



# Tale of the Necromancer (Memento Mori 3)

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**Category:** Romance, Paranormal, Fantasy, Dark, Horror

**Description:** Now she knows her past. But is it one worth living with?

As Marguerite finally learns the terrible truth behind what she is—and why Gideon Raithe needs her—the memories of her past come flooding back. As she travels through all her previous lives, she learns she has been running from a decision the entire time. And now, she has nowhere left to hide.

Is her life one worth living? And despite how she has come to feel about Gideon, can she forgive him for all that he's done?

Or are some things worth leaving in the grave?

**Total Pages (Source):** 83

# Page 1

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1

July 1551

Palace of Fontainebleau, France

“Father!”

Marguerite ran to him as fast as she could, although the tears stung her eyes. She flew into his arms, burying her head in the rich fabric of the king’s robes.

“Oh, my dear heart. Whatever is wrong?” Henri hugged her tight, stroking a hand over her hair.

Throwing her arms around his neck, she sniffled. “Why are they so mean to me?”

“They are but children, Marguerite. They know not what they do. Come, come.” He brought her over to a bench by the wall and sat, patting the spot next to him.

She nearly collapsed next to him, wiping her eyes with her handkerchief. “Francis said I did not matter. Said that nobody loves me. Called me a bastard.”

“That is not true, and you are well aware of that fact.” Henri placed an arm around her and hugged her close to his side, kissing the top of her head. “I love you more than the stars. You are my gift from God.”

“But...I...I am not really your daughter.”

“Oh? How strange. I had thought you were. What a terrible misunderstanding.” He chuckled, and then let out a sigh. “No, my beloved, you are my daughter. But you are not the daughter of my wife, and therein lies the rub, I am afraid.”

Marguerite nodded weakly. She knew she was not Catherine de Medici’s daughter. That fact was made painfully clear to her from the first day she was old enough to comprehend the thought. It was a fact the queen herself enjoyed reminding her of at every opportunity.

She was not really a princess. She was not really the daughter of Henri II, King of France. She sniffled and wiped her eyes again. “I know.”

“They are just jealous of you.”

“Father, now you jest.”

“No, I am quite serious. You are older, smarter, more talented—and indeed, I think if you were allowed to train in the art, you would be a better fencer. I have seen you in the yard playing with young de Lorges. What is his name again?”

“Leopold.” She paused. “You are not mad at me?”

“Hm, no. I think it will be a long time before I allow you to enter the knighthood, however. But I see no harm in picking up a wooden sword and playing at children’s games.” He hummed as a thought clearly came to him. “Ah, see? There is the benefit to your condition.”

“How so?”

“If you were heir to the throne or a titled princess, you would not be able to sneak off so.” He tapped her on the end of her nose and smiled wryly. “With your little pad of

paper and pilfered charcoal to sketch the fountains in the gardens. Or to fence with your companion by the woods.”

Marguerite pouted. “I thought I was hiding that.”

“You were, but there is much that a father sees that others do not. Even I, as king, as busy as I may be.” He kissed the top of her head again. “The children are simply jealous of you, and for more than just the freedom your heritage allows. No, they are jealous because you were born of true love, my dear heart.”

“What do you mean?”

He smiled sadly as he gazed out the window into the gardens and yards outside the palace. “You are too young to understand, I fear. There is a simple rule in the world around us, one that is as inescapable for kings as it is peasants, if not more so. A marriage of love is mournfully often the exception, not the rule.”

“You do not love the queen?” She frowned. How sad for both of them if that were true.

“Our relationship is...not meant to be about such matters. We were wed by arrangement. I had barely even met her before we were bound. I do love her, but it is not the kind of love that one aspires to own.”

“I still do not understand.”

“I hope you never will. If I have my say, my dear heart, yours will be a life of love. I will give you that which I never had the opportunity to achieve.” He pulled his arm from around her shoulders. “Now, dry your tears and off you go, dear heart. Ignore the callousness of the children. They play at cruelty to test the limits of their bonds.”

“Thank you, Father.” Standing, she turned back to lean down and kiss his cheek. She curtsied before she left his side, feeling much better than she had moments before.

## Page 2

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If entirely confused.

\* \* \*

July 1556

Palace of Fontainebleau, France

Marguerite glanced up at the statue on the pedestal before her, and then back down to the sketchbook in her lap as she worked on sketching out the details of the form with the bit of charcoal she had borrowed from her tutor. Well, borrowed was not the right word. She had stolen it. While drawing was a perfectly ladylike pursuit to the stuffy gentleman, he wished her to adhere more strictly to her other studies. She personally felt his other subjects were utterly useless, and instead wished to spend her time drawing.

Honestly, from a practical standpoint, what was the difference between embroidery and drawing? They were both art. But what dismayed her was not that her tutor allowed her to draw, or that he wished her not to. It was that it did not matter.

Perhaps that was it? One was a harmless triviality, something to pass the time, and the other was a talent of honor that could grant rights and money to those who possessed it. There were no famous female painters. She knew it was not because her gender was incapable of such things. It was because the other gender wished them not to be. She could draw just as well as any man, paint as well as any man, but she would never make a living at it.

She still did not understand why, but it did not matter in the end. It was a simple fact of life, and it would not be her place to stop it. Even as the half-daughter to the king, she was powerless in such matters.

But she could choose to ignore it.

And so, she sat on the bench in the hallway of the palace, her skirts pooling around her, and she sketched the figure of a man onto the scrap of paper she had also borrowed from her tutor. Claude d'Urfé would oft roll his eyes at the discovery of her drawings, but as a patron of the arts himself, did not punish her for the simple dalliance that he viewed as merely a misplaced interest in the topic, not an affinity for the creation of it. His mindset on the topic suited her just fine.

Despite that, it was immensely frustrating to her that she was not allowed to take formal lessons in art and yet her male half-siblings were allowed to do whatever they liked. Especially Henri the younger, who preferred art to more scholarly subjects as well. As Catherine's favorite son, young Henri was...well, Marguerite worked at all opportunities not to cross the impossibly dramatic five-year-old prince.

That was not to say she did not get along with the flamboyant young thing. All the opposite. She would sit beside him in the gardens, and he would allow her to draw as well, often using the same supplies. He would regale her with what he had learned, and she would listen eagerly.

Sometimes it angered him that she was ostensibly better than he was at drawing, but she would calmly point out that she was ten years his elder, and therefore had no extra talent than he, simply ten more years of practice. And that once he reached her age, he would have easily surpassed her, as she would not have access to the tutelage he could have on account of her gender.

That always calmed the boy, who insisted that he was to become whatever he liked to

be, no matter the rules.

Honestly, Marguerite hoped he had the chance to do just that. Even at such a young age, the young Henri was an almost overwhelming presence in any room he found himself in, and she often found herself smiling at the boy's antics.

But better anyone than the eldest prince, Francis. One year Henri's elder, and in all ways seemingly the younger. Where the young Henri was full of passion and vigor, even if it was sometimes used maliciously, Francis was the opposite. Frail and fragile, she could not abide that child's incessant whining. But he was the heir apparent, and she was simply a fixture of the court. And so, she attended his wishes and did her best to mind them when their nurse was not around to do so. Ever since Diane had left, the duty fell to Marguerite instead.

She smiled faintly. She missed her half-sister. Diane was the eldest child of the king and a fellow illegitimate daughter. They had bonded over that, and Marguerite had found shelter in her kindness. Often, Diane would point out how very kind Henri was to his children, regardless of their heritage.

It was one of the many reasons Marguerite loved her father. She could complain all she wanted about learning Italian and Latin or being taught to play the lute—which she was abysmal at—but she knew what the alternatives could be. She was not an ungrateful daughter.

She was just a little bit of a lonely one, sometimes. At the age of fourteen, Diane had been wed and was now a duchess. Without a fellow half-daughter around to keep her company, Marguerite found herself spending more and more time with her favorite companion.

“There you are!”



Smiling, she looked up from her scrap of paper. “Hello, Leopold.” She blinked at the young man, just a few years her elder. “Oh! Am I late?”

“Yes, indeed.” He smirked and crossed his arms over the front of his tunic. “How do you expect me to train you to fence if you do not attend your lessons?”

“I lost track of the hour, that is all.” Tucking her drawing into a stack of other papers she had been meant to be reading on some treatise or another, she sprang to her feet. “Shall we, though?”

“Only if you say you are sorry for leaving me standing out there by the woods.” His smirk widened to a grin.

“Yes, yes, I am sorry.” She stood on her tiptoes to give him a harmless kiss on the cheek. “Let us go, then. I am eager to learn more parry techniques.”

“Better you master the first one than learn the rest. And you are quite terrible.”

“I am not!” She frowned. “It is this lousy dress. You are allowed to fight in—in trousers, and I must do so like this.” She picked up the fabric of her skirt and dropped it again. “It is not my fault.”

“So you keep saying.” He laughed. “I do not think I believe you.”

“I do not care if you believe me.” Pouting, she kept her head held high. “I am a princess. You are merely my knight. It is not your place to question me.”

“Oh, is that so?” He shoved her arm playfully. “You are no more a princess than that plant over there.”

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“And you are no more a knight than a candlestick. What is your point?” She smiled at him, confident in her argument. “We are children of our fathers and not our mothers. Perhaps we should start our own court. There seem to be enough of us in the world.”

That got Leopold to laugh hard, his face lighting up at the thought of it. “How wonderful would that be?”

“I say it is already done. You are my knight, and I am the princess.” She nodded resolutely. “And therefore, I do not care if you believe me or not.”

“A court cannot have only two members.”

“We have to start somewhere, don’t we?”

Leopold chuckled and shook his head. “If you say so.”

“I do say so. That is very much the point.” She took his hand as they left the palace and headed for the private area by the woods that they often snuck away to. Being as she was had disadvantages, but it also had many advantages. No one cared when she went missing for long hours, as long as she made her appointments. And since her father knew and approved of her friendship—and sparring matches—with Leopold, everyone else was encouraged to look the other way.

The scandal of her playing with wooden swords hardly outweighed the one that which she was born into. No one expected her to act like a true princess, so she could skirt the edges of propriety. It was harmless.

In more ways than one.

Because despite her arguments to the contrary?

The dress had nothing to do with it. She really was terrible.

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2

January 1559

Palace of Fontainebleau, France

“But I hate him!”

Marguerite watched as the young Henri threw himself back dramatically on her bed, one arm flung out at his side and the other draped over his head.

She smiled and shook her head, amused at his antics. She would forever be amused by the foppish child. “Henri, love, you hate most everyone.”

“No, I do not.” He pondered the thought for a moment. “All right, perhaps I do, but not you, Marguerite. You, I can tolerate.”

“I appreciate that.” She chuckled as she turned back to her writing table. “And you do not hate Francis. You are just annoyed by him. It is very different.”

“He keeps calling me Henrietta. But if I go to strike him, I am scolded for hitting someone with ‘such a weak constitution.’” He mocked their nurse, doing a fairly adept imitation of the older woman. “It is not fair!”

“Well, you should not let his name-calling trouble you so. He only likes to needle you because you are the queen’s favorite, and she has no qualms about making that known.” She set down her quill. There would be no writing done with Henri in the

room.

The young boy jumped from the bed. “I suppose.” He headed to her wardrobe and, throwing open the doors, began to play with a few of Marguerite’s scarves, tying them around his head and posing in the mirror.

There were many in the palace who would have likely wished to slap the boy silly for such effeminate behavior. Marguerite allowed it for several reasons. First and most importantly, it was not her place to judge who the boy was or how he would wish to live his life. She was eighteen and had met many a young man in the court who acted quite like her younger half-brother. Many of those men had sought her hand in marriage, recognizing in her behavior an acceptance for their proclivities. As it was generally those men who preferred the company of each other over those of women.

She might not suffer the same condition, but she, too, found herself in the strange world of being both accepted and yet distinctly “other.”

“He thinks just because he got married, he can boss me around.” Henri huffed, now having moved on to her modest jewelry collection to play with.

“I suppose it is a rite that makes one an adult in the eyes of most.”

“Can you imagine it? Being married to Francis?” He let out a loud and dramatic sound of disgust.

She made a face. “No, gladly, I cannot imagine it.”

“Why aren’t you married yet, Marguerite?” Henri swirled in front of the mirror. “You’re awfully old. Is it because you’re ugly?”

She barked a laugh. “Well, excuse me, my prince!” Shaking her head, she smiled at

him. There was a fiendishness to him that she could not deny she enjoyed. “Yes, that must be why. And here I had been taking my father’s word on the matter this whole time. Yet no one had the strength of character to tell me I was entirely hideous. Thank you for your honesty.”

Henri grinned from ear to ear. He loved these kinds of games, and she was one of the few who had come to not only tolerate but encourage them. “Oh? What has father told you?”

“I do not think I am now able to say. I am too overwrought with grief, finally knowing the truth of my revolting appearance.” She put the back of her hand to her forehead and draped back against her desk, feigning sorrow.

“Oh, come on!” He ran up to her, ditching his costume on the floor wherever it lay, and nearly threw himself at her, climbing into her lap. “You must tell me.”

“Must I?” She sat back up and hugged the boy. Picking up one of her hairbrushes, she began to comb some of the snarls out of his hair. For someone seemingly obsessed with his appearance, he was still a young boy. “I do not know as I must do anything.”

“But I am a prince.”

“Yes, but you are not the prince, are you? Francis will be king when our father is taken by God. I do not believe you outrank me.” Oh, he did. But she was not about to tell him that.

“But—but—” He pouted. “I want to know.”

“It is a secret.”

“Now I want to know even more.” He whined comically and slumped against her.

“Margueriiiiite!”

“Say please.”

“No. I am a prince. I don’t have to say please.”

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“We shall see about that.” She tickled his sides.

He shrieked and squirmed, laughing loudly. “Stop, stop! I surrender!” When she refused to relent, he finally gave up. “Please!”

“All right.” Wrapping her arms around him, she hugged him close and leaned her head against his. He snuggled into her, smiling. “I have not been married as father has said he wishes me to marry for love. I believe he is waiting for me to tell him who I have chosen. It seems he has enough children to marry off for political gain that I do not warrant much notice.” She chuckled. “So, I find myself waiting for a suitor toward whom I feel such adoration.”

“But what if you never find one?” Henri frowned. “You could wait forever.”

“I suppose. Then I would finally relent and pick whoever would marry an old crone like me.”

“A hideous old maid!” He cackled.

“Why, you—” She joined him in the laughter, especially after she began tickling him again. He ran from her to escape and flew out into the hallway. She chased after him, racing down the corridors of their home, weaving around startled-looking servants as she did.

Family. There were worse things one could be saddled with in life.

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Marguerite lifted the front of her skirts a few inches to walk through the grass as she headed down to the small clearing in the woods just past the line of the palace gardens. She and Leopold had taken to being a bit more out of sight as they grew older, and their practice weapons moved from sticks to wooden swords to metal.

She was still abjectly terrible. Leopold teased her for being all vigor no finesse, and that was true. Honestly, she had long since given up on the hope of wielding a weapon with any modicum of skill. She made her way out to the woods for their training once or twice a fortnight for the excuse of his company.

Her breath was mist in the cold winter air. They trained year-round, if the weather was good enough. At least there was no snow on the ground. She hated stumbling about in a dress in the snow.

As she approached the clearing, she frowned. There was an odd sound coming from the row of trees. Thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk. Like someone chopping wood. It echoed through the trees. As she drew closer, she furrowed her brow.

Yes, Leopold was indeed chopping wood. In a manner of speaking. Her dear friend was standing in the clearing, a broadsword in his hands, hacking at a large oak with so much fury that his shirt was soaked through with sweat.

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

Bits of wood and bark sprayed off in all directions as he hacked away with the blade. She moved farther into the clearing and sat down on a fallen log that ran along one side, watching him as he worked out...whatever it was he was working out.

She tried to interrupt him in between swings. “Leopol—”

Thunk, thunk, thunk, thunk.

“Leop—”

Thunk, thunk, thunk.

Finally, she gave up and simply shouted. “Leo!”

He dropped the sword, his shoulders going limp as the blade fell into the grass at his feet. He leaned his forearm against the battered, chipped-at tree, and braced his forehead against it. “Leave me be, Marguerite.”

“I see you have found yourself a more suitable sparring partner. I am not sure how I feel about being replaced with a tree, but I think perhaps it does have better form than I. Therefore, I will concede the matter.” She smirked, trying to cheer him up. If even just a little. It was rare that Leopold had fits of temper, and when he did, they were always temporary.

When he turned to look at her, her smile instantly faded. His eyes were red, and tears streaked his cheeks. He opened his mouth as if to speak again, perhaps to send her away or scold her for her teasing, but he seemingly lost the will or could not find the words.

“Oh, Leo...” She reached her arms out to him, calling him over. “Whatever is the matter?”

Tiredly, he shook his head. For a moment, he hesitated, before crossing the clearing toward her. He slumped down onto the ground at her feet and laid his back against her legs. Instantly, she wrapped her arms around him and held him, resting her chin on his shoulder.

For a long time—minutes, perhaps—they sat in silence. Him, quietly crying, occasionally wiping his face with his sleeve, and her, simply holding him and waiting

for him to be ready to speak.

When he did, his voice was strained. “Father is forcing me to marry.”

“Well, you have been avoiding it, rushing off to every war and skirmish in the known world.” She kissed his cheek. It tasted of salt. “It is hardly subtle how little you wish to be wed.”

“I—I cannot marry. I simply cannot.” He grimaced.

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“Pah. At least you have worth outside your matrimonial value. You may carry a sword, become a soldier, or an artist, or a scholar. The very best I can hope for is a husband who does not beat me when I wish to pick up paper and charcoal. Or one who philanders.” She paused. “Correction—one who philanders too much. I am beginning to think some dalliance is inevitable, if court life is anything to judge.”

“You do not understand.” Leo shut his eyes and let out a long, beleaguered sigh. “You simply do not.”

“Then explain it to me, my darling.”

“I—” He hesitated. His expression became unsure and pained, the lines of his face drawing thin. What was so terrible that he could not tell her? His oldest friend?

She tightened her hold on him, tucking her head closer to his. “I love you more than my own brothers, Leopold. There is nothing you could say—nothing you could do—that could change that. You cannot escape my friendship, no matter how hard you try.”

“Are you so certain?”

“I am a very stubborn creature when tasked.”

That made him chuckle weakly. Finally, he sighed again, and she felt his muscles go slack as he surrendered to whatever he felt was so inevitable. “I have no passion for women.”

“Oh. Well.” She paused. “That does not seem to be much of a barrier for many of the fops in—”

“No.” He cut her off, his tone frustrated. “I do not desire men, either. I desire no one.” Now that some manner of dam had burst, it all rushed forward in a flood. “All my life, Marguerite, I have seen how people gaze at each other. Desire, need, wanting—stolen kisses in the shadows. I care not for a single speck of it. There has not been a single creature of any gender that has ever caught my eye.”

She would have made a comment about taking that quite personally, but now did not seem the time to jest. She merely held him as he kept speaking.

“I am—I am unwell. I do not feel lust. At all. I wished to join the priesthood—where I could hide my disorder behind the veil of God, but Father would not have it. Therefore, I did precisely as you said. I hid behind the sword and shield. I ran off to the hills at every opportunity whenever the subject arose. But now, he will suffer it no longer. He is to force me to marry. I—I cannot—if I were wed to some poor unsuspecting woman, what would become of me? Rumors would spread, how I could not consummate the marriage, and I would be shamed. My family would be shamed.” He choked on the last few words, struggling to keep his composure. Tears flowed renewed down his cheeks. “I am a bastard. I have precious little distance to go before familial bonds shatter. Without the position granted to me by my father, I am nothing. It is by his grace that I am not disowned and left to rot. You know this more than anyone.”

Yes. She did understand. Her heart broke for him, and she held him tight. She did not argue with him—ask him details about his condition. She understood his dilemma. What was a man if he could not perform as a man? Just as worthless a woman who could not conceive, she supposed.

How horrible that all humanity is measured by others on what lay between their legs.

Then, she knew what must need be done. She smiled. “What if the young lady were not unsuspecting?”

“Huh?” He twisted to look at her, confused. “What are you—”

She smiled and kissed his cheek. “Will you marry me, Leopold?”

He whirled about, kneeling now at her feet, looking up at her in shock and confusion. “Why would you do this? You would be trapped in a loveless marriage.”

“No. Not loveless.” She put her palm against his cheek and smiled. “Sexless, perhaps. But there are ways around that.” She chuckled. “Mind me not for my lovers, and I will find one who resembles you well enough that we can claim a child or two as yours. It is all very pragmatic, when you think over it. Your honor will be defended, and we may still raise a family together, if you wish.”

He hesitated, his gaze flicking between her eyes as if searching for something. “Why would you do this for me? Why?”

Gathering up his hands in hers, she held them in her lap. “You are my closest companion, Leopold. I cannot imagine my world without you at my side. I think I would find myself immensely jealous of any woman who would have you, if not I. The past few years, I wondered if you were utterly dense, how you seemingly were ignorant of my wish that you might court me.”

His cheeks went a little pink. “Not entirely dense. Simply...unable.” He looked down at the ground between them.

“Now I am no longer offended.” She chuckled. “Oh, Leopold. I wish you had told me sooner. But I know why you did not.” Picking up his hands, she kissed his fingers before setting them back down in her lap. “I believe my own father’s temperance

wears thin on my unmarried status as well. No one will doubt us that we had been secreting off as lovers for years. We are inseparable.” She looked over to the battered-up tree that had borne the brunt of Leopold’s angst. “I think my nurse would prefer that manner of sparring partner than the more literal option, besides.”

He laughed at that. “I—I do not know how to thank you for this. To sacrifice your life, to...to protect me.”

“Sacrifice my life? Please.” She grinned. “How ostentatious a thought. No. With you as my husband, I can pursue all that I desire. The arts, literature, science—to see the world. You are the kindest man I could possibly think of. Who better to have at my side than my dearest and closest friend?”

A tear slipped down his cheek again, but this time she knew it was not one of anger, grief, or fear. Wordlessly, he gathered her into his arms and pulled her down to sit on his lap, and simply held her against his chest as though she were a stuffed doll. She did not mind in the slightest.

“I will speak to my father this evening.” His voice was now a quiet murmur.

“It will not take me much to convince my father. I believe he has been waiting for you to announce your intentions with me for years. He will be overjoyed.”

“I do not know what I could do to repay this favor, Marguerite.”

“Buy me a nice home. Perhaps one that overlooks a pond. Oh, could we raise ducks? I love ducks.”

He laughed again quietly, holding her tight. “Your wish is my command, my lady.”

She tucked her head against his neck. She felt safe with him—she always had. Her

protector and her friend.

And now soon to be her husband.

She smiled.



Gideon could not look away from the young woman seated on a bench in the gardens. It was an unseasonably warm winter day, and it seemed she wished to enjoy the sunlight despite the chill in the air. She was perched there with a book in her lap, although from the looks of things, she was not reading it. Instead, she had a piece of charcoal in her hand, and she kept glancing studiously between the blank piece of paper she had placed in her small tome and the fountain before her.

By the gods, she was beautiful.

He stayed in the shadow of a column, his dark clothing aiding in hiding his presence. It felt as though the air had been robbed from his lungs. She had stolen his ability to breathe, unwittingly as it may be on her part. Indeed, she was entirely ignorant of him. And for the moment, he preferred it that way. It allowed him to watch her in this private moment of focus.

It was by far not the first time he had seen her. In the many months he had been traveling to the palace to meet with the queen, she had gone from a passing fancy to something that bordered obsession. Now, he found himself searching her out, walking the corridors of the palace for a chance to see her.

Yes, perhaps he was obsessed.

Each time he found her, she had arrested his attention as though nothing else in the world existed but her. Despite his deep desire to do so, he had not introduced himself. While he had ingratiated himself to the queen well enough, the king was far harder to

convince. King Henri the Second was a shrewd and intelligent man, and while he was matched by his queen in wits, he was sorely lacking in the deviousness that Catherine de Medici possessed in such abundance.

In short, Henri had honor. And that meant worming his way into the king's graces would take more time and careful planning. But perhaps the beautiful young woman who sketched away, oblivious to his presence, could be both the solution to, and the prize of, his current political scheme.

Slipping away like the shadow he resembled in his long black cloak, he smirked as the wheels began to turn away in his head. It was fortuitous he already had an appointment with the queen. Now, he merely had another item to add to the agenda. As he headed in the direction of her audience chambers, he watched as the servants of the palace moved quickly to step out of his way.

He was a frightening thing to behold. Tall, broad shouldered, and garbed entirely in black, he sculpted his appearance on purpose. His long white hair was juxtaposed by his youthful face. Coupled with the "exotic" color of his skin, and he knew he was quite something to behold. He enjoyed the nervousness others experienced upon seeing him. It was the same as a dangerous snake in the wood, warning the unwary traveler to carefully watch their step.

The guards by the audience chamber opened the door for him as he approached. He entered as one announced him. "Dr. Johann Faust."

Another false name. Another false persona. But it was no matter. He enjoyed spinning a good tale when it was needed. The claim that he was a brilliant Spaniard orphan raised by a German alchemist struck the perfect balance between too farcical to be believed and yet fantastical enough that they wished to believe him.

And no one questioned it.

He dropped to a knee before the queen and bowed his head low. “Your majesty.”

“Ah, Faust. Good. I had wanted to speak to you.” Catherine tapped her fingers on the arm of her chair.

“How may I be of service, my queen?”

Catherine gestured her other hand. The servants left the room, shutting the doors behind them, leaving all but one trusted maid standing nearby. “I believe we may have a Protestant spy within our walls, and I wish you to use your...methods...to root them out. This is a matter of secrecy and urgency, as I hope you can imagine.”

He smiled. That would be easy enough. “Of course. I will begin immediately.” He stood from the ground and paused. “I would ask a question of you, if I may.”

The queen gestured idly for him to continue.

“The young woman who sits out in the garden each morning and draws...who is she?”

“Hm?” The queen grimaced as she realized precisely of whom he was speaking. “Ah. Yes. Marguerite. One of the results of the king’s many...dalliances.”

He arched an eyebrow. “If I might pry, with whom?”

“He will not tell me.” She laughed incredulously. “All the others I know, and yet with her, her parentage remains a mystery. Why do you ask, alchemist?” A wry smirk crossed her full features. “Has she caught your eye?”

Always give up enough to be trusted. Never give up anything that matters. Feigning embarrassment, he smiled shyly. “Yes, she has.”

“You are full of surprises, magician.” Catherine looked off thoughtfully, gazing out the window. “The girl is approaching the age where she should be wed. I would prefer her no longer underfoot. She is pliable and respectful enough, but I dislike the reminder of my husband’s indiscretions lingering about.”

“Naturally.”

“There is one flaw in this arrangement. Henri has pledged to the girl that she will be allowed to marry for love. I will do what I can to convince him that his fantasy has run its course and it is time to see her properly and profitably wed.” The shrewd woman tapped her fingers on her chair again. “But perhaps I can arrange a meeting between you two. Perhaps there is a potion you could brew or some spell you could work to make her dote upon you.”

