank you for letting me be there. For trusting me. For telling your...Hunger that I'm welcome."

She still feels shaky, and she nods, eyelids flickering with fatigue. Her throat is on fire and her legs feel wobbly, boneless even.

“You need to sit,” he murmurs, leading her back to the car.

She stumbles slightly, but leans against the firm, solid length of him. She slides awkwardly into the car, letting her head fall back against the headrest, eyes half-lidded watching a blurry Rory walk around to the driver’s side. He slides into the seat, and she hears the clink of keys, the engine roaring into life.

She slides into her Mind’s Eye, to examine the patch of burned ground, still smoking from Rory’s mental attack. The acrid smell of smoke lingers in the air. Hun nudges her hand, and she absent scratches behind the creature’s ear as she kicks some dirt over the scorched patch of earth.

25

Lyon’s Cross

Rory

The twin lion sculptures are placed on either side of the dirt road. The base of the sculptures are choked with tangled jasmine vines, but are otherwise nondescript. Just two roadside oddities—until the Oldsmobile speeds past the twin lions and over the town line into Lyon’s Cross. The wrought iron gates that mark the entrance appear just beyond the sculptures, and, unlike Rory’s previous trip to Lyon’s Cross, they are closed.

“This is new,” he says with a frown.

They come to a complete stop, the engine idling. A uniformed guard is leaning against one of the gates, and he pushes himself up as they approach. He walks casually toward the newcomers, hand on the gun at his hip. Rory can tell that the guard is avampire from the smell of the smoke and slight metallic tinge of him even

through the window. His skin is pale, his shoulders broad. He walks forward with a slow authority, the sort of casualness that only comes from knowing power and having the confidence to abuse it. Rory tenses.

Up close, the guard looks bored as he smiles tightly at them, revealing pointed canines and incisors. Rory recognizes the fang arrangement; it's caused by a rare strain of vampirism. Rory was once friends with the source of that strain, considered her family—until he staked her husband. Fuck, he thinks. If his former sister-in-law is here, in Lyon's Cross...then she has a stake with his name on it, and he highly doubts she would spare Calliope. He tightens his grip on the steering wheel, calculating the risks of just slamming on the gas and breezing past the guard. Could the car make it through the gate? Maybe, but he hesitates to announce their arrival to the insular magical community in such a way. Maybe Aisling isn't here. Maybe this is just one of her lackeys, cut loose from her conclave for some minor indiscretion? It wouldn't be the first time.

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The guard knocks on the window with a knuckle. Rory dutifully rolls it down, taking in the additional weapons strapped to his belt: a wooden stake, freshly sharpened, and a neat row of vials carrying various poisons.

Rory tries to smile amiably, even as he avoids looking directly at the guard, in case he recognizes him. “Is there a problem?”

The guard shakes his head, his tawny hair rustling in the breeze. “New security precautions.” His voice is rough, unfriendly. “What’s your business in Lyon’s Cross?”

“Apothecary.” Rory tightens his grip on the steering wheel.

“How long are you staying?”

“Just the day. We’ll be gone by nightfall.”

“ID?”

Rory pulls his wallet out of his back pocket and hands him a warped driver’s license, plastic peeling apart at the corners. The photo on it is real; the name—Rory Smith—is false.

The guard looks at it with scrutiny, eyes darting up to compare the picture with the face in front of him. There is a tense moment. Rory is hyper aware of the guard’s body, his proximity to the car, the way his hips are angled so that the gun and stake are ridiculously obvious.

Then, he hands the ID back, nodding toward Calliope. “And yours?”

Calliope’s wallet is in the glove box, and Rory’s glad he left it there the night she was shot. She pulls out her driver’s license and reaches across Rory to hand it to the guard. Rory can see her hand shaking slightly. The guard takes her identification, scrutinizing it in the same way he had Rory’s. He hands it back. “Mayor has enacted a curfew effective at nine. See that you’re out of town limits before then.”

“Will do. Thank you.”

The guard pats the top of the car twice with an open palm and steps back, waving a hand at the gate. The iron structure unlatches in the middle, the gates swinging back with a loud squeal. Rory pulls through, nodding tightly at the guard as they pass.

“What was that about?” wonders Calliope, looking through the back window at the receding figure of the vampire.

Rory grimaces. “No clue. But it can’t be good.”

They continue, the car bouncing along the dirt road. The trees on either side lean toward each other creating a tunnel. The roots have been intruding upon the dirt path for a century at least, and Rory hopes vaguely that they don’t get a flat tire.

And then the trees clear and the town of Lyon’s Cross lies before them, spreading out all the way to the sea, which can be seen in the distance if he squints, a flash of diamond waves against the horizon. The window is still rolled down and the smell of the sea wafts around them as Rory navigates the car onto the cobbled road that winds down the short hill and into the city. The interaction with the guard is pushed to the back of their minds as they find themselves in the town center. The circular courtyard is lined with various shops and businesses, each with their own style of architecture, a haphazard mash-up of centuries and colors and textures. Out of the corner of his eye,

he can see Calliope craning her neck to read the hand painted wooden signs hanging from the iron hooks on the storefronts they pass.

In the center of the courtyard is a fountain crowned by a lion. A seagull lands on top of the lion's head, only to be rudely shaken off as the statue moves, the sound of grinding stone lost to the seagull's outcry.

The lion resumes his pose, a sentry standing stoically as passersby file past. And there are several people that walk by—vampires, Fae, and witches milling about and chatting and laughing. Whatever the reason for the curfew, the town doesn't seem too worried.

Rory finds a parking space down a side street just off the courtyard. It's at least ten degrees cooler in the damp shadows of the buildings on either side. At both ends of the alleyway, though, the summer sun is high in the sky, and he can just see the air vibrating with heat. He grabs his baseball cap from the backseat and pulls it low over his eyes.

Calliope does the same with her sunhat, tucking her hair up inside so it's no longer covering her back. "Do you know where we're going?"

