



# Suckered

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Vampires

**Description:** Alexei Vladel is...the worst. Worse than that, really, since even the vamps don't want him. As the Prince of Vampires, he was supposed to choose a life mate but decided love isn't real instead. As punishment he's been banished and forced to work in the human resources department of LoveBubble—a dating app for people who want long term relationships. Will one of his coworkers make Alexei believe in love at last?

**Total Pages (Source):** 24

# Page 1

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## Episode 1: Bagels

“If I could dig a grave and ceremoniously shove the entirety of Cedarburg, Wisconsin into that grave and then cover it with a fresh layer of manure and then light the entire planet on fire...it still wouldn’t be enough to soothe the loathing in my heartless corpse of an existence. But please, sir, go on. Tell me about your new love connection.” I gripped the phone so hard that the plastic squealed against my palm. “We at LoveBubble...” I stopped, if only to stare into the dark abyss that was the gray wall of my cubicle. “We at LoveBubble...love...snuggles.”

The man on the other end of the line yammered on about some woman he’d met who liked everything about him, from his hairy, odd-nippled chest to his argyle sock collection. My mind wandered to what sort of woman possessed that talent for lying and what it would take for me to convince her to let me into her apartment so I could sink my fangs into her.

“Alexei, remember! Mouths are for smiling, ears are for listening, and fingers are for—”

Shoving up your—

“Typing copious notes so we can better serve our LoveBubble customers!”

That was Keif. Remember him so we can exact vengeance on him later. Keif with an f. It’s bad enough to be Keith but no. His mother chose to legally name him Keif. Like she gave birth to a bad joke. Keif is the regional manager and he eats a bowl of plain cornflakes in the break room every damn day at damn 10:15 in the morning like

it's damn brunch.

And every day, he stops by my desk to tell me something I should improve. Yesterday, he told me to “put the chip back in chipper” and then tossed me a bag of corn chips. Like...he planned that shit. He was ready.

“I can't do this.”

“I'm sorry?” Argyle wheezed into the phone. “Can't do what?”

“Listen to you. Work here. Do this. I can't do it anymore.”

“Oh. Could you transfer me to—”

I squeezed too hard. With my damn vampire strength. And the phone receiver cracked in two. I still moved to hang it up like I was on fucking autopilot too, which made me more angry than remembering the corn chip incident. I stood with vehemence.

“Oh hey there, Alexei, honey! Lovely Thursday, isn't it? I just love me a good Thursday, don't you know?” Felicity smiled, her bifocals slipping down her nose. “Where...where you going? Break time already?”

“I'll be outside, draining the life force from my well-pleasured victims,” I growled at the old woman.

“Oh, a smoke break, eh? Those'll kill you, you know.”

“I beg for death. Yet it never comes.”

She nodded, still beaming. “We all have our vices, deary. But do try and cut back. I

want you working here with us for a long time to com—”

I pushed past her and stepped out into the main office area of LoveBuggle, Inc. After being greeted by a choir of idiots who were happy to see me for absolutely no reason, I stepped into our stairwell and dissolved into the shadows there, reappearing beneath the clouded, gloomy Wisconsin sky. February was the most brutal of winters. But at least something was brutal in this town besides me.

My phone rang. My actual phone. The one in the pocket of the black trench coat woven stitch by stitch by the hands of the imprisoned nuns in my homeland. I pulled the phone out and glanced at it. No number. With a groan, I pressed it to my ear.

“Leave me alone.”

“Back in you go.”

“I’m taking a smoke break.”

“You’re fleeing your sentence.”

“It’s a break—”

“If you cannot adhere to your sentence, more drastic measures will be taken.”

“More drastic?” I scoffed. “What did I ever do to you, Dimitri? Hm? What did I ever do to you?”

“You bled my mate when I was out working for your father. That’s one. Number two—”

“Alright, alright. Like you wouldn’t bleed my mate if I had one.”

“Maybe I would. If you had one, Alexei. But you don’t. And that’s the problem, isn’t it? The Prince of Vampires with no mate? Producing no heir?”

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“I don’t need an heir to rule. I can use Vanya’s child. Surrogate.”

“Your sister doesn’t want you corrupting her offspring, Alexei. Besides, mates offer us balance. Which makes for longevity.”

“I can make my own longevity.”

“At what cost? At our cost?”

“What do you want me to do, Dimitri?”

“Pick. A. Mate. Subject yourself to her. Then you can come home. And sit upon the throne of shadows. Feast on the blood of the innocent. Writhe in the admiration of your brethen.”

“Or you could let me leave this hell. Tell my father my sentence should be repealed.”

“When you bring her home to meet us. Then you can come home.”

“That doesn’t make any—”

Dimitri ended the call. Can you believe that? Dimitri. Ended the call. With me. With me. I don’t think you understand. He ended the call...

With me.

“Alexei, is that you?!” Felicity smiled, her ruby cheeks covered in too much rouge

and her scarf bundled so thick around her neck there was no way she could breathe. “I’m headed out to get us some bagels for the big meeting. But I heard a little whisper. That you might be signing up...for LoveBubble?!”

Is that what they’ll make me do? The Royal Family? They’ll make me sign up for the app they force me to work for? No.

“I won’t survive it, Sheryl.”

“Sheryl? Oh, it’s Felicity, you silly. If you want help with a profile, I could help you set it up. You have that dark hair and those...all those scary tattoos! And the muscles. Plus, those terrifying eyes... Oh girls will love you! All we have to do is remove some of the tattoos, get you a little hair cut—”

“Fine. Fine. I’m going in.”

“Oh, good! Well—”

“I’m going in. You can call it off, Dimitri,” I seethed. He could hear me, the bastard. I knew he was lurking in the shadows. “I’ll answer the damn company calls.” I squeezed the bridge of my nose. “Forever. Until my blood leaks from my brittle veins and I succumb to eternity.”

Felicity chuckled. “Oh. Well, that sounds nice, honey. What kind of bagel should I bring back for you?”

I glared at her.

She smiled at me.

Glare.

Smile.

Glare.

Smile.

“Is there an endless despair flavor?”

“Erm...cinnamon raisin?”

“Yes, Meredith. The Prince of Vampires...wants a cinnamon raisin bagel.”

She nodded. “Okay, honey! I’ll ask them for extra cream cheese.”

Episode 2: Audit



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“Bagel time-it’s bagel time! Bagel time-it’s bagel time!” Felicity would have skipped into the conference room if her brittle ankles would have allowed it. She loved turning cruelly mundane things into little blood curdling songs. She slipped a bagel in front of me, its bitter, sulfur fragrance assaulting my nostrils. “Cinnamon raisin for you, sweet Alexei!”

I snarled at the coagulation of confectionary refuse on the napkin in front of me. “I prefer my cuisine to be sanguine in nature, Agatha.”

“Oh? What’s that mean?” Felicity asked.

“Blood, Felicity. I only consume blood.”

She chuckled. “You young people and your fad diets.”

Fad...fad diets? I’ve never been on a diet in my life. I mean...you. Help me, here. You see this, don’t you? You see the beauty that is Alexei Vladel, Prince of the Vampires? My obsidian hair, cut by the Blade of A Thousand Years. Eyes so red and so rimmed with darkness that I could bring a soul to its end with just a look. A jaw sharp enough to impale the weak. Why would I need a diet?