“Such things are possible, and not outside my skills, but...they are fragile, temporary, and do not generally end well for any of the participants.” He shook his head. “Careful what you wish for, and all.”

“I suppose. Well, then you will have to do it the old-fashioned way.” She laughed. “Very well. I will see what I can do to arrange this. It rids me of a nuisance and serves to pay you for the deed in the same breath.” She gestured dismissively. “Simply do not forget your other task.”

He bowed low. “It shall be done, my queen.”

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Turning from the room, he could not help but grin. There was no doubt in his mind of the outcome. He would win the girl's heart.

Marguerite would be his.

\* \* \*

Marguerite hated attending evening events. But at least she had good company in her hopefully soon-to-be husband. Her evening took a rather swift and unexpected turn, however, when someone called her name.

“Marguerite—” someone called from across the room, interrupting her conversation with Leopold. It was the stern voice of a woman that she recognized quickly. It was hard not to. She was the queen, after all.

Quickly and without hesitation, she moved to stand before Catherine de Medici and curtsied low. “My queen.”

“I wish to introduce you to an associate of mine.” She gestured at a man beside her, garbed in long black robes. “You may have seen him around the palace, I believe, as of late.”

Yes, she had seen the man before. And every time he had given her a strange chill. Often, she had seen him lurking in the shadows of the great hall or watching her from the darkness. She had heard whispers that the queen had business with an alchemist, but she didn't dare listen to them. Listening to gossip about the queen was a good way to lose her limited favor.

Nor had she ever dared to get this close to the stranger. Now, she found herself regarding him in full—and he, her. It was as though she had been pinned to the spot.

He was tall and broad shouldered. He was young, perhaps in his early thirties, and handsome with sharp, striking features. But that was not what caught her by surprise. It was the nature of those features that left her speechless for a moment. His hair was long and pure white, like freshly fallen snow. His skin was toned like those perhaps from southern Spain or Portugal. And his eyes...they were metallic silver. They watched her with matched fascination.

“This is Dr. Johann Faust, arrived from service to the lordships in Germany.” The queen’s expression became coy and amused. “I believe he would like to dance with you this evening.”

Her face went warm at the suggestion, and she found herself staring at the man who looked very distinctly unlike any German she had ever met before. Stammering shyly for a moment, she finally managed to curtsy to the strange man. “It would be my deepest pleasure, my lord.”

He chuckled, a deep rumble that seemed to find its way inside her and twist about like snakes. She could not tell if it was a pleasurable sensation or a deeply unsettling one. Perhaps it was both. “I am no lord, my Lady Marguerite. Merely an itinerant servant, providing my knowledge where I can.”

He reached for her hand, and she gave it to him after a moment’s hesitation. He bowed, kissing her knuckles, and the warmth of her cheeks increased. His silver eyes never left hers, and they flickered with something strange and frightening. When he spoke again, his voice was lower, like the rumble of thunder. “And the pleasure is all mine.”

She swallowed the lump in her throat. “I—” She hesitated. Quickly, she realized she

did not know what to say. She was spared the silence as the other guests began to take their spots on the floor. Faust led her to take their own positions. Glancing nervously at Leopold, she discovered he was not even paying attention, but engrossed in a conversation with a friend.

She was on her own.

With a man who was smiling at her quite like he meant to devour her. There was a heat in his silver gaze that kept the warmth on her cheeks. She knew she was blushing, and she did not know why. Men had looked at her in lust before—she knew she was not an unattractive woman. But no one had ever gazed at her quite like that.

As the music began, she focused on the steps, and not the molten silver eyes that never wavered from her, even as they turned and changed partners in the rotation of the dance. Each time their hands touched, it was like something crackled between them that she did not understand. By the time the music concluded, she felt dizzy and overly warm, even in the winter chill of the palace.

She curtsied to him, quickly mumbled an excuse that she needed some fresh air, and fled without looking back. Finding a large door halfway down the corridor away from the ballroom, she pushed it open and stepped out onto the stone landing, grateful for the blast of cold air. Usually, she hated winter. But this time, she was glad for the temperature drop.

Pressing her hands against the frigid marble railing, she took in a deep breath and slowly let it out.

“My lady?”

She jolted, shocked at the voice, and turned to see who had spoken to her. Silhouetted against the candlelight from inside, she saw the figure of Johann Faust. He stepped

outside and lowered the hood of his eccentric black robe.

“Are you quite all right?” His voice was deep and smooth, and she shivered. She did not know if it was from him or the cold.

“I—I—” She stopped her useless stammering, forced herself to take a breath, and began again. “Yes, forgive me. I did not mean to be so rude. I think the warmth of the room went to my head.”

“I was merely worried.” He took a step closer. The smell of rich herbs and something else wafted over her as he approached—almost like petrichor. How odd. She could not dwell on it for long as he smiled, and there was such tenderness in his expression that it struck the thought from her mind. “I will not bemoan the chance to speak with you outside the din of the hall.”

“Oh?”

“Yes.” He took another careful step toward her, and soon she was looking up at him. He was tall. She thought perhaps it was an illusion created by his stark black clothing against the opulently painted walls of the palace. She was of shorter than average stature, yes, but he was still impressive—and a little intimidating. “I hope you do not think me too forward, my princess.”

“I am not a princess.” She chuckled and took a step back. He answered it with another step forward in turn. “I fear you are mistaken. My mother is not the queen.”

“I did not say a princess.” He reached down to scoop up her hand, and she watched, helpless in her surprise, as he kissed the back of her knuckles once more. “I said my princess. And that you are without any shadow of a doubt.”

Now it felt as though her face was ablaze. She took another step back, straight into



the marble railing, and squeaked in surprise. He did not release her hand as he dropped it to their sides as he stepped even closer to her, the heat of his body now warring with the cold night air.

“Sir, I—”

“I fear I must apologize to you. I beg you to forgive me, but I have no other recourse for that which I am about to undertake. There is only one path laid out before me, and I am helpless but to walk it. And I only hope I can convince you to walk it with me.”

“Wh—what path is that?” It was a struggle to keep air in her lungs. She felt as though she were drowning—in him. Like he was some great dark lake, threatening to pull her under. His touch felt strong and sure, both things she had lost the moment he arrived. She felt lost, floundering at the surface, afraid to sink beneath, knowing she might never return if she did. Still, something in him called to her in a way that scared her even more than his overwhelming nature. Something that sang to a part of her she did not know existed.

As if he could see her thoughts play out before him, his molten silver eyes sparkled as he smiled, wry and devilish. “I believe, my princess...that I will have you as my wife.”

Marguerite fainted.

Gideon scooped the poor creature up into his arms. Very well, perhaps he could have worded his proposition to her a bit gentler. But he had been a bit caught up in the moment himself, finally being truly in her presence. Her emerald eyes had fascinated him, hypnotizing him like he was nothing but a snake in a basket. Before he knew it, he had blurted out his intentions.

For a fraction of a moment, when she swooned into his arms, he wondered if he had merely been struck by the gods of good luck. But when she went limp, he knew he had merely overwhelmed her.

He carried her back inside and shook his head at the guards who took in the sight of him carrying the unconscious young woman with rightful alarm. “Nothing to be concerned over. Marguerite merely exerted herself after too much wine.” He smiled, easily playing the role of the physician. Simply because he was. Yes, magic was his true forte, but he was as skilled in the art of healing, as he was the rest of what he called his trade. “I will take her to bed and ensure she’s cared for.”

The guards nodded, smiling to themselves at what they must have believed to be nothing but courtly antics. If the young woman was approaching her twentieth birthday as he suspected, he was likely not the first to sneak her away for a night of affection. The French did view that manner of things rather differently than the English or the German.

After asking a maid for directions to Marguerite’s room, he took his time in taking her there. He enjoyed the feel of her in his arms. She was a little thing, shorter in

stature than most, but figured in such a way that made his mouth water.

No, no. Pace thyself even but a little, you fool.

Stepping into her room, he laid her down on top of the quilt of her bed and returned to the door to quietly shut it. Stepping back to the bed, he sat on the edge and reached out to gently place the back of his fingers against her forehead.

No fever. Merely stunned. He had worried for a moment that he had happened upon her just as she was to be seized by some deadly ailment. It would be my luck.

Standing, he pulled a blanket up over her. Fetching a light towel from the water basin on her dresser, he dipped it in the cool liquid. Wringing it out, he returned to her side to press it to her forehead. "Poor dear. I hope you know this was not my intention." He chuckled quietly to himself. "Although I had imagined being in your bedroom this evening, this was hardly the manner in which I had hoped."

At the sound of his voice, she stirred, letting out a low hum and turning her head to the side.

"Easy, now, not too fast."

She pulled in a startled hiss of air through her nose, her eyes flying wide. In a moment, she panicked and punched him.

Right to the face.

He groaned in pain and pressed a hand to his nose where she had smarted him. Despite the blow, he had to laugh. "I deserved that." His princess had a little fight in her, and a fairly impressive punch, all things considered. It only made him adore her more.

“I—I—What—what are you—”

“You fainted, my dear. I brought you here to rest. I apologize for startling you, but I am a physician, and—”

“You fiend!” She punched him again, this time to the temple. He winced and stood to get out of her reach as she went for a third, sloppier hit. Her disorientation was seemingly cured as she flew off the bed to follow him, striking him now with both fists. “You rotten—”

He caught her wrists and pulled them behind her back, smiling down at her furious face as it put her chest squarely against his.

Her cheeks instantly went pink. “Let me go, or I’ll scream.”

“Let me speak, or I will claim you have some manner of dangerous and contagious madness.” His smile faded to a smirk. “As I said, I am a physician and alchemist in service to your queen.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” Uncertainty flickered behind emerald eyes of rage and righteousness.

Arching an eyebrow, he called her bluff. “Wouldn’t I?”

“If you want to speak, then let me go, and we may do so from opposite ends of the room.”

He hummed thoughtfully then shook his head. “A fair negotiation, but I fear you are not in the position to make demands, my pr—”

Her knee met his groin. That time, he fell to a knee and doubled over. He had to press

a hand to the offended part of his anatomy as stars flashed over his vision. His princess had more than a little fight in her. Making a valuable note not to underestimate the girl again, he looked up to see her standing before him, several feet away, brandishing a jeweled hairpin as though it were a sword. She glared at him with all the quiet rage that would waver the resolve of a Greek goddess.

By the gods, she's adorable.

"I deserved that as well," he managed to get out after he could inhale enough air to speak. "I take your point. I have imposed upon you."

"Grievously."

"I would sincerely hope not." Kneeling fully, he sat back on his ankles. He did not want her to fear him. Especially not so early on. She would come to learn much about him that would fill her with dread. The memory of their first meeting should not add to the list. "I apologize profusely if that is the case. I did not mean to scare you, or wrong you, or—"

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“Sneak into my bedchambers?” she interrupted him angrily.

“I did not sneak. You fainted, and I took you to rest and ensure that you were well. Several servants witnessed me bring you here. Do you think I can walk through walls?” He chuckled. “Novel as that would be.”

Not through the wall itself, but cracks are so horribly pervasive. Best not get caught up in the details.

The frown on her expression was priceless. “And they just let you carry me off?”

“Phys—”

“Yes! Yes. As you have said.” She paused. “What do you want, Faust?”

“Your hand in marriage. I was not being coy. Perhaps I should have been, in retrospect.”

Her jaw twitched as she glared at him. “No. I do not accept.”

It was not an unexpected response. But he was a shrewd politician. “What for? We have only just met. Please, let us look upon the past hour with humor, and take it as a sign of my devotion to you that I achieved such a remarkable misstep. I have glimpsed you here in the palace, and I have found I cannot think of anything else when you are near.”

There was the pink tone to her cheeks. He placed a hand over his chest. “I do not ask

you to accept my offer barely knowing my name. Merely to allow me a chance to know you, woo you, and perhaps—if I am lucky—win you.”

Please, Marguerite...

She wavered, and his heart hitched on a single thread of hope. But it shattered as she shook her head. “You misunderstand. I have promised my hand to another.”

Hatred welled in him like an unexpected slice of lightning through the sky. Darkness coiled up, freed by this revelation, and he felt his power itching at the back of his mind, wild and untamed. For nearly nine hundred years he had been undead, and he still struggled to master the urge to feed death a thousand souls in lieu of his own.

“Please, reconsider.” His words were desperate, but his tone was seething and echoed with malice. Marguerite took a step back, her eyes going wide at the new danger he posed. “I will be a good husband, my princess. Devoted, gentle, and kind. No one will care for you the way that I may tend your needs. The world will be at your feet—all knowledge you wish for shall be yours. You will be free. You will be loved.”

“I—I am sorry, forgive me. It is not that I think you do not mean the words you say, but—” She shook her head again, edging around the bed to place the piece of furniture between them. “I cannot break my vow.”

The window of opportunity slammed shut in his face. There would be no path forward this way.

Standing slowly, he watched her with equal parts heartache, anger, and remorse. He bowed. “I appreciate your time, Marguerite. And I apologize once more for frightening you.”

Without another word, he left, shutting the door behind him. He pulled the hood of his cloak over his head as he loosed the reins on his rage. This was a setback, but not a defeat. She would be his.

Without question, she would be his.

It just means that first...someone has to die.

\* \* \*

Marguerite knocked on the door to her father's library. When she heard his quiet call for her to enter, she stepped inside. She was nervous, although she did not quite know why.

Because an eerie and frightening alchemist has made his intentions very clear—and while he may have backed away last night, I do not believe he has given up in the slightest. She smiled warily at her father as he looked up from his desk.

“Ah, dear heart.” He put his quill down in the holder and turned to her, smiling broadly. “I heard you had a spell last night. Are you well?”

“Yes, I think the wine went to my head. Too little dinner, and too much dancing.” It was a lie. She had not tasted a drop of the substance the entire evening. But there was no point in troubling her father with the propositions of a man who very well may be insane, if the entire situation could be avoided.

“I am glad to hear it.” He stood from his desk, and with a groan, arched his back. “Come, sit, tell me what troubles you.” Gesturing to a cushioned bench by the wall, he ushered her over to it.

“How do you know something is troubling me?”



“A father always knows.” He smiled to her as he sat, patting the surface next to him.  
“And you wear your very soul on your sleeve. Come.”

She joined him and chewed her lip for a moment before she committed to her decision. “Father, I think it is time I am married.”

“Oh, is it now?” He chuckled. “Has a man finally caught your eye? It was not our queen’s newest acquaintance, is it? I saw you dance with him last night.”

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“Well, I—” Her face went warm. There was something about that strange man’s silver eyes. She could not lie and say that some part of her was not drawn to him in a peculiar way. Dr. Faust was...haunting. There was no other word to describe him. A figure in the darkness, beckoning her nearer. And part of her wanted to follow him, even as offended as she was by his poor manners.

But she had made a vow.

Her oldest friend needed her.

“It is Leopold.” Summoning the image of her companion to her mind, she smiled.

“I wondered when you both would accept the inevitable.” Her father reached out and hugged her close. “But is it what you truly want?”

Never once had she lied to her father, and she was not about to begin now. “He is noble, kind, and loyal. We know each other better than anyone else in our lives. I love him as though we were already family.”

“Oh, I know all of this already, dear heart. But that was not my question.”

Leaning her head on her father’s shoulder, she sighed.

“You may tell me. It goes no farther than I, I promise.”

“He is not...suited for marriage. There is an illness in him that prevents him from feeling desire for others—of any gender. He fears what will happen if he weds

another. His father is pushing the matter.”

“The later portion I knew. Captain de Lorges has been to see me many times inquiring as to whether I would find matrimony between you and his son an amicable arrangement.” It was his turn to sigh. “Gabriel is a stubborn man. It makes him a wonderful soldier, and a terrible nuisance. As for the rest, I am dismayed to hear he has suffered so long in silence. I suspected something was amiss. Lord knows you have chased his heels for many enough years without him noticing how you have pined after him.”

She chuckled at that. “It was never required. Now I know why and am considerably less offended.”

Laughing, he leaned away from her but kept an arm around her. “Are you certain you wish to do this? It is a mighty sacrifice.”

Marrying Leopold may also save me from the alchemist. “Yes. While our love may not be passionate, it is unbreakable. I will have in him a soulmate. I will thank God each morning to have him at my side.”

“Then...consider it done. Perhaps it is not the manner of love I had wished for you, but life is not like the stories of yore.” He kissed her forehead. “You two shall be wed with my blessings. I will draw up a contract immediately. And about time—Catherine has redoubled her pestering on when you might finally fly the nest. Although Jean will be sad for your departure—she is quite glad for the help you provide in minding the others.”

She smiled sadly at the thought of leaving her home. But there was always a time for things to end, and this was the start of something new. “She is a more than capable nurse. She will do quite fine. Although I believe young Henri will grow to be even more of a handful than he is already.”

“I fear you are correct.” He stood, heading back to his desk. “Well, I have a new contract to draw and send to my captain of the guard. And you, my dear, have a future to dream of. Go tell your fiancé the good news.”

Smiling, she headed for the door. “Thank you, Father.”

“Anything for you, daughter of my love.”

She left her father’s library in the strangest of moods. She was all at once elated and mournful, grateful and regretful. Leopold would be a wonderful husband. She loved him like family.

She loved him. There was no question of that.

It would be enough for her. She would be happy with him. Even if it did feel somehow...empty. It did not matter. He needed her, and she would be there for him no matter what.

Regardless of how she felt, one thing remained true.

Her life was about to change.

5

Gideon slipped the needle-sharp blade between Gabriel de Lorges' ribs. He did always hate stabbing a man in the back, but it was just simply so much more efficient when his victims did not see it coming. It made it less traumatic for them as well. Or perhaps that is simply what he told himself.

It did not matter.

One.

Two.

He held the man's throat in the lock of his elbow as he counted the seconds, waiting for the moment when de Lorges' heart ceased to beat. The man barely even moved. He certainly did not struggle, his mind instantly entering a state of shock. His body knew it was already too late, with the vital organ skewered through. The thin blade was otherwise nearly imperceptible. He would barely even feel it.

Three.

Four.

Gabriel de Lorges' was captain of the king's guard. Of course, he would be hearty and strong. But there was no stubborn resilience that could best death. Not like this, at any rate. He smirked to himself as it finally happened. On the count of five, the man died.

And in the very same instant, he resurrected him. Tethered the severed soul back to the flesh that had not even staggered or fallen to the ground. Gideon pulled the blade from the man's back and wiped the smear of crimson from the nearly invisibly thin blade on a cloth before tucking it carefully back into its sheath.

The longer a soul experienced death—the longer the body was left to rot—the less human the subject appeared to others. But if the flame of life were arrested just at the moment it ceased to be, the illusion of it was flawless.

The captain turned around to face him. There was a flicker of momentary confusion on his face, but it quickly faded. “Yes, my master?”

Gideon smiled. “You will refer to me as Dr. Faust while in public. You will defer to me only in private instruction. All shall appear to remain as it was. Do you understand?”

The revenant bowed his head. “Yes, Master. What shall you have me do?”

Murder your son. It was tempting—so tempting—to say those words. It would be such an easy solution to his immediate problem. But it would be a rash act, and likely to fall apart at the seams.

“For now, you shall wait. Continue on as you always have. When I am in need of you, I will make it known.” Gideon turned from the revenant and walked away without another word. There was no purpose in being polite to his undead creatures.

And he was in a foul mood.

Killing Leopold would not be any guarantee of securing Marguerite's hand in marriage, even if it would satisfy his hatred and rage. No, he would need to play his cards carefully. And the best way to do that was to ensure he held the entire deck.

That was not to say he did not have a plan. Quite the contrary.

As he approached Catherine's quarters, he motioned to the guards who stood at the door to open it for him. "I must speak to the queen on urgent matters."

The guards were already his revenants. They did not bat an eye as they knocked, announced that "Dr. Faust" was here to see her, and waited for the reply. When Catherine replied for him to enter after a pause, they opened the door for him.

He entered, knowing his anger was clear on his face. He did not care what she might think of it. If she learned to fear him, all the better.

The queen was sitting on an upholstered bench, a book in her lap, looking quite startled. "Dr. Faust, I did not expect you..."

"No. You did not." He tilted his head down slightly, using the shadow of his hood to hide his features. He wished to look as terrifying as possible in the moment. "Marguerite has refused my proposition. It seems her hand is already taken by another. She has already given her vow to Leopold."

Catherine sighed. "And I'm sure that lovesick fool of a husband of mine agreed to it?"

"The contract has already been drawn and signed by both Henri and Gabriel." It is also now in my pocket. He had stolen the signed contract of marriage from Gabriel as he had slipped the blade into the man's heart. It was the only formal proof that Henri had agreed to Marguerite's wish, and it would be an important tool for him.

"I am sorry to say that there is little to be done, then. Henri keeps me out of all state affairs. He barely listens to me when I speak. His heart belongs to de Poitiers, and he has never been subtle over that. We are both out of luck."

“Perhaps...perhaps not.” He walked to the window, turning his attention out to the winter fields below. “Did it ever occur to you that Marguerite may be the daughter of your husband’s favorite mistress?”

“Of course.” She huffed. “It is obvious. Why else dote on the girl so? Why make such a childish promise that she could marry for love, when it is clear he was denied the opportunity?” He heard Catherine slam her book shut. The loathing was painted deep in her voice. “Damn him and his infidelity. Damn that harlot. And damn the spawn of their sinful coupling.”

“Careful the words you speak, my queen. Calling damnation down upon your enemies is not a deed to be done lightly.” He turned to her again. “Especially when one such as I am in your presence.”



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The shrewd woman narrowed her eyes, but he saw the flicker of fear in them all the same. “Speak plain, Faust.”

He chuckled. “The solution to all your problems stands here before you...my only question is whether or not you have the resolve to ask.”

“You are an alchemist, not—”

“Are you so certain?”

She wavered. “What are you proposing, Faust?”

He let the coils of his darkness edge out from him for a moment. Nothing but wisps of dark smoke that would soften the edges of his black cloak against the light from the window behind him. He let his true nature free but for an instant—just enough to sour the air. Just enough to rob the remainder of the queen’s surety and color from her features.

He grinned, a feral and cruel thing. “That the king...must die.”

\* \* \*

July 1559

Hotel des Tournelles, France

Marguerite hugged Leopold’s arm and rested her head on his shoulder as they sat in

the stands on the side of the jousting field. He had already gone the day prior, and while she had been terrified for him, it had all been for naught. He had been victorious, and both he and his opponent had left the match largely unscathed, even if his armor had a few more dents in it than before.

Life had been peaceful and happy in the preceding months. Their wedding was scheduled for August, and she was finding herself more and more excited as the days went on. They had postponed it for several months to allow Leopold's siblings to arrive. Her father was preparing to purchase a chalet several miles north of the palace as the first part of her dowry and wedding gift to them both.

She was going to have a home. A husband.

"Ducks."

"Hum?" Leopold looked down at her with an arched eyebrow.

"We are going to raise ducks." She smiled. "I have decided."

He chuckled. "As you have." He leaned down to kiss the top of her head. "I know better than to argue with you. We shall raise ducks."

Grinning at the notion, she shut her eyes, enjoying the sound of the birds flying overhead and the flap of the tournament banners in the breeze. It was a beautiful day. Warm, but not insufferably hot like the summers were prone to.

"What an odd day, that we are to watch our fathers face each other in a joust." He let out a quiet hum. "I think my father plans to throw the match. I expect it is bad form to beat the king."

"Most likely. I love my father, and while he adores his hunting and these

tournaments, he is hardly a soldier like yours.”

At the blast of trumpets, announcing the combatants were to take the field, she sat up and paid attention. Her father was wearing blue, the color of his mistress Diane de Poitiers, who sat in the box close to the throne and the queen.

Marguerite may be young, but she was not a child. She understood that her father loved his mistress deeply—and likely more so than the queen herself. But marriage was not about true love. She wound her hand into Leopold’s and held it tight.

Perhaps Catherine and her father had come to an arrangement, much like she and Leopold. She could only hope that the queen understood and encouraged her father’s adoration of his mistress. But if she did not, there was little that she could do. Henri was king, and kings kept mistresses.

They applauded as Henri and Gabriel turned their horses to the line on either side of the fence and readied their lances. With another loud blast of a horn, the two heavily armored men kicked their horses into a full gallop and charged at each other.

Her father had fought in a hundred such tournaments.

He would be fine.

Gabriel moved his lance at the last minute. In one sickening moment, everything changed.

Snap.

The wooden lance shattered against Henri’s chest. Gabriel held it firm, somehow keeping hold of the broken weapon against all odds.

Marguerite stood, her terror instant and total, as the crowd gasped. The horses jogged to a stop. Several squires rushed forward to help the king. But he was slumped over, his armor keeping him upright.

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A shard of wood the length of her forearm protruded from the visor of his helm.

Her father toppled from his horse.

And in that moment, her life fell apart.

\* \* \*

Marguerite sat at the bedside of her father, swallowing down her tears.

He was dying.

She was only given a moment to be with him. There were many who wished to say their farewells to the king, and when all was said and done, she was an illegitimate child. Scooping up his hand, she kissed his palm before placing it to her cheek.

I will not weep. I will not. I will be strong for him. I will weep in private.

“Daughter of my love...”

Her will cracked at the sound of his voice, and tears loose themselves against her wishes. “I am here, father. I love you. I love you, and I am so sorry.”

“Why are you sorry? It is a beautiful day...look at how the children are playing in the yard, my love.” He stroked his thumb against her skin. He was blinded by the wood, and Doctor Faust said he was drifting in and out of awareness.

The large shard had punched through his left eye and gone into his brain, or so the physician said. She did not trust him, but in this...the proof was plain. His voice was thin and reeked of delirium. At least he was not in pain. For that, she would thank God above.

“Leopold will take care of me. I will be safe, and loved, and cared for. All because of you. I—I will miss you, every day of my life. I love you, and I will pray to God each day that you rest in Heaven with him.”

“Marguerite, oh, it’s you...I mistook you for your mother for a moment, forgive me. My mind—my mind is—not well. But I would know her anywhere.” His sallow features cracked in a weak smile. “You have her voice.”

“My...” And then she knew. She was a fool. An abject child for not seeing it sooner. Daughter of my love. It is not a kindness. It has been literal all this time. Catherine had refused to allow Diane de Poitiers to see Henri on his deathbed, a fact that made quite a stir amongst the servants.

Her mother.

Tears streaked down her cheeks again, and she kissed her father’s hand. “I love you.”

“And I, you...”

A servant touched her arm. It was time for her to go. She stood and, leaning down, kissed her father’s cheek under the bandage. “We will see each other again. This is not goodbye.”

He smiled wearily and muttered something about butterflies. Her heart cracked in half, and she kissed him one more time before leaving the room. She made it two steps from the door before she collapsed against the wall in hysterics.

A hand fell on her shoulder, and for a moment she wondered if it might be Leopold. But her fiancé had been sent from the grounds along with his father. While it had been an accident, it was not...appropriate for them to be there.

The hand on her shoulder was strong and firm, and she looked up—into the worried face of Johann Faust.

He pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of his robe and extended it to her. “I...am so very sorry for your pain.” His tone was soft and gentle. “He is in no pain, I promise you.”