He's only been to Lyon's Cross a handful of times, the last time being more than a decade ago. He runs a hand over his chin. "We can start at the courtyard and make our way down each side street. I'm sure there's a ton of apothecaries here. We'll stumble across one soon enough."

They make their way back out into the sun, and Rory squints at the signs. They head south, passing by a cafe and a general store. There's an ice cream parlor and a candy store, with a group of teenagers congregating outside. Rory skirts the crowd with a scowl. One of the kids breaks apart from the group to look Calliope up and down with a smirk. Rory narrows his eyes and the youth blanches, holding his hands up in

front of his chest in a vague apology.

Calliope shakes her head with an amused laugh before linking her arm with his, pulling him down the closest side street, a smirk tucked into the corner of her cheek. She seems recovered from his psychic intrusion, or at least, not permanently harmed. He's still mildly in shock at finding his entire consciousness pulled into her thought-structure. It was an odd sensation. He was still aware of his own body, but otherwise, he could feel the sun on his shoulders, smell the dirt and greenness of it all. It was raw and intimate and exhilarating to be so close to her, to feel her magic. He actually felt warm—not like when the sun shines down on him, but inside of his chest, right down to the marrow of his bones.

And her Hunger...well, he's not sure what to think about that just yet. One thing at a time.

Something he is willing to indulge in, however, is the feeling of her at his side now, hand nestled in the crook of his elbow. They walk briskly on the shadowed side of the path, passing by a bookstore and a handful of boutiques selling brightly colored dresses and scarves in the window. One store front is covered with brooms and appears to sell nothing else. Another claims to be the home of Lyon's Cross's only legitimate psychic with a ninety-nine-point-nine percent accuracy rate.

Calliope scoffs. "That's impossible. The best psychic can get it wrong much more often and still be a legitimate psychic."

They continue, Calliope's pointy boots sharp and precise against the cobblestone path. Her hips sway with her walk, the skirt of her dress brushing against his jeans. They leave the shadow of the alleyway and find themselves at the boardwalk, the sea stretching beyond into teal nothingness. The seagulls are louder here, and the waves break against the shore sending out a salty mist that hangs in the air.

In the distance, they can see white dots of boats coming and going. Sloping down from the boardwalk is a strip of white sandy beach populated with reclining figures underneath striped umbrellas and children splashing in the water. Even from the boardwalk, Rory can tell that none of the people on the beach are entirely human—all of them smell of magic and even a few of them look it, with pointy ears and long limbs that speak of Fae heritage. A couple comes up behind them, arms heavy with beach chairs and tote bags filled with towels. Rory and Calliope dart out of the way with mumbled apologies, which brings them fully out of the alleyway and onto the wooden plankthoroughfare of the boardwalk.

“Oh, look.” Calliope points at the chipped gold letters painted on the window of the nearest storefront. “We found one.”

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The bell above the door jingles when Rory pushes it open. The smell of spices and smoke hits him instantly, as do the bunches of drying herbs hanging from the ceiling. He ducks, holding them to the side for Calliope to enter, then turns his attention to the store. The apothecary is dark, lit by candles and mismatched lamps scattered throughout. The walls are lined in rows of glass jars and vials, all filled with various substances and liquids, and even, occasionally a preserved specimen, otherworldly and grotesque. There are skulls of all kinds, shapes, and sizes—alligators, birds, wolves and even more from creatures he doesn't recognize—and two large bins of various bones for customers to pick through. He's not sure what kind of spell requires the use of bones, and he's perfectly okay with not knowing.

In the center of the room is a stained-glass sky light depicting a celestial map that Rory guesses looks up onto the appropriate section of sky for whatever its purpose is. Calliope stands underneath it, head tilted back, her bushy mass of hair cascading all the way down to her waist as she holds her sunhat in her hands. He keeps his baseball cap on and makes his way beyond the skylight to the counter against the far wall.

The sales assistant is counting stones, marking the quantity of amethyst, quartz, and obsidian on her clipboard. She looks up as he approaches and smiles blandly. "Welcome to Artemisia's. How can I help you?"

He reads off his list of items needed, vaguely aware of Calliope wandering around the store behind him. The assistant, a twenty-something witch, nods distractedly, chewing gum tucked into her cheek. She starts with the Minotaur horn powder, measuring out the light brown powder on a set of scales. She fills up a small jar and labels it with a felt tip marker. "Looking for something lost, ain't you?" She sets it aside and begins to bundle up a cup of poke berries in a canvas pouch.

Rory makes a noncommittal noise.

The thieves oil comes prepackaged in a vial with a printed label. She fetches it from a display to the left of the sales counter. She tallies the totals on a receipt pad. “You ever been here before?” She looks up from her pad. “You look sort of familiar.”

He shakes his head. “Guess I just have one of those faces.”

“Guess you do. Name?”

He hesitates, jaw clenched, his eyes narrowed at her.

She gives him a tight, disingenuous smile. “It’s policy to record basic customer info.”

Rory unclenches his jaw, though his hand is still curled into a fist by his side. “First name, Rory. Lastname, Smith.” He internally cringes. He’d prefer to use a fake first name too, but he’s worried she’ll ask for his license.

She grunts. “That’ll be fifty-three dollars, Mr. Smith.”

He has a feeling the price has been marked-up a bit higher than is fair, but he still counts out the money, crisp from the bank. The sales assistant bags his items in a paper sack stamped with the apothecary logo. His finger just brushes her hand as she passes it over to him, and he skims her foremost thoughts, catching a snippet that makes his stomach plummet: a photograph of him being passed around a town hall meeting and a large sum of money being promised for any information concerning his whereabouts.

His sister-in-law has gotten into small town politics, it seems.

The Flames Of Madness

Rory

He tucks the bag under his arm and smiles tightly at the sales assistant. It takes some effort to keep his steps measured, calm. Calliope is waiting by the door, and he places a firm hand against her back, pushing her outside. She shoots him a confused look as he ushers her quickly around the corner and back down the alley they took earlier.