Keif strutted in on his stick legs, his tight little waist packed into pleated khakis and his biceps popping out of the seams of his short sleeved button down. It was never leg day for Keif.

“We’ve got some performance reviews coming up soon, team. I know how we look forward to those!”

Literal squeals from the other employees around the unnecessarily long table. Keif's performance reviews were all about positivity. He rewarded effort, not skill. It was all pointless. Everything in life had become...pointless. But I couldn't fake my way out of this place. No matter how skilled I was at deception. I needed a life mate. And that meant love. And love...wasn't real.

"I might sink my fangs into an unsuspecting commuter this evening," I said aloud.

Keif gave a loud laugh and pointed at me. "Now that's the kind of go-getter attitude I'm looking for, Vladel! You go out there and chat up some commuters, get them to try out LoveBubble and zing! A long-lasting love connection is—"

I stood up and walked out of Keif's meeting. He'd have a chipper talk with me about "sticking it out" later but I couldn't take it anymore. Maybe I'll stick my head under the faucet in the breakroom. Maybe I'll throw my rolling high back swivel chair with lumbar support out the fucking window. Maybe I'll take a match to the—

I stopped. Someone was standing in the main office. Someone I'd never seen before.

She glared with the fury of a hundred restless souls. Dark eyes, hair blacker than irony and gathered into pigtails on either side of her head. She wrinkled her perfectly pierced nose, her black lips puckering. "Why does it smell like fucking bagels in here?"

"It's...cinnamon raisin."

She glared at me with those black rimmed eyes. "What the hell? Is...is this hell?" She looked around at the LoveBubble posters on the walls: a couple smiling, a woman pushing a full grown man on a swing set, a woman in a cardigan being force fed chocolate hearts...

“...worse.”

She nodded her head at me. “Who are you supposed to be?” She switched the shoulder bearing the weight of her messenger bag and revealed wrinkles on the shoulder of her already wrinkled collared shirt. One half of her shirt tail was tucked into a black pleated skirt that was far too short.

“I am Alexei Vladel, Prince of Vampires.” That introduction was once followed by a symphony of screams and a litany of groveling.

“Yeah? Well I’m here to audit you, bitch.” she tilted her head at me, blew a bubble of violet bubble gum and popped it with a studded tongue. “I’m your worst nightmare.”

And for the first time in my 874 years of life, a shiver ran down my spine. “But...” I swallowed. “I love nightmares.”

### Episode 3: Coffee

She walked up to me, her eyes narrowed, though it was hard to make out the purity of her gaze with the amount of black eyeliner ringed around her eyelids. It was like staring into the void of death. Sweet, inescapable death.

“I’ll start with you,” she said, still chewing her gum. “Name?”

“I already told you.”

She glared at me. “Make a note. Employee is belligerent.”

“I’m not...wait, who are you talking to?”

“Employee is also nosy.”

I tried not to show how perfect she was, but I feared the corner of my mouth may have twitched. As for you, who seems to be becoming quite useless to me, if you could remind me that I am indeed the afterlife come to earth and to keep hold of my faculties?

“Name?”

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I swallowed, searching for my composure. “Vladel. Alexei Vladel, Prince of Vampires.”

She pointed a finger into my chest and I shivered. “You always go around calling yourself ruler of the underworld, babe?”

“You asked for my name. That’s my name.”

“Mmhmm.” She looked me over. Even circled around me as she examined. “You got fangs to go with that title?”

“...yes.”

“Really? Lemme see.”

“Here?”

“Yes, here. You brought it up here.”

“If I bring them out to show you, I’ll want to feed. Here.”

She took out a phone and began typing into it, her thumbs flying over the screen, her gaze never leaving me. “You always threaten to feed on your coworkers?”

“They...are not my type. So no.”

“Customers?”

“Too cheerful. Or too desperate. Neither is a flavor I enjoy.”

“What about your boss?” She glanced down at her phone and wrinkled her nose.

“Keif? Who the hell names their kid Keif?”

“My...my thoughts exactly.”

“Make a note. Keif deserves no mercy.”

I had to swallow to keep my fangs from lengthening in front of her. She was...perfect.

“You been feeding on this Keif fellow, Vlad?”

“Not if my immortal life was draining from my very body would I ever consider having a taste of that man.”

She flicked her eyes up at me. “So no.” Then she tilted her head so her pigtails flopped to one side. “You handle the money here, Vamp Prince?”

I gritted my teeth. “Human. Resources.”

“Oh god. My condolences.”

“Your compassion is noted. And wasted.”

“As it should be. How would you say money is handled in this particular branch of LoveBubble?”

“You want an opinion?”

“Sure.”

“Like shit.”

She started typing on her phone again. “Go on.”

“The flagrant and perpetual purchase of unnecessary items brings me great pain, in fact. Why, just this morning, Cynthia brought in a slew of bageled confectionaries. To what end? For what purpose? To pad the already swollen asses of the staff? To stabilize their constant depressive declines?”

The woman popped another bubble. “Not a big fan of gluten?”

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“I don’t eat.”

“What about asses? Not a fan of those either?”

I shrugged. “I like a good ass, I suppose. But only if it’s sensible.”

“Classic vamp.”

Classic Queen of the Undead.

She walked past me then, kicking the door to the break room. “You there! I’m looking for the bagel bitch. I have questions.”

Once she was gone, I could finally breathe again.

“Who’s that?” Dan asked, his hands shoved into khaki pants. Dan was the only moderately acceptable human at my workplace. Dull as a medieval town gathering pre-pitchforks...but acceptable.

“I don’t know, Dan. An angel?”

“She’s terrifying.” Dan sipped a cup of wildly mediocre coffee. “Is Felicity...crying...in the breakroom?”

I smirked. “She leaves justice in her wake.” I shook my head in disbelief. “Like a vigilante of darkness.”



Dan eyed me. “You’re so weird, man.”

“Thank you for noticing,” I said. I put my hand on his shoulder. “Now. Brew this temptress a cup of that revolting morning blend coffee. She needs sustenance.”

Dan frowned. “...what?”

“Sustenance, Daniel! We cannot leave her wanting. Go forth!” I shoved him and Dan stumbled forward, looking back at me over his shoulder as he slipped into the breakroom.

I shifted into the shadows, searching for what this monstrous woman was doing next. She pulled Keif into his office and I felt my stomach drop in anticipation. Perhaps she will bring to him his deserved demise. I’d never been more excited. No one deserved to be ended more so than my employer. On Christmas, he’d brought something called snowball cookies for the staff to try. Nothing but butter and powdered sugar. If only he knew how he offended the god of wintry damnation. But enough about him. That’s a different story.

The woman left Keif’s office with a sway to her short pleated skirt. She walked into the bathroom and Keif decided to dig his claws into me in her absence.

“How about you hop on over to your cubicle, Alexei? We’ve got some love connections to make! I know the audits are a scary time, but we’ll get—”

I left him blabbing and plopped down in my damn swivel chair. Then I opened my damn computer. Twelve damn emails from damn staff members. Damn.

“You.”