Taking the square of fabric, she pressed it to her eyes. “T—” She struggled to breathe. “Thank God. Thank you, doctor.”

“Of course.”

When he took a step toward her, she caught the smell of herbs and petrichor that he carried with him. It dangled in front of her like she was a fish and he the lure. God above, what is this pull?

In the haze of her grief and agony, she finally recognized it for what it was. Desire. For all his overwhelming overtures of marriage in her direction, it seemed the attraction was not one-sided between them.

But now was not the time to consider such things. Even if his presence gave her a strange comfort. When he gently pulled her into his arms and into a consoling embrace, she shivered. There was such strength in his frame, she felt as though she could shelter from a thunderstorm beside him.

“All will be well, princess,” he whispered to her. “I promise you.”

When a servant suddenly fled the king's room, a look of panic and anguish on his face, the alchemist went rigid. He looked down to her and stroked a tear from her cheek with his thumb. "I fear the time has come. Go, find the children. They will need your strength."



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She nodded. The children had all been gathered in a nearby hall and allowed to say goodbye to their father in pairs or more. She had been the last, as the eldest remaining child who had been at on the grounds during the tournament.

Pulling herself from his arms, she watched him for a moment, those strange silver eyes of his fixed on hers. When the servant tugged on his sleeve, he nodded and turned his attention to the job at hand. He disappeared into the room and shut the door behind him.

She knew she should go be with the others.

She knew she should.

But something else pushed her forward. She stepped back to the door, ignoring the protests of the guards, as she opened it silently.

Faust was standing beside her father's bed, his fingers pressed to the dying man's throat, another holding Henri's wrist, his thumb pressed to the pulse.

Her father breathed in. Then breathed out. Then breathed in...and then breathed out.

And then nothing happened.

It seemed time held still as all parties watched and waited.

One.

Two.

Three.

Four.

Faust pulled his hand from Henri's throat and gently crossed her father's arms over his chest.

Some kind of noise escaped her throat that she did not recognize. It caught the attention of the alchemist, who looked up at her in shock that quickly turned to grief.

Marguerite fled the room, blinded by tears. She did not know to where she ran. She did not know as it mattered.

Her father was dead.

Gideon stood in the shadows of columns, watching Marguerite as she sat on the edge of a fountain, weeping as if she were to overflow the basin with her tears. She clutched his handkerchief, occasionally using it to wipe at her cheeks that must be raw from the repetitive action.

His heart...to say it ached for her would not do it justice. Her pain was so visceral that he shared in it. He had known the death of her father would hurt her.

But to see it firsthand?

A pang of regret needled him. This was his fault. This was his doing. Her father was dead at the hands of a revenant he had built for the task. Someday, when she loves me, I will tell her what I have done. She will forgive me.

But there was much still to be done. Stepping from the shadows, he carefully made his way to her and sat beside her at the fountain. When she did not seem to notice his presence, he reached out to touch her shoulder. Startled, her eyes were red as she looked up at him.

Suddenly, he decided he never wished to see her like that ever again. "My dear Marguerite...I am so very sorry." For much more than you know. And much more that is still to come. He went to stroke her cheek, but she shied away from him. He did not force the matter, and instead rested his hand atop hers. That time she did not pull away, and his heart delighted for it.

She struggled for words for a moment, before giving up and shutting her eyes. He did not blame her.

He took a breath, held it, and let it out in a long rush. "Grief is selfish."

That time, she met him with an expression of anger. She had such a beautiful fire that smoldered away, hidden inside, and he far preferred it to this weeping creature before him. "Excuse me?"

He chuckled and waved his hand as if dismissing his own words. "Allow me to explain."

"Please do."

He laughed at her dourness and looked up at the sky. The clouds were beautiful against the blue sky. It was a beautiful day, despite all that had transpired. "The dead do not mourn their own passing. We feel grief because we have lost those we love. We do not weep for them, but for ourselves. The pain of loss is a terrible one. Mark me, I do not say this to belittle what you feel. But sometimes I think there is a peace to be found in knowing that our agony is but that of absence, not death."

Silence stretched between them for a moment as she considered his words. She sniffled and wiped at her face again with his handkerchief. She looked down at the sodden piece of silk. "I fear I have ruined this. I apologize."

"It is nothing." He squeezed her hand gently.

After another long pause, she looked up at the sky. "Did he suffer?"

"No. I suspect the shard of wood rendered him unable to feel much of anything at all." That was true. At least he did not need to lie to her about that. "Where is your

fiancé?”

She shook her head. “He left with his father. Regardless of it being an accident, it...he decided it was uncouth to stay, and Leopold joined him. I will meet up with him again at the palace.”

“He should have stayed by your side.” Gideon frowned. He had ordered his revenant to leave, but Leopold’s decision to follow his father was his own. “Does he not care for what you would suffer?”

“He does. He just—” She pulled her hand from his and stood. “It is personal. Thank you for the comfort, Dr. Faust. But I should do as you recommend—I should go be with my family.”

I would not leave your side if I thought you were in pain. No god nor devil would keep me from you. What manner of man is Leopold to abandon you so? Anger rose in him again. Something did not make sense, and if there was one thing in the world that troubled him more than anything else, it was not having all pieces of the puzzle neatly arranged before him.

When she moved to leave, he grasped her wrist. Standing, he pulled her back to him. “Marguerite, wait. Speak to me of what troubles you.”

“I do not know you, doctor. You have shown me kindness this day, but I shall not forget your...bizarrely egregious poor manners prior.” She tugged on her wrist, but he did not release her. She sighed. “Let me go, lest we repeat ourselves.”

“I will let you go on accord.” He pulled her closer. She tried to dig in her heels to fight him, but he outmatched her by far. “Look me in the eyes, princess, and tell me you wish to marry Leopold. Tell me you two are madly in love, and I will relent.”

Anger flushed her cheeks. Anger and something else. Shame, perhaps? She stammered, yanked uselessly on her wrist, and then let out a low, annoyed growl. She glared up at him, and he could not help but smile at how beautiful she was. "He and I are to be wed, doctor."

"Swear to me you love him."

"I do." She turned from him.

He would not allow it. He banded an arm around her waist and pulled her to him, her smaller frame nestling so perfectly against his, even as she went rigid and tense. "As a husband or as a brother? Speak to me the truth. Swear to me you wish to share his bed, and I will never broach the subject again. Swear to me on your father's soul."

Fury lit in her, and he was impressed that he did not burst into flame. "Damn you."

He smirked. "Far too late for that, I fear." He leaned over her, enjoying using his height to his advantage. She had to tilt back to avoid him. "Now...give me your vow, and all this is over. No lies, princess. I will know."

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“I—I—” She fell silent. Her anger died in a flash, and tears appeared in the edges of her eyes again. “Stop. Please, just...stop. Do not make me—” Her voice cracked. “Please do not make me do this. Not now—not like this.”

“As you wish.” Instantly, he relented. He released her and took a step back. He bowed slightly, his hand to his chest, as she ran past him and fled into the building.

He had his answer all the same. Smiling, he straightened up. Who would have thought this scheme of his would be noble in the end? What a wonderful surprise.

I will save you from this bargain you have trapped yourself within, princess. I will save you from a loveless future. I hope someday you will see me for what I am to you—your protector.

He walked from the courtyard humming, even as the bell of the nearby church began to toll to announce the death of the king. He had a great deal of work to do. And now he would do it with a smile on his face.

\* \* \*

Damn him! Damn that terrible man. That terrible, strange man. She swore vehemently in her head at Dr. Faust as she stormed through the building toward where she knew the rest of her family were gathered.

Damn him because he is right.

No. No! She would marry Leopold. It was her duty as his friend. There was no way

around it. Nor did she wish to find one.

As she stepped into the large hall where the children were gathered, her anger and confusion gave way once more to grief. Young Henri was weeping, his face red and puffy, much like she suspected her own was. The other children were in no better condition. Upon seeing her, Henri jumped from his chair and ran to her, flying into her arms. She knelt and held him tight. “Ssh...I know.”

“But F—Father—”

“I know. I know. I will miss him, too.” She kissed his temple. Holding the young weeping boy made her feel somehow...stronger for it. She did not know why. Perhaps seeing his grief made her swallow her own.

“Wh—what happens next?”

That is a very, very good question.

“Everything is going to be all right. I promise.”

\* \* \*

Marguerite supposed she should be grateful that Catherine waited until the king was interred in his tomb before ruining her life.

But the only things she felt were fury and helplessness.

She had been summoned to the queen’s chambers in the palace precisely one day after the funeral, but she knew not why. Standing at her side was Dr Faust, his features hidden under the shadow of his black hood.



Catherine did not wait long to tell her why she had been called. Nor did she dance around the subject in any way. “Your marriage to Leopold is canceled.”

“What?” She couldn’t help but shout. At Catherine’s angry expression, she tried to school herself back to a demure politeness. She swallowed her surprise and stared down at the floor. “Forgive me, your majesty. M...may I ask why?” Is it because of the man at your side?

“He is the son of the man who murdered your father. Gabriel de Lorges has left our royal service, and so has Leopold.”

“It—it was not murder, it was an accident, and—”

“Quiet, girl.” The contempt was thick in the queen’s voice. There was a loathing in her tone that Marguerite had never heard before in all her years. It frightened her. Has she always despised me? Were all her politeness and niceties before only an act?

She did not have to wonder for long.

“You are the daughter of my late husband and that harlot de Poitiers. Tell me, Marguerite, why should I tolerate you within these walls? Why should I not cast you out to the street like the urchin that you are?” Catherine seethed. “Be glad I have simply rethought your usefulness and not abandoned you in full.”

“My queen...” Faust urged her quietly. “I would ask you to rethink this cruelty.”

The queen gestured sharply at the alchemist to be quiet. “And you, doctor, for all your lauded miracles, failed to save my husband. Tread lightly.”

Faust’s jaw ticked in anger, but he fell quiet.

“Your marriage is canceled.”

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Marguerite grasped wildly for any chance she might salvage the situation. “I—there is a contract, signed by the king—”

“Late king.” Catherine sniffed dismissively. “And no contract could be found. Indeed, it is as though the whole arrangement never existed. Perhaps he was lying to you.”

Swallowing down all the things that wanted to burst from her at once—indignant obscenities, pleas for mercy, invectives of hate—she felt adrift at sea. There was...nothing she could do. She had no connections.

“Now, at least, I can finally make use of you.” Catherine sighed. “Henri’s insistence that you be able to choose your own suitor was irritatingly childish. I will have to consider the options and inform you within the fortnight. But mark me, girl—you will finally serve the family to which you should never have been born.”

Marguerite refused to cry. She would not let the tears fall. She stared down at the ground before her. “Of course. Your word is law. Is there anything else, your majesty?”

“No. You are dismissed.”

She curtsied and turned. She kept her back straight and her head high until she had returned to her room. Her door had barely clicked shut before she collapsed into a chair, shaking in an overwhelming combination of emotions.

I will still flee to Leopold. We will leave together and make our own way out of the

country. Perhaps we will go to Germany. But what kind of nonsense was that? She would be a fugitive in the eyes of the crown. They would have nothing. No connections, no home, no family. She could not ask Leopold to give up everything for her.

There was a quiet knock on the door.

Somehow, she knew who it was. "Come in, Dr. Faust."

When the door opened and then shut once more, she did not dare look up to him as he entered. It might be the end of her resolve.

"Am I that predictable?"

She put a trembling hand to her temple and kept her eyes shut. She felt as though she were coming apart at the seams. "You are becoming so. If I am to find myself inconsolable, or unconscious, you somehow appear at my side like a phantom."

His footsteps were quiet as he crossed the room. She felt him kneel before her. When his hand touched hers that lay in her lap, she twitched but did not recoil. "I am so sorry, Marguerite..." In the strangest way, she believed him. There was such sincerity in his voice, she did not doubt that some part of him did not empathize with her pain.

When his fingers brushed her cheek, she finally looked to him and to those strange, molten silver eyes. The sight of her pain reflected back at her in his own sympathy was finally enough to snap the last of what held her together. Once more, in front of him, she cried.

He shushed her gently, shifting closer to her and stroking her tears away. She did not pull away from him that time, desperate for the consolation and affection he offered her. Leopold is gone. My father is gone. Everything that I have ever known will

change the moment she marries me off. “Catherine will wed me to the cruelest man to which she thinks I could be made of use.”

“You have done nothing to deserve her wrath.”

“And yet, I have it. She loathes me for the love my father felt for my mother.”

Gideon sighed. “Yes. She does. And yes, I suspect your theory might turn true. She is...an unkind woman.”

The images of some stranger standing over her flashed through her mind, and her imagination played through all the manners in which a man could torture her as her husband. But it did not matter. She was trapped. “I—I am so very scared...”

He gathered her hands into both of his and held them in her lap, and bowing his head to her fingers, he kissed them. “Marry me, Marguerite. Let me be your shelter from this tragedy. Let me show you the love that fills my heart. I will be a good husband. You will want for nothing.”

“But the queen...”

“I will deal with the queen. Say yes, Marguerite. Say you will be my wife.” Silver eyes, hopeful and pained, turned to her. There was so much longing in them that for a moment she was stunned.

“Do you truly love me?”

He smiled as though she had said something both humorous and adorable. “What a foolish question. I have walked this world alone for so very long, my princess. I have traveled to every country, seen every court, and met every manner of beautiful woman this Earth has to offer. And never once have I been taken with one such as I

was the moment I laid eyes on you.”

Her cheeks went warm at his words. She searched him for any sign that he was lying, but if he was, he was a far better actor than she could detect.

He stood from the ground slowly, pulling her up with him. Once more she found herself in his arms, wrapped in the warmth of his embrace and the softness of his dark robes. The strange and exotic scent of herbs and petrichor washed over her as he pressed her to him.

God on high, he was so strong. The feeling of him against her lit a fire in her of which she had not known she was capable of experiencing. His fingers threaded into her hair, cradling the back of her head, and urged her to turn up to him.

His breath was warm against her cheek as he grazed his lips against her skin to whisper to her. “I love you, Marguerite. I love you more than anything in this world—and I have it all. Come with me. I will shower you with all that you could desire. Power, wealth, knowledge—Earth will be at your feet. Say yes.”

“I—” She hesitated, her head swimming with how overwhelming his presence was. She had never been this close with a man—well, except Leopold—and the need it sparked in her was so sudden it felt violent.

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Grasping her hair, he turned her head to his, and all thought fled her mind as he kissed her.

My first kiss.

The innocent moments she had stolen with Leopold as children did not count. She thought perhaps those had been kisses.

Now she knew she was wrong. Very, very wrong.

Faust kissed her with such virulent passion that it stole her breath from her lungs. He worked his lips over hers bruisingly, as if he meant to consume her. She melted into the strength of his embrace, her hands resting on his chest, grasping lightly at the velvet edges of his robe, and surrendered to him.

Everything in her body felt alight, as if something strange and new had awoken in her, some foreign beast baying in her soul, demanding to be fed. When he finally broke away, he was panting for air, and she felt as if she might faint in his arms once more.

“Marry me, Marguerite.” His voice was a low, dusky growl, and it reverberated through her. “Let me love you.”

The single word left her in a whisper. It was all the breath she had left to spare.

“Yes.”

7

Gideon smiled as he saw Marguerite sitting on a log in a forest clearing. He had trekked out to find her, after learning that this might be where she had been disappearing to every day for the past two weeks.

Three days. Three days, and she would be his wife.

She would be his.

It was approaching the end of September and his favorite season—when life hovered on the edge of death before surrendering to winter. It was very much a state that he himself was arrested within. Neither truly living, nor dying. Perpetual autumn. It was perfect.

He would have to find a way to do the same to her. He did not intend to let her wither and die like the flowers in their way. Nor did he wish to keep her as a revenant. He did not want her subservient. He wanted her by his side.

She sat on the log, facing away from him, her foot nudging a small rock around on the ground in front of her. He thought perhaps she had simply left the palace for the need of fresh air, but as he saw the look on her face, brows furrowed and full lips drawn down into a frown, he knew he was mistaken.

Instantly, he felt concern. What could he do to cheer her? Disappearing into the woods for a moment, he found a small grouping of white flowers. Daisies. Perfect. He plucked a few and headed back to her. Hiding them behind his back, he made



certain to snap a twig as he approached.

No need to frighten the deer needlessly. He did have a terrible habit of walking silently.

She looked up, her eyes shining in hope. He smiled.

The hope died.

He frowned.

She wishes I was someone else. And he knew precisely who she wished to see in his stead—that damned fool child Leopold! He may have rid them both of his physical presence, but it seemed he would have a far more difficult time removing that bastard from her heart.

Jealous rage snapped over him like a crack of lightning. What he would not do for Marguerite to look at him like that. How he knew she would if he were that child instead. He shoved the anger from his mind. He did not wish to frighten her. Settling his expression into one of morose concern, he walked slowly to her side.

She did not recoil from him, but she pulled her legs closer to herself and cast her eyes back down to the ground. “Good afternoon, Dr. Faust.”

Her words twisted a knife in his gut. Sitting beside her, he held the flowers in his lap. The act felt foolish now. “You may call me Johann. We are to be wed this week.” He held the daisies out to her.

Carefully—as if she were a deer interacting with a wolf—she took the flowers from him and smiled sadly down at them. “They’re beautiful, thank you.”

“It seemed the least I could do.” They fell into silence for a long moment. He reached out and tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear and was rewarded with a flinch. She did not pull away, but it was clear the touch was not entirely welcome. He dropped his hand to his side and sighed.

I know you do not wish to be my wife. I know you are only seeking shelter from the storm. But oh, how I wish you could see how much I adore you. How much I love you, and will love you, until the end of all my days.

And I have plenty.

He did not say the words. They, like his touch, were not welcome. “I have been wondering where it is you disappear to every afternoon. I finally had to bribe a maid to tell me your secret.”

That made Marguerite chuckle. “It isn’t a secret. You just scare them.”

“I cannot imagine why! I am perfectly amiable, affable, and quite handsome.” He huffed in false indignancy. “I cannot help the color of my hair or my skin.” I can, but...it is extremely uncomfortable.

“I believe you share that affliction with many in this world—being judged by your appearance. I do not doubt it to be true. But in this instance, I believe it is your demeanor that unnerves them so. You are a bit intense, Doctor—” She paused. “Johann.”

Soon, you will know my true name. I will reveal myself to you, and my wedding gift to you shall be the whole world laid at your feet. Again, he kept that to himself.

“Hm. I suppose.” How he wished to touch her again. How he wished to pull her into his arms, kiss her, and perhaps even love her here in the grass under the blue sky. But

her thoughts were not on him. “You are waiting for Leopold.”

A statement, not a question.

She nodded. At least she did not do him the indignity of attempting to lie to him. “We met here several times a week. He would train me with a sword.”

“Oh? My Marguerite can fence?” He grinned.

She laughed. “No. I cannot. A decade and a half of practice, and I’m still more liable to hit a tree or my own legs than my opponent.”

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“Then Leopold is a terrible instructor.”

“Perhaps. Or merely a patient friend.” She looked off into the woods and sighed. “My home is no longer my own. Now that Father is dead, I...am not welcome. The children shun me, as they follow the lead of the queen. Only young Henri still sneaks away to speak with me.”

“That boy is of his own mind and no one else’s. He will be a force of nature when he has come of age. Far more so than Francis. I fear for that boy’s longevity.” Gideon shook his head. “He is not long for this world.”

She nodded gravely. It was not a surprise to her, nor anyone, that the newly throned King of France would die young.

“I am sorry that you have been cast out so. I heard that your rooms have been moved. The queen should not be so cruel.”

A lie. A terrible, terrible lie. Oh, Catherine de Medici was incredibly cruel. And it did not take much for the queen to find the inspiration to drive Marguerite from the palace. But all the rest of it—renouncing the marriage to Leopold, distancing the young girl from her family, even pushing her into a smaller bedroom in the wings of the palace?

That was by his design.

The queen merely needed the suggestion of a direction in which to move, and the wrathful woman was eager to take revenge on the representation of the love that the

former king never held for her. But it was the words from his mouth that made it all take shape.

Someday, he would confess his schemes to her. Someday, perhaps a hundred years from now, when she was immortal like he, loved him, and would be certain to forgive him. Once she understood the depths of his love and devotion, certainly she would forgive him.

Masterminding the death of her father, however?

Perhaps he should take that to his grave.

But what he was sorry for, and what made him frown in sympathetic pain as he watched her, was how she suffered. Soon, though, it would all be over. Her suffering would cease, and she would know true happiness as his wife. The thought of it improved his mood. He reached out to stroke her hair and shifted himself closer to her side. “He is gone, Marguerite. I am sorry. But Leopold has abandoned you.”

I commanded his father to kill him as soon as they were off the palace grounds, and then find a grave in which to inter them both.

Leopold is dead, Marguerite. And he is dead by my design.

Another fact he would take to his grave.

She cringed and lowered her head. “I know. You must think me such a child. But he is the closest friend I have. I—I miss him. I wanted to save him from his terrible future, and I—to not see him at my wedding? It will hurt.”

“What you were willing to sacrifice for him was noble beyond measure, Marguerite. You were willing to martyr yourself for your love of him. For that, I cannot speak of

how highly I respect and admire your loyalty to him.” He gently stroked her hair again. He heard her sniff, and she wiped at her eye with the back of her hand. “But your sacrifice is no longer needed. He has been removed from the court, his father is disgraced, and I highly doubt Leopold will be pressed into marriage any longer.”

His suitors are now the maggots who eat his flesh. They are the only companions he will ever need again.

She sniffed again, and he shushed her. Pulling her into his arms, he was pleased when she didn’t recoil, even if she did go stiff. But slowly, after a moment, she finally relaxed against him. Kissing the top of her head, he held her.

“I am frightened.”

“I know. It’s all right. But you are safe with me. This I vow to you.” He lowered his voice as he spoke, and he felt her sink deeper into his embrace. She wanted him—the desire was thick in her eyes when he had kissed her before. And when he spoke to her, quiet and deep, it put her nearly in a trance. “I love you, Marguerite.” When she went to reply to him, he shushed her. “No. It is all right. I want nothing in return that I do not already have.” He tipped her chin up to look at him. “I know you do not love me. How can you, during all this upheaval? I must earn your heart. And I shall.”

“Oh?” She arched an eyebrow. “You are so certain of it?”

“I am a very stubborn man.” He smirked. Bowing his head, he kissed her. It was hardly the forceful, passionate thing he had given her when she had agreed to marry him. But it was enough to ensure that he left her just a little breathless, and her cheeks just a little pink. Releasing her, he stood and ran his hand over her hair one last time. “It is nearing dinner. Come, we will be late.”

She cast a forlorn glance out at the clearing again, as if she did not wish to say

goodbye to it, and what it represented.

“In three days’ time, we shall leave this place and never look back.” I will make sure of it. “You will start a new life with me—and in that place, you shall want for nothing. You shall have all you desire...and you will choose who you wish to become.”

“You spin a beautiful fantasy, Johann. It is tempting to allow myself to believe you.”

He huffed again in mock insult and tugged on the collar of his tunic. “I am a magician, my lady. An alchemist of the highest order. The world is mine to command. And soon, I will be your servant.”

She laughed quietly, smiling up at him. The tenderness in her eyes made his heart hitch in his chest. When she spoke, her tone was far lighter than it had been before. “Forgive me for mourning what I have lost, for I have lost everything I have known. You are patient and kind with me, and for that I am very grateful.” She reached a hand to him, and he took it eagerly, helping her stand.

“Oh, Marguerite...” He bowed to kiss the back of her knuckles and began to lead her from the clearing. “Do not apologize, and certainly do not thank me.”

For you do not know what I have done to have you.

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It was the dinner before her wedding. Marguerite could barely wrap her head around it. Tomorrow, she was to be wed. A bride. And married to Dr. Johann Faust. He was a kind man. Tender, and gentle. But what would he be like when they were bound together, after he had whisked her away to his home in Germany?

She could not imagine him raising his hand to her, but if there was one thing she had learned in the months since her father's passing, it was that no one could fully know another.

Leopold.

To leave her—abandon her—to never come back, even to say goodbye? Not even to write her a letter? It made her want to cry each time she thought of it. She missed her friend dearly, and the sting of what felt like betrayal pricked her like needles.

How could he have just left her alone after what had happened?

And now, she was to be married and to leave France altogether. She would never see him again. She wept at night thinking over it. But for the moment, she had to dress, do her hair, tend to her appearance as best she could, and eat dinner with her family for the last time.

Her family.

Or what was left of it.



She felt numb and removed from the proceedings as she attended the great hall and sat next to her soon-to-be husband, who smiled warmly at her, greeted her tenderly, and kissed her hand in the fashion of a perfect gentleman.

There was a modicum of guilt she felt for how coldly she treated him in return. It was clear he adored her. But everything in her life had been upended so very quickly, and there was still something...unnerving about the alchemist. Something about him felt dangerous and unnatural.

Because he is a magician, as he said.

When she was seated and food had been served, she bowed her head slightly to Johann and spoke in a volume barely more than a whisper. “My lord, may I ask you a question?”

He chuckled. “Johann. Please. And of course. What is it?”

“When we are...” She paused. The words were still hard to force from her mouth. “When we are gone from here, I have a request. I know I am a woman, but...I think I would like to learn alchemy. Would you teach me to be a magician? I think I might greatly enjoy commanding the elements.”

For the expression on his face, one would have thought she had professed her undying love for him. His eyes went wide and then glittered in sheer joy. He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles, lingering in the embrace before clutching her hand beneath the level of the table. “Nothing would make me happier, Marguerite...Yes, yes, and once again yes. All that I know shall be yours to learn.”

She smiled. He would be a good husband. Perhaps being rid of her past would not be a bad thing. A new beginning in a foreign land where she could become a powerful magician. It was a storybook fantasy—one that was becoming too tempting to ignore.

“I—”

The door to the great hall burst inward. There was shouting from the halls as someone stormed into the room. They were dirty, torn, and a bloody bandage wrapped the man's side.

She flew to her feet. No matter his condition, she would know him on sight. She always would.

“Leopold!”

Her friend glowered at Johann and pointed a finger at him. “Your dark magic ends here, necromancer.”

Johann laughed. The sound sent a shiver up her spine as if death itself had entered the room.

And once more, her life was entirely upended.

Gideon stood slowly from his chair, seething in rage. If he could ignite Leopold where he stood, he would have done so. Sadly, that was not his gift. Even if he did have plenty of other means of murdering the boy.

He was meant to be dead and gone. And now, on the eve of my wedding day? How dare he! Gideon's fists clenched at his sides as he glowered at the other man, his teeth bared in a silent snarl.

"Demon. Monster! Fiend." Leopold stepped farther into the room and pulled his sword from his sheath.

"You accuse my advisor of a great many things," Catherine interrupted the exchange harshly. "What proof have you, bastard son of the man who murdered my husband?"

"We were not two miles from the jousting grounds when my father turned on me with a knife, your majesty." Leopold motioned to the bloody bandage wrapped around his side. "After I bested him, he called that bastard master and told me, as tears welled in his eyes, that he did not wish to do the deed but that he had no choice."