“I was thinking we could stop in at that cafe in the square,” she says, looking at him sideways, “I saw that they have spiced blood, and I think it’d—”

“No time.” He darts a look behind them, as he presses against the small of her back, urging her to turn again. His beat-up Oldsmobile comes into view and he quickens their pace. “Curfew.” He opens the door and angles his head, urging her to get inside.

She frowns, looking up at the sky. “It’s hours before sundown.”

His eyes dart between both ends of the alleyway, as he steps closer to her, voice lowered. “Calliope, I need you to get inside the car. Please.”

He wills her to see his worry, his anxiety, to understand that someone has recognized him. He knows she read about the Blood Wars. She knows about him, but only in an abstract sense. She doesn’t know how brutal other vampires can be, how much blood he’s spilled. She doesn’t understand, not truly, why he lives in a secluded house with no ties to any magical communities.

He could compel her, of course. Command her to get into the car. Force her to listen to his reasoning later. But the thought makes him sick. A shadow falls across the entrance of the alleyway. It’s the sales assistant from the apothecary and a guard, dressed the same as the one at the gates, though with dark hair closely shaved and of

stouter stature.

Rory settles for showing her, sending just a flash of each memory through the connection she opened when she pulled him into her Mind's Eye. He shows her the sales assistant, head cocked to the side, saying, "You look familiar." He shows her his sister-in-law smiling, her canine and incisors sharpened into fine points, her lips stained with blood. He shows her the guard at the gates, with the same fang structure. He pulls up a memory of his sister-in-law cursing at him, spittle flying from her mouth as she swears to make him pay.

Calliope pulls back, gripping his biceps to steady herself. She glances behind them, sees the guard walking toward them, hand on the stake clipped into the holster on his belt. She nods quickly, already sliding into the passenger seat. He jogs around to the driver's side and folds himself in, slamming the door. The engine roars into life and he presses down on the gas, the tires squealing.

In the rear view mirror, he sees the guard talking into a walkie talkie and curses under his breath. He drives faster, haphazardly navigating around the town square and eliciting quite a few stares and shouts of alarm. The car bounces along with a creak of protest as the cobblestone road becomes pockmarked earth and the gates come into view. They are approaching quickly, and Rory can see the other guard talking into his radio.

"Don't stop," says Calliope.

He darts a look over at her. She's tossed her hat in the backseat and her hair crackles with energy. Her eyes are black, frost lining her lips as she whispers something. In front of them, the gates groan, unlatch and begin to scrape across the ground. The guard turns around, startled. For a moment, the vampire tries to stop the gates from opening, muscles straining with the effort. The metal bends with the force of the guard's grip, then snaps back into shape with a preternatural rigidity as Calliope's

magic overcomes his strength. There's a shock of red in Rory's peripheral vision, and he looks over to see blood running down Calliope's chin.

She covers her face. "Don't stop."

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Fuck. Rory slams on the gas. The guard reluctantly steps out of the way, though the side view mirror still clips him.

And then they are merging back onto the highway, Lyon's Cross firmly behind them. One eye on the road, Rory pops open the glove box and hands Calliope a bandana to staunch the bleeding. "Are you okay?"

"Yes." Her voice is muffled by the cloth, quickly turning crimson. The smell of her blood—his blood, their blood—metallic and floral and a little off, tinged with the burned herbal smell of magic, makes his gums hurt. It overwhelms his senses for a brief, sharp moment. Some of his kind learned very early on that vampires can live off of any type of blood—human, animal, Fae, and even vampire. He never much had a craving for the blood of his own kind, though, finding it too intimate, almost sexual. He silently curses at his sudden reaction to her blood. Not the time. He keeps his eyes trained on the road, but he can feel her looking at him.

"What was that?" she asks. "That woman. The teeth..."

"You've read Sabine."

She huffs. "Yeah, I seem to recall that she doesn't check her sources, so I didn't get very far." She pulls down the visor and inspects her nose. The bleeding has stopped, crusting around the edges of her nostrils and she wipes at her face.

"What you did with the gate," he says, eyes darting between her and the road ahead. "That's what you did with the illusion, right? Pulled the magic from the Ether? Why did you get a nosebleed now and not then?"

“I don’t know.” She flips the visor up and levels her gaze at him. “It seems to happen when I push myself too far.” And then before he can linger on the notion that she might have put herself in danger to save them both, she adds, “Who is she? The woman you showed me.”

He instinctively tightens his grip on the steering wheel, glancing in the mirror again to make sure they’re not being followed. “My sister-in-law. After...after I ended the war, she put a price on my head. The guards belong to her. I had no idea she was in Lyon’s Cross.”

Her stare is piercing, calculating. “That’s why you’re in Willow Lake? Hiding away because she wants you dead.”

He nods, but avoids looking over at her. The trees blur by and the silence builds.

“Explain,” she says softly.

That’s it. Just one word, and his entire past comes spilling out of his mouth. She commands and he obeys. There are days when it feels like Rory’s life begins and ends with his brother, and so he starts there, now, his voice low, but steady.

* * *

The two brothers could have been twins if it wasn’t for their difference in size. Although they were the same height, Rory inherited the broad shoulders of their father, while Aodhán took hold of the elvish silhouette of their mother’s ancestors and refused to let go even as he got older. They used to joke that Aodhán was born from the long spindly arm of a tree, which fell to the ground with a crash of dew-drenched moss and out sprouted young Aodhán, with mischief tucked into his cheeks.

Rory, on the other hand, was the brooding waves that cracked upon the broken shore.

He was born Artur, but his need to protect his little brother earned him the name Ruairidh. The King. Forever handing out proclamations and rules.