I had to hide my gasp of excitement as the woman sat on my desk, knocking over my

stupid jar of pens. She put a combat boot up on the arm of my chair and turned it sharply so I faced her instead of my computer.

“Me.”

“What’s wrong with this place?”

“Where would you like me to start?”

“These people are all crazy. Everyone’s smiling. And being...nice.” She took her gum out, reached between her legs, and stuck it under my desk. Then she whispered. “I don’t trust it for a second.”

“Because it’s not to be trusted.”

She sniffed, like an attack cerberus ready to pounce. “You’re kind of hot.”

I glanced down at my perfect musculature, at my stunningly pale, divinely tattooed hands. “Kind of hot?” Who has she been sleeping with in comparison? Zeus himself?

“Take me to lunch.”

My dead heart fluttered to life in anticipation. “Is that an invitation?”

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“Only if you’re man enough, blood boy.” She hopped off my desk just as Dan brought over a cup of coffee. She glared at him and licked her obsidian lips. “I only drink from wells of despair or fountains of youth, bub. Nice try.” Then she snapped at me. “I’m in the car. Bring the fangs.”

### Episode 4: Graves

“How did you know which car was mine?” I asked as I approached the strangeling. I inched her away from it, so she didn’t accidentally brush against the paint.

She scowled. “That one’s obviously Keif’s.” She pointed to a brandless sedan with gray paint and a pine tree air freshener hanging from the rearview mirror.”Unnaturally boring.” Then she turned. “That one’s for spending company money on bagels.” She gestured to a burgundy minivan. Then she circled around to the passenger of my vehicle. “Aston Martins are for pretty boys with death wishes.”

“You have no idea, my dear.”

“What color is this?” She squinted at my paint job. “It looks...made up.”

“Midscream black. And actually...yes, I designed it. They gave me a hard time about the saturation since that level of black does not exist in the natural order, but...by the end of our negotiations they knelt before me trembling.” I shrugged. “Worth it for a color like that.”

“Are you going to let me in?”

“I suppose I will.”

I opened the door for her—habit since I am generally polite to those I am about to remove from their plane of existence—and then went around to the driver’s seat.

“So...where are you taking me to eat?”

“To eat you? I have a few ideas.”

“What? No, not me.” She tossed her black hair and adjusted the air conditioning to the coldest setting. “Not yet.”

“You do know...I am being literal. Yes?”

She blinked thick dark lashes at me. “Consent is important for vamp types, isn’t it?”

“I’m not a vamp type.” I started the engine and peeled out of the soggy LoveBubble parking lot. “I am an actual—”

“If you take me to Applebee’s, we’re getting a divorce.”

“What’s Applebee’s?”

“Good.”

“I know a place humans don’t like to eat. I can take you there.”

“Will there be food?”

“No. But you can feast on your own starvation if you wish.” I braced myself for the fear, the shriek, the attempt to jump out of the moving vehicle to escape me.

She leaned back in her seat. “You’re fun.”

I pulled the car over on the side of the road, automobiles honking and drivers waving as they swerved around me. This is the absolute worst town in existence.

“Why are we stopping? Is this it?” She jabbed her thumb toward the pawn shop at her right. “This can’t be it.”

“Get out.”

“What? Why?”

“I know what this is.”

She looked around, confused. “That makes one of us.”

“Who sent you? Sasha? Dimitri?”

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“Random people I definitely do not know.” She wrinkled her nose. “Why do you think people sent me? Are you being hunted?” She gasped, turning toward me. “Oh! Is it the mob? Or...or an undead army? I’ve always wanted to battle necro—”

“No. I am a vamp-i-re.”

“Mhmm. And you think other vampires sent me? To do what? Be a snack?”

“To convince me to—” To seek a mate. To let the only true master have her way. Love, and the destruction she brings. Only love wasn’t real and I could bring enough destruction on my own. “Did they put you up to this? Are they trying to make us...a couple? ”

She scoffed. “I don’t know a ‘they.’ I don’t believe in ‘couples’. And I don’t let people put me up to things. Now are we going to not eat or what? I’m starving.”

“What’s your name? If you’re so innocent—”

She held up a finger. “Never said I was innocent, sir. Definitely not that. But the crime you’re accusing me of is pathetic. I’m a true villain, thank you. Show a little respect.”

“You...are?”

“I am. The truest.”

“Do you mean...because you work for the IRS? It is a nefarious organization, I’ll

admit—”

“No. Not that.”

“Then what?”

“I...dabble.”

“In what?”

“Name’s Kat.” She offered her hand and I kissed it, not because I wanted to, but because of some wicked compulsion to have my lips closer to her veins. She stared at me, biting her pierced bottom lip. “Damn.”

“Damning is one of my favorite pastimes. Do you damn?”

“Exclusively.”

I shivered. Then put the car into gear and didn’t say another word until we were at my favorite cemetery.

I sat there, waiting to see if this Kat would demand to be taken back to the LoveBubble headquarters. But she unbuckled. “Love graveyards. Brilliant choice.”

“You...do?”

“I don’t think anyone’s ever taken me on a daytime romp.” She side-eyed me. “A little romantic for a first date. But...” she shrugged.

I led the way along the cobblestone path, perusing the markers of pathetic humans who died for no reason. A cough here, a fever there. No one in Cedarburg, Wisconsin

ever died of anything interesting. But at least they were dead. Dying was the most interesting thing most of them had ever managed to do.

“Look at this one,” Kat said. “It’s fresh.”

In truth, the dirt had just been turned and laid to rest on top of a decaying body. “This one’s one of mine,” I said. Now you should know better. Because it’s one thing for me to say I’m a vampire. It’s another thing for someone to realize I quite literally sink my fangs into the necks of strangers and drain them of their life forces.

She glanced at me, then back down at the mound. “Was it...hard?”

“He was pretty willing. Makes the drain easier. And the turning is always more gentle if they go down easy at the end. But he’s not got a lot of power. Will be a lower servant, I think.”

She shook her head in disbelief. “How long does it take?”

“Full moon will do it. Sometimes it takes three. If they’re really powerful, a few years sometimes. Decades. Centuries. But those are rare.”

“So you’re like...really really really old.”

“Don’t be rude.”



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“I can be whatever I want to be, bat boy.”

“Not after I’m through with you. Then you’ll be whatever I want you to be. For all eternity.”

Kat flashed me a grin, her eyes dark and daring. “Good luck.”

“Is that a challenge?”

She stepped toward me. “Can I confess something to you?”

Then she continued without my permission, running her hand over my biceps. “I am very good at people. I can read a room in a second. I hate them all, don’t get me wrong. But I’m good.” She leaned into me, her hips pressing against me just firmly enough to arouse what would be her greatest nightmare. “And I think—actually, I know—that you aren’t going to turn me. Because that would make me immortal, coffincake. Immortal and haunting you every day and every night. And your biggest fear is commitment, isn’t it?” She plucked my lips. “You don’t want to be stuck with me forever. Because you know you’ll love it.”

“Over there,” I said, pointing to a large oak tree. “In the shadows.” I put my hands on her waist and steered her forward. The words she said were too ridiculous to bother me much. I wasn’t afraid of anything. Love wasn’t some curse. It wasn’t real. I turned her around and shoved her back against the bark of the tree, and slid my hands up her thigh, scratching my fingers along the leggings that kept me from her bare skin.