"And what about that statement makes this man a necromancer, and not merely convincing?" Catherine arched an eyebrow.

"For no matter how many times I ran him through with my blade, he would not die. And..." He winced. "Because my father told me of these things after I had cut his head from his shoulders." His gaze flicked to Marguerite, concern flashing over him

instantly. “Marguerite—”

“Leo!” His future bride moved to join her friend.

He caught her wrist before she could escape and yanked her back to his side. “Lies,” Gideon huffed. “The fanciful tales of a jealous man who abandoned his fiancée and now finds himself sorely lacking. You seek to blacken my reputation merely to have her back.”

“I agree with Dr. Faust. Begone, Leopold. You are no longer welcome here.” Catherine gestured to dismiss him.

When one of the guards stepped forward, Leopold turned and growled at the man. “You know I could kill you where you stand, Bernard.”

The guard in question took a step back.

Marguerite tugged on her wrist in his grasp. “Let me go, Johann. Let me speak with him.”

“You will be silent,” he snapped at her without intending to. She jerked in shock at his harsh tone and looked up at him in fear and uncertainty. Checking his anger, he sighed. “He is delusional. He could be dangerous.”

“He’s my best friend...please, Johann.”

His jaw ticked. He wanted to give her whatever she wished for. If she begged for the moon, he would find a way to pluck it from the heavens. But this? This, he could not allow. “No. You are to be my wife. I will not risk him abducting you.”

“Let her go, you monster!” Leopold took another step forward, his sword gripped

tightly in his hand. “Or I will kill you where you stand.”

“You would not escape this palace alive, boy.” Catherine chuckled. “What do you hope to prove?”

“I do not need to escape alive. I merely need to kill him.” Leopold squared his shoulders. “Face me, necromancer.”

“What?” He arched an eyebrow at the other man. “Are you jesting?”

“No. I challenge you to a duel to the death.”

“Leave here, boy.” Gideon sneered. “I will not waste my time with you. I have no desire to kill you this night.”

“You will not have to worry about that. I hereby challenge you, and your honor, to a fight to the death, necromancer.”

“No—” Marguerite tugged on her wrist again. “Do not do this. Please, both of you—do not do this!”

Gideon laughed, and with a small shove that was perhaps harder than he intended, he pushed Marguerite back into her chair and faced the brave fool who had signed his own death warrant. “Very well, boy. I accept your challenge.”

Catherine sighed and shook her head. “Do it outside. Do not ruin my floors.”

“No! You cannot do this. Leopold, leave—go—I am all right. Please, leave me here.”

“Never.” The younger man shook his head, turning his attention to Marguerite. His expression grew mournful and sad. “You are my best friend in this world, and

without you, I fear I will not know what to do with myself. I will rescue you from this demon and send him back to the pits where he belongs.”

“Demon.” Gideon chuckled. “You know not of which you speak.”

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“It does not matter. One of us dies here tonight.” Leopold smirked. “And I believe it will be you.”

He grinned viciously. I highly doubt that, boy. I very highly doubt that.

\* \* \*

Marguerite had to be restrained by a guard to keep from flying in between the two men. She did not know when she began to cry. It was so frequent these days that she barely noticed when it began and stopped.

For a moment, she had hoped it would be an easy match. Leopold had several inches and perhaps fifty stones of muscle on Dr. Faust. But as Johann had shed his cloak, she was reminded there was more to the doctor than met the eye at first glance. The man was slimmer built than Leopold, and he lacked the bulky muscle that defined her friend. But he moved with a smoothness and grace that worried her.

And when she saw how easily he handled the silver rapier he had fetched from his room, her worry turned to terror.

Each man fought with a sword and a dagger.

They ignored her pleas. If she raised her voice, the guard shook her roughly on the shoulder. She was forced to stay quiet. But it took all her strength to swallow her cries as the fight began.

Leopold was stronger. He hit harder.

But Johann had speed...and skill. The man fought as though he were merely in a dance. As though his life were not at stake. He dodged and parried Leopold's strokes with practiced ease.

But that was not to say that Leopold was entirely outclassed. He was a soldier, and one of the best she had ever seen. Where Johann seemed to treat the duel with a casual air, Leopold fought with drive and passion, putting every ounce of strength he owned into each strike.

The moments dragged on, seemingly without end. Swords clashed, and the sound of steel ringing out mixed with her choked sobs as she watched in horror.

Her heart leapt into her throat as Leopold managed to get in close for a strike. He dug his dagger deep into Johann's stomach. It was hard to tell from where she stood, but it seemed as though it had sunk in deep to the hilt.

Johann gagged in pain.

And then drove his own dagger into Leopold's throat. He stuck the blade in from the side and yanked, slicing her friend's throat open from side to side with one, vicious, tearing rip.

Blood gushed from the wound, instantly soaking him in shades of deep crimson.

His eyes went wide. And glassy.

Marguerite did not even scream before she fainted.

\* \* \*

When she woke, she was in her bed. A damp cloth was being dabbed to her forehead.



But it was the smell of something near her that jarred her out of her sleep. It was the smell of spices, of petrichor, and...of blood.

She jolted in shock, whirling and smacking the hand away from her face. She looked up at the tired and strained expression of Johann Faust. “I—”

“Shush, Marguerite...” He frowned as he placed the damp cloth to her head again. “You are safe.”

“L...Leo...?” Perhaps it was a dream. Perhaps it was all an illusion. Perhaps—

Johann shook his head mournfully. His voice was deep, soft, and full of sadness. “Forgive me, my love...but I had no choice.”

“No. No. This cannot be real.” She sat up, plucking the cloth from her head. “He cannot be dead. You—you—”

“He would have taken my life in turn. He nearly did.” It was only then that she noticed the bandage he wore around his midsection. It was stained a shade of red that looked darker than perhaps it should. “He challenged me, Marguerite. I did not wish to fight him. I told him to begone. I am sorry for what I have done, but I am not to blame for his death.”

Tears poured down her cheeks. She knew he was right. She had heard the exchange—she had witnessed it all. Leopold had demanded Johann’s honor.

Arms circled around her as she wept into her palms, and she did not have the strength to push him away.

But her best friend in the world...was dead.

At the hand of the man she was to wed on the morrow.

\* \* \*

Numb.

That was what she was. Devoid of all things. Of emotion, of reaction...of caring. Her father was dead. Her family had shunned her. Her best friend in the world had died at the hand of the man who was now her husband.

The same man who was now walking her into a castle he claimed he owned, far away on the northern coast of Germany. He was being so patient with her, so kind and gentle—soothing and caring. She could not have asked him for more than what he gave her.

But it did not penetrate the strange, empty nothingness that filled her mind. It was not even a coldness, for a cold would imply that there was something there at all. It was merely ...nothing.

Johann had murmured to her of traumatic experiences, and how this would all pass. How she would mend in time, and a new setting and a view of the coast would rejuvenate her before she knew it.

She remembered the wedding as if it had been a dream. She had stifled her tears long enough to take part in the ceremony. Johann had looked overjoyed, as if he truly were the happiest man on Earth. It sat in stark contrast to her own mood.

Her family had not attended.

No one had attended.

It had just been her...the priest...and her husband.

And the carriage had waited for them outside the palace.

Leopold was dead, and she did not even have the chance to place flowers on his grave.

They had ridden through the night, and she had slept leaning against Johann, lulled to a strange restless peace by his warmth and his strength. His wound was healing quickly—she was impressed he had survived at all, as he had said. It should have been deep. It should have been a killing blow.

Luck, he said.

The first night they stayed in a tavern along the road, she expected him to make good on their marriage. She was his wife. She was his property. Her body was his to take. She lay on the bed in her shift, waiting for the inevitable to come.

She had expected to dread the moment. Or perhaps to be excited about it. Johann was beautiful, handsome, and passionate. She had no doubt that he would not hurt her, and that the night would be enjoyable.

Yet she did not care.

For she felt nothing at all.

But as he disrobed down to his breeches—which should have been a distracting sight, had her mind and soul not been stolen away by death itself—he made no advances upon her.

There was only grief and regret in his eyes as he lay on the bed beside her. He held her to him, kissed the back of her head, and murmured words of love to her.

Every night in roadside taverns went precisely the same way.

But now they were in his castle. His home. The servants who cared for it kept it in meticulous condition while he was away. It was enormous and lavish, and while it did not match the ostentatiousness of the palace, she knew he had not been bluffing in regard to his wealth and standing.

“Do you like it?”

“It is beautiful.” She found herself studying a large painting over the fireplace. It was a landscape scene of a city she did not recognize. It was surrounded on three sides by water, and along another, a large wall. The buildings were packed close together, and the architecture was foreign to her.

“Constantinople. Istanbul, now. But that is a depiction of the way it was before Mehmet the Conqueror and his siege.”

“Oh.” She had nothing else to say.

Hands rested on her shoulders, and he tenderly kissed the back of her head. “Do you know much of history?”

“No more than what stretches to the edges of France, and enough of English history to know why we are to dislike them. It is not a ladylike pursuit.” A hint of bitterness crept into her voice. It was the first emotion she had felt since Leopold died. Perhaps it was not the best place to start, but it was a start, nonetheless.

“Speak no more of what it means to be a lady in this household. My library is yours.

My knowledge is yours. My wealth, my power, all that I am is yours.” His arms slid around her waist, and he held her against his chest in an embrace.

She could not help but let her eyes slip shut as she leaned against him. “And you have taken all I am in return.”

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“No. I have taken your hand in marriage, that is all. I will steal nothing more of you—this, I swear.” He turned her to face him, and to her shock, he dropped to one knee before her, clutching her hands. “I will not ask of you to give me your heart or your body, Marguerite...I will not demand these things from you. If you wish to give them to me, I am a pauper begging upon your doorstep, and I will praise your name until the day I am dust.”

She raised her eyebrow at him. “Have we found ourselves on stage without me noticing it? Or are you always this unduly theatrical?”

He laughed and bowed his head to her hands, kissing her fingers. “Perhaps a little.” He stood from the ground but did not release her hands. “You are home now, my princess. I hope this place becomes your salvation. I hope you come to love it here—and to love me. But I will not expect any of this from you.”

“And what if I do not come to love you at all? What then?”

His expression fell, and for a moment she regretted her words. She did not like to see him in pain. “I...if you truly could not...then...I would let you go. You are not my prisoner. This is no ivory tower in which I have locked you away. I would not have some fair-haired country boy coming to rescue—” He broke off, wincing as if she had slapped him, as he instantly realized his mistake.

Tears suddenly welled in her eyes. The first she had shed since the night Leopold had died.

My knight lies dead in his grave. There is no one to save me. All that I knew and

loved is gone. And now I am here, and I am lost.

He gathered her up into his arms and led her to a nearby chaise lounge. He sat down, and for a moment she went stiff as he pulled her onto his lap, sitting sideways across his legs. He leaned back against the wall and held her to his chest.

They said nothing as she wept. He merely held her, humming some unknown tune, his voice deep and rumbling against her. The sound of it lulled her exhausted mind into silence.

Blessed sleep came for her, and it was a dreamless darkness.

I am lost. But I am not alone.

I must remember that.



With each day that passed, a little of his Marguerite returned to life. He had extensive experience with the dead that walked, and the fact that she resembled them so acutely hurt his soul. Every passing moment that he watched her in her empty shock wrenched his heart from his chest.

It was no wonder. To suffer such loss would send anyone into a near fugue state. But, day by day, as they ticked by, she seemed to come back to herself just a little bit more. The first time she smiled at him over dinner, he thought he might weep with joy.

He was to blame for her grief. He knew that. And he would be responsible for mending it. And when she was allowed to spread her wings and become the woman he saw buried deep within the cowed, frightened thing that had been raised to be meek and quiet, he knew he would have a proper Greek fury on his hands.

And he eagerly looked forward to it.

It would take months. Perhaps it would take years. But he was certain she would come to love her new life—and him in turn. He was already beginning to win her trust. She no longer flinched from his touch. She did not stiffen when he climbed into bed beside her at night. He did not touch her; he would not dare for anything more but an embrace or a gentle kiss to the cheek.

Her body would be hers to give. Her heart, the same. He had vowed it to her, and he was a man of his word. He had taken enough from her to have her as his wife. He

would take no more.

It was two weeks into their return to his home that he found her prowling through his library, fingers tracing the spines. Smiling, he leaned against one of the wood plinths that held up the balcony that ringed the room and watched her.

She had found his tomes on magic. Of course, she had gone straight for those. His more...salient books and scrolls were hidden away in his “workshop” in the basement in a locked room. What she would find in these shelves would be scandalous enough by all standards without discovering his studies on the resurrection and animation of the dead.

Plucking out a tome on demonology—which was entirely lies, by his measure, but worth keeping for the sake of academic comparison—she took it to a nearby sofa and sat down to read.

He could move silently when he wished. Creeping along the wall, staying to the shadows, he came up behind her. Leaning down, he placed his hands on either side of her on the backrest and tucked his mouth close to her ear. “Demons, hm?”

She shrieked.

Laughing, he ducked away as she swatted at him.

“You cur! You damnable cur!” She slapped his arm. “You nearly killed me!”

“Now you are the one who is being bombastic. I did no such thing. I merely gave you a right good start.” He plucked the book from her lap. “And you are starting in entirely the wrong place, little magi.”

“How so? It is a book on demons, is it not? And do you not derive your power from

them? I thought it best to begin by learning the names of those I would be calling upon.” She stood from the sofa, his childish mischief already forgiven and forgotten in the wake of the chance for forbidden knowledge.

He knew the allure quite well. The flicker in her eyes was one he was certain he shared in quite often. He placed the book back on his shelf and began searching for another title. “Demons? Hardly.” He gestured idly over his shoulder as he browsed. “They are an unpredictable lot. I prefer not to deal with them if I have the chance. If you believe I am ‘unduly theatrical,’ as you say, I have nothing compared to those you might converse with from the great plane below. They can be a bit...histrionic.”

“Wait—” She followed eagerly beside him. “Wait. You have met demons? Truly?”

“Of course. I have met the king of all demons.” The look of pride he knew was etched upon his face was unbecoming of a gentleman necromancer, but he could not help it. “Stern fellow. Quite serious. Hardly the cackling madman that the churches would have you believe. No hooves, either.”

“You lie.” She nudged his arm. “You have not met Lucifer himself!”

“Oh, but I have. We spoke of philosophy. He does not believe there is a God, you know.” He smirked.

“That makes no sense at all. God is the one who cast him out.”

“Not as he tells the tale. By his words, he and his ilk simply left Heaven in what you could call a religious schism with his more faithful kin. Perhaps he is a deceiver, as they say. But I had no such sense of the creature when we met. We drank wine, we ate dinner. He answered my questions, we sat by my fire, and then went on his way. Quite an uneventful if perfectly pleasant evening, to be quite honest.”

“You are lying to me still.” She folded her arms across his chest. “Are you truly even an alchemist?”

“Ah, and so the shoe lands.” Turning to her, he could not wipe the smile from his face, no matter how serious he was attempting to appear. “Do you demand a demonstration of my power, princess?”

“I—” She hesitated. For a second, the meek woman she was raised to be fought for purchase. But she squared her shoulders and lifted her chin. “Yes. I do demand it. Show me you are not a charlatan, Johann Faust.”

Oh, how he wanted her in that moment. The sheer measure of her voice undid him and unraveled his defenses as if he were made of nothing but straw and she were the vengeful gale.

Goodness, she is right. I am theatrical.

“Hm. And what would you have me do? Summon the elements—fire, wind, and rain? Transmute our dinner from steak to lead, perhaps? Or would you like to dine with the devil himself, as I have? Shall I summon a demon from the pits to amuse you, my princess? Shall I pull Lucifer from the depths of Hell to join us for dinner?”

“No, no. A demon is too much. And I do not know what I would say to them, regardless. And certainly not the King of Hell. I would first send him a letter before summoning them to your dining room in a ball of fire.” She paused and furrowed her brow thoughtfully. “It must be quite irritating to be summoned unexpectedly, not to mention inconvenient. Can you even imagine what it must be like for them?”

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The laugh that burst from him was unlike any he had ever made before. Or perhaps for as long as he could remember. It was full of happiness. And the kind of bliss he felt in his heart he knew was unique to his life. He stepped toward her, and before she could react, he cradled her head in his hand and kissed her.

He had promised not to force himself upon her. And to that, he would always keep his vow. But he had to kiss her. He had to. When he broke away, her eyes were lidded, and the perfect emerald orbs that dwelled there were dark with shy desire. Her chest rose and fell quicker than before.

He watched as her cheeks turned red, and he forced himself not to smile in pride once more. How he wished to lay her down on the sofa by the wall and take her, then and there. But no. He made a promise he intended to keep. Yet with each passing day, he was convinced she would come to him in time.

Focus, you old fool. You are nigh over nine centuries and yet you are acting as though you are but fourteen. “What would you have me do for you, my considerate magi? What is the one power you could possibly wish for?”

“There is no way you control the world, Johann. Do you mean to say you command all the magical forces of the universe?”

“No. I merely dabble in them.” He smirked. “Name it. If you could have such power—any power at all—for what would you wish? To fly? To speak with the birds? Name it, and I shall not only demonstrate the gift, I shall teach it to you.”

She considered his offer in half seriousness. He knew there was a part of her that was

merely playing along with him. She did not believe him—but she would. She would before the night was out. If his little magi wished to command the forces of the unseen world, it was time for her to believe in it.

When she seemed to settle on a decision, the words that left her mouth stopped his heart for a moment. Everything in him ran cold as ice. He learned, right in that moment, a valuable lesson he would never, ever forget.

Never underestimate Marguerite Valard.

With unwavering determination, she spoke seven words that unraveled all his careful plans.

“I wish to speak to the dead.”

\* \* \*

One would have thought she had stabbed Johann in the stomach aside Leopold’s still-bandaged gift. He flinched and recoiled, turning his back to her as he walked away half a dozen paces. “Marguerite, you do not know for what you ask.”

“Can you do it or not, oh mighty sorcerer?” Her strange numbness seemed to have snapped and given way to a kind of cold, steely anger. She did not know for what reason she was mad, but it was there. I am angry at the world for having done this to me. And I want to say goodbye to my friend. I wish to ask my father for his advice.

“Necromancy is a dark art, princess. It is not to be practiced lightly.” His hand twitched and clenched into a fist briefly before releasing. “It unsettles the soul to perform it.”

“Will it harm you to do such a deed? To summon someone from the beyond?”

He hesitated for a long moment before nearly imperceptibly shaking his head. His words were a dire whisper. "Choose again, I beg you."

"Will you pay some terrible price? Will you be lessened in any way for doing as I ask?" She stepped toward him. "Tell me why you dread this act so, and I will relent."

An even longer stretch of silence followed. When he finally broke it, his words landed with the weight of boulders. "What you will learn from those you wish for me to call will only cause you grief and pain."

"But you can do it?"

The quiet rush of the fire in the hearth of the library was the only thing that stretched between them for what seemed like minutes. "Yes."

"Johann...do not lie to me, I beg you. Are you a necromancer? Do you command the dead?"

Silence. He turned to look at her, and the expression on his face made her take a step back. It was not angry, it was not threatening, but the intensity of it was like finding herself standing unexpectedly next to a blaze. "I can do many things, my princess."

Reaching out, she gripped the back of a chair that sat at the table in the center of the room. She needed something to steady herself with. "Can you command the dead, Johann Faust?"

His jaw twitched. Lifting his head, those liquid silver eyes of his bore into hers. Finally, like a gavel, the word fell. "Yes."

"You denied it before. You lied."

Something in him snapped. He growled in anger and whirled from her, beginning to pace. It seemed out of pace with their conversation, and she did not know what had upset him so. “What I study is forbidden. The magic I work would have me hanged or burned. As it is, I am chased from one corner of the globe to the other, forced to change my name, give up all that I know, and slip into hiding! Kings and queens are happy to have my services as an alchemist, but the moment they learn my true nature, I am a foul demon and a fiend. Think on the life I live, my love, I beg you, and take some modicum of pity upon me.”

She paused. “Change your name?”

“Of all of what I just said, that is what you focus upon?” Running a hand over his face, he sighed. “Yes, Marguerite. I have had many names. Many lives.”

“Johann Faust is not your real name...?”



“No.”

“We are wed, and I do not even know your name.” She let out a breath as if he had struck it from her with a blow. She pulled the chair from the table and sat, afraid she might not be able to stay standing.

When he approached her and took a second chair to twist it toward her, and sit so that his knees brushed hers, she did not recoil from him. They slept in each other’s embrace each night. If he wished to harm her, there was nowhere for her to run.

Hands lifted hers from her lap, and he kissed her fingers. “My name...my true name, the day I was born, was Faustus Diogenus, in the city of Istanbul. I have not been that man for many years, I fear. The name I prefer, the one I think of myself as, is Gideon.”

“No surname?”

He shrugged. “They’re useless when one has no family and hails from nowhere and everywhere at once. I pick and choose new surnames as they suit me. But I required something more German to convince the locals, and...Johann Faust is who I became.”

“You do not look German at all.” He was from the east. The Ottoman empire. It made so much more sense, than him claiming he was half Spanish and half German.

“Not much to be done about that.”

“I am a fool. I should have known. I should have put it together.”

“No, Marguerite. You are struggling to keep your head above water in a world that is flooding in a storm.” He reached out and gently stroked her hair.

“Gideon.” She tried it to see how it felt, watching those silver eyes in return as they trained on her as if she were the only thing in the world. “It is a far better name for you than Johann.”

He chuckled. “I am happy you think so.”

“I must ask a promise of you, Gideon.” It did flow much nicer. It was a better name.

“Say it, and it is yours.”

“Swear to me, my husband, that if I ask you something...you will not lie to me.” She shook her head. “I will not ask you to tell me all your secrets. I fear that a necromancer must have many to spare.”

The grunt he made was enough of a confirmation of that.

“But if I ask you a question, promise me that you will speak the truth.”

He kissed her hands again. “Yes. I swear it on my mortal life.”

“Then I must ask you this...did you command Leopold’s father to kill him? Were you in control of him?” She did not dare think about the consequences of the answer. If he were to say yes...

“No.” The answer came quickly, and searching his silver eyes for the lie, she found none. Or perhaps she was simply naïve. But she had no means of proving him wrong.

She nodded once and took his hands. The simple gesture softened his expression. The hard lines smoothed at the edges of his eyes, and for a second, she was caught off guard by how beautiful he was. How perfectly handsome.

Lifting a hand from his, she placed her palm to his cheek. His eyes slipped shut, and he leaned into her touch. He looked so...desperate for her affection. So grateful for every moment. "You truly do love me."

"Did you doubt?"

"Of course. I am no one but the bastard daughter of a king. Besides, you do not know me."

"I fear you stole my heart the moment I saw you, sketching away in secret in the courtyard, pretending to be studying your book." He smiled, eyes still shut, still basking in her gentle touch. "I knew you well enough then. You were not one to do as you were told. You would defy me at every turn. You would do as you wished—when you wished it, and I would have no say in the matter. And in that moment, my fate was sealed. I had to have you. I had to free that young woman from the chains in which her life had placed her."

"An odd manner of freedom I have, married to a man whose name I did not know, nor his dark vocation, until a fortnight after our wedding day."

"I never said I was perfect."

Laughing, she leaned in and acted on impulse. She kissed him. It was hardly the passionate embraces he paid her when she least expected it. It was shy—furtive and unsure. She did not know what she was doing. Her first kiss had been given to Leopold when she was but a child. He had not reciprocated, and at the time she had not understood why.

She expected him to crash over her like a tide. To take her kiss as the waving of the flag at the beginning of the tourney, and to throw her onto the table and have her. She knew how deeply he desired her—the proof of it was often plain without his intention. The feeling was growing startlingly mutual.

A large part of her wanted him to do it.

But the other part remembered her lost friend.

To his credit, he restrained himself. He let her kiss him at her own pace, and while he matched her passion, did not drown it with his own. It was not a heated embrace, but a tender one. And when she parted from him, the look on his face—eyes still closed—was one of pure and total bliss.

He truly does love me.

Stroking her thumb along his cheekbone, she smiled faintly. The thought that came to her was one she should perhaps have kept to herself, but it seemed too cruel to deny him hope. “I think I might come to find you a perfectly satisfactory husband, Gideon the Necromancer.”

“Doctor Gideon the Necromancer.” He smirked, his voice still dreamy and quiet. Silver eyes finally met hers. When he spoke again, his voice was a whisper. “Thank you.”

“But I must insist.”

He sighed. His expression fell. “Princess, I...”

“I value your warning. I do not even yet fully believe that you can do what you say. But if you can, and this is all the truth of the world we live in, do not think me so childish as to not know the dangers of tampering with the beyond. I only ask you, please, try to understand. Leopold and I are”—she winced as she corrected herself—“were inseparable. He was my best friend in the world. He was more family

to me than my brothers and sisters. I forgive you for taking his life, for you are right in that you had no desire to do so. But...please.” Tears pricked her eyes. She ignored them. “I wish to say goodbye.”

He wavered, gaze flicking between her eyes, before he lowered his head, resting his forehead to hers. His white hair brushed against her cheek, soft as silk. With a sigh, he stood, still holding her hand.

“Come, my little magi. There is work to be done, and it is time for your first lesson.”

10

Gideon held her hand as he led her down into the lower levels of his castle. He carried a lit lantern as he descended the stairs, holding it aloft to light their way. She stayed close to him, her hand tightly clutching his. She was afraid.

She should be.

She very much should be.

He should be overjoyed. She accepted his darker nature without barely missing a beat. She was already calling him Gideon and seemed to empathize with why he had lied about his past to the court. She had kissed him for the very first time.

But it was not happiness that burned in him. It was a strange kind of anger. Everything was going so well. And now...now it will all be ruined.

Perhaps it could be salvaged. Leopold knew nothing of consequence to jeopardize the house of cards that he had built. Summoning his soul from the beyond would be a painful reminder of his loss that would hurt Marguerite's progress of dealing with her grief. Or, perhaps, it might aid it. There was something to be said of saying goodbye.

No, it was not over his endangered plans that he was angry. Because that was not the only emotion that twisted in his stomach.

It was shame.

He had lied to her.

After promising that he would not, after giving her his vow, he had lied.

Yes, Marguerite. I commanded Leopold's father to kill him. And I am furious that he failed. For if he had succeeded, you would have gone through the rest of our eternity together believing your friend had merely abandoned you.

And if you knew that I commanded the man who sired your friend...then it is an easy leap to deduce that I am responsible for the death of your father.

He had to lie. There was no other option. To tell her the truth would be to end all his careful work in bringing her here. He would tell her someday, long in the future when she was immortal, her love was his, and they were bound together as one. When he was certain she could forgive him.

But it hurt him to speak false when she had looked at him with such vulnerable hope and trust. It had hurt him deeply. Killing her father, and killing her friend, were means to an end. He did not wish them ill for personal reasons. But he had spoken true to her in every other regard. Most importantly, when he told her that he had to have her. She had to be his. He could not continue through the world without her at his side.

And so...they had to die.