But unlike trees, Aodhán was a wild, restless creature, forever uprooted. Running headlong into the fray. Throwing himself and his soul upon the mercy of the Heavens. And unlike the ocean, Rory was firm. Unyielding. He was the hand on Aodhán's shoulder, trying to keep him from falling over the edge of the cliff. He mostly succeeded, but occasionally fell along with him.

Despite their differences, Rory and Aodhán faced the world with the same bright blue eyes, twinned sympathy lining their mouths. When they listened to the moon-soft whispers of night, they tilted their head in the same way, ear pressed against something only they seemed to understand. An identical cut of chin spoke of warriors of old. They seemed to hold the knowledge of battle deep in their marrow.

They each had their own faults, of course. Aodhán held authority from the day he was born, but though his words were forgiving, his hands were calloused, nails worn down with weak excuses. Rory was, perhaps, too unmoveable. A giant's step couldn't shake the firm earth he stood upon. When the cries and indignation of those he loved became too loud to bear, he simply stopped caring. Because for all of his steadfastness, he was fickle at heart.

Until Irina Dobrev sauntered into their village with something quite like hunger sparking in her eyes. Her declarations of affection were delivered with a reluctance that made Rory proud. She'd never felt love so strong for anyone else. She was heartless, except when it came to him.

Rory was nearing forty-five at the point. He was childless, widowed, and desperately in love with Irina. He accepted her offering, her blood pooling like honey in his belly. He awoke with fangs and a hunger that surmounted even his love—or, at least, that's what he thought it was at the time—for Irina.

For his brother, even.

Aodhán never had plans to join his brother in interminable damnation. Rory made the decision for him as he laid dying on a sickbed. It seemed wrong that Rory should be gifted immortality, when his brother—his precious brother whose eyes mirrored his own—would succumb to the pain of an unnamed affliction. Rory Turned him without hesitation, and even if he knew what his brother would become then, he would have made the same decision.

They traveled with Irina for several years. It's how Aodhán met his wife, Aisling, whose father-by-Bite was the Head of the Fíor, a sect of vampires who ruled over the magical communities that dotted Ireland, Scotland, and Britain. Soon after, the Head of the Fíor died under suspicious circumstances and Aodhán, flanked by Aisling, Rory, and Irina, moved to capture the crown before the throne had even grown cold.

His rule was not accepted by all—and so began the First Blood War. It wasn't until Rory had blood permanently crusted under his fingernails that he looked up and realized that Aodhán was no longer the brother he knew. Aodhán led with his Fangs and Rory grew weary of fighting.

He mourned the loss of his brother, then, and began to dismantle the war from the inside, passing along information to the opposing side, the Unaligned, those who refused to abide by King Aodhán's rule.

When the war ended, Aodhán had a crown, but no throne to sit upon. They set off for the Americas, traveled, gathered alliances and handshakes, garnered support from new lands, new communities willing to kneel to the Fíor.

Another war seemed so far away to Rory. It was all talk, just words passed between the shadows. But when Rory looked up and saw the flames of madness rising again in his brother's ice-blue eyes, he did what he deemed necessary.

It was remarkably easy. A cliff by the sea. A false smile. A stake pierced through flesh.

He watched as Aodhán fell to the earth, and he saw that flame of madness burn brighter, and then leave. He didn't realize that it took his soul with it.

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A darkness began to spread through Aisling's heart. He understood, of course, and was resigned to his fate—his death at her hands. But some instinct inside of him refused to let go of his immortality. Something in him wanted to survive.

And so he fled.

Rory traveled, avoiding magical communities where he might be recognized. He'd hide out for a few years among humans, until they began to notice his lack of aging.

He was in Paris in 1989 when he stumbled into a bar that, unbeknownst to him, was owned by Aisling. The bartender recognized him and that instinctual need to survive pushed him back to Texas—back to the house that he had built, but which his brother and Aisling had hardly been aware of.

He was safe there.

They all were—him and Kane and Calliope.

And now he's gone and fucked it all up.

* * *

When he finishes speaking, the silence stretches between them and if Rory didn't need to keep his focus on the road, he would hang his head while he awaits his fate, baring his neck to the scythe of her judgment. There's so much still left unsaid, buried deep down—but he is willing to dig it all up for her, lay himself bare if she would have him do so.

“Will she be able to find us now?” she asks. He can’t discern the emotion in her oddly toneless voice. It reminds him of when she first woke up in the basement. It makes his chest hurt.

“I don’t think so,” he answers hesitantly.

“Is the house protected by anything? Any type of wards or shields?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t know. I’m sure the coven had something, but it’s been three years since a witch has lived in that house.”

“We have me now. I’m sure there’s something in the library. Kane can help me look when we get home.”

He nods, waiting desperately for a hint of something other than the pragmatic, numb expression she has now.

“It’s not your fault,” she tells him. “You had no reason to believe that she would be there.”

He shrugs but doesn’t reply. It’s true that he didn’t know she would be there. But the truth is heavy in his stomach: the possibility was always there and he ignored it.

“You know, there’s nothing keeping me at Graeme House.” Her words are soft, aimed at the window and not him.

An unspoken fear strikes him in the chest, traveling down his spine. She’s leaving, he thinks numbly. The leather of the steering wheel squeaks as he tightens his grip even more.

“Not physically anyway,” she continues. “The cuffs dampened my strength, but

didn't keep me from running." A pause. She turns to look at him. "The truth is that I'm hiding too."

27

White Flowers Unfolding

Calliope

There it is. She's said it. Rory tears his focus from the road, his eyes lingering on her a second too long before he's forced to look away. The fear she's been holding onto since she left her husband unspools in her belly. "My husband—"

"You don't—don't have to explain if you—" Rory is saying, eyes trained on the road again. His grip on the steering wheel is so tight, she worries he's going to bend it in half.

She shakes her head, fingering a torn edge in the lining of the seat. "Seems fair, considering what you just shared."

His shoulders relax, just a fraction. From her angle, she can see his jaw unclench. "It's different. You deserved to know why we left Lyon's Cross like that." His eyes dart over and she's sure he's looking at the dried flakes of blood around her nose. "You don't have to tell me this, if you don't want to."