I kissed her mouth first, taking my time with my tongue as I explored her darkness. I rarely ever rushed. All the time in the world was mine, after all. I put my hand on her jaw, clenching just a bit to keep her still, to angle her the way I preferred. She was so willing I could taste it. Such openness changed the very fragrance of her blood. The flavor would be incomparable.

But if a source desired to be devoured, and if I was able to bring them to the place of purest delight, I would be rewarded by the most exquisite dining experience of them all.

“Invite me in.”

Kat dug her fingernails into the back of my neck, her legs parted as she pulled me closer. “You sure you’re ready?”

I squeezed my hand tighter, so her jaw could hardly open. “You have no idea who you’re talking to, little Kat.” I slipped my fingers into her underwear. “Remember to breathe. Final breaths are the most succulent.”

## Episode 5: Bubbler

I remembered the first time I tasted a woman’s blood. It was terrifying then, to think of what I’d become. To realize that the coppery taste flowing down my throat was truly divine. Even after the number of women I’d had, and the number of years I’d spent drinking, the sheer beauty of their blood still surprised me.

Kat’s blood...I wished it was no different than anyone else’s. But there was something deeper, something sweeter. And when she moaned with her back against that tree and when I tilted her chin up, I knew I’d never savored something so wicked and pure. I gasped when my fangs plunged into her neck, when her blood hit my tongue. And I wanted nothing more than to finish. Then to drain her dry. An

unmistakable urge not to replicate myself, not to extend my clan's power, but to have her to drink for all my eternal days.

Her nails digging into the back of my neck provided exquisite motivation and I was fully prepared to take my vampiric efforts deeper inside her if she so desired it.

“What the...?! This is a gravesite!”

A groundskeeper or someone dared attempt to interrupt us. Dared involve himself in my conquest. “Wait here while I demolish him,” I told the sweet one, pulling my fangs from her perfect neck.

“No,” she sighed. “Ignore him.” She bit her own lip. “I want more...”

But the bastard turned a hose on us. There were enough shadows for me to shift through them to take his soggy little life, but Kat grabbed my arm and tugged me back toward the car.

“I’m not going to prison for a graveyard groundskeeper. Come on.”

“But he was both insolent and insufferable. He must endure my wrath.”

“And I have business back at the office. Come.”

I growled at her. “You are commanding me?”

“No.” She swiped the trickle of blood dripping down her neck. “Well...a little.”

“You cannot. I am—”

“The Prince of Vampires.”

“Yes.”

“Who is too afraid to turn me.”

“That’s not—”

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“Then turn me. In the car.”

I frowned. “On my leather?”

“In the office then.”

“Fine. I will.”

Kat reached for my door but I stopped her and pulled her to me. I raked my tongue over the fang wounds I’d left on her pale skin so the blood would stop running.

Her eyes searched mine when I pulled away. “You like me.” She chuckled. “You really like me, actually.”

“Get in the car,” I growled.

She slid into the passenger’s seat and glared at me as I got in and pulled off. “It’s a shame.”

“What?”

“I’m going to destroy your little LoveBubble empire.”

I had never been more aroused. “What do you mean?” I ran my free hand over my cashmere coat. Damn gardener ruined it. I detested shopping. Now I needed a new one, and there was no way I’d convince Dimitri to send me something woven from the silk of a thousand sorrows. I’d have to wear cashmere yet again. Like a peasant.

“Best if you don’t know the details,” Kat replied, popping a new stick of violet gum into her mouth and fiddling with a charm bracelet I hadn’t noticed before.

“I did not think auditors razed companies.”

“I didn’t think men who drive pretty cars sped with this level of recklessness.”

“Me? I’m not speeding.”

“You are driving one hundred and twenty miles an hour, Fangs.”

“Well, I’m a bit stressed.”

“Because we weren’t finished with our...activities?”

“Because I have to buy a new coat.”

Kat chuckled. “I’m not immortal, you know. I’m a mere human. I won’t walk away from a pile up like you would.”

“I wouldn’t let you perish.”

“Because you like me. Admit it.”

“I don’t believe in ‘couples’ either, Katerina.”

“How did you know my full name?”

“Easy guess.”

“Well it’s not Katerina.”

I wove the car around a sluggish hatchback and tried not to sideswipe the obvious Aunt who was late to her eyeglass appointment or some such drudgery. Definitely someone's aunt though.

“If it's not Kat...what is it?”

“I don't know.”

“You don't know your own name?”

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I pulled into LoveBubble's parking lot and felt the burden of depression sink onto my shoulders. How you haven't managed to save me from this place, I don't understand. What is the point of you if not to come to my aid when I'm in need?

"I'd advise you to steer clear while I work," Kat said. Then she leaned over to my side of the car and kissed my cheek. "But after work...we should finish our date. I've always wanted to be immortal."

She left my door open when she headed back into the front doors of my prison.

Felicity found me before I even made it past the water cooler. "Oh Alexei, honey! Do you think I could borrow those strong muscles of yours? Just for a sec?"

"I'm very busy ignoring your request," I replied, scooting past her.

"I need someone to get the new water jug up into the cooler, is all. Bit heavy for someone as delicate as me."

Felicity had a good bit of plump to her, but she also had tiny little arms that, I was quite certain, were entirely useless. How she managed to haul so many bagels about on a daily basis was a true marvel.

"I have calls to answer. Complaints to file." I wanted to sever my own tongue for saying such words. But it was true. Everything about my banishment at LoveBubble was real. I had to do the work of a human resources manager. I had to...resource...humans. But I didn't have to help Felicity hoist water jugs.



“Well ahoy there, bub!” Keif appeared, blocking my path away from the stout woman with the needs. He hauled up his khaki pants and wiggled his mustache. “A team player plays for the team, Al.”

“If you ever call me Al again—”

“Why don’t you pitch in? Help our little miss Felicity out? Hm?”

“Why don’t you pay the water delivery person to assemble the dispenser when he drops off the containers? Hm?”

“Well—”

“Your arms are fine. Do it yourself.”

“Part of being a team player—”

I reached my hands toward the LoveBubble regional manager but I could not wring his neck, or snap it, or break it over my knee. I couldn’t touch him. Such was my curse.

“Oh dear,” Felicity muttered.

“Move, Caroline.” I grabbed the water jug and slammed it into the dispenser hard enough for the entire contraption to disintegrate, water flooding the ugly carpet. “There.” I looked Keif dead in the eye. “I hope you’re pleased. Because that’s what happens when Alexei Vladel is asked to perform menial tasks.”

I grabbed the incessantly ringing phone at my cubicle and lifted the receiver to my ear. “What?!”

“Hi, you bloodsucking rage machine, you.”

Her voice purred into my ear and I shivered. I looked around, the phone still to my face. “Sweets?”

“Mhmm...”

“Where are you calling from?”

“Nowhere. Just thought I’d tell you that was a magnificent display of watery violence back there.”

“Don’t tease me.”

“But you’re so teasable.”

“I will not be belittled.”

“Nothing about you seems little, sir.”

I want her. I want her with vehemence. Aggressively. “Where are you now? And why is it not here?”

“Still busy.”

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“Busy doing what?”