And he had to keep his influence in it a secret.

When they reached his basement laboratory, he passed her the lantern, fished the iron key from his pocket, and undid the heavy lock that held the wooden door shut. Swinging it open, he retrieved the lantern from her and stepped inside. Taking the lit candle, he began to illuminate the stone chamber.



She stepped inside after him, clearly eager not to be lost in the all-encompassing darkness of the windowless stone hallways. As his far more secret and private place of study came into focus as he lit the candles, he heard her gasp.

Yes, he supposed it would be something to see. He was simply used to it. The center of the room was dominated by a large white circle painted permanently on the surface. It allowed him to change the shapes within and alter the magic as he saw fit, but the circle was constant, so he opted to paint it.

Shelves lined the walls, stacked several high, stretching up to the stone ceiling overhead. They were not only lined with books...but with the tools of his trade.

Skulls. Bones. Knives. Needles and thread. Jars of dark liquid that he could identify as blood, but she would likely only be able to guess at.

And a large birdcage sat in the corner—an aviary of sorts. When the creature within shifted, ruffling her feathers, Marguerite let out another loud gasp.

“Oh—Oh, God.”

Shrugging his robes from his shoulders, he placed it on the back of his chair. It was too warm in the room with no ventilation. Picking up a scrap of dried meat from his main desk, he walked to the aviary and reached a hand through the bars. “Hello, Eurydice,” he murmured to the undead vulture. “Forgive me for leaving you here alone for so long.”

His familiar ripped the dried meat from his hand and swallowed it down. It was clear the undead, rotted bird was irritated. He did not blame her.

When he heard footsteps, he turned to his bride. He had expected her to flee from the room—racing into the pitch-black darkness of the basement and screaming until

unconsciousness took her. But instead, she was creeping toward the aviary. Her eyes were wide as disks, and she was clearly terrified.

Yet slowly, step by step, she approached the cage.

And with each cautious movement closer, his hope for her swelled.

Eurydice turned her head to peer at the young woman, the empty socket holding no eye with which to see. But it did not stop her from seeing all the same. Marguerite jolted in shock as the creature moved, and she hesitated, but then took another step closer.

“She is my familiar.”

Marguerite did not take her eyes from the vulture. And once more, Gideon learned not to underestimate her. “You keep her locked away down here, in the darkness, all alone in silence? How utterly cruel.” She furrowed her brow. “Will you treat me the same way in time?”

“I—” He stammered. He felt his neck go warm. He was being scolded like a child, and he did not know what to do with that. “I—well—” When Eurydice turned her attention back to him, seconding the young girl’s opinion of his negligence, the heat that rushed over him in a fresh wave of shame was nearly overwhelming. “I—I could not very well let her loose about the castle, terrorizing you, and—”

“Just me?” Marguerite glanced to him but could not take her eyes off the bird. “Not your servants?”

“They are—ah—well—” Damn, damn, damn, damn!

“They are all dead, too.”

Silence. When she fixed him with a glare, he muttered a sheepish “yes” and found he had to look away.

She sighed drearily. “I am in a castle of the dead. Fantastic.” She stepped up to the bars. “Will she hurt me?”

“No.”

In another action that shocked him, and one he likely should have stopped but found himself unable to do so, she yanked the iron bar from the door to the aviary, pulled the door open, and stood aside. “Go on.”

Eurydice hopped from her perch and half-flew, half-jumped to the ground at Marguerite’s feet. The bird ruffled her feathers, peered up at her, and let out a strange cooing noise. Marguerite smiled. “You’re rather hideous, but I suppose you cannot help it. Regardless, you seem to be sentient. You are a bird. You are meant to fly. You do not belong in this basement.”

Gideon could sense his familiar’s amusement with the young girl. Amusement and instantly earned friendship. While his familiar was a curt, cold, and unaffectionate creature, Marguerite had just earned her respect. The bird hopped from the room, unable to spread her large wings in such an enclosed space.

“Never, ever, keep her locked away again. Or any of your sentient creations.” She tossed aside the metal rod that kept the aviary door closed, the sound of the metal clattering on stone nearly deafening in the enclosed space. “Do you hear me?”

“Y—yes—I—” Shame welled in him once more. “I had no choice. I do not enjoy keeping her hidden, but—”

“Never again. And I do not know how one properly apologizes to a dead vulture, but you will do it.”

He swallowed and bowed his head. “Yes, my princess.”

It was only when he looked back up that he realized she was shaking. Positively trembling. For all the strength in her voice, it seemed she was not immune to the shock and horror of what she had just witnessed.

“Gideon? I—I think I believe you now, about the magic...” Her world had been upended once more. When her knees buckled, he rushed to her side to catch her. Her eyes were glassy and dim, and she blinked them rapidly as she struggled to come back to the waking world.

“It’s all right, Marguerite. I have you. You are safe.” He lifted her into his arms at the same moment her head rolled back.

You command me like you are my queen, and then promptly faint from terror.

What an odd creature you are.

And I did not think I could possibly love you more, yet here I am, proven wrong once again.

\* \* \*

Marguerite came back to the world and found herself sitting in the chair at Johann’s—Gideon’s—desk. His dark robes were gathered around her, dwarfing her and swallowing her in their warmth. They smelled like him—like spices and petrichor. Despite all that had just happened, she found it comforting. He was kneeling at her feet, looking up at her in concern.

“I did not think myself one for fainting until you entered my life.” She groaned and rubbed her face. “It is becoming embarrassing.”

“I believe each time you have been justified in the act.” He chuckled and stroked her cheek. “Think nothing of it. Come, let us go back upstairs. You can drink a bottle of wine if you wish, and we will discuss what you have seen in front of a warm fire.”

It was tempting. It was very tempting. But she braced herself, swallowed through the

thickness in her throat, and shook her head. “No. I can do this. But I will take you up on your offer once this is through.”

He smiled. “You may need something stronger than wine at that point, I fear.” He stood and crossed to a bookshelf at the other end of the room. Retrieving a bowl filled with white bits of chalk and a long wooden stick that seemed hollow in the middle—she could not identify from what plant or tree it had grown. It looked like a reed, but not like any she had ever seen. “What is that?”

“Bamboo. It grows in the east. And it is perfect for this.” Placing the bowl of chalk on a small table beside the painted circle, he plucked a piece of the white substance from it and tucked it into the end of the reed. It fit snugly and did not fall out when he turned it over.

“Huh. Clever.”

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“I tire of crouching to do my work.” And to work, he went. She watched in eager fascination as he used the bamboo to draw on the floor.

“Do you not need a book?”

“I have memorized this particular spell.”

“Oh.”

He chuckled at her response. “I did not lie about my skill, my love. I am practiced in the magical arts—and I suppose, most substantially, the dark ones.”

“I am married to a master necromancer.” She said it to herself aloud in hopes it might help to sink in. “I am married to a master necromancer.”

Turning to her, he paused in his work, a sympathetic smile etched on his face, though there was only sorrow in his eyes. “Does this trouble you, my princess?”

“I do not honestly know. I believe I have not yet determined how I feel on the subject. It certainly is a bit...theatrical.”

Laughing quietly, he turned back to his work. “I had hoped to introduce you to this part of me more gently. But it seems you are wont to turn over rocks to see what you might find beneath.”

“It seems so. I did not know this about myself.”

“It is astonishing what you learn about yourself when you are tested. I hope this is the end of what you will have to endure from me.”

“Somehow I doubt that. But I appreciate the sentiment.” She smirked and leaned her elbow on his desk and propped her chin on her hand. A human skull sat on the wood surface not far from her, its jaw removed. She hoped it was not sentient. She wanted to explore his collection, morbid and frightening as it was, but she could not tear her eyes away from the symbol he was drawing on the floor. She worked hard to commit it to her memory.

When he was finished, he stood back and placed the reed of bamboo against the wall. He gestured to the symbol. “Now, it is up to you.”

“What?” She blinked.

“We shall see if you have the talent for magic or not. Come, stand within the circle. You are the one with the connection to Leopold, not I. Summoning the dead against their will is painful for both parties—and I suspect he does not wish to speak to me.” He frowned.

“No, I would guess not.” Standing from the chair, she crept toward the circle, staring down at the symbol. “What else is needed? Incantations? A bowl of blood?”

“Nothing but the will required. In time, you may learn to do this without even the symbol. Magic is merely the strength of your soul working within the universe around you. All the rest are tools, meant to assist. You can kill a man with your bare hands, or you may use poison, a knife, or a bludgeon. The act is the same.”

“You have the tone of a tutor. Have you taught many magicians in your day?”

“Never once.” He smiled. “You are my first, princess.”



“You have a talent for it.”

Still smiling gently, he bowed at the waist. “Now...step within the circle and focus. Find him where he sleeps and knock upon the door. Call him to you.”

Cautiously, wondering if it might turn into some endless pit beneath her, she took a step into the circle. Nothing happened. She glanced to Gideon nervously. “I do not know what to do.”

“Shut your eyes. Think of him. Reach out through the veil...and knock. He will answer. He will come to you.”

Taking in a deep breath, she slowly let it out in a long rush. “I do not think it will work.”

“You have not tried, silly thing.”

Shutting her eyes, she squared her shoulders and tried to do as he said. She focused on the world outside of her. The stone floor beneath her feet, the walls, the air that was cool and thick and musty in that way that all basements were. She took another deep breath and slowly let it out.

And then she felt it at her feet. A strange...sensation was the only word for it that she could summon. There was no other way to describe it. It was not heat. It was not cold. It was not like the presence of a storm before the rain. It simply was.

She felt as though she were standing upon a raft at sea. No, even that was not quite right. It was as though around her was the ocean, raging and swirling, but she herself stood on solid ground. She was immovable, in the torrenting rage of power around her. “The symbol. It is a shelter, not a door...”

“Yes. Yes, princess. That is precisely right.” He sounded so very proud. Overjoyed, even. “Soon will come the time you can weather the storm without its aid.”

She was not so certain of that, but it was a nice thought. The power around her was overwhelming. Like the raging winds of a hurricane, yet silent and still all at once. It made her skin crawl.

It did not matter. She had a mission. She reached out her hand in front of her. But in truth, she tried to reach it out into that strangeness around her. She tried to reach out...and find her friend. “Leopold.”

She whispered his name. But she summoned to her mind every memory of him she could. Lying in a field, watching the clouds, laughing and holding hands. All the years of training her uselessly with a sword for naught but bruises and skinned knees.

All the laughter. All the tears. All the times they had merely just been. Her friend. Her companion. The man she would have married to save him from the shame he would have endured.

The one she did not know how she could live without. “Leopold.”

It was not that something took her hand. It was not a physical touch. But she felt something reach back to her. Something brushed against her very soul and stepped forward from the veil.

“Marguerite?”

Marguerite froze. She had heard Leopold speak her name, whispered as it were. Oh, God above, I have summoned the dead! She shivered despite herself. “C—can I open my eyes?”

“Yes, my princess...yes, you may.” Gideon’s voice was thick and strange, and yet layered heavily with awe. But she could not think much of it. She had summoned the dead.

Blinking her eyes open, she gasped and took a step back, nearly leaving the circle. There, in front of her, was Leopold. In a manner.

He was translucent. She could see straight through him. He was as she remembered him—there was no terrible wound that bisected his throat. He was not covered in blood. He was there, but he was also...not.

She reached out to him, and he did the same in return. But her hand passed uselessly through his. Tears sprang to her eyes. “I wish I could hold you.”

Leopold smiled sadly and shrugged a broad shoulder.

“Oh, Leopold.” She stepped toward him, and for all the world, wanted to take him in her arms. “I am so very, very sorry.”

“It is not your fault. It is his.” The last word was spoken with so much seething rage, she nearly recoiled. He pointed a ghastly, transparent finger at Gideon. Leopold

turned to glare at the necromancer, his face twisted in rage. “Demon! Monster! Your black arts—”

“Yes, yes. I have heard it all before.” Gideon gestured his hand dismissively. “And now your dear friend—my wife—has committed the same. She is the one who summoned you, not I.”

Leopold turned now to look at her, eyes wide in horror. “Say he lies, Marguerite. Say it.”

“I—” She blinked and felt the sudden shame crawl over her.

When she could not answer him, Leopold shook his head and grimaced in disgust. “He has corrupted you...”

“No! I—I just—I wanted to see you, to talk to you, to say—” Tears were streaming down her cheeks again. “To say that I miss you, and I love you, and I am so very sorry...”

Leopold reached out to comfort her, but his hands passed through her like he was made of nothing but smoke. Turning his head to the necromancer, he glared at Gideon. “Leave.”

“Pardon?” Gideon arched an eyebrow in response. “You jest.”

“Leave us. Let this be private. You have defiled us both enough. Let us have a moment’s peace without you.”

“You think to command me, in my own home?” He let out a bark of a laugh. “You are nothing more than wisp, and you—”

“Please,” she cut him off. “It will be but a moment.”

Annoyance and anger flashed over him—and she recognized instantly a dark jealousy in his silver eyes. But he relented, nodded once, and stormed from the room. “Two minutes.” She flinched as he slammed the wood slab behind him.

“Marguerite—you cannot trust him. He killed me!”

“I know, I—I do, but I had no choice. It was that or be married to some violent lunatic.” She shook her head. “The queen sought to levy revenge against me, for that I was the reminder of my father’s infidelity toward her. Gideon is—he is kind.”

“Gideon?”

“Another lie...” She shut her eyes and wished she could hold Leopold with every ounce of her soul. But that was magic she did not possess. “I do not think he means to harm me. I think he truly does love me.”

“He is not human, Marguerite.”

“What?” She looked up at him then, her brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I stabbed him. I sank my knife into his gut to the hilt. He should have died.” Ghostly hands hovered near her shoulders, but he did not close the distance between them. There was no point. “He is not a mortal man. Some black magic has corrupted his form. You must run from here—you must escape him.”

“To where? Where would I go?” She shook her head. “I am alone in this world.”

“It does not matter. Anywhere that he is not. He is a monster, Marguerite—one of a making I do not know. But he should be dead. He should be in the grave, not

I...”Agony etched into his features, a desperate grief. “I tried to save you from him. I failed you.”

“No, no—my friend, you have done no such thing. You did not fail. Please, do not believe so. You laid down your life for me.”

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“I was a fool...I did not know what he was. I thought him a mortal man. And now, you are his, and I have died for nothing.” He let out a rush of air. “My death was pointless.”

“No, no, please do not believe that.” She wiped at her tears, but they were instantly replaced with more. “Oh, Leopold...I am so very sorry.”

“None of this is your doing.”

“But it does not matter. I—I do not know what I will do without you. I do not know how I will cope.”

“You are resilient, Marguerite. You will be all right.” He smiled mournfully. “I never did much for you, anyway. I could not even teach you to properly fight.”

“I do not know what to do.”

“Heed my warning. He is not a living man. Stab him while he sleeps. Sink a dagger into his heart. You will see for yourself.” He sighed. “I must go. I fear this state drains me.”

“Does it—does it hurt? To be dead?”

He shook his head. “It is peaceful.” He furrowed his brow. “But I know nothing else of where I was. I have forgotten it like a dream.”

Reaching up, she grazed her fingertips along where his cheek would be. He leaned in

as if to accept her embrace, but she felt nothing as her fingers only disturbed the surface of his existence like she was touching the smoke of an incense burner. “I will miss you every day of my life. I will never, ever forget you. And I will try to be half as strong without you as I was with you.” She heard the door open behind her, but she did not turn to see Gideon reenter. “Goodbye, Leopold. Goodbye, my friend. I love you.”

“And I you, Marguerite. I will be at your side always...one way or another.” He shut his eyes. “I am so very tired...I would like to sleep.”

She knew she could not keep him like this, hovering in this state. But it was so hard to release him. To truly say goodbye. She swallowed down a sob and let out a wavering breath. “Goodbye...”

Like releasing the thread of a kite, she...let go.

Like smoke curling from a candle, he was gone.

Marguerite collapsed to her knees and wailed.

\* \* \*

The evening had started so wonderfully. After she had demanded to summon the dead, he had not known what to expect. Even as he had been schooled like a child as she released Eurydice, he could not have been more proud of her.

And the sight of her performing true magic for the first time...?

He had wanted her more than he had ever wanted anyone in all his years. She was beautiful, standing in that circle, feeling the power of the world around her for the very first time. She would be unstoppable with proper training.



Perhaps he could sense it in her when he saw her—this latent ability to tap in to the beyond. Was that what drew him to her so hopelessly? Sensing a true kindred spirit?

What would it be like to make love to someone who commanded the ether in the same way as he? They could conquer the world together; he was certain of it. If she had summoned anyone else from the beyond, he would be overjoyed.

But as it was, he was kneeling on the ground beside her, cradling her to his chest, comforting her while she wept. It took a long time before she stopped, but he kept her against him, rocking her gently back and forth.

“It was good to say goodbye,” he murmured to her as her shoulders stopped hitching with the desperate attempt to breathe past her tears. “Perhaps this will help you move past his—”

“Are you human, Gideon?”

The words were strangled, broken, and raw, as she forced them through a throat wracked by sobs. She did not even lift her head as she asked him the question.

He stayed silent.

“Leopold stabbed you in the stomach to the hilt. You should be dead.” She finally lifted her head to look at him, her eyes bloodshot. She looked so very tired. Working magic for the first time—and necromancy, no less—he was shocked she was conscious. “What are you?”

His jaw ticked. “I am your husband.”

“I—”

Placing his thumb to the center of her forehead, he commanded her to sleep. The magic worked over her quickly, though she fought it valiantly. “Rest, my love. We will speak of this another time.”

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She went limp against him as his power put her under. Lifting her into his arms, he carried her from the room, walking easily in the pitch-black darkness of the castle. He needed no light to find his way.

Winding his ways through the halls, he made his way to their bedroom. Laying her down on the sheets, he sat beside her and stroked her hair away from her face. Forcing her under was not a moment he was proud of.

But the conversation of his lack of humanity?

That was one neither of them was prepared for.

Bowing low, he kissed her. He held the embrace for a moment. It was a stolen embrace—one she had no part in—but for a moment, he imagined himself as some storybook prince.

A shame he was no such thing.

He was the dragon. He was the miserly, deadly lizard. And she was his prized possession. “I am your husband, Marguerite. And you belong to me. And past that...nothing else matters. Someday soon, you will come to understand. Someday soon, you will see this all as an unpleasant dream, as easily forgotten as a simple nightmare.”

I will not let you go, Marguerite. I will never, ever let you go.

\* \* \*

It was morning when she woke. The light was streaming in through the curtains. For a long moment, she wondered if the strange events of the night before had only been a terrible dream.

But she knew better.

Gideon was not beside her, though the depression in the pillow and the mattress said that he had slept beside her. She could not remember much after Leopold disappeared. She had cried—she had asked him a question—and then darkness had taken her.

What had she asked him?

She struggled for a long moment to grasp it from the scattered and groggy state of her mind. But finally, it was there.

What are you?

He had touched her—a thumb to her forehead—and the world had gone dark. Had he put her under a spell? Anger boiled in her at the thought. How dare he!

When else had he worked his magic on her? She desired him—was that by his design? Climbing out of bed, she staggered but caught herself on the post. Shaking her head to clear it, she tried her best to steady herself.

Dressing as best she could, she left the room to find Gideon. She stopped at the kitchen first, plucking a dangerously sharp looking knife from the block. It was small enough that she could conceal it in her sleeve, but big enough to be easily deadly and require no skill for her to wield.

Wandering the halls of the stone castle, passing by the servants she now knew were

not of the living, she pondered her situation. She was the wife of a man who may not have been a man at all.

She found him sitting in his library, reading. Approaching him warily, she did not know how to begin the conversation. When he looked up upon hearing her footsteps, he seemed surprised. His brief look of shock faded to amusement. “Of course. I should have known.”

“Known what?”

“That you would wake earlier than intended.” He shut his book and placed it on the table before him. He was not wearing his long black robes, instead donning a simple black tunic tucked into similarly colored pants. He was still an imposing sight, with his long white hair trailing about his shoulders.

I should have known he was not human. Look at him. The snow-white hair. The silver eyes...“What are you, Gideon?”

With a grimace, he glanced away. “I am a man.”

“I am not speaking to your gender. A bee might be male. A bird. A dog. I am asking of your species.”

He held his arms out at his sides. “Do I resemble a dog to you?”

“A wolf, perhaps.” She shook her head. “You refuse to answer me. You know the nature of my question, and you hide behind semantics. Why do you avoid telling me the truth?”

“Because you are not ready to hear it. Because I am protecting you.” He took a step toward her, his boots far louder on the wood floors than her simple slippers. “You

have endured much these past few weeks—the loss of your family. This marriage. Moving to a strange country. Discovering that I am, in fact, a necromancer. Raising the dead of your own accord and speaking to your lost friend. Is that not enough for you?” He sighed. “I, for one, am exhausted.”

“I cannot suffer the shadows any longer! I find myself lost in a maze and I cannot decipher the map. You know the way, but you hide it and claim it is for my own good. I am not a child, so do not treat me like one.”

Another grimace, and he turned away from her, stalking across the room to the fireplace. He leaned his hands on the mantel of the unlit hearth. “You are no child, Marguerite. But you are young. And there is only so much a person can be expected to endure in such a short time. I will tell you the answer to your question—I will show you in time, how I survived the blow from Leopold. But I—”

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She dug the knife into his ribs. He did not hear her approach. Her slippers were nigh silent and easily drowned by his speech. He stiffened, his back straightening and going rigid, as she slipped the kitchen knife farther into his body from behind.

He did not fall.

He did not even make a noise.

He simply stood stock still.

Everything seemed to stop and hang in the air. Finally, he turned his head to look at her over his shoulder. “If you wish to kill a man properly, go through the fifth and sixth ribs. Four inches higher and to the left of the spine, to reach his heart.”

She staggered away, yanking the knife from him in the process.

He grunted as she did. “The sensation of a knife sliding on bone is one I will never learn to tolerate.” The man did not even seem to bleed. Almost nothing oozed from the wound she had paid him. And what did come from the slice was dark, nearly black, and certainly not that belonging to a living man.

Clutching the knife in front of her in both hands, she staggered back until she hit the table that dominated the center of his library. Panic consumed her. Her words left her in nearly a scream. “What are you?”

With a beleaguered chuckle, he fully faced her and smiled, a sarcastic, halfhearted thing. “I am your husband.”

Turning, she ran. She knew not to where. She did not think she cared. But she ran from him. She ran from her husband.

Her husband, the master magician.

Her husband, the necromancer.

Her husband, the monster.



12

Marguerite ran.

As fast as she could, as hard as she could, she ran. She did not know when her slippers fell from her feet. She did not quite know as it much mattered. The stones of the castle floor dug into skin. But she barely felt it. All that consumed her was terror.

“Marguerite!”

She did not turn. She knew she was being pursued. She could hear him behind her, heavy footfalls echoing in the hallways as she made her way for a door to the outside. To away, and to freedom.

Leopold was right. Gideon the Necromancer was a monster.

And he was her husband.

No, no, no! It was all a nightmare. It had to be. This could not be real; this could not be happening to her. She wished it all away. She wished it to vanish in the morning sun like all the other frightening dreams she had ever experienced.

But as she scraped her arm on the jamb of the door as she fled out of the castle, she knew this was no illusion. She could feel the hot sting as flesh gave way and knew she was bleeding. But she did not stop to worry over it.

“Marguerite!”

Perhaps it was the panic that inspired her. Or perhaps she was faster than she would have expected. But it seemed that Gideon could not keep up with her. His scream of her name was farther away than she would have thought.

But she was a deer running from a wolf, and there was no doubt in her mind that if she hesitated, his teeth would sink into her heels before she could begin to run again. So, she would not stop until she was certain she was safe.

Stone gave way to grass. Grass gave way to sticks and pine needles as she ran into the woods. Her heart pounded in her chest, the blood deafening in her ears. The bark of the trees scraped at her palms as she disappeared farther into the woods. When her legs felt as though they were going to collapse beneath her, she finally stopped.

Perhaps it was a mistake, but she could help it no longer. She was not accustomed to such activity, and she fell into the needles and pinecones beside a great, tall tree beside her, pressing her back to the trunk.

She felt as though she were going to be sick. She was dizzy. Her heart was racing louder and harder than it ever had in her life. And tears—her ever-present companions—were streaking down her cheeks.

Clutching her knees to her chest, she buried her head against them and tried to breathe. Tried to think. Tried to be as silent as possible. Minutes passed, and she heard nothing from around her. When her heart had finally calmed to the point where it did not risk exploding in her chest, she stretched out her legs and took in a slow, shuddering, hitching breath.

And waited.

When the sounds of the morning forest were all that greeted her, she leaned her head back against the bark of the pine. The sun was streaming through the branches, and

she could hear the birds chirping high above. Creatures—squirrels and the like—rustled in the underbrush around her. For all intents and purposes, it was a beautiful morning.

Save for the fact that she was married to an inhuman monster.

Her arm stung. Lifting it, she inspected the wound that stretched from her elbow to halfway to her wrist. It was bleeding, but it was not deep. She would be all right. Her feet, however, had also not gone unscathed. Wincing, she picked up her foot and brushed some of the gravel and sticks that had embedded themselves into her. Bits of blood flecked where they had broken through the soles.

It did not matter.

But in the silence left after the panic, she began to think through her predicament. Where was she to go? She was a few miles from the nearest town, and she did not speak a word of German. And even if she managed to reach them before she was devoured by far more literal wolves, what then? Where would she go?

Would they hide her? Help her? Or were they all undead creatures in service to the necromancer, and she would wind up back in his clutches before nightfall?

She could not go home to the palace. She had no home to speak of. Leopold was dead. All her friends and allies were gone. But perhaps she could go home to France. Find her way back to her home country, and find some peaceful village where she could work in a tavern until...

Until what?

My life has never been my own. I have always lived in service to the plans of others. And now...I do not know what to do with my future.

There was no “until” worth considering. Shaking her head, she resolved herself. She would walk to the nearest village, find someone who would take pity on her, and then begin to travel back to France. If she found a tavern worth hiring her along the way, she would settle there. She would work in exchange for a pile of straw in the barn and food in her stomach.

She had never much valued the comfort of palace life. She would miss it, but she did not require it. It did not sound like such a terrible life to be a peasant, all things considered.

Especially with the alternative that was waiting for her in the darkness of his castle.

Tearing strips of linen from the bottom of her underskirts, she began to wrap her feet. It would slow her down too much to walk feeling every rock and pebble jabbing at her. Using what she had left to wrap the wound on her arm, she climbed back up onto her shaky legs.

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*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:18 am*

The village she had seen was south of the castle. She had run...glancing up at the sky, she squinted. East. Turning appropriately, she began to walk. She did not dare leave the woods for now, should Gideon or his servants be patrolling the fields and roads for her.

She did not know if her plan would come to fruition.

She did not know if she would survive come nightfall.

But compared to the monster who married her...

She did not know as she cared.

\* \* \*

Gideon was furious.

To be fair, he was angry mostly with himself. He had slipped on the stairs! How had he slipped on his own stairs? What was he, a child? Marguerite had fled from him—which he supposed was warranted, given his response to her stabbing him—and he had given chase.