"I want to tell you." She looks out of the window again. "I need to tell you. I had nothing to do with his death." She turns back to him, twisting in her seat so that her shoulders are facing him. "But he's not dead. He's a warlock. A powerful one. Who used my magic and the magic of others to fuel his work. His business deals were always shady and usually ended in death, but not his death. Never his death. He had...precautions against such things." And then before Rory can ask, she adds, "I

don't know what precautions. There's not much that can cheat death, but I know he isn't dead. And I'm sure he's looking for me."

Rory's jaw clenches again. "Any idea where he would be then?"

"No. But I doubt he could trace me to Willow Lake. I hitchhiked there, took a weird route." She returns to fiddling with the split fabric, pushing the torn vinyl with her thumbnail. "I feel safe at the house. And with Kane and...with you. You make me feel safe."

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Rory sighs, finally relaxing his grip on the wheel. He reaches over and squeezes her knee. His fingers are cold and heavy. Comforting. She wishes her dress wasn't so long, so she could feel his skin against hers. He doesn't say anything, but, then again, he doesn't need to.

The car speeds along the highway and the silence that envelops them is tender and soft. Vines spread across the forest floor of her Mind's Eye. White flowers unfold under a dark velvet moon.

She wipes again at her nose, feeling the dried blood flaking off. It had dripped down her chin and trailed down, soaking into the neckline of her dress. The fabric feels cold and stiff against her skin. She was honest when she told Rory she didn't know why this use of magic caused a nosebleed, though she wonders if it has to do with the fact that she wasn't trying to create an illusion for Officer Burton. It simply happened. The Ether knew she needed help and it opened itself to her command.

But what she did with the gate was enacted with purpose. She had a goal, and she pulled what she needed from the Ether, too quick to ask, too frantic to wait for the Ether to do it itself. She hopes she didn't pull too hard. She wants to slip back in, to make sure she didn't do any damage—to the Ether or to herself—but when her eyes slip shut, she finds sleep taking her instead.

* * *

She wakes when Rory pulls into the driveway. The sun is just beginning to set, and the house is awash in pale blues and golds. Kane greets them by the door, as if he's been standing sentry on the banister all day.

“Is that blood?” he caws.

Calliope looks down at her dress with a frown. “I need a bath.”

“What happened?” she hears Kane ask as she makes her way up the stairs.

“Long story,” is Rory’s reply.

She turns into the hallway and makes her way to her room, trailing her fingers along the wall. The lights flicker. “I’m happy to be back, too.”

Despite her nap, exhaustion still sits heavily in her body. She undresses slowly, running a finger over the dried blood on her collar. The stain is already set, and she doubts she can wash it out. She is too tired to try anyway, and she lets the dress fall to the floor before turning on the taps of the claw-foot tub. She drops in some lavender and eucalyptus oil, and then, after a moment of consideration, she adds a drop of vetiver, smiling at the image of Rory that it conjures in her mind.

She’s glad she told him about Maddox—that he’s still alive and probably looking for her. It’s not the full story, of course. She doubts she’ll ever be able to share it all, even with time stretching endlessly in front of them. Still, it’s as if something between them has cracked open.

That man is not Maddox Grey, she thinks. He’s a far better man than Maddox Grey could ever be.

She’s not foolish. She knows that Rory has far more blood staining his skin than even her husband, but Rory has something the warlock never had and probably never will: remorse. His past circles around her, like a ringing echo of a bell on the wind. A ripple on a lake. He trusted her with his story, and she’ll hold it carefully in her heart like the precious thing it is.

She slides into the water, submerging herself up to her chin. Rory is a good fella, her grandma would say. Sad soul, but a good fella.

Calliope agrees. She didn't have to talk herself into using the Ether to escape the guards, even though she had no reason to believe that they would trifle with her. It just made sense to help him, because it was helping them both. They were—are—in it together. A team. A family, even.

With a delicate smile playing on her lips, she slips below the surface of the water. She visits her Mind's Eye first. Hun is there, though she slumbers peacefully. Calliope leaves her curled up in the soft soil, and lets her consciousness slide down farther, through the ground and to the nothingness of the Ether.

The impenetrable blackness consumes her vision. A thin layer of ice begins to form on the bath water, though she hardly notices. Her mind is fully enmeshed in the Ether, her attention on the thin, hairline crack of light, made catastrophic by the contrast of the darkness around it.

"I'm so sorry." Her voice echoes back at her.

Although she is still tired, her nap has restored some of her energy. She rallies what she has left, every last honey-sweet drop of energy, and she begins to pour it all into the Ether, an offering to the haven gifted to her by an ancestor long ago. Thank you. She doesn't say the words out loud—doesn't need to, because the Ether knows her. It's a part of her. Like calls to like. She hadn't truly recognized it before, but now, as she pours herself into it, she hears the soft bird call of her Mind's Eye, and a bright green tendril of life springs out from the crack, suturing the ends of the tear together.

With one last burst of energy, Calliope smiles at the darkness with its shock of green.

* * *

She comes back to the present in lukewarm, blood-tinged water. She wipes at her face, realizing that she's crying. She is overwhelmed with emotions, but perhaps it is mostly exhaustion. She puts a hand over her mouth to stifle the sounds, chest heaving with a breath it doesn't need.

But the Ether is healed, which is a comforting thought even as her febrile skin heats up the water around her, even as her body feels heavy and limp. She's not sure how long she's been in the bath—vampires don't get wrinkled fingertips it seems—but she's sure her absence has been longer than expected. She lifts herself heavily out of the water, grabbing the clean towel that's suddenly appeared on the small table next to the tub. As she slips into the soft, well-worn cotton dress, she can't help but wonder about its previous owner. It fits her perfectly, just like all the other dresses the house has provided. The house, she thinks, who needs protection from vengeful vampires.