“Don’t you have phones to answer?”

“Busy. Doing. What?”

She sighed. “Robbing your boss of everything he’s ever held dear and leaving him penniless.”

I had to shut my eyes to keep from moaning. That is how much I relished the thought of that being true.

“But don’t tell,” she whispered, audibly popping her gum. “It’s a secret.”

Episode 6: Files

“Tell me where you are.”

“Tell me what you’re doing. At your desk.”

“Wishing I was anywhere else.”

“Hey. So...can I ask you something?”

“If you must. I suppose.”

“Yeah, um, so you definitely actually have fangs.”

“Correct.”

“And you definitely actually sunk those fangs...into my neck. Just processing a bit here.”

“It was lovely. You have the blood of a sugared virgin.”

A pause on the other end of the phone. “Thank you.”

“It’s simply the truth.”

“Okay. But...so you’re really definitely actually a vampire.”

“I am.”

“The Prince of them. Yeah?”

“Yes. As I’ve said.”

“But you’re...working...at here.”

“Must you continually remind me?” I growled.

“Babe, why?”

“I am cursed to endure the cruelest of fates for all my endless days.”

“Damn.”

“Indeed.”

“What did you do?”

“I...” For some reason, I wished not to tell Kat why I was trapped in hell. “I am not at liberty to divulge.”

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“Must be something pretty bad then.”

“An unforgivable transgression.”

“So you’re pretty awful?”

“I am defiled and despised, yes.”

“So...wanna...help me? I could use someone despicable.”

I stood, attempting not to crush another phone in my hand. I spoke with gritted teeth.

“Tell me. Where you. Are.”

Another popped bubble. “I’m in the file room. Come find me.”

I knocked the wall of my cubicle over in my haste to leave behind the tasks that awaited me on my computer’s email. The file room was one flight of stairs up, but the Prince’s don’t take stairs. So I entered the elevator. What a grave mistake that was, for in the elevator was none other than Felicity.

“Hey there, Allie, honey!”

“Do you come with an off switch, perchance? Or is bludgeoning the only way to silence you?”

“Oh dear, you say the silliest things.”

I narrowed my eyes at her. “What hell demon sent you to work here with me, hm? Who could conceive of this?”

“Hampton’s Temp Agency?”

“They are the most impressive sadists ever to live.”

Felicity chuckled. “I think you’re sweating because you’ve got a little crush on the new auditor.”

I slammed my fist into the metallic wall of the elevator, but the dent did not even cause Felicity to blink.

“I take that as a yes!”

“Mind your foul tongue, old woman.”

She shrugged, quite pleased with herself. “You know...tomorrow is Valentine’s Day...”

“How long can one elevator take? How long must I suffer for my lack of belief? How long—”

“You should ask her to be your Valentine—”

“Listen and hear me, you feeble office worker. I will never entertain a day devoted to the mythos of love. No matter the temptress. No matter the price to be paid for my insolence.”

“Maybe some nice flower—”

The elevator door opened and I left the torturer behind me, headed for the file room. When I opened the door, Kat was sitting on top of a file cabinet, a laptop open and a lollipop between her lips and a bit of yarn inexplicably twirled between her fingers.

“Hey, darkness,” she said.

“Sweets.”

“Wanna see?”

“You?”

She glanced at her laptop and then back up at me. “I mean...I guess? If we’re quick.”

“Yes.” I took her laptop and flung it across the room.



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She gasped and then scowled when her device shattered against the wall. “I needed that.”

“Oh.”

She sighed. “Fine. Bite me. But then after that, you owe me a laptop.” She unbuttoned her shirt, still balancing on top of the little file cabinet. “And I am on a time crunch, so—”

I took her gladly to the floor, kicking the file cabinet to the wall and ignoring the fluttering protest of displaced papers. I entered her and ripped my fangs into her neck at the same time, unwilling to let an interruption get in my way again. Someone tried to enter the file room—which I failed to lock—and I kicked the door closed and held it.

“Hello?” Dan pushed and shoved his shoulder against the door. “Um...I need a file?”

Kat seemed to be melting into the floor as I drank from her, the softest sounds of pleasure leaving her mouth. And I realized it would be easy to finish what I started, to drink until there was no more in her. To turn her into someone I could keep.

But at the very last moment, I pulled away, her blood leaking down my chin.

I tugged one of her pigtails. “Are you dead?”

She arched her back, still not through with her experience. “Wait...” she exhaled, breathless.

I held my tongue until she calmed herself, collapsing onto what remained of the scattered files.

“You...didn’t—”

“That’s enough,” I told her. Then I squinted at her in the dim lighting. “You are...alive, yes?”

“A little?”

“Good.”

She sighed. “I have to...do my job now. Somehow.”

“Focus up,” I told her. “Bringing pain to Keif will produce a semblance of relief to my broken existence.” And seeing her lying there with her skirt tossed about and her beautiful breasts rising and falling made me want to drink again. And that couldn’t happen. Not so soon. “What do I have to do to destroy him? Tell me.”

“I need a device. So I can hack his accounts. You shattered mine, remember?”

“That I did.”

“Well I need one.”

“Use the one at my desk.”

“No, you shadowcrawler. I need a real device. Not Windows 10.”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“If the bagel bitch can figure the computer out, then it’s not good enough. Get me a criminal-worthy computer or the only thing we’re doing to Keif is trashing his file room.”

I groaned as I stood. “I...know who to call. Wait here.”

“Sure won’t.”

I blinked at her, amazed. “You’re...wonderful.”

She winked. “Yeah I am.”

I’m...in trouble.

Episode 7: Jammies

Back outside again, this time on my cell phone in the LoveBubble parking lot. A few cars slowed, no doubt because I hadn’t yet cleansed the blood of the temptress from my face.

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“Alexei—”

“I need a computation device and I need it now.”

“What—”

“Send one.”

“Is this about your exile?”

“This is about me, the Prince of Vampires, expressing a need. And you, my eternal servant, fulfilling that need without objection.”

Silence on the other end of the call. And then finally Dimitri spoke. “I can supply any need, Prince, as long as it does not violate the terms of your banishment. So says the King and Queen Of Blood And Damnation.”

I sighed. I’d have to divulge more information than I wished. “It is...in regards to...a woman.”

“What...” Dimitri cleared his throat. “What did you just say, Alexei?”

“A...woman.”

“Oh, blessed are the cursed! It’s happening. It’s finally happening. What sort of woman? Does she please you? Will you choose her? Is she willing?”

“Get me the damn computer.”

“Right away.”

And I hung up on him.

Before I could turn back toward the office, a flurry of shadows enveloped me, leaving a box in my hands. About time someone treated me with some respect. I tucked the new computer under my arm and started on the path back to the file room.

The elevator door had almost closed when Felicity called for me to hold it for her. I pushed the closed button a thousand times, but she still waddled over with just enough to stick her pudgy beige ballet flat into the door.

“Oh thank you, Allie, honey.”

“You should try the stairs next time,” I told her.

“Not with these knees. I’m not as young as I used to be. But...” She was holding a box of donuts and waggled her eyebrows. “Did you ask that pretty girl if she’d be your Valentine?”

“No, Martha. I did not. I will not. Not for—”

“A nice card? And some flowers?”