He had wished to take his true form. That would have ended the farce quickly and without incident. As a lich, he could have snatched her up from the ground in an instant. But what would happen then, when she saw his real self?

No, he had opted to remain in his human appearance. She was traumatized and

shocked enough from the events of the past day. Between summoning Leopold, to...discovering that he was not so very much mortal and instead entirely other.

He had made egregious missteps in dealing with her. He should not have revealed his dark magic so soon, and he certainly should have never allowed her to summon Leopold. His over-eagerness to see her wield magic and accept his nature had led to this.

And then his proverbial misstep had led to a far more physical one. Marguerite was quick. She ran like a jackrabbit through his home. She was smaller than he, lighter on foot, and her house dress did not have enough fabric to slow her down to make up for it.

And he had fallen down his own damn stairs.

By the time he pulled himself up from the heap he had become at the bottom landing, she was already gone into the woods.

Grimacing as he stood on the steps to the castle, he looked off into the woods. He knew Marguerite would not return on her own. She was too stubborn—too strong-willed. She would march off to the nearest village and seek shelter. She was clever enough to know where it had been. She might even make it there before nightfall.

She will stay in the woods. She will know I am tracking her on the roads. He sighed. She is naïve, but she is not a fool.

The villagers feared him, and rightfully so. But they also respected and adored him. As lord of their lands, he was far more benevolent than most. What use had he for their money? He had plenty of his own. Instead of paying him in taxes, he took what he needed in food and wares, which was not much.

They certainly did not complain with the arrangement.

What would they do, however, when his terrified bride arrived on their doorsteps, battered and exhausted? Would they bring her back to him, or would they hide her, secret her away, as their suspicions about his dark nature were finally confirmed?

He could not take that chance.

Letting his human form dissolve, he stretched out as his true self, the shadowy creature that he had become all those many centuries ago. He could not fly—but he certainly could not trip down the damn stairs either.

Mentally kicking himself, he slipped over the grass and toward the woods. He would hunt her. Find her. Bring her back.

Fear over her safety joined his anger and frustration. He was a fool to have let everything twist so far out of his control! He would fetch her, tend to her, lock her away in their room, and woo her back to his side.

She would understand.

She would forgive him.

She would love him.

She must.

\* \* \*

Marguerite decided she disliked walking in the woods with no shoes. The fabric around her feet had done a great deal in protecting her from the detritus of the forest

floor—but it did little to help the nettles.

Hours passed as she made her way through the trees, always keenly aware of every snap of a twig or rustle of a branch. He will come for me. He will not let me go. The wolf hunts me, even now.



*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:19 am*

She was exhausted. She was trembling and jolting at each unexpected sound. Too focused on her survival, even her tears had gone silent to aid in her alertness.

When she reached a stream that ran south, she began to follow it. The village would have built itself on or near the source of fresh water, she was certain. If she went along the path long enough, she would find another soul to speak to.

Hopefully, they were another living soul.

She was starving, her stomach grumbling in protest as she walked, but she filled it with water and mentally told it that was all it was to receive this day. The cold stream was a relief as she cupped water to scrub her face and wipe her wounds clean.

It seemed like both an eternity and only a moment before she noticed the sun was slipping low on the horizon. Soon, it would be night. She would be unable to march through the woods with no light. She had no means of starting a fire, and not even the foggiest idea of how to do so with only what she could find around her.

I wish Leopold were here. He would know what to do. He would help me. The memory of her friend sent fresh grief panging through her. But he was dead and gone. She was alone, and she had to rely on herself to survive.

If I do not make the village by dark, I will do my best to find some shelter. I have water, which is an important start. Perhaps I shall become a forest hermit! I shall live here, living off berries and trout, and this shall be my life. She laughed quietly at the absurd idea.

I do not know which berries are safe to consume. I would die within days. She wished, deeply wished, she knew how to care for herself and survive on her own. But she had always relied on those around her. Her father and the comfortable life he provided, Leopold, and most recently Gideon.

Luckily, as sunset blazed the sky orange and began to die to a pale bluish purple, she saw signs that she might be near the village. Trees were chopped short to stumps, and a deep wagon path ran from the stream and away. Hope and relief swelled in her chest as she immediately began to follow the wagon path.

Not for nothing, it also was less painful on her poor, abused feet.

The forest turned to fields just as the stars began to appear overhead. It was a beautiful night, crisp and cool. God and the weather had been kind to her on a day where everything else was not.

Perhaps it was a good omen. Perhaps now she would find some kind older couple to aid her. It was another hour, and well and truly dark by the time she saw buildings. The moon was half full and gave her just enough light to see out in the fields. Had she been in the woods, she would have been utterly consumed by darkness.

The first building she came across looked to be an inn. It was taller than the rest, although it was modest in its own right. A sign hung from a hook on the front, though she could not read it. When she heard voices coming from a group standing by the side of the building, her heart jumped for joy.

She approached them. In the firelight from the windows, she could just barely make them out. A group of young men, three of them, stood in a circle, speaking casually to each other. One of them was leaning against the wall, his arms crossed over his chest, smiling and laughing at something the other one had said.

They all went silent as she approached. “E—excuse me, I hate to interrupt, but...I need your help.”

The one who was leaning against the wall tilted his head slightly to the side, his eyes wide in surprise. “Was zum Teufel...Schaut euch das mal an. Ist das eine Leiche?”

One of the others huffed. “Sie sieht aus, als wäre sie gerade aus dem Grab gekrochen.”

“I—I am sorry.” She shook her head. “I do not speak German, forgive me. But I am in desperate need of your help. My husband is—he is a monster, and I need to escape him.” The three young men looked strong and capable. Swords hung from the hips of two of them. Perhaps they were soldiers, traveling on the road? Maybe they could protect her from Gideon! She stepped toward them, a little closer into the warm glow of light coming from the side of the inn. “Please. Help me.”

The third one, the one without the sword, frowned at her. “My French—very bad. You need help?”

With a sob of relief, she clutched that man’s arm. “Yes! Yes. Please. Help.” She placed a hand to her chest. “In danger.”

The third man turned to his friends. “Sie sagt, dass sie in Gefahr sei und unsere Hilfe braucht.”

The first man was watching her, a strange look on his face. He was handsome, his sharp features marred by a thin scar that bisected his cheek. They were soldiers, without a doubt. His dark eyes were fixed on her. She was positive he was their leader. “Soso, unsere Hilfe also? Wir kämpfen aber nicht umsonst.”

The third man, who was shorter with blond hair and blue eyes, turned back to her.

“We money soldiers. You pay?”

“I—” She hesitated. Mercenaries. They were mercenaries. Which would be perfect, if...she had any money. The hope in her chest fell just as soon as it had come. Looking down at herself, she took stock of her condition. She had nothing she could trade them for. Nothing at all. She was in her house dress and wore no jewels.

Oh!

She pulled her wedding ring from her finger. It was gold. Perhaps that would be enough to satisfy them? She held it out to them in her palm. “Is this enough?”

The second man, who also had blond hair but was much taller than the third, looked at her with a bemused smile. When he spoke, his voice was smooth and sweet, even if she could not understand a single word he said. “Sie läuft vor ihrem Mann weg. Schaut sie euch an. Er muss sie schwer verprügelt haben, wenn sie so davongelaufen ist.”

The first man with the scar pushed away from the wall and stepped toward her. He was tall, easily over six feet. But she was short, so everyone was tall to her. He took the ring from her palm, thought it over, and then slipped it back onto her finger. He closed her fingers over her palm, but then did not let go of her hand when he was done. “Ich kenne eine andere Möglichkeit, wie Ihr uns bezahlen könntet...mit etwas viel Wertvollerem.”

The way his voice lowered flipped something in her stomach. She did not understand his words, but she understood his meaning.

They do not wish for me to pay in gold.

They wish for me to pay in flesh.

Marguerite locked up as the second man stepped up close to her side. I am a fool. They are men, and they are mercenaries. I have no means of paying them. Of course, this is what they would want in exchange.

The second man pressed his palm to his chest. "Oskar." He gestured to the man with the scar. "Tomaz." Then to the third, who spoke terrible French. "Fritz."

Oskar, Tomaz, and Fritz. It is nice to know the names of the men who intend to rape me. But did they intend to harm her? She did not know. They did not strike her, throw her to the ground, and rip her clothes from her body.

Maybe it was not a highway robbery. Maybe it was merely a trade. But she did not yet know if it was one she was willing to make.

What choice do I have?

I cannot return to that monster.

Nervously, she muttered, "Marguerite." She was trembling again as Oskar stepped even closer to her and ran a hand slowly down over her back. It sent a shiver crawling through her.

"We help," Fritz said as he ran the back of his knuckle down over her cheek. "For you."

Tomaz reached out to her and carefully took her wrist. He pulled her toward him, gently turning her until her back was against his chest. She was shivering, her mind was reeling, and her stomach was twisting in knots.

“Sag ihr, dass wir sie beschützen werden. Wir bringen sie weit weg von hier,” Tomaz murmured into her ear as he leaned down. He pressed his lips to the hollow just beneath her ear in a slow, sensual kiss. He smelled like dirt and the odor that comes with a man who has worked hard all day. It wasn’t...unpleasant, but something about it made every muscle in her body go even stiffer.

Fritz stepped into her from the front and caught her chin in his hand, tilting her head up to look at her. “We help. We take away. Far away.”

They can save me from the monster. They can save me from Gideon. All I have to do is—is let them have me. She shivered and pressed her back against Tomaz’s chest. She felt like she must be a marble statue with how tense she remained.

Oskar pressed in close as well and turned her head to him. Before she could react, he kissed her. When his tongue invaded her mouth, she let out a startled sound but didn’t fight him. She was too overwhelmed—too confused—to react at first. When he pulled his head back, he let out a shuddering breath. “Oh, süßer Honig.”

She slapped him.

His head rocked to the side, and she froze once more, expecting them to be angry. But Tomaz laughed at her back, a deep chuckle, and the other men joined him. “Eine Kämpferin! Sehr gut. So mag ich meine Frauen.” He caught her wrists in his hands and captured them at her sides. But he wasn’t rough. He wasn’t violent. If she kicked and screamed and struggled, she was certain she could wrench from his grasp.

Fritz was smiling—no, grinning from ear to ear—as he slid a hand over her chest,

cupping one of her breasts in his palm and squeezing firmly. A second hand quickly joined the first to mirror the action, and that time she let out a whimper. Confusion consumed her and kept her from speaking, as she watched him in idle fascination as he explored her body over her clothes.

“No fear,” Fritz murmured, his voice low as he groped her. “No fear. No hurt. We help. Trade.”

“M...my husband is a monster. He...kills people. Murderer.” She did not know it for a fact, but how could it not be true? “Husband murderer.”

Fritz frowned and glanced over her shoulder at Tomaz. “Sie sagt, ihr Mann sei ein Mörder.”

“Kein Wunder, dass sie weggerannt ist.” Oskar, the smooth one who had kissed her earlier, tilted her head to his again, his breath washing over her skin.

Fritz began to untie the front of her dress, starting at the top. “We help. Keep safe. Trade. Take far away. Yes?”

My body for freedom. My body for safety. My body for escaping a monster. Oskar was still hovering close to her, his pale eyes searching hers. There was a strange desperation to him, as if he wished so desperately for her to say yes.

“Gentle?” she whispered.

Oskar smiled, a sweet and dazzling thing. He seemed so chivalrous...perhaps they were her knights. They were not the legends of old, but fairytales were lies. This was the part of the story her father had left out for her young ears. This was the currency she had with which to pay.

And pay she would.

“Gentle,” he whispered back. He knew that much in French, it seemed. Oskar closed the distance between them then and kissed her a second time. This time he was slower, more careful. He stayed to his word. When his tongue softly entered her mouth, she surrendered to it.

She let her eyes slip shut. It was many moments before Oskar slowly broke the kiss and placed another tender gesture against her cheek.

When Tomaz gathered her up in his arms, carrying her like he might a bride, she didn't fight him. She kept her eyes shut, not wanting to see where they were going. This was the price of her freedom. This was the price of her survival.

Perhaps she would learn to enjoy it. Perhaps it wouldn't be too bad. Something twisted in her stomach. No matter the fact that this was her path forward to freedom, she was afraid. Part of her knew this was more than likely a mistake. If I do this, I am a whore. If I pay them in sex, and receive their protection, that is what I have become.



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*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:19 am*

When Tomaz laid her down, she felt straw at her back. Opening her eyes, she saw that he had taken them behind a small structure. It was dark and far away from where they might be seen. At least it is not a barn. At least I will not be rutted like an animal surrounded by what I've become.

Tears stung her eyes. Fritz knelt at her side and wiped them away. "What wrong, pretty?"

"I am a whore..."

He chuckled. "No. No whore." He kissed her cheek where he had stroked the tears away. "Not job. Trade. Ours."

Ours.

A whore with three clients is still a whore.

But I will be free of Gideon. Far, far away from where he could find me. Swallowing the rock in her throat—and her pride—she took in a deep breath, held it, and let it out in a wavering rush.

She nodded.

"I fear I will be a terrible harlot. This is my first time."

Fritz blinked. "Virgin?"

She nodded.

With a huff of a laugh, he said something to the others under his breath that she didn't quite catch. But at their expressions, she knew he had relayed the message.

Oskar tutted. "Was für ein Mann verschmählt so eine schöne Frau?"

Smiling, Tomaz nudged her knees apart. She let him kneel between them, and she watched in rapt fascination and nervousness as he placed a hand close to her head to lean down over her. He caught her cheek in his palm.

He kissed her, fiery and passionate. Where Oskar was sweet and tender, invading her mouth like they were in a dance—Tomaz claimed her like they were in a brawl. His tongue tangled with hers.

She moaned against his lips. She couldn't help it. It was...it was good. When he parted from her, her body felt flush, and her chest was rising and falling faster than it had before. He smiled down at her again, his dark eyes smoldering in lust. "Tja, ich würde sagen—sein Verlust, unser Gewinn...und natürlich ihrer." He sat back.

Detached, feeling almost as though she weren't really there, she watched as they undressed her. Tomaz finished unlacing her house dress, and she let them pull it from her. Her underthings followed shortly after. Soon, she was naked before them, lying in the straw. She felt like a foolish peasant girl, lured away by the promise of kindness in exchange for debauchery. And that is what I have become.

Oskar lowered himself to her, and she gasped as he captured one of her nipples in his mouth, worrying it between his teeth, sucking on her as though he were a babe. She whimpered in nervous fear and twisted her hands into the hay beneath her. But matched with it in equal step was...was pleasure. It felt like bliss.

“Shh, shh.” Fritz lay down on his side beside her and turned her to meet his gaze.  
“Look me.”

“Watch,” she halfheartedly corrected him.

Chuckling, he stroked her cheek. “Watch.”

Tomaz let out a hum from over her. “Wenn wir ihr Deutsch beibringen, haben wir den verführerischsten Übersetzer, den ich je gesehen habe.”

When his hands grasped her knees, she went rigid and let out a squeak of fear. She looked up at Tomaz to see him still kneeling between her bare legs. He was staring down at her sex, a hungry and needy expression consuming him.

And he had freed himself from his pants.

Oh, oh, God above. Oh, God above!

She knew what it meant to make love. She did. Though she had never experienced it herself, the details had not escaped her. She also understood fucking. And that was what this was. It was not love. It was a transaction. She knew what she had implicitly agreed to with them.

But to see him there? Like that? Ready to plunge himself inside her?

Panic broke over her, and she struggled. She shoved Oskar away from her.

“No, no, watch—” Fritz turned her head back to him. “Watch me. Marguerite. We help. We save.”

“Save...” She shivered.

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*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:19 am*

“Husband...evil. You, ours. Join.” He gestured at the three of them. “Speak for us. Be ours. Teach French.” He chuckled. “My French bad.”

“It really is terrible,” she replied, her voice caught as barely more than a whisper.

“Safe.” Fritz ran a hand over her cheek, before slipping it into her hair. He placed his forehead to hers. “Marguerite safe.”

Safe. Free. Far away.

She nodded once again, however much she trembled. “Join. Yes...”

Oskar went back to playing with her breasts. He ran his tongue over the hard bud of her nipple and groaned. She gasped in response, her body reacting to the sensations, sending a sharp thrill of pleasure arching through her. “Ich glaube, ich bin verliebt.”

“Ich auch,” Fritz whispered as he crept his face closer to hers. “Marguerite...stole hearts.”

She chuckled. “Now you’re lying.”

He shrugged a shoulder. And then he kissed her. Tomaz was fiery and passionate. Oskar was sweet and smooth. And Fritz was like kissing a playful imp. He was teasing, always breaking away just when she wanted more to watch her before descending again. He nipped at her lips mischievously, chuckling at the noises she made.

Tomaz was stroking her thighs slowly before running a hand over her stomach, splaying along her abdomen. It seemed he didn't want to startle her. She appreciated that. But when one of Tomaz's hands left her knee to slip between her legs, she gasped and broke away from Fritz to watch Tomaz.

He smiled down at her reassuringly. "Gentle."

Then he touched her. His hand stroked over that part of her body that no one had ever touched, save her. She could not look away. Fritz kissed her cheek, his free hand stroking her body. Oskar sat back as well, and she noticed him undo his own trousers to pleasure himself.

"Gentle," she repeated, her heart once more pounding in her ears.

Tomaz's fingers worked over her, slowly, carefully, tenderly. Caressing her, toying with her, sending pangs of pleasure arching up through her spine. His dark eyes stayed trained on hers, as if watching for any sign of resistance.

If she screamed, they would stop. She was certain of it. This deal was hers to make, not theirs. This was not rape. And for that, she was immensely relieved. Perhaps these men could be my friends...perhaps they could be my lovers. Father had many women. Why might I not have many men? Is that not only fair?

She reached for Fritz's hand, and he took it eagerly, squeezing it tightly.

"Good, Marguerite. Good, yes," he urged her, kissing her cheek. "Safe."

Tomaz shifted, leaning forward, lowering his body between her legs. Oskar had to move, shuffling to kneel by her head. She could see him in the corner of her eye, stroking himself, and knew that tonight would not begin and end with the man over her.

Tomaz kissed her then, softer than the first time, but not by much. She surrendered to him. She surrendered to this.

Perhaps this will even feel good. It has so far.

He parted from her to prop himself over her body, and she felt him there at her entrance.

It was time.

Spreading her knees wide for him, she braced herself.

Two dark claws split through Tomaz's eyes from the back like meat on a skewer. Two jagged, black points jutted from the sockets.

Blood poured onto her face.

Marguerite screamed.

Marguerite awokenaked and covered in blood.

Smoke stung her eyes the moment she blinked them open. She rolled onto her side and coughed, trying to clear the taste of soot from her mouth.

And found herself staring into the gaping, empty, bloody eye sockets of Tomaz. They were nothing but gory pits where his eyes should have been. When she screamed, she choked on the smoke in the air and instead could only scramble back away from him, heart pounding in her ears in terror.

Her hand fell into something thick, ropey, and viscous as she frantically tried to escape what was before her. Looking down to see what she had touched, she found her fingers pressed deep into...intestines.

Oskar lay beside her, or what remained of him. His stomach was torn open, nothing remaining of the skin that should have held his organs in place. His face was caught in a silent scream. Unlike Tomaz, he had known he was dying. His eyes were locked wide in terror, staring sightlessly at the starry sky overhead.

For a moment, it seemed Fritz was missing. But then she saw a hand lying by her foot. A hand it did not seem the other men were missing. The stump of a leg sat in the grass a few feet away. It was as though a giant cat had caught and dismembered a mouse.

She could only sit there, frozen in shock. She was covered in blood. Their blood.

Turning, she retched into the straw, unable to stop herself. Only water exited her, thankfully, as she had nothing in her stomach to surrender. When she was finished, she found herself unable to do anything but simply stare at the bodies around her.

It was after several moments of her mind simply failing to grasp what was happening before she realized she could see clearly. The straw pile she had been placed upon was no longer obscured in the darkness of the night. But neither was it daytime.

Another coughing fit caused by smoke catching in her lungs jarred her out of her frozen state. Everything around her was illuminated in a flickering, orange glow. As she turned her head, she realized why.

The village was on fire.

All of it.

Climbing out of the gore, she desperately tried to find her dress, or at least her underthings. But her hopes fell as she saw they were soaked through with the viscera left behind by the three mercenaries who she had been about to...

She shook her head, forcing the thought from her mind. They were dead. Very dead. And there was nothing she could do to save them. Something had attacked them, and she was lucky to be alive. She needed to escape, naked or not! Perhaps she could find something in the charred remains of the village when it burned itself out, if she could just find somewhere to hide long enough to wait it out, and—

A sound set her teeth on edge and tore every thought from her mind without warning. But it was not a true sound. Or it was not one she heard with her ears, perhaps. It felt like it ripped through her. When it finished, nausea washed over her again, but that time she managed to keep it down.



What had done that? What could produce such a—a sensation?

Turning, she quickly discovered her answer.

And she was not glad she had.

There, outlined against the blaze of the burning buildings, the pyres of orange stretching high up into the night sky like perverse summer bonfires, was darkness. Cut out like the night sky had come down to reclaim some of its rightful kingdom, a silhouette of nothingness was stamped against the brightness of the fire.

It was tall—easily twelve feet or more. A hood seemed to be draped over its head, long black flowing robes of purest nothing that tapered off into swirling tendrils of smoke that raised from it along the edges. Its arms were long and thin, far longer than they should be to truly resemble a human. Around its wrists hovered silver circles, like bracelets, but that seemed to defy all sense of the natural world.

In its hand—it was more of a claw, long, viciously pointed things that had no business being real—it held the head of a man who dangled several feet from the ground, kicking and screaming.

She did not know the man. She had never seen him before. Nor would she ever have the chance.

The creature squeezed, crushing the man's skull in his grasp like an egg. She could hear the sickening crunch from where she stood. The man went instantly limp.

And the creature tossed him away as if he were nothing more than chaff.

It was when the man landed on the ground like a child's doll that she realized he was not alone. Scattered about the center of the town was...death. Bodies, lying where

they were killed or discarded. Easily two dozen that she could see. She knew there were more.

This thing has been sent by Gideon to find me. Will it kill me for its master? No. It left me alive. It has come to retrieve me. I must run!

Turning to try to do just that, she made it only a few feet before her body, unable to cope with what she had witnessed, gave out on her. Her knees buckled, and she collapsed to the ground before retching once again. Nothing exited her that time, but it did not stop her stomach from making the valiant attempt.

A shadow fell over her, a ghastly silhouette of the monster. She turned to face it, sitting in the dewy grass, and lifted an arm to protect herself, for what good it would do.

The creature loomed over her like the product of a nightmare, the shadowy and shifting robes it wore curling in some unseen breeze. It stared at her.

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Where she found the strength to speak at all, she did not know. She was mildly impressed with herself that she found the ability at all. “Wraith, if you have come to kill me or take me back to your master, then—then do it.” Tears stung her eyes.

Long, ghoulish hands curled into fists. She watched in horror as the monster...shifted. It shrank and changed as robes made of darkness turned to those of fabric. And before she could truly understand what was happening, one fiend from her nightmares had turned to another.

Gideon.

Silver hair draped from the shadow of the hood he wore. Backlit by the inferno that was the village, she could not see his face. But his posture was drawn tight as a bow. She could feel his fury from where she was, just as bright as the flames.

And just as dangerous.

He is a wraith. I am truly married to a monster.

“I—”

“Silence!”

Shrinking back at his voice, she curled her legs up into herself. The single word had been a hiss of pure rage. I am to die here. I am to die here with all the rest. I am certain of it.

Undoing the clasp of his robe, he whirled it from his shoulders and hurled it atop her. In one swift movement, she was draped in the thick black fabric. She was happy for the garb, glad to hide her nudity, but as she saw his features, she suddenly wished he had kept it.

Fury. That was the only word for it. His chest rose and fell in deep, fast gasps. His lips were pulled in a grimace, and those silver eyes reflected the all-consuming white-hot orange and reds of the fire, giving him all the illusion that he was made of the destruction he had wrought.

Cowering, she wrapped the robe around herself and waited for his anger to turn itself upon her. She did not have to wait long.

“Explain.”

One more word filled with such seething hatred that she could not help but duck her head and try to hide within the veil of her hair. She could not think of how to respond.

“Now.”

Shutting her eyes, tears streaked down her cheeks—likely cutting paths through the drying blood she could feel spattered there. “I need to escape—”

“Escape me.”

“You are a monster.” The words were whispered, but she knew he could hear her all the same.

Silence for a long moment. “And the instant you make your bid for freedom, you spread your legs for three men?” A growl left him. “What were you thinking, you naïve child!”

“I had no choice!” Some manner of anger came up in her in response to his. Murdering her was one thing. But he did not need to insult her in the process.

“Oh? They were defiling you against your will?” He huffed a sarcastic, cruel laugh. “I heard no cries of protest. I saw no resistance.”

“There were none.” She finally lifted her head to look up at him. “They are—were—mercenaries. They agreed to take me far from here. To keep me safe. But they are soldiers of fortune. What else could I pay them in? I have no other currency with which to barter.”

Snarling, he reached down and snatched her left wrist. Without warning, he yanked her roughly up onto her feet. He held her wrist up between them, clenching tightly enough that it stung.

Jaw ticking, silver eyes flashing in hatred, he said nothing. He did not need to. He was holding up her wedding ring.

“I would break my holy vows to see myself spared from an unholy beast,” she murmured.

Grimacing again, he yanked her toward him until she was only inches away. She tugged on her wrist, but there was no use. He was far too strong. “They would have used you and left you here or slit your throat and left you for dead once they had what they wanted, you ignorant fool!”

“It was a chance I had to take.”

“No. It was not. Nor was it one you will ever have the opportunity to make again.” He yanked her into him, his other hand fisting painfully in her hair at the back of her neck. He craned her head back to face him. “Listen to me carefully, Marguerite...you

belong to me.”

\* \* \*

Gideon was uncertain if he had ever been so angry in his life as he was in that moment. He had found his wife beneath another man, surrounded by two more. Her eyes were wide in fear, but...also in anticipation.

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Three men seduced his wife with promises of safe harbor, and she had agreed out of a desperate need to escape him. Had it been only that? Or was there something more wanton at play? Did she desire them? To be used by them? To be ravaged and pillaged like nothing more than a common harlot?

Even if her words were correct, and she had only been viewing the tryst as a transaction where her flesh was the currency provided, a simple fact remained true.

Three men had been easily successful where he had only failed.

Jealousy had consumed him in a way he had never known was possible. The first man was dead before he had even realized he had moved. It was a shame, as he wanted them to suffer for what they had done and nearly done.

The other two had died far slower. He had enjoyed their screams. The first one he eviscerated and allowed to die slowly, watching in terror and agony as he plucked pieces from the third as if he were nothing more than a daisy in a field.

She loves me, she loves me not.

She loves me, she loves me not.

Their screams had been a small balm to the wound Gideon felt torn open in his chest. She was willing to give up her body to escape me. She was willing to pleasure three men if it meant escaping me. She was risking her life with them, and she found it preferable to my companionship.