"I'll make sure you're protected," she whispers, pressing a hand to the door frame. "Don't you worry." The lights buzz brighter in response.

She leans heavily on the banister as she makes her way downstairs, but when she reaches the bottom, she pauses to catalog her body, letting her awareness travel down her torso, expand out to her limbs. She squares her shoulders, straightens her spine, pushes her exhaustion out through her fingers and the tips of her hair. She has a kelpie to help, after all.

"Sorry I took so long," she says, pushing through the kitchen door.

Rory looks up from the cauldron on the stove. "It's okay. How are you feeling?"

"Better." She yawns. "I could sleep for days though." She sits at the table, glancing out the window to see Kane perched on the railing, keeping watch on Effie, who is but a pale green mist swirling in the center of the lake. She's getting restless. Calliope can feel it—can almost hear the flair of nostrils and the high-pitched noise.

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Rory frowns. “We don’t have to do this now.”

“No, I want to. Effie needs her bridle.” She smiles and it must be convincing enough because Rory nods and turns back to the stove.

“I’m almost done with the base,” he says, picking up a glass stirring rod.

“How can I help?”

He removes the stirring rod from the cauldron, placing it down on a dish towel spread out on the counter, before turning around to face her. “The main thing about our dear friend Griselda is that she is very specific about ingredients but not so much about quantities, preparation, how and when to add them. I’m making some assumptions here. The rosemary will stay whole, since it needs to be tied together. But I think we should muddle the forget-me-nots and the poke berries together.”

“And the cowslip?” she asks, holding up the bundle of yellow buds.

Rory leans against the counter, crossing his arms over his chest. For once, he’s wearing a short sleeve t-shirt, showing off his broad shoulders and sculpted arms. “Ground up into a powder.”

“Why ground up, instead of muddled with the other ones?” she asks, with genuine interest. For someone making assumptions, Rory seems perfectly at ease making such deliberate decisions. Alchemy must be more like potion making than she thought.

Rory’s answer confirms this. “I broke it apart like an alchemical experiment. The

Common Base is neutral. Nothing in it will react negatively or positively with the ingredients. But we still need them to combine in the cauldron to create a cohesive solution. Cowslip can increase the absorption of other herbal ingredients—I don't know if that's why she included it, but I think adding it, not only first, but as a powder will help it spread throughout the base more evenly..." His voice fades, and he arches an eyebrow. "Why are you smiling like that?"

She lifts a shoulder. "I like listening to you talk about this stuff."

He cocks his head to the side, his eyes glittering. "Oh yeah? Maybe after this, we can try our hand at another Griselda concoction."

"I'd like that."

Rory smirks, showing off a canine tooth that is just a little too pointy to be human, and she remembers how he looked as they stood by the roadside. Warmth floods her cheeks, and she ducks her head down, pulling the mortar and pestle to her.

They work in companionable silence, Rory bent over the cauldron on the stove as he prepares the base. Calliope grinds the cowslip, the sound soothing in its regularity. In its mundanity.

They move around each other with ease. Calliope is comforted by the space that Rory takes up, in the shapes they make when they stand next to each other. At some point, there is a tapping sound at the door, and it swings open to admit Kane. A flutter of wings and he's perched on the chair opposite her.

Calliope looks up from her work. "How is Effie?"

"She hasn't spoken to me. Or maybe she can't?" He twists his head to the side, golden eyes calculating. "There's something different about her though."

Calliope glances out of the window, where the green mist swirls against the smooth surface of the lake. “She’s restless. I think so, anyway. She hasn’t spoken to me. I think she can only speak to me in the Ether.”

Kane begins preening his wings and Calliope returns to her mortar and pestle, grinding the poke berries to squeeze out their juice. Beside her, sits a strainer, balanced over a bowl. As she pours the berries into the strainer, she blinks against something in the corner of her vision. She even absentmindedly brushes away a curl, only to find there’s nothing physically there.

She looks up at Kane, whose focus is still on his wings, and Rory, whose back is turned as he checks the consistency of the potion. She turns back to the strainer, but the spot appears again, a soft yellow that’s asking for her attention. She stills, tilts her head, keeping the glow in her peripheral vision.

And then she blinks, because the glow has solidified into a shaft of light pointing right at her. She looks down at her chest.

“Everything okay?”

She looks up. Rory has turned around, eyebrows knitted together.

“Yes.” Her voice comes out rough. She clears her throat. “Yes, sorry. Still a little tired.”

His frown deepens as he steps toward her. A gentle, cool hand is pressed to her forehead. She can’t see his face because she realizes, with mild alarm, that the shaft of light aimed at her chest is also aimed at his, an ethereal pathway of illumination that connects them.

“You’re burning up,” she hears him say.

“I’m always burning up.” She gently clasps his hand and pulls him down to her level so she can see his face.

He obliges kneeling in front of her, the lines on either side of his mouth etched deep. “You can go to bed early. I can finish this up here.”

The sun is just beginning to set, and a breeze blows in through the window, bringing with it the smell of rain. “Okay, thank you.”

She begins to leave the kitchen, the tendril of light continuing with her. Before the door closes behind her, she turns to look at Rory. His attention is once again on the stove, his gray-streaked hair hiding his face from view as he leans forward. The light is still there, and she reaches out, briefly, to try and touch it. He presses a hand to his chest, where the light connects with him, but doesn’t seem to realize it’s there.

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She lets the kitchen door swing shut before he looks up, and as she makes her way up the stairs, she marvels at how the light becomes thinner, pulled taut by the distance she puts between herself and Rory. It's delicate though. She has a feeling it could snap at any moment.

28

Something Sharp and Hungry

Rory

Rory listens to the sounds of Calliope making her way up the stairs. There's an uneasiness in his chest, a sense of forbidding. He keeps rubbing his sternum to dispel the feeling, which started as she told him about her husband and her suspicion that he isn't dead.