“Flowers? They would wither at the sight of me.”

“Oh. Don’t be so hard on yourself. Though, you would be much more handsome without all those tattoos, you know. And if you maybe cut some of that hair...it’s a lot of hair. So much hair. And it’s so...black—”

“Do not touch my hair, old woman.” I glanced at my knuckles and put a hand on my neck. “And these tattoos were etched with the venom of entombed primordial spiders.”

“It’s a little...dark.”

“Yes. Exactly.”

“Well, girls like pretty things! Flowers. Chocolates. Teddies. Cuddles. Jammies.”

“Jammies?”

“A little matching set with hearts and arrows.”

“I wouldn’t mind arrows. Poison-tipped?”

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“Oh dear.” She pursed her lips, then licked her thumb and tried to rub it on my chin. “You’ve got some jam—”

“It’s a medley of blood and desire, Marilyn. It’s not jam!”

“Ohh,” she giggled. “Odd name for a jam, don’t you think? Brands these days.”

The elevator dinged and I hurried out the door kicking my way into the file room to find Kat...gone.

“Hey, obsidian nightmare.”

How did she get behind me? I turned. “Kat.”

“For me?” She slid her hand over the laptop box and then snatched it. “Acceptable. Also this is an MSI Raider GE66-15 with Intel i7-12700H 14-Core processing and 64GB DDR5 4800MHz RAM.”

“Indeed.”

Now you know and I know that I don’t know what she’s talking about. But she wanted a laptop and somehow I’d been hypnotized, perhaps by the sheer bliss of her blood in my veins, to get it for her. If you’re not alarmed by now you should be.

“This will do nicely,” she said, tiptoeing to kiss my cheek. “And then maybe later, you can make me undead. We’ll see if time allows, won’t we?”

“We won’t.”

Her dark eyes glittered up at me. “Let’s get this gear hooked up. I have accounts to sweep.”

She slipped back into the file room and opened her gift. Her long black fingernails clattered over the keys, her gum popping and her eyes focused on the ones and zeroes on her screen.

“Damn.”

“Damn?”

“I can’t breach his firewall. Not for all the tuna in Wisconsin. ” She wrinkled her nose. “Keif? Why so much protection, Keif?”

“Wait.”

She glanced at me. “Waiting.”

“Why are you trying to rob Keif in the first place? He can’t have much to begin with.”

“Oh he’s devastatingly rich. Inheritance. He’s put a lot into LoveBubble investments and that’s what I’m going to...repurpose.”

“So you’re robbing both Keif and LoveBubble?”

“Sure am.” She started typing once more. “That alright?”

“Oh yes. Yes. That’s perfect.”



“So um...he’s got a firewall...generated by someone in this building, looks like.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope. It’s someone here.” She closed the laptop. “But the question is...who?”

I hated that the corner of my lip twitched. “Shall we...seek out the enemy...and vanquish them...together?”

“On one condition.”

“Name it.”

“Keep calling me Sweets.” She winked. “I like that shit.”

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“Well come on, Sweets. Destruction desires to be rained down on our victims.” I took her hand. “Let’s hunt some LoveBubblers.”

Episode 8: Pedigree

“Daniel.”

I slammed my hand on Dan’s desk, sending a crack through the center of it so intensely that the man gulped and went rolling back in his swivel chair.

“Oh good god!”

“No. Not god. It’s me. Prince of Vamp—”

“You broke my desk!”

“Don’t obsess over pointless things, Daniel. I have questions.”

“My phone, my keyboard, my coffee, my—”

“Are you a hacker, Daniel?”

He blinked bland blue eyes at me. “W-what?”

“A hacker. Do you hack? Have you hacked? Will you be hacking?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about!”

He bent over in his chair to begin gathering his piteous office supplies and I pointed.

“Give me that stapler, Daniel.”

“This stapler?”

I glared at him. “The only stapler...in your hand.”

With a tremor, he placed the device in my open palm.

I flipped it in my hand. “Did you know that I love putting little holes in things? Hm? I do it all day. I’ve been doing it for a thousand years. And if you don’t confess what you know, Daniel...I’ll take this simple little stapler to your simple little forehead. Now do you understand?”

Dan, wide-eyed behind his glasses, inhaled slowly. “...No?”

He knows nothing. I straightened abruptly and left his cubicle. “I’m keeping the stapler.”

In the file room, I leaned against the door frame. “So far, no culprit, Sweets.”

“Same on my end. Though I made someone named Mario cry over his hot pocket in the breakroom.”

“Mario would have cried in the breakroom whether you were there or not.”

“Really?”

“He cries every day. At 2:13 sharp.”

“Why? No. Don’t tell me.”

“I’ve never been curious enough to find out.”

“Well...it’s not fucking Mario. And it’s no one else on my list.”

“Same.”

“Well hell...”

“What about someone transient? The water delivery man? Or the IT company?”

“IT company is a good idea. Bet they’re listed in these files.”

So we pulled every sheet of paper out until we found something that could lead us to the culprit. “Says ‘Damian.’ No last name.” I sighed. “How are we to exact vengeance on his family line for a thousand generations if we don’t know who his family is?”

“You want to exact generational vengeance with me, soul piercer?”

I shrugged. “I would...”

“You really know how to treat a girl.”

“Don’t get too used to it, Sweets.” But also...you would look damn good in my coffin. But no. No. It’s not real. We can never become real. Because love...isn’t real. “Let me ask Sharon. She knows everyone. Obviously we missed someone.”

I knew if I waited in the elevator, Felicity would show. And she did, wheeling a basket filled with plastic bags of orange slices.

I stared at them for some time before I decided it wasn’t worth it to ask questions about the contents of the bags. “Do you know a Damian?”

“Hm?”

“A Damian. Is there a Damian who works here? Perhaps in IT?”

“Oh no. I’ve never worked with a Damian.” She smiled at me, her plump cheeks high. “Apple slice?”

“...apple?”

“Oh. Oranges, bananas. Whatever they are. Want one?”

What on this plague-filled earth? Does she not even know what she’s hauling about?

“I don’t eat. I have told you this more times than is possible.”

“Oh. Well...how is it going with that girl? I haven’t seen you at your desk all dayyy...”

“It’s fine. She’s looking for a Damian.”

“Oh? You’re helping her with her audit? How romantic!”

“It’s not romantic—”

“What are you getting her, then?”

“I’m not—”

“She’ll expect it. For Valentine’s Day.”

“I don’t—”

“Meet me in the upstairs utility closet, honey, if you want to know more about Damian. I can’t resist a good love story.”

And then the door dinged open and Felicity bopped out, humming the theme song to some sappy American television show.

So I circled back to the file room to meet Kat and to let her know that perhaps Felicity had lost her mind, but that we were to meet her upstairs. But when I opened the door, I found the thief completely unclothed, sitting cross-legged on the floor atop our piles of papers and manila folders.

“What. Is happening?”

“Hm?” She had another lollipop, this one lime green, and she spoke around it as she typed. “Oh, I figured I’d take another job real quick while you harassed that old woman in the elevator.”

“Alright.”

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She glanced at me. “What?”

“You’re completely naked.”

“Oh.”

“Why...?”

“Convenience?”