He wished to raise them from the dead only to make them suffer more, but then there had been the issue of the village itself. She had known to flee to its safety. While she would never leave his castle again if he had any say in the matter, she was wily and more resourceful than he gave her credit for.

No, he needed to remove this option of escape.

So, he did exactly that. In the simplest, most succinct, and cathartic way possible.

By taking the life of every man, woman, and child, and then razing their structures to the ground.

Marguerite was shivering in his grasp. When he had reminded her of the simple fact that she belonged to him, her words had failed her, and she had descended into quiet tears. Not once had she asked for mercy or claimed she felt any regret for her actions. At least she would not go so far as to lie to him.

It did not stop him from digging the proverbial knife between her ribs, as she had done far more literally to him, as he turned, thrusting her ahead of him, still fisting her hair cruelly in his grasp. “They are dead because of you, Marguerite. All of them. Every life in this place is lost because of your actions.”

“I did not do this!”

“You sought to use them as shelter. You should have known what would happen when I found you.”

“No. Their deaths are on your hands, not mine. How was I to assume you were a wraith, sent from the grave to torture me?”

“Tortureyou?” He laughed harshly and yanked her back to him. Grasping her jaw in



his other hand, he forced her to look at him. “How have I tortured you? Hm? I have given you everything you could ever desire. I have trusted you. Shown you all that I am. I have shared with you my home, my wealth, my knowledge. I have been patient—I have been kind—have I once lain a hand upon you?”

Those large green eyes watched him in fear and grief. But not in regret. “No.”

“Do you wish for me to show you what it means to be abused, Marguerite?” He tightened his grasp on her hair. By her hiss of pain, he knew his point had been made. “Is that what you desire from me? From those men for whom you so readily spread your legs? Is that what they offered that I have not?”

“N—no.”

“Then do not speak to me of torture. You know nothing of the word!”

“Let me go, wraith. Please, let me go.”

He laughed. It was harsher than he intended it to be, but his anger still ran unchecked, and he was too consumed by it to care much for her tears. “No, Marguerite. You shall never be free of me. Nothing shall take you from me.”

“I do not belong to you. My life is mine.”

“Oh? I beg to differ.”

“Then I shall find a way to rid you of my life, even if it means I must surrender it as well.”

“Not even the grave shall free you of me, my princess.” He sneered. “For the kingdom of death is mine.” With that, he let his human form dissolve. The cloak that

wrapped around her dissipated, but she was not much aware of it. As she found herself in the clutches of a wraith, her eyes once more rolled into her head, and she surrendered to the rigors of the world around her.

Grasping her bloodied, naked body in his talons, he headed back to his home.

You will never be free of me, Marguerite. Even if it means I must wall you up in a tower, you will be mine.

No matter the cost.

15

Marguerite yanked pointlessly on the doorknob. It would not turn. With both hands, she grasped it and rattled the wood slab against its hinges. Letting out a whine of frustration, she finally gave up and kicked it with her bare foot.

Which was a mistake. She hopped, hissing and swearing under her breath in pain. She was still covered in cuts and bruises from her attempted escape. Limping back to the bed, she sat on the edge of it.

Their bed.

At some point while she had been unconscious—again—he had bathed and bandaged her. She would feel indignant about it, if she had not known the other option was that he leave her naked and coated in the dried blood of the mercenaries. She honestly preferred it this way.

When she woke up, he had been gone. His side of the bed was still made, the lines of the linen crisp and showing that he had not slept there that night.

Rubbing the back of her neck, she bit back a fresh flood of tears. He had locked her inside their bedroom. She supposed that was not a surprise. Better here, where there were windows—also locked—than some dank, dark hole in the castle basement.

“What am I to do?”

She said it aloud, knowing no one was there to answer her. Or perhaps there is.

Perhaps this place is filled with spirits that do his bidding. She shivered at the thought and decided to keep her thoughts internal from that point on.

Unless the dead could read minds.

She did not think they could. But then again, she was not certain they could not. Placing her head in her hands, she ran through the options before her. But found she quite literally had none. Well, that was not entirely true. She had two.

Endure whatever torture Gideon would levy against her for her transgressions...

Or shatter the window with the end table and jump to her death.

Neither seemed pleasant. But the latter seemed far more so than the former. And so, she lay back on the bed, stretched her arms wide, and waited for Gideon to return.

She did not have to wait for long.

When the door clicked open, she leapt from the bed to put as much distance between her and the man who walked inside. But he was not a man, was he? No. He was a wraith. A demon of the shadows. She shuddered at the memory of seeing his true self, and quickly found herself with her back pressed to the far wall.

Gideon shut the door behind him, his expression unreadable. He carried a tray of food—bread and butter, and a small jug of water. Without speaking, he placed it on a table by the opposite wall.

They watched each other for a long moment, neither moving, neither speaking. With a long sigh, he finally shook his head, walked to the edge of the bed—their bed—and sat down. “I am not going to hurt you.”

“You are a wraith.”

“Lich.” He smirked, but the expression did not reach the hardness in his eyes. “There is a difference. I had hoped to teach those designations to you. I hope I still can.”

Trying not to panic, she took in a slow breath and let it out. She believed him that he did not wish to hurt her. If he wanted her dead or maimed, he would have likely done it already. But he was a monster. And there was one burning question in her mind that would quickly settle whether or not he was her enemy. “Am I now your prisoner?”

Silence.

He nodded once.

At least he was honest with her. At least he did not try to claim this was anything else. She respected him for that. He was still a murderous, evil, inhuman “lich,” but she could respect his honesty.

Those silver eyes of his slid shut. “You were going to let those men have you.” There was such defeat in his voice, such sadness, that she could not help but suddenly feel...guilty for what she had nearly done. Not just that, but shame.

Clenching her fists, she tried to hold on to her dignity. “I had no choice. Nothing else with which to barter.”

“So you said.” He opened his eyes again and shifted his attention down to his lap. He turned his palms up, as if pondering his own existence. “As a man, I am jealous. As your husband, I am furious. But in all other ways, I cannot fault you. In your position, with your gender, I do not think I would have acted differently.”

That was a vision I never needed. Any other day, perhaps she would have laughed.

Instead, she forced the tension out of her limbs as best she could. “You murdered everyone.”

“Yes. I did.”

“Simply to block off my path to escape.”

“Yes.”

“How many lay dead? How many souls are gone now, in the hopes of keeping me here?”

Gideon paused for a long moment before he answered slowly. “I fear...I did not keep count. Twenty or more. Perhaps forty.”

With a cringe, she felt the tears rise up in her again as she grappled with those numbers. They did not seem real. Dozens of poor, innocent lives were ended because of her. If she had only stayed here...if she had sacrificed herself to the monster, they would still be alive. Guilt and shame wracked her worse than it had before, easily eclipsing her act of infidelity. When she spoke, her voice was caught in a whisper. “It cannot be that I am so important to you as to take the lives of an entire village. I cannot be worth all those lives.”

“To me...you are. Without a shadow of a doubt.” He let out a long, heavy sigh and pushed up to his feet with the weariness of a man far older than he appeared. “There are no other towns that you can reach. The horses are all my creations, and they answer only to me. They shall not give you passage. My servants shall not aid you. All doors leading from the castle shall remained locked at all times. All windows shall be kept closed. I shall not confine you to this room, Marguerite, but you shall not leave these walls without me at your side.”

The reading of her rights as a prisoner. “Let me go, Gideon.”

“Never.”

And with that, he turned on his heel and left the room.

Sliding down the surface of the wall to the floor, she sat there and did the only thing she could think of to do.

She wept.

\* \* \*

It was as the sun was setting that starvation sent her from her position on the floor in search of food. She had not eaten a proper meal in two days, and the bread Gideon had brought her had only done so much to settle the growling in her stomach.

I would make a terrible peasant.

As she walked along the hallways and corridors that she had slowly become familiar with, she found their nature entirely soured in her mind. She jumped at every shadow and recoiled from every servant who passed her. They looked at her in sadness, as if they were well aware of the reason for her newfound avoidance of them.

They are all dead.

They are all his creations.

She truly was such a naïve thing, wasn't she? To have dabbled so readily in dark magic, not understanding the reality of it? The true darkness that beat at its core? It was one thing to be tempted with the promise of the power to speak to her beloved dead.

But to command the flesh of corpses? To make them stand, and walk, and feign life?



It raised the bile in her stomach.

I am a child. He is right in that. I know nothing of the world around me. Least of all...him. What was I thinking? But for the moment, her self-loathing would have to take a step back. Her stomach was attempting to devour itself in desperation, and she could smell food coming from the dining room.

As she passed the door, she saw Gideon sitting at the table by himself, a plate in front of him, the silver cloche still covering his plate. Another one sat at his righthand side. His elbow was propped on the arm, his temple resting on his closed fist.

He looked...

Miserable.

Utterly miserable.

And if she were not mistaken, his eyes were tinged red as if he, too, had been crying. Certainly not. A wraith—lich—certainly did not weep. Yet had she not just been ruminating on her ignorance of the world? What did she know of such things?

What am I to do?

Her stomach growled, answering the question for her. And it did so audibly enough that Gideon's attention lifted from the covered plate in front of him. He glanced to her briefly before returning. "You may take your plate and go, if you wish."

Did she wish to dine with him? No.

Was she starving? Yes.

Did some strange, pathetic part of her feel guilty for causing him pain? Yes.

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That last piece was an emotion she sought to quickly ignore. But something else nagged at her—the sad reality of her situation. She was married to a monster, and now had been imprisoned in his castle. She was living the worst manner of fairytale, save that there was no shining prince coming to rescue her.

My hero is already dead, murdered at the monster's hand. Therefore, she had only herself to rely upon for her escape. And she could not do so with the doors and windows locked and barred. If I am to find a way to escape...I need to regain his trust.

It meant swallowing her fear and her pride. It meant allowing herself to edge dangerously close to the monster but keeping herself away from the snap of its teeth. While it was not her flesh that was in danger—he had proven that he had no intention of harming her—she feared for something greater now.

Her soul.

With a long exhale, she headed into the dining room and cautiously sat at the setting that had been put out for her. “I cannot hide from you in this place. There is no point in pretending that I can.”

Lifting the cloche from the plate, she set it aside. There were no servants in the room to do it for her, and she was honestly glad for the privacy. Judging by the temperature of the food before her—steak, green beans, and mashed potatoes—dinner had been here some time, and they had likely all been sent away.

Picking up her knife, she hesitated. “Is this meat from a cow?”

He huffed something that could have been a laugh in a former life. “Yes.”

“Good. At least you are not serving me the villagers you roasted. I will at least thank you for that.” She began to eat, trying to pace herself, lest she get sick. Or look like a barbarian.

“The thought had not even crossed my mind.”

“Small favors.” She gestured at his own covered plate with her knife, prompting him to eat. He arched an eyebrow at the gesture but sat forward nonetheless and did as he was instructed. They ate in silence for a time before she felt she could dare to take a sip of the red wine sitting in a goblet in front of her. Alcohol had always affected her strongly, and especially so if she had nothing but a quarter of a baguette in her stomach over two days’ time.

Finally, she felt as though she could work up the courage to do what needed to be done. Sitting back in her chair, she took her wine goblet with her so that she had something to sip and fiddle with. “I am...I am sorry, Gideon.”

“Do not pay me the insult of lying to me.”

“No. I do not regret running away. I would do it again, if I had the opportunity and thought I stood a chance of survival.” This game must be played slowly. He will not believe a sudden change of heart. “But for the men I sought to—to employ—for that, I am sorry. I was terrified, desperate, and I reacted poorly to the truth of your nature. I know what you said to me last night is true. I could not trust them, and I was a child to think that I could. I was helpless and without a shred of defense against them.”

And to an extent, the words were true. She saw the reason and logic in his words, and knew he was right. But she also knew that had not mattered. She had one coin with which to pay for her escape. Given the chance to do so again, she would likely make

the same choice.

He studied her, searching for the lie, and seemed to find none. “You are...forgiven, Marguerite.” His voice softened. “And I, for my part, also reacted poorly.”

My poor choices would have only potentially ended with my throat slit after they finished using my body. Your poor choice ended in the brutal murder of nearly forty people.

He continued, oblivious to her thoughts. “Take pity on a man who found his wife in such a state.”

“I do.” She shook her head. “I believe there are many men who would have committed murder in such a moment. Your methods were...more spectacular, perhaps, than most. But I will not pretend a mortal human could not do the same.” She paused. “Now you have referenced yourself twice as a man. Are you able to lay claim to such a thing, given you are a wraith—”

“Lich.”

She rolled her eyes. “—as you are?”

“I do not know by what means I am meant to measure. In my humors, I am male. I have the urges of a man. I have the mindset of a man. Despite the fact that my human cage may come and go as I wish it, I would call that enough.” His mood improved at the chance to discuss something that did not revolve around their current predicament.

She pondered his words for a moment then nodded. “But what precisely are you? What is a lich?”

“The rules of my existence are not well defined, even to me. I am still discovering it to this day. But the heart of your question, I believe, comes at the nature of my physical state. This thing that you see before you is no more representative of my true self than your body is to your own immortal soul.”

She supposed that made some manner of sense. “You can control your shape at will?”

“Yes.”

“This...thing I see before me, then, what sculpts it?”

“My own mind. I can change it if I wish. It is just more difficult to maintain a form that is not natural to my own identity. Think of Leopold, as he appeared to you as a spirit. What gave him that resemblance? Whatever it was that makes his soul his, I presume.” He tilted his head slightly to the side. “Do these topics interest you, my love?”

Nodding, she found it was not a lie. Her curiosity over the soul—over magic—was real. Even if she found her tutor was one she did not wish to keep.

A faint smile, one that dripped of hope, crossed his features. Dinner finished, they pondered each other over their respective glasses of wine. His silver eyes seemed to constantly be searching hers for something. What it was, she did not know.

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Finally, he spoke. “Give me a chance to win you, Marguerite...to show you that I am not some terrible, cruel monster.”

“The village—”

“Was a rash act.” He shook his head. “One I regret. We have both done deeds we would rather move past, have we not?”

I am still not certain the deeds equate in any way, shape, or form. “Yes, I suppose we have.”

He leaned forward and reached out to place his hand atop hers. It took every ounce of strength she had not to jerk away from his touch. “Give me a chance to win your love.”

“And if you cannot...?”

He smiled sadly. “Then you will be free.”

It was then that she came to the horrifying realization that he was lying to her. No creature destroyed an entire village to keep something he would be willing to release.

The only way she was going to escape this place was by her own hands.

I need a plan. Simply earning his trust is not enough. But she was a child playing at escape against something she still could not truly comprehend. What chance did she stand against Gideon? None. She needed help. But what help was there to be found

around her? Every servant within the walls was his undead creation. She was alone.

Or am I?

Chewing her lip, she fidgeted with her goblet.

“What is it, princess?” He squeezed her hand gently.

“If I—” She hesitated, struggling to find her words. She was grasping at the edge of a cliff over which she dangled, and she quickly needed to learn how to climb. Deceit and manipulation were not skills she possessed. Yet she had to try, all the same. “If I am to give you this chance to win me, as you request, I need to come to terms with what you are. To find myself not so horrified at what manner of monster I now sleep beside.”

His expression fell, but he did not seem offended. Merely wounded.

She continued. “I must be at peace with the monster before I might learn to love him.” She could not look at him while she talked any longer, turning her attention back to the wine in her goblet. “Let me be there with you while you work. I wish to watch you perform your magic and your research.”

He lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her fingers gently. “Nothing in this world would make me happier. Of course. And...thank you. I know times have not been kind to you of late. But let this be the valley and let us climb from it together. Agreed?”

I need help. And I know precisely how to get it.

Summoning the strength from somewhere she did not know, she smiled faintly at him. She did not try to hide her nervousness or her fear of him. There would be no



point in making the attempt. “Yes, agreed.”

God help me.

16

All she needed was a piece of chalk.

A piece of chalk, and an hour of privacy.

The first was easy. The moment she was back down in Gideon's laboratory, and he had turned his back, she had secreted a piece away into her dress.

The second?

The second proved to be the real challenge.

First, she tried simply walking away. But either Gideon found her quickly, asking what she was doing, or a servant shadowed her steps.

Then she tried feigning illness. But her husband had placed his undead vulture upon the back of a chair in their room to watch over her while she slept.

She could not seem to get a moment to herself. For the first week that passed, it was irritating. For the second week, it was infuriating. Then, it became humorous for a third. But by the fourth week, she was beginning to feel desperate. The only time she had privacy was when she bathed and sent the servants away so that she might do it herself. Even then, she suspected she was being watched.

An hour—just an hour, even perhaps a half—to herself! It was so simple, and yet so far out of her reach.

If she outright asked him for the moment's peace, Gideon would wish to know why. And if she answered truthfully, either he would refuse her or demand to be present. Neither of which were acceptable answers. If she lied, he would see through her façade with ease, she was certain.

One month turned into two. Two turned into three. It was winter now, and it proved to be a cold but surprisingly dry one. And for what it was worth, her life with Gideon was not...bad. It was wrong—entirely wrong—but it was not bad. She watched him in his studies and learned from him, as he proved to be the avid teacher. And with each scrap of magic she learned, she felt all the more confident in performing her task.

But everything she gained from him came at an unexpected cost.

She had grown to enjoy his presence.

He was handsome, witty, and powerful. He was kind to her, gentle and sweet, and still had made no attempt to seduce her or force her to make love to him. He slept beside her, and for the first month, did not even dare to touch her.

Damn him to the pits of Hell where he belonged, the monster was...winning her. She could feel it, no matter how hard she tried to push it away. The poison was seeping into her veins. Each time he walked into the room, she found herself happier for it. When he was absent, she found herself eager for his return.

The monster was sinking his claws into her heart. Slowly and tenderly, perhaps, but the action was all the same.

And it was month eight, just as the air began to crisp with the smell of autumn, that she found herself sitting on his worktable with him standing between her knees. And she was kissing him. Her body reacted to his presence with a fervor that

overwhelmed every should not that had echoed in her mind.

She wanted him.

It was wrong—a perverse expression of lust that she would wager was far worse than lying with three men in exchange for safety. For the lips that worked over hers in desperation belonged to a monster. A lich. A creature she had learned did not even possess its own soul, but instead had it tucked away and hidden somewhere that Death could not reach.

And she wanted him. Needed him. Wanted him to split her wide and fill her. Wanted his hands to roam over her naked flesh and possess her.

She was going to Hell. Her soul was now doomed. And there was only one reason for it. The monster was not winning her.

The monster had won her.

I love him.

Not in spite of his darkness.

But because of it.

The thought of the creature she saw in the village looming over her, taking her, claiming her—yes, oh, yes!

Gideon tightened his hands around her waist and yanked her close to him, and she moaned against his lips at the feeling of his presence there, outlined painfully against the fabric of his trousers. His fingers dug into her, almost painfully, and the profane sound she made only grew louder and more passionate. But it was drowned out by

one of his own.

I love this evil, murderous, inhuman thing before me. And I want to feel him ravage me like I deserve.

She broke away from the kiss, gasping for air, her chest heaving and her heart pounding. He chased her lips, nearly frantic that they should begin again. She had to place her fingers over his lips and chuckle at his overeager response. “I—I need to breathe, wraith...”

“Lich,” he replied in a dusky growl.

She grinned teasingly. “They are the same thing.” Needling him with her constant mislabeling of his undead species was one of her favorite games. And it was not one he seemed to mind in the slightest, despite his outward protest.

“Perhaps I should just make it easy on you.” He pulled her hips roughly to his again, grinding his body to hers, making her gasp. She needed to cling to the front of his tunic to keep from toppling over backward. “Perhaps I shall become Dr. Gideon Raithe, just for you.”

“I—ah—” She had to stop as he ground himself against her a third time, mimicking the dance he clearly wished to begin. “But Marguerite Raithe sounds—sounds terrible.”

“Hm...it does.” His hand slid to her knee and then began to work its way north up her thigh, slipping beneath her skirts. “You may stay Marguerite Valard, then.”

“How thoughtf—” Her words broke off in a cry as his hand wormed its way into her undergarments. His fingers had gone quickly to work. He banded an arm around her to hold her steady.

Nervous fear took over, and she went rigid. “Gideon, I—”

“Sshh.” He kissed her cheek. “Our first time shall not be here, surrounded by my gory work. It shall be tonight, in our bed, after a lovely dinner and a bottle of wine. But allow me, if I might...” He slipped a finger inside her slowly, sinking himself deep

into her to the knuckle to the tune of her mewling whimper. “Do this much.”

As he began to slide his finger from her only to plunge it back in, she had no words with which to argue. When a second finger joined the first, he captured her cry in a kiss. Pleasure crashed through her, snapping through her veins, sending all the rest of the world away.

There was only him—the strength in his frame, the feeling of safety with his arm around her. The smell of petrichor and spices. The spiritual power she could feel beneath his skin now that she could recognize it. His kiss was insistent, possessive, and greedy. She wondered if her lips would be bruised from the embrace. If he means to devour me, to consume me, let it be like this.

Gideon Raithe was her world.

He laid her onto her back, following her down, now supporting his weight with one arm while the other hand worked between them. With more room, he sped his pace, no longer so gentle.

She found herself lifting her hips to his assault.

When his thumb stroked over her hypersensitive bud, she broke away from his lips to cry out loudly, the sound echoing off the stone walls, as everything in her body went white-hot. Ecstasy. Bliss. The end of loneliness. That was what he gave her in that moment.

She held him close as he stilled his movements and pulled his hand away from her. But he stayed over her, kissing her cheek, allowing her the space to breathe. And she was desperate for the air. With a grunt, she shut her eyes.

He chuckled.

“What?”

“You are beautiful.”

“That was not why you laughed.”

“I was pondering the simple fact that should I have known how today’s lesson was going to end, I would have begun this particular chapter earlier. Much, much earlier.”

That was funny. She chuckled. “I do see your point.”

He straightened, lifting her back to sitting, and tenderly kissed her. “You may have the rest of the afternoon to yourself. I fear what I might do if you remain in my presence. I may not have the strength of my convictions.”

She glanced around his laboratory. Filled with its jars of strange liquid, bits of human remains, skulls, and the like...no. She did not think she would want her first time to be in a place such as this.

Perhaps her second.

I am going to burn in Hell.

This was wrong. The way she felt was a perversion. She had fallen for a monster, and what did that make of her? Perhaps it was not her fault. It was fully possible he had placed an enchantment on her. Forced her to fall in love with him.

No. That could not be true. If that were the case, he would have done so the moment he laid eyes on her. He would not have waited this long. No, this aberration was all her doing.



I need to escape before it is too late for me. Or...I need advice on how to accept what I have become.

Shutting her eyes, she looked away. “May I have some privacy this afternoon? I—I tire of the constant supervision. I want to gather my thoughts in peace, if that is all right.”

“What thoughts must you gather, princess?” He tilted her head back up toward him.

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His handsome expression read of worry, hope, and the affection that never left them when he gazed at her.

Her words left her in a whisper. “I need to pray to my God for forgiveness, for I have lost my heart to a monster. I find that I love you, Dr. Gideon Raithe.”

Silver orbs went wide. And then they glittered with what might have been moisture. He hugged her to him suddenly, pressing her to his chest. “Oh, Marguerite...Oh, my beautiful, my wonderful Marguerite. My princess—” He kissed her again, his desperation matched only by his joy.

Laughing against his lips, she gently urged him away. He relented, straightened his shoulders, and tugged on his clothing to straighten it.

It did nothing for the state of his trousers, however.

She opted not to tease him on the subject.

“Of course.” He smiled to her. “Take as much time as you like, my love.” Cupping her cheek, he stroked his thumb over her skin. “Tomorrow we shall start our life anew. This world will be yours for the taking. Anywhere you wish to go, anything you wish to see, it is yours.”

The impulse struck her without warning. “Istanbul. The city you grew up in.”

“Done.” He kissed her forehead slowly, holding the embrace for a moment. “Now...go on.” He took a step back. “Before I tear your dress from your body and rut

you over my table like an animal.”

She slid from the table and headed toward the door. She responded without turning around, a fiendish little smile on her face. “Perhaps tomorrow before we depart.”

The strangled noise he made from behind her was one she would cherish for a long time. But now, she had her moment’s peace, and a decision to make.

Should she spare her immortal soul and seek an escape from Gideon Raithe?

Or should she accept her love for him, and his nature in turn, and stay at his side?

Evil was made of temptation. And she was sorely that.

Heading to a far corner of the castle, she found a room that sat mostly empty—there were just the two of them “living” there, after all—and shut the door. Locking it, she began to pull the furniture out of the center of the room.

The symbol she drew on the floor in chalk was one she would never forget. But simply because she remembered the complicated shapes did not mean she had Gideon’s skill in drawing it. It took her several attempts to draw the image upon the floor before she was satisfied that the universe might be able to recognize her attempt—shoddy and crude as it was.

With a long breath, she stepped into the circle.

“I need help,” she said to no one in particular. She was “stating her intent,” as Gideon told her often helped in such matters. “I do not know what to do. At first, I wished to escape. But now, I find myself longing to be in his arms and by his side. I have been corrupted by the beast, and I do not know how to cure myself of his poison. I do not even know that I can. I need to flee, but how?”

Shutting her eyes, she reached out into the world around her. She felt that rushing power that lurked beyond the veil. She stretched out a hand in front of her and called out to the one person in all the world she knew would have all the answers.

He always did.

“Father.”

17

It took only an instant.

“Daughter of my love...”

Marguerite cringed in pain at the sound of her father’s voice. Tears, her favorite companions, stung her eyes as opened them to see the ghastly, transparent apparition of her father. She expected to see him smiling at her as he always did.

But there was only sorrow, regret, and anger in his eyes. She took a step away from him in surprise. “Father?”

“I have tried to call out to you for so long. To warn you.” He reached toward her, as if to touch her cheek, frowning as he quickly realized he could not touch her. “Yet I did not have the strength.”

“I—I do not understand, I summoned you because I need your advice, and I—”

“You must escape this place. You must flee the monster Gideon. You must run! Death in the woods is preferable to being his prisoner!” Rage and hatred twisted his features into something she barely recognized.

She blinked, stunned at her father’s outburst. She did not know what to say—she had never seen him this angry. “I do not understand...I—I know what he is, but—”

“You may know what he is, my daughter. But you do not know what he has done.”

This was not at all how she expected the conversation to go. She had wanted to speak to her father of Gideon, yes—but not like this. “What...what has he done? What do you know?”

The hatred faded, turning only to sorrow, and he shook his head. “The dead know much, my beloved. And for what I am to tell you now...know that I take no joy in it. But you must understand the depravity he has committed. You must.”

Marguerite braced herself for what was to come but knew deep down that she could not truly be prepared. “Tell me.”

\* \* \*

Gideon hummed as he arranged the table to his liking. He had insisted on cooking dinner, and he had sent his servants away for the evening. He enjoyed the convenience of having help, and maintaining a castle was certainly not a one “man” job—lich as he might be. But he far preferred to do as much as he could with his own hands.

It gave the results a greater foundation—of being valid and real. If he cooked the meal himself, it was more personal. More intimate.