If Calliope's vampiric instincts manifest as a snarling many-eyed, horned beast, then his are black fire coursing through his body. Even now, as he stirs the potion, his hands clench with the urge to snap the unknown man's neck.

He keeps his grip on the glass stirring rod firm but steady. He thinks again of that forest she pulled him into and the vaguely wolf-like creature that stood beside her. It's no wonder she barely has any cravings for blood if she's managed to tame her hunger into a creature like that, one who answers her command, however reluctantly. And what did she call it? Hun? The thing that all vampires have raging in their blood, the instinct that has caused countless deaths, torn bodies apart, drank another's life like water and she calls it Hun.

He smiles to himself and continues stirring. A flutter of wings and Kane lands on his shoulder, claws pinching his skin.

“What’s so funny?” asks the bird, nipping at his ear.

“Nothing.” He schools his expression into something more neutral. “How was it here while we were gone?”

“It was fine. Quiet. That horse though…” Kane looks outside the window. “It’s weird. Something changed while you were gone.”

Rory removes the stirring rod and places it on a clean cloth beside the stove. “Well, it’ll be gone in three days.” He turns, shaking his shoulder to dislodge Kane, and brings over the bowls of ingredients that Calliope prepared.

He begins to add them in, slowly, stirring between each one and checking for any unintended reactions—not that he would know an unintended reaction if he saw one. He’s relying on his rusty alchemy skills to judge the quality of the final product, but there is truly no knowing if what he is doing will accidentally ruin the whole batch. He finishes with a strand of Effie’s hair and watches as the liquid bubbles up around it. It disappears under the thin teal film that quickly coalesces over the top of the potion.

Kane watches, perched on the counter, and when Rory finishes, he returns to his shoulder. “And now we wait,” he caws softly.

* * *

The days pass slowly, agonizingly so. Rory continues to feel the heavy sense of something in his chest, though he’s not quite sure what it means—if it means anything at all.

It is early-August, and all the windows stay open, the house sympathetic to the plight of its inhabitants and their intolerance of the heat. Calliope twists her hair up to keep it off her neck, though the curly mass always escapes its confines in the end. Rory relents and foregoes the long sleeves, being extra cautious in sticking close to the shadows as they shift around the house.

The cauldron sits on the stove, a dish towel draped over the top.

The days pass and Rory catches Calliope looking at him oddly, with a sparkle in her emerald eyes that he can't quite define. He's not sure if it's a good look or something sad. She's going to leave, he thinks and the heavy thing in his chest squirms.

She reads through Griselda's grimoires, looking for a protection spell or something to help keep them hidden, to prevent intruders from happening upon the house.

When Kane isn't in the library with her, he stays close to the porch, watching the rippling shadow of the kelpie as it circles the perimeter of the lake.

* * *

On the second day, Calliope stands on the porch, eyes darting from her canvas to the lake. She makes a stroke, just one, and Rory is amazed at how such a small addition can change the entire thing, how one swipe of a paintbrush can mean the difference between an indistinct blob and something recognizable.

But suddenly, she drops the paintbrush and sits down next to him, arms folded sullenly across her chest. He raises an eyebrow as he brings his glass to his mouth.

"It's not doing what I want it to do," she explains. She unfolds her arms and leans forward, elbows propped on the table. "I hate waiting."

He drains his glass in one smooth motion. "Come on." He ushers her into the kitchen, then through the door and into the living room. He sits at the piano, patting the spot next to him. "I'll teach you."

The smile that blooms across her face is radiant. The thing in his chest feels warm, full. Happy.

Her shoulder brushes against his arm. He can feel her thigh pressed against his even through the thick cotton of his jeans.

She watches his fingers eagerly as he plays a simple scale, announcing the notes as he presses down the keys one by one. She emulates him, plucking out each note and nodding. Her hair, half loose from her braid, tickles his shoulder.

He wouldn't have it any other way.

* * *

The sun begins to set on Thursday, and they stand in the kitchen, observing the cauldron.

Kane drops the adder stone he found a few days ago, and it clatters against the counter. It's just a simple rock, smooth from the persistence of the water, but the hole in the middle of it is uniquely, perfectly round. He looks up at Rory and Calliope. "Well?" He clicks his beak. "What are you waiting for?"

Rory shares a look with Calliope. "You should do it," he says, an encouraging hand on her back.

She nods, biting her lower lip. She steps forward and removes the cloth. The potion inside is almost translucent, though with an oily sheen to it, tiny rainbows reflecting off the surface.

She lays the stone down on a piece of white cotton and picks up a freshly cleaned paintbrush. Dipping the brush into the cauldron, she begins to coat the stone. It darkens with the liquid, but otherwise, there are no other indications that the potion is working.

When the stone is completely covered, she steps back. "I guess—I guess that's it?"

"No way to know for sure, except to try it," Rory says.

She grabs the stone and they all file outside into the gathering dusk. Rory follows

behind her as she takes the steps down to the edge of the lake. Calliope considers the stone in her hand for a moment before bringing it up to her eye looking through the hole.

Rory watches her closely as she blinks, rotating her head to get a full view of the lake. She shakes her head. “I can’t see anything.”

“We can walk along the shore.”

Kane flies ahead as Rory helps Calliope down from the steps, his hands on her waist as she lowers herself onto the slip of mud between the stone wall of the house and the lake. She holds her skirt up with one hand, while looking through the stone. She takes a stumbling step forward, and Rory grips her waist tighter, guiding her as she awkwardly makes her way through the mud and uneven ground. They are on the northern shore of the lake when Calliope stops suddenly.

“There.” She points to a spot on the lake about twenty feet from the shore. “It’s there. Just under the water.”

She tucks the stone into the pocket of her skirt and begins to remove her shoes.

“Are you sure?” Rory squints. The lake is murky, and the center is deep—deeper than he realizes, he’s sure—but the spot where Calliope pointed isn’t that far in. Surely if the kelpie has been living in the lake for a few weeks now, she would have found it as she circled the perimeter?