“How is stripping naked while working in a file room...convenient?”

“Did you find out who Damian is? I’ve cleaned the account of some executive of Pedigree while you were away.”

“The dog food people?”

“Yep.”

“Oh. Well Felicity may have a lead for us. We’re to meet her upstairs.”

Kat closed her laptop and stood up, stretching as if doing so was the most luxurious experience known to mankind.

I had no choice but to go to her. She was, quite frankly, the most beautiful creature I had ever beheld. “You’re very manipulative. Did you know that, Sweets?”



“Aw. Don’t make me blush.”

“I’ll drink from you now.”

“You need an invitation for that, don’t you?”

I slid my hands over the soft curves of her flesh, grabbing her from behind and squeezing hard. “Give it to me.”

“After.”

“After what?”

“We find Damian.” She tilted her chin so the throbbing veins of her perfectly pale neck were exposed. “And then...You can have your drink.”

“I’m not your junkie, Sweets.”

She backed away and bent slowly while she reached for her skirt and blouse. “Not yet, son of Dracula. Not yet.”

Episode 9: Koi

I need to talk to you for a moment. Yes, you. I need to talk to you. I think we need to change our strategy here. With regards to Sweets. Because of course we can’t make her our immortal mate. That’s always going to be a no. But...in the short term...

In the short term, she’s got that sweetness to her blood and the curves to the hips hidden beneath that damned pleated skirt. We could keep tabs on her, is all I’m saying. For a while. That’s all. So that’s just a note I’m making to you.

“Elevator’s are slow,” Kat complained, her arms crossed.

“Vampiric royalty does not take stairs.”

“Couldn’t you slink through some shadows or something?”

“Not in the building. Or I’d never do any work. They like to keep tabs on me.”

“Your vampire brethren? The ones who banished you?”

“Yes.”

“They’re real assholes, huh?”

“You have no idea.”

“What did you do? Why are they punishing you?”

“Why were you naked in the file room?”

She glared at me. I glared at her.

When the elevator opened we made our way to the utility closet. I was shocked to find Felicity outside, smiling, holding a tray of cookies.

“What the fuck, Gertrude?”

She giggled. “He’ll see you now.”

I blinked at her. “Who’s he?”

“Damian.”

“Oh shit,” Kat said from beside me. “This is like a godfather thing—”

“Your father’s a god?”

She frowned. “You don’t watch movies?”

“Entertainment is for the living.”

“You’re so awful.”

“I accept your compliment with grace.”

Her eyebrow twitched. “I’m obsessed with you.”

“Naturally.”

Felicity cleared her throat. “Are you going to flirt until the office closes? Or are you going to go in, cuties?”

I got the door for Kat and she slipped into what should have been a tiny closet, but what ended up being the largest office in the entire building. There was even a desk crafted out of what appeared to be ivory and silver and was equipped with a koi pond beneath the table top. Sitting at the desk, hands clasped beneath his chin, was a boy. Maybe ten years old. Maybe eleven. Smooth brown skin and an impressively thick afro. He wore a black Armani sweater and a Rockford Moss platinum necklace with 1.15 count diamonds. On his wrist was a Rolex Daytona Eye Of The Tiger.

What the hell kind of wealth does this small boy possess? And why is Felicity bringing him snacks?

“Damian, these two miscreants are here to see you,” Felicity said, delivering the tray of cookies to his desk.

“Milk?” Damian asked, his eyes steady on us.

“Oh right away,” Felicity said, hurrying off.

I scoffed. “You’re a child.”

Kat smacked my arm. “Be respectful.” She stared at his koi desk. “Love the furniture. Looks delicious.”

“Be respectful? I’m the—”

“Prince of Vampires,” Damian said. “I’ve been paying attention.” He motioned. “Have a seat.”

We both looked around, bewildered. “There are no chairs.”

“And what can I do for you today?” He glanced at his Rolex. “We’ve got thirty minutes until close.”

I blinked. “But you’re a child. You’re the IT specialist?”

“I am prepubescent, yes. If that’s so disconcerting to you, let’s get that out of the way shall we?”

“Ignore him,” Kat said. “Damian, we’re here to disassemble the firewall on Keif’s accounts. We want to wipe him clean.”

Felicity returned with a glass of milk and a napkin and set it on Damian’s desk. “Here you go, sir.”

“Thank you. And are you aware that these people are trying to rob my father, Felicity?”

“I am, sir.”

“Good. That’ll be all for now.”

“Keif is your dad?” Kat asked, wincing. “Are we in conflict here?”

“Depends.” Damian tapped his manicured fingers on his desk. “What’s the plan for the money?”

Kat shrugged. “I just like stealing shit.”

Damian inclined his head. “I want a cut.”

“Why not take it all if you’re the one with access to the firewall?”

“I’m no criminal.”

Kat grinned. “You set up firewalls on the accounts of the wealthy and then wait for people to pay you to take them down?”

Damian snagged a cookie and dunked it into his milk. “Smart and gorgeous.”

“Watch it, kid,” I snapped.

Kat chuckled. “The Prince of Vampires gets jealous.”

“I’m not worried,” Damian said with a shrug. “You know where to find me if you ever want a real man instead of a shadow ghoul.”

I stepped forward. “I’m going to snap his tiny bones—”

Kat put her hand on my chest and addressed Damian. “Twenty percent.”

“Thirty.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll have Felicity supply you with my account numbers.”

“Twenty four hours sound good?”

“Perfect. Pleasure doing business with you.” Then Damian nodded his head toward me, reached under his desk, and pulled out four enormous rolls of duct tape. “And I could wrap him up and leave him somewhere if you want, my lady? Take you on a

nice Valentine's date?"

Kat chuckled. "I do believe I already have Valentine's arrangements." She looked at me. "Right?"

"What?"

"You're my Valentine's Day plan. Right?"

"Go on, motherfucker," Damian said, narrowing his beady eyes. "Hesitate."

"You're not a candidate, child." And then I faced Kat. "...Sure."



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“Yeah?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Good.”

She nodded at Damian. “Twenty four hours, cutie. But go ahead and drop that firewall for me.”

“Anything for you, Ponytail.”

I followed Kat out of the office and watched in awe and horror as she grabbed the slip of paper from the tray Felicity was holding just outside the office. “Have a great day!” she called out to Kat.

I paused. “What the fuck even is Valentine’s Day? I know it’s a day of fabricated ill will, but...what am I supposed to do to her?”

“For her.”

“What?”

Felicity giggled. “Let’s get to work, honey! Romance is in the details.”

Episode 10: Muffins

The brethren could keep me in the LoveBubble prison, but they could not disrupt my

ability to attract wealth or my ability to attract whatever I wanted to me. My house was moderate for my elaborate taste—my gargoyles were not even so menacing—but it would have to do until my parents regained their sanity and allowed my status as royalty to be reinstated.

“Almost ready!” Felicity said. She stood in my kitchen, whisking and whisking, flour and chocolate on her smiling face. “Oh she’s going to love all this.”

“Confectionary delights are not her style,” I explained for the hundredth time. And yes. We have allowed this woman into my house. But what else was I supposed to do? I am devoid of all romance and romantic tendencies. I am, quite literally, the monster of all villainy.

“All women love baked goods, Allie, honey. All women.”