He smirked. Intimate.

It was not that he was not extremely eager for what would happen after dinner was concluded. Oh, he very much was. Quite literally, his eagerness had grown painful. But it was not what waited for him through the long hours of the night that brought him such joy.

Love.

His Marguerite had spoken to him of love!

Smiling while he hummed, he set out the silverware and the candles. They were to dine in one of the smaller studies—a far cozier space when the fire was lit than his dining room. He would tell her of the world that awaited her, of the cities they would visit and the lands they would travel.

When the time for dinner came, and she did not arrive to join him, he frowned. Perhaps she did not know where he was—although she always managed to find him. She said it was easy enough to follow the scent of his cooking.

Perhaps she had fallen asleep, or was bathing, or was engrossed in her “prayers.” It was no matter. He would fetch her. When he reached their room, he found it empty. It was then that he began to grow concerned. “Marguerite?” He called her name but heard no reply.

He searched the castle for a half hour. By the time he found the locked door, he was in a near panic. Had something terrible happened to her?

Had she escaped again?

No. No, that was not possible. She had professed her love for him, reluctant as it might be. She will make peace with what I am. And soon, when she is ready, what she will become. I will make her a lich like I am. But she is young. That is all.

He knocked on the door. “Marguerite?”

There were muffled voices on the other side. A man’s voice, deep and insistent, and a woman’s interjecting—Marguerite—her tone distraught. What was going on in there? “Marguerite!”

He had sent his servants away.

There was a soul on the other side of that door—he could sense it. A soul, but no body. He pounded on the wood. What had she done?



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When she did not answer, he growled and shifted his form to that of his true self. He slipped under the locked door, oozing through the cracks, until he loomed on the other side.

Rage overcame him like a flash of lightning, sudden and unexpected.

Marguerite stood in the center of a white chalk circle. He knew the symbol by heart, and it seemed so did she. She was weeping, tears once more streaking down her face unchecked. She was trembling, her eyes wide, and she looked on the edge of a mental break.

But that was not why he was angry.

It was the spectral form of the man who stood beside her. A man who was dead and gone. Or at least—he should have been gone.

Instantly, he knew what had happened. Instantly, he knew why Marguerite was so very upset.

“How dare you.” The words left him before he could stop them from issuing forth.

The glass in the room cracked and shattered.

She winced at the sound of his voice that she could not hear, but that resonated through her soul. He expected Marguerite to scream. Perhaps to faint. But once more, he underestimated her. She flew to a nearby table, picked up a small letter opener, and brandished it at him like a dagger. “Stay away from me!”

“The truth is told,” the ghost of King Henri the Second said, sneering at him. “She knows what you have done. She knows it all. Your truth is laid bare, monster...and now you shall reap what you have sown.”

With the gesture of a large black claw, the ghost was sent back to the ether from which it had come. He would hear no more from the king, and neither would Marguerite. He would have his revenge, but now was not the time.

Shifting back to his mortal form, he stepped toward his wife. “Marguerite—”

“No more. No closer.” She retreated another step, inching toward the door that led to a balcony. They were on the fourth floor, near to the top, and on the side of the cliff on which the castle stood. There was no escape for her.

Lifting his hands to show that he meant no harm, he took another step toward her, ignoring her plea. “Marguerite, calm down, we may speak of this in—”

He froze as she turned the sharp knife on herself, pressing the tip to her throat.

“I said no more.”

That time, he listened.

\* \* \*

She saw fear in his eyes as she pressed the knife to her throat. True fear. “You cannot mend me if I die.” She laughed, sickly amused by the concept. “You do not wish me dead.”

“No. Of course not.”

“Would it not be easier? To take my life, like you did Leopold’s father, and then command me like one of your revenants? Father told me what Gabriel de Lorges whispered to him as he lay crumpled on the field of the jousting tournament. How you commanded de Lorges to strike a fatal blow against him.” Her hand shook, but she gripped the knife tighter to keep it from trembling. “You could do the same to me. Command me to love you.”

He shook his head, agony creasing his features. “Marguerite...no. I would never do such a thing. I do not want a servant—I do not want a pet. I want you, as you are. By my side.”

“And you would do anything to have it.” She took another step away from him. “Anything at all. You would murder a village. You would murder my best friend. You would murder my father. You killed him so that you could convince Catherine to have us wed.”

Gideon’s hands balled into fists at his sides, clenching tightly enough that his knuckles went white, before something in him surrendered, and they released. “Yes. I would kill anyone, destroy anything, if it meant I could have you.”

“You destroyed my life!”

“What life?” He laughed. “A half-daughter of a naïve king? Please. I am offering you everything you could ever want, and my undying love. The life I took you from had no future. No happiness. You would have married Leopold and died loveless.”

“Loveless?” She shouted the word, not believing what she was hearing. “You think the life I led before you killed it all was loveless? I had my family. You took them all away from me!”

“Am I not worth such a trade to you?” He reached out to her. “Please,

Marguerite...put down the blade. Let us talk over dinner, and a bottle of wine, and—”

“No! I will be party to this no longer!”

Darkness came over him like a cloud over a moon. His silver eyes went cold. “You have no choice. There is nowhere for you to run. Nowhere you can hide. You are mine, Marguerite. Now and forever.”

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And so, she arrived at the crossroads and knew which was the only path ahead of her that she could traverse. She expected to feel terror. But she did not. She knew what must need be done, and she was...at peace with it. Perhaps her conversations with the dead made it so. Or perhaps she finally accepted that which she should have done a long time ago, before his corruption poisoned her heart.

“There is but one thing left for me to do.” She smiled faintly at him. “One place where I can go that you cannot reach.”

His silver eyes widened. He took a silted step toward her. “No—”

“Goodbye, Gideon Raithe.” She took the knife from her throat just long enough to rip her wedding ring from her finger and hurl it at him. In the same moment, she fled onto the balcony, shoving open the doors with their shattered panes. They cut her hands. She did not care. It would not matter soon enough.

The ledge of the balcony was low enough that she could jump easily onto it. She turned in time to see Gideon coming toward her.

The thin band of gold still rolled across the floor, bouncing a few times before skittering along on its edge like a coin. Its path was ended abruptly as a dark boot flattened it to the stones.

A whisper of dark fabric.

“Marguerite—wait!”

The stone crenellations on the balcony dug into her palms. She could feel the grit as the edges of the blocks jabbed into the cuts on her hands. She watched the man who pursued her—who had taken everything from her. The monster she had fallen in love with. Dark robes swirled around him. Only his silhouette was visible, cut out against the firelight of the torches behind him.

He reached for her.

I choose to die.

She let herself fall backward into the darkness.

Indigo wool fabric whipped in the wind as the world rushed past her. Someone screamed her name, but it was too late. Hewn stone walls of the castle exterior turned to rough, jagged cliffs.

Then...all movement stopped.

Her ribcage collapsed.

Her lungs flooded with blood.

Her skull cracked.

She died.

Jagged rocks had met her at the bottom of the castle. Its parapets were black silhouettes against a barely brighter sky. She couldn't breathe. She couldn't move.

She was already dead.

The silence of her heart was deafening. Her body was dead.

But she was still...there, somehow. Linging. Stuck. Waiting for Death himself to fetch her.

Someone was suddenly there beside her. But it was not the reaper, although black robes swirled around him, caught in the wind she could no longer feel. He knelt beside her. Claws, long and jagged, as dark and shining as onyx, reached for her. Silver bands caught the dim starlight, stark in contrast against the shadows around him.

He spoke.

“You will never die alone.”

A promise and a threat.

Comforting and terrifying.

Angry...and mournful.

She was afraid of him. She was afraid of dying. But that wasn't all she felt. There was something else there, lurking in the shadows of her stilled heart.

He lifted her in his inhuman hands, cradling her dead and broken body close to him. She watched, somehow within her body and without it, as he pulled a necklace from the depths of the darkness he was made from.

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A talisman hovered over his palm, floating like the circlets around his wrists. Whispers came from him then, as inaudible as his promised threat. They were only felt like a chill on the wind. She could hear him because she was not alive.

But the words he said were strange and broken. Not any language she could have ever fathomed. But it called to her—sang to her—and her soul responded. The talisman hovering over his palm began to glow. It pulsed with a white light, not quite a heartbeat, but not quite anything else.

She began to glow, all the same. Her soul shone and pulsed in time with the glowing talisman.

The light left it. Like lightning striking a tree, it entered her. The talisman clattered to the rocks, empty and abandoned.

Pain surged through her, like nothing she had ever felt before. Agony of her injuries, and something else. It felt like roots were inside her, squirming, writhing things that wanted to wrap around her and never let her go.

She had been broken to pieces, and he had mended her with the only thing he could use.

Himself.

Darkness, as deep as the void, as cold as death, wormed into her soul. Twisted and tangled together with her own until she was more the tree than she was herself anymore.



Marguerite screamed. She screamed with her body, with her mind, and with her soul.

For none of it belonged to her anymore.

And it never would again.

18

March 1685

Whitby, England

Marguerite ran. She fled through the field, running for her very life. A creature beyond all measure pursued her. She did not know him, save for the flashes in her dreams of a demon that possessed her.

She had seen priests to aid her. She had visited women who practiced the old ways. None could rid her of the dreams that took her in the waking world, whispering to her of a past that could not be. She saw herself dying—again, and again, and again—in such terrible ways.

And each time, that thing, that terrible and shadowy monster was there. Nipping at her heels. Reaching for her soul. She did not know herself. She did not know from whence she came. All her memories and recollections were gone. All, save those terrible nightmares that could not be real.

Or at least she had not believed them to be real. Until she witnessed the monster in the waking world. Her physician—who had claimed to be able to help her—had melted away. His body had disappeared into the shadows and horrifying reaching talons.

She had screamed. And then she had run.

It was pouring, the water coming down in sheets around her. She could barely see, and the long grass around her clung to her dress as if wishing to pull her down into the dirt. As if that was where she belonged.

Perhaps I am already dead, and that is but Death himself come to claim me. I am not alive, am I?

She ran as far and as fast as she could, before one misstep ended her escape. Her ankle twisted in a depression in the ground, and with a cry of pain, she fell into the wet grass.

She sobbed, her tears joining the rain as it sank into the ground. Yes. She was dead. And this was her home.

There was family in the dirt.

She sank her fingers into it, needing to feel the clinging grit against her hand. She put her forehead down and shut her eyes tight. “I am alone. Please, I do not wish to be alone. If I might die, let me die. But I cannot do this any longer.”

When a hand touched her back, she screamed. Rolling over, she gazed up at—

At Death.

But not the shadowy creature she had expected. No. What stood beside her was—was a—was a skeleton.

It stood upon its bony, rotted, yellow legs, no skin or tendon to help hold the pieces together. From its shallow shoulders and empty ribs hung tattered remains of fabric. A skull perched atop a neck, and no lower jaw decorated its fleshless remains.

It stood there, watching her. With no lips with which to aid it, the skeleton spoke to her. "I am here, Marguerite."

She screamed.

And her world went black.

\* \* \*

Gideon snarled, his fists clenching.

How was it that his world was always insisting on going from bad to worse?

There, walking through the moors in the pouring rain, heading back to his home, was not Marguerite. When she had fled from him, he knew she would run through the moors, perhaps sprain her ankle, and then, soaked and hopeless, she would return to him. And then they would begin in earnest.

But no.

No.

Instead, he saw the bony, impossible, infuriating form of a fleshless revenant carrying her unconscious body back to the light of his home. When the skeleton stepped closer, meaning to move past him and out of the rain, he stepped in front of it. "Leave her and go."

"I cannot. More importantly, I will not." The skeleton stood firm, holding the girl to his lifeless frame as if he were a living man. "She summoned me. I crawled from the Earth. And I walked over field and through ocean to reach her. From my grave I have come to this foreign land." He paused. "Besides which, I would remain simply to

spite you, necromancer.” He took another step forward, bony foot sinking into the muck. “Now get the fuck out of my way.”

Looking down at his wife, at her drenched state, he knew there was nothing he could do. She had summoned a revenant without realizing it. She had latent power before they were bound, but now that his soul was tangled up in hers, she was truly dangerous.

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He stepped aside. The skeleton walked past him into the room and headed straight for the fire. He placed her tenderly in a chair and began working to rid her of her sopping wet dress.

Gideon glared at the revenant. It was useless anger, but he felt it all the same. With a long, beleaguered sigh, he accepted his new fate. “How wonderful that the hero has returned to us.”

“There is a fence post outside that is tapered more than most. I think in the rain it would fit quite nicely. Go wedge it up your arsehole.” The skeleton straightened and fetched a blanket to wrap it around Marguerite, who was now dressed down to her slip and corset.

His jaw twitched. “Lovely to see you again, too, Leopold.”

\* \* \*

December 1961

Portland, Oregon

Maggie held her pet in her lap. She was sitting on the floor, her legs crossed, and she cradled the little creature in the crook of her arm. He was wheezing, his chest rising and falling in short, rapid gasps.

Her pet rat Algernon was dying.

His eyes were closed, and she knew it would happen soon.

She understood death. She understood that creatures died. And her little rat had lived a long and happy life for his species. Rats only lived up to three years, Dr. Raithe had told her. He had asked her instead to consider a cat, as they could live up to twenty. She liked cats—she had nothing against them. In fact, she thought that was a great idea and she had gone to the pet store with him with the full intent of coming out with some lovable kitty.

But when she saw Algernon's adorable little face and whiskers peering up at her from the cage in the pet store, she'd instantly fallen in love. That had been four years ago. He had lived longer than she had thought possible.

She understood his time would come.

But it still didn't do anything to stop her grief, or her tears. John, her best friend and fellow patient of Dr. Raithe, sat beside her. He had one of his strong arms wrapped around her shoulders. He kissed her temple but said nothing.

"Thank you for all the love you gave me," she whispered to the little animal. She knew he couldn't understand English, but she believed animals could feel the intent behind them. "Thank you for all the laughs, and for stealing all my hair ties. Thank you. I'll miss you." She sniffled. "I love you, Algernon."

John hugged her tighter. "He'll always be with you."

"I know...I'm just going to miss him so much."

"It's all right." He rested his head against hers. "You gave him a wonderful life, and he adored you. I've never seen a rat follow a person around the house." He chuckled. "Scared the shit out of me a few times."

She smiled at the memory. But the bittersweet moment turned sour as Algernon stopped breathing.

Maggie wept.

John helped her dig a little hole in the back yard, and she placed her friend in a shoebox, burying it deep enough that the neighborhood animals wouldn't make a meal of her friend's remains.

It wasn't until two in the morning that night that she finally fell asleep, fitfully turning from side to side, wishing she could reach out and feel the warm, fuzzy presence of her pet rat. Gideon always scolded her for keeping him in the bed with her. But the little guy was studiously clean, and never really wandered off. It felt wrong to keep him in a cage when it was clear he had no interest in running away.

At four in the morning, her hand touched something fuzzy on her pillow. Fuzzy—but...not warm.

Opening her eyes, she sat up, instantly awake. Fumbling for the light switch, she flicked it on. There, on her pillow, was Algernon. He was cleaning himself, wiping the dirt from his face and whiskers with his little hands.

No. Her rat had been dead. Was this a miracle? Had he returned to life? Had she been mistaken, and buried her living friend, who had dug himself out of the dirt to come back to her?

Reaching out, her rat eagerly jumped into her hand. She petted him gently, even if she was trembling. He was cold. As cold as—well—the grave.

Algernon had not come back to life. He was still dead.



She fainted.

\* \* \*

November 2019

Boston, Massachusetts

“And that’s that.” The nurse smiled at her and handed the packet of papers to Maggie over the counter. “You’re all set.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Sure. Thanks.” She kept herself from laughing incredulously at the woman’s comment. “All set” to her apparently translated to being shoved into a halfway home with a monthly stipend from the state, mandatory meetings with her state-appointed psychiatrist, and no fucking clue who she was.

But being in a dumpy apartment in Chinatown was still probably better than being in the hospital. She was getting really sick of the food. She supposed she had an excuse. She’d been in Mass General for six weeks, and had every possible scan run on her that they had machines for.

She was really sick of MRIs.

Stupid loud-ass tubes.

“Good luck!” Her chipper nurse patted her on the shoulder then went off to deal with other patients.

It left Maggie standing in her hospital room alone, with only a bag of her pseudo personal belongings and the clothes she was wearing. “I guess I’ll go call a cab,” she muttered to nobody. Leaving the hospital felt...strange. Even though she didn’t want to be stuck there, it was oddly comforting to be constantly surrounded by people. She had no idea who she was, or why she woke up lying in Copps Hill Burying Ground in

the middle of the night. She had no identity besides “Marguerite” and no one had come to “claim” her.

And her mind was plagued with visions of her death. Waking or sleeping, it didn’t matter. Again, and again, and again, she dreamed of dying by almost every means possible. And nobody in the hospital could tell her why or make it stop.

But at least she hadn’t been alone.

Walking out of the doors, she found herself not looking forward to her cruddy studio apartment, because there’d be nobody there with her.

“Marguerite?”

She jumped at the sudden voice. She turned—and blinked. Standing before her was easily the most handsome man she had ever seen in real life. He had bronze skin, as if he hailed from the middle east. His hair was pure, snow white, as was his goatee. His eyes were liquid silver. He wore an expensive suit that was entirely black, save for a tie that matched his eyes.

He smiled at her warmly. There was real tenderness there—real sympathy. He reached his hand out to her. “My name is Dr. Gideon Raithe. I’m your new psychiatrist. I thought perhaps I could give you a ride to your apartment.” His voice was deep and rumbly, but smooth like velvet.

“I—ah—um—” Her cheeks felt warm. Was she blushing? Holy shit, get hold of yourself. Placing her hand in his, she forced herself to smile. “Maggie. Nice to meet you.”

After shaking her hand, he pointed off down the street with a cane that he carried. It was clear it was for fashion and not for need. The top was a vulture, cast in silver.

“My car is this way.” And with that, he turned and led the way.

I wound up with the weirdo eccentric doctor. Great. Go me.

She found herself staring at his ass and snickered quietly enough that he couldn't hear her over the sounds of downtown.

At least he's hot.

19

Present

Boston, Massachusetts

Gideon watched as Marguerite came to, her eyes blinking as she returned to reality. She had gripped the wedding rings in her hand and had sunk deep into a fugue state. She had been lost in her memories for no more than an hour.

And during that time, he did what he needed to do. Something he should have done a long, long time ago. He knew she would be furious, and rightfully so. He loathed to do the deed, more than anything else in the world...but he had no choice. She would leave him no other option.

He had packed her a bag.

Once that was done, he sat in a chair across the room, and began to work his way through an entire bottle of scotch. He hated it, usually—tasted too much like a peat bog for his liking—but it was strong, and he had a particular need.

When she came around, he was two-thirds of the way through his goal. The world was getting fluffy around the edges, and his vision was beginning to swim.

Marguerite looked down at the rings in her palm. His and hers. Clenching her fist, he expected her to hurl them across the room at him. He deserved it. Instead, she slipped them into her pocket and leaned back in the chair to stare at him.

Lifting his hand, scotch sloshing in the glass he held, he gestured at the duffel bag on the sofa beside her. “Phone. Cards. Identification. A week’s worth of clothes, and keys to the Mercedes in back.”

Her jaw ticked. “That’s all you have to say to me?”

“No. It isn’t. But it’s all that I expect you want to hear.”

She arched an eyebrow at him. “Gideon, are you drunk?”

“No.” He sniffed dismissively and stared down into his glass, closing one eye as he did. “Still working on it.”

They sat in silence for a long time, simply watching each other. He had expected tears—for her to sit there and weep. Or faint. Or do anything at all. But she just stared at him in silence.

Finally, he could not take it any longer. “I am sorry.”

Marguerite burst out in laughter as though that was the funniest thing she had ever heard. There was an edge to it, and then he realized what was going on. She wasn’t sad. She was furious. She had every right to be. And honestly, he preferred her anger to her grief.

“How dare you, Gideon? Where the fuck do you get off—” She stopped herself mid-rant and shook her head. “No. Never mind. I know exactly where you get off.”

“I am not condoning a single act I have ever done, Marguerite. Not one. I do not ask for your forgiveness, nor do I believe that any of the actions I took were anything more than the acts of a selfish man who was—is—obsessed with you.” He grimaced in disgust at himself. At how pathetic he really was when it all broke down. He was

just a man desperate for the love of a woman he could not have.

When he spoke again, his voice betrayed his agony. His voice cracked, and he felt his own eyes begin to water. “I love you, Marguerite.” He downed the rest of his glass and quickly refilled it. “What I did, I did for love.”

“Bullshit.” She pointed at him accusatorially. “You didn’t even fucking know me, Gideon! I was a child. Just a kid, living under my father’s wing. I was an older kid, sure, but I wasn’t ever allowed to grow up in that place. You took me from there, murdered everyone I loved, and—and holy shit, Gideon—an entire fucking village!”

He winced. “You remember that?”

“I remember everything. All of it. Every goddamn day, every goddamn death, everybody you murdered because you couldn’t stand letting me out of your reach.”

“How could I let you loose into the world, Marguerite?” Now his anger rose to match hers. “What was I to do? Your soul and mine were one, and you were a broken, shattered thing. I had to fix you before I could even—” He wiped a hand across his face, cleaning the tears from his cheeks. He didn’t know why he bothered; more were on their way. “I could not let you wander off into the world, alone and defenseless. You would be taken advantage of.”

“Right. ‘Taken advantage’ of.” She snorted. “For what it’s worth, I think those mercenaries were actually going to help me. And fucking three guys at once sounds like a fun night.” She sneered at him cruelly. “What if that’s what I want to do now, hm? What if I go find that goddamn pretty boy vampire and say ‘you, me, and ten of your most brutal friends. Let’s run a train tonight. I don’t stay dead. Let’s party.’ What would you do?”

Jealousy and fury boiled in his blood. He knew Marguerite might make good on her

threat, if only to harm him. He wanted to pin her to the ground. To make her regret her words and cry for mercy as he took her with the violence she threatened to invite upon herself.

Jaw twitching, he knew there was no point. He sank back into the chair and shut his eyes. “Such is your choice.”

“You stole me, all those years ago. You stole me from my family...and you stole my ability to die.”

“Yes. I did.” And then, he said the truth of it all. “And before you ask it, yes. I would do it all again.”

Marguerite let out a long, heavy sigh. When he looked to her, she was rubbing the heels of her hands against her temples as though she had a headache. “I need to sort this out.”



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“Take the bag and go. I will not follow you. I have the feeling you can handle yourself now.”

“You’ll be tracking me, though. You’re tracking the car, and probably my phone, and the credit cards, and—” She paused as he stared at her flatly. Then, she remembered. “Right. I have your soul. You’ve already got the ultimate LoJack.”

“I will always know where you are, and if you’re in pain.” He sipped his scotch. Yes, he was getting well and truly wasted. “I’ll do my best to ignore it.”

She stood and picked up the bag from the sofa and slung it over her shoulder. His heart sank as she did. He didn’t expect her to stay—what kind of a fool would think she would? But he still felt a pang of hurt as she stood there, looking toward the back door and where a car was waiting for her to take. She furrowed her brow. “Hey, Gideon?”

“Yes, princess?”

“Do I know how to drive?”

He laughed once. “Yes.”

“Great.” She shrugged. “I’m pretty sure I’d figure it out. Can’t be that hard. Besides, if I wrap the car around a tree, it’s not like I’ll stay dead.” She paused again. “I’m not going to permanently die now, am I? I don’t—I remember everything now. I don’t feel sick anymore.”

“I suspect you’re mended. As much as you can be, with my soul tangled with yours. I think we are—what’s the phrase? ‘In the clear.’” He shut his eyes. I will live an eternity now without you. I suppose that is my penance. That’s the price I have to pay for what I took from you. “Your life is your own to live, as much as I can grant it.”

“Pretty sure you couldn’t keep me prisoner anymore, anyway. Pretty sure I can just order your stupid ass around.”

“Jarringly, yes. That seems to be the case.” He downed the glass of scotch and poured himself another. “But my stupid ass plans to sit here and get trashed.”

“Apparently.”

Silence reigned for a long moment. She was going to leave him, but something was giving her pause. Something left for her to discern. She was just staring at that back door, as if she were walking through the next moments of her life in her mind.

He took the opportunity to ask a question that had haunted him since the night she died for the first time. It was one he had always wished to know. “Marguerite...I have no business to ask this of you. You needn’t answer me. Indeed, do not answer at all, if you would instead lie to me, but I—that night. You said...” He trailed off, tears brimming in his eyes again. He grimaced and swiped them away.

“I meant it.” Her voice was softer then. When he looked to her, she was fidgeting with the strap of the duffel bag. “I loved you.” It looked as though she was going to say something else, but she stopped. “In that place, before I knew the truth...I really loved you.”

He smiled mournfully and shut his eyes. “Go, Marguerite. Be free of me. And for the love of the gods, will you please take that miserable revenant of yours with you?”

She chuckled. “Yeah. I will.” She turned toward the stairs. “I guess I should go wake him up. Hey, Harry!”

\* \* \*

Maggie headed backdown the stairs with Harry at her heels. He was groggy, confused, but seemed more than ready to leave the house. All she explained was that she remembered everything, and it was time to go. And that Gideon wasn’t coming with them.

He didn’t need any other encouragement to leave.

Algernon was perched on her shoulder, burrowed into her hair, his little paws playing with her earrings. She scratched him gently on the head and crossed the room toward the back door to Gideon’s Boston estate.

Freedom. Control. Power.

It was all hers now. Everything she could have ever asked for was right there, waiting in the driveway. The keys were in her hand. She had her best friend, and she had her pet rat.

I raised them both.

They’re mine.

With a shake of her head, she tried to wrap her head around the fact that she could do magic. And she had been able to for a very long time. She had just forgotten it along with everything else in her life.

She paused as they crossed by the living room. Gideon had finished off the first bottle

of scotch and had apparently moved on to a second one. He was sitting in the chair, looking utterly despondent. Mephisto was lying on the ground across his feet, her head between her paws, doing her absolute best to cheer up her master.

With a long breath, she handed her duffel bag and the car keys to Harry—Leopold—whatever. She jerked her head toward Gideon. Harry, understanding that she had to say goodbye, but not being too happy about it, nodded and headed out to the car.

Walking into the living room, she walked up to Mephisto and crouched down by the big sheepadoodle and petted her head.

“Saying goodbye to the dog?”

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Oh, boy, Gideon was trashed. Usually, she'd be amused. Instead, she just felt...sad. "Yup." She straightened and gazed down at the man who looked as though his entire world had ended. Perhaps it had. "This had to happen. We couldn't go on like that."

"I know."

"My father. Why did you do it?"

"Murder him? You know why."

"No. Turn him into that—that thing that the Vatican kept."

The fingers of his hand on the armrest of the chair curled in, creaking against the leather, as he made a fist. "Every stone I own, you wish to overturn." He shook his head and let out a wavering sigh. "I was...furious that he told you the truth. I wished to ensure that you could never raise him again to cause more problems."

"Ah. So, because you're a murderous