“Hey, Calliope—”

His words are lost with the sound of Calliope dipping below the water. He curses, slips off his boots, and wades into the lake. Before he dips below the surface, the sky darkens, the sun now firmly nestled behind the trees and an acrid green fog rises from

the surface of the lake.

Shit. That can't be good. He dips below the water.

The cold would steal his breath away, if he needed to breathe. The edges of the lake are in darkness, but Calliope is a wisp of pale skin and blue dress in front of him.

He can see the bridle, one of its gold fixtures glinting off a small, persistent tendril of light from above. But something's not right—the bridle is wedged underneath a rock and Calliope's delicate fingers grapple to pull the leather bridle free.

Rory kicks forward, but before he can reach her, he watches as Effie sidles up, mane floating in a black fog. Effie is changed, no longer putting forth the effort to maintain the sleek black bulk of a creature in need. She is something sharp and hungry, now.

He kicks again, but he was never a strong swimmer, and his weight is a detriment to his progress forward. He opens his mouth to call out, but his voice is distorted, wavering toward Calliope as nothing but indistinct shapes.

Effie is quickly losing control of her form, the edges of her slipping away like oil. The horse's eyes glow green, putrid in the darkness, set back into a skeletal face.

Calliope's focus is narrowed onto the bridle. She doesn't notice. Rory kicks again, pushing himself forward as quickly as his bulk will allow.

She just manages to free the bridle, when the kelpie lunges forward and snaps its teeth around Calliope's wrist, even as Rory grabs hold of her dress, her leg, anything he can get his hands on.

But the kelpie's grip is strong, and it drags Calliope away in a swirl of mud and algae, the fish scattering, blocking Rory's view. Still, he swims forward, arms grabbing at

everything and nothing, hoping to feel his skin connect with Calliope's warmth, desperate to wrap his arms around her and pull her back.

He swims, reaching and grabbing but finding nothing but murky water. He thinks he yells, calls her name, a curse—he's not sure.

Water fills his mouth. Cold and stale, it slides down his throat, fills his lungs. He will have to vomit it up later, but he keeps swimming, keeps yelling, keeps calling.

It isn't until he reaches the shore—when the ground rises to meet him and he stands—that he realizes that the kelpie is gone and so, too, is Calliope.

* * *

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Rory is standing on the shore of the lake when Kane finds him. The sun has set. The heavy thing in his chest is gone. He is numb. Hollow. Lost.

“She’s gone,” says Kane. He hops closer, feet leaving prints in the mud. “You should come—”

“It took her.” Rory tears his gaze and looks down at Kane. “Ittookher.”

“I know.”

And then suddenly, Rory moves. He walks quickly back to the house, taking the steps to the porch two at a time. He bangs the door open, heedless of the wall or the glass or the house at all. The lights flicker, but don’t stop. On and off, strobing until several bulbs pop and burst with the surge of energy. The windows rattle and more than a few paintings crash down to the floor.

The house looks like how Rory feels. Disheveled. Chaotic. Angry.

He moves quickly through the house, up the stairs, and barges into the library, which is in a worse state than downstairs. The walls are shaking up here and the books are falling off the shelves, tumbling down to the floor.

Kane flies after him and lands on the table, only to flutter out of the way as Rory tosses a book in his direction.

“What are you looking for?” Kane hops away as Rory tosses another book on the table.

Rory doesn't answer Kane's question. Instead, he says, "We're going to get her."

"How? Where?"

Rory picks up another book and pauses. *Rare Beasts*. He opens it, flips through to the back page. "Broom Hollow." He points toward the photo of Phillipa Ledbetter and then to the address below her bio:

Last Horse Publishers

Broom Hollow, TX

Rory leaves the library.

Kane flies after him, wings beating furiously to avoid a sconce that's been shaken loose from the wall. Rory is already at the door and Kane lands on his shoulder, talons clutching desperately for purchase as he hops down the front steps.

"What about the house?" Kane asks.

"The house will be—" Rory looks over his shoulder. Where previously a bright red door sat against the stone facade, there is now a solid wall. "The house can take care of itself," he tells Kane. And then, quieter, aimed at the house, he adds, "I'll get her back."

He slides into the car, and Kane flutters awkwardly to the passenger seat.

Rory fishes his keys out of his pocket. "You don't have to come with—fuck." He looks down at his finger where Kane has nipped him. A small bead of blood wells up even as his healing abilities kick in.

"Don't be foolish." Kane's nails poke into the fabric of the seat as he settles in. "Of

course, I'm coming with you."

Rory starts the car.

29

Epilogue

Fire travels up her arm, spreads through her chest. She hadn't realized it was possible to feel warmer. Is she sweating? Can vampires sweat? Is she still a vampire or is she a fire? She's certainly not a witch. Her mind reaches for the Ether but finds nothing. Hun cries in her veins. Whatever she is, she is burning away at the earth. She will eat it all up, the trees, the lakes, the buildings, the people.

She is on the back of a horse and each step sends a jarring pain up her arm. Her teeth hurt. Her chest aches with the absence of something, though she can't remember what that something is.

The world tips, and she's no longer on the horse. Her fingers curl into fists and the crannies of her nails are filled with soft sand. The air smells of salt and sea. A familiar set of cowboy boots swirl into focus in front of her, the black leather stark against the crisp white sand. A waft of smoke is blown in her face and the cloying fragrance clings to the back of her throat.

Maddox Grey smiles down at his wife. "Hey there, Cal."

There is a shadow beside him. Calliope lifts her head, blinking against the bright sky. So blue it consumes her. The woman is vaguely familiar. A heart-shaped face with no love in the apples of her cheeks. Cold red eyes. The woman smiles, revealing tapered teeth. Canines and incisors.

"Is that what you were looking for, Mr. Grey?" asks the woman.

“Sure is, Madam Mayor.” He stands and shakes hands with the woman. “Pleasure doing business with you, Aisling.”