“She...does seem to like candy.”

“Trust me. She wants a Valentine’s Day. Did you cut out the hearts?”

I grimaced, displaying the colorful cardboard the old woman had set before me. “The scissors will not cooperate.”

“Well, you have to put your fingers into the holes and slice, Allie.”

“For some reason...I cannot. The skill evades me.”

“I think you just don’t want to try—”

“I can’t cut out hearts, wench! I am darkness in flesh and bones. These are—these are pink!”

“Pink is pretty!”

“Exactly my point. I prefer my decor slathered in the inky tears of the wicked and impaled on poles!”

“She’s not going to like that!”

“She is not going to like this.”

Felicity sighed. “How many Valentine's Days have you prepared for, Allie?”

I growled, crushing the pink paper in my fist. “None.”

“So who will you be listening to? Hm?”

“...you.”

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“Very good. And Damian and Kitten will work things out—”

“Kitten? What the fuck? Who’s Kitten?”

Felicity blushed. “I saw her name when I processed her account transfer. Oh, now I’m embarrassed. Was it a secret?”

I stared at nothing for a bit, my mind turning. “Is she...is she a werecat? Oh that makes perfect sense. The yarn, the koi, the nudity. What’s her last name?”

“Bastet? Kitten Bastet?”

“Goddess of felines. Damn.”

“Damn? Why are we damining? Cats are sweet! Everyone likes cats.”

“No. I’m not saying she has a cat. I’m saying she is a cat. Perhaps erring on the side of deity.” Which means she’s more powerful, more terrible, more sneaky and seductive than any human ever could be. Which means...I will want her...forever. I am drawn to power, to wicked intent, to malicious malevolence of the highest order and type. She’s...captured me. And she knows it.

“I love calicos, personally—”

“Are you on purpose an idiot, Felicity?”

She smiled, still whisking. “Are you on purpose an asshole, Alexei?”

I sat on my stool and picked up the scissors. “I’ll cut the damn hearts.”

And after everything was assembled and the pathetic humans slept and had their coffee, I put it all into a box and headed to LoveBubble to meet the werecat who tasted like danger.

And then...I got a text.

Let me warn you that this text was not one that I expected to get. And the very fact that the Prince of Vampires received a textual message rather than a herald or a royal emissary with the wings of a bat was upsetting enough. I am quite embarrassed that you haven’t done anything to prepare me for this sort of thing. You should be embarrassed as well.

The text went as follows:

Dear bat daddy,

You’re loads of fun, but I think I’m going to take the money and do my own thing. I’m a free spirit and I’ve got my own trees to climb, if you know what I mean. Happy V Day. Sink those fangs into some sobbing hottie tonight and think of me.

-Sweets

I pulled my car over and stared into the abyss that was my immediate future. Then, I took out my phone and dialed a number I rarely called. Someone whose advice I knew I could take without fear.

“What?”

“It’s me.”

“Oh. Alex. Well what?”

“A woman.”

“Shit.”

“Yes, shit. Shit, Jack.”

“Okay well what do you need. I could ice her out if you give me a location.”

“No. Don’t...kill her.”

“Shit.”

“I know.”

“She got you?”

“...”

“Does she got you, Alexei?”

“A little.”

“A little?”

“I’m a little got.”

“Alright, here’s what you do.”

“I knew you’d know. You’re such a goddamn bastard.”

“Okay, man. Alex, don’t buy her a damn thing. No gifts.”

“Shit.”

“Definitely no expensive gifts.”

“Shit.”

“No nicknames. Trust me, man. Do not give her one of those.”

“Shit.”

“Is it an adorable one?”

“It...really is, Jack.”

“Fuck. Okay, Alex, listen to me. Do. Not. Feed. Her.”

“I haven’t done that one yet.”

“Starve that girl, alright? You make her fucking waffles and she’ll never leave.”

“I was going to bring her...holiday pastries.”

“Today?”

“Yeah, today!”

“Well what the hell, man!”

“I know! That’s why I called you! But...she’s taking off.”

“Then why are you calling? Problem solved.”

“Because...”

“Because what?”

I hesitated.

“Because what, Alexei? Because what?”

“I...don’t want her...to go...”



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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 9:32 am*

Jack sighed into the phone. And I heard someone giggle and a series of kisses. Then some babbling about putting clothes on and taking the damn dog outside. Then Jack said one final thing. “I have to go. But Alexei...fuck it up. Fuck the whole thing up. Don’t give in. You’re the goddamn Prince of goddamn Vampires.”

“Who...is giggling in the background, Frost? Who is that?”

“A goddamn mermaid, Alex. A goddamn mermaid.”

And then he hung up.

A...mermaid? What that meant, I could not fathom. But I had a werecat thief to mourn. And some emotions to, in the words of my demi-god associate, fuck up.

So I walked into LoveBubble with my box of Valentine’s nonsense and...fucked it up. I threw the wine bottles into the computer screens and kicked down the cubicle walls. I spilled the freshly brewed coffee onto the cardboard hearts. I pegged anyone who came close with the chocolate pieces. Dan would need a medic, since I got him in the eye right with a raspberry creme truffle when he was cleaning his glasses.

It wasn’t until Damian and Felicity walked into the main office that I paused.

“What are you doing to my company?” Damian asked.

I froze, a bottle of champagne in hand. “Excuse me? Your company?”

“I just bought it, bitch.”

“Oh dear.” Felicity waddled off. “I’ll get a napkin.”

The door opened and a pigtailed werecat in human form strolled into the room.

“Wow.”

I turned, unsure of what to say. She wore what could only be described as the casual gown of a renaissance brothel hostess if she were queen of corpses, her hair in two buns atop her perfect head.

“You really...went for a specific aesthetic in here, huh?”

I stared. “You’re here?”

She took the broken champagne bottle from my hand. “I thought it would be fun. A bit of torture? A bit of intrigue?”

But...I love torture and intrigue.

“Is this for me?” She motioned. “All this?”

“Uh...”

“Did you assault your coworkers...with muffins? For me?”

“Seems so.” I straightened my shoulders. “I got your text.”

A slow smile spread across her face. “And you were sad?”

“No. I was overcome with rage most violent and the swelling power of a hellkeeper unleashed.”

“You were sad.”

“I was not. I don’t...I—”

“Well. Damian and I went in half on half on the LoveBubble stock. So I’ve got a front for my operations now.” She tilted her head. “Unless you’d rather report the change in management to your brethren?”

“You...bought LoveBubble...for me?”

She shrugged. “You’re cute. And I like the fangs.”

I balked. “Did you just...buy me?”

“A little.” Then she tossed the champagne over her shoulder. “Now, Mr. Prince Of Vampires. Meet me in the file room for a very important meeting.”

“I...won’t be turning you, if that’s what you—”

“Sweet sexy vampy baby,” Kat tugged on my coat collar. “I don’t need your immortality. I have my own.” She kissed me so hard I could feel her heartbeat in my throat. “You’re stuck with me. Better learn to love it.”

Then she snagged a bit of muffin off my shoulder and popped it into her mouth.

Oh...oh no. I fed her. I’ll never be rid of her now.

She locked those dark eyes on me and purred. “Best. Valentine’s Day. Ever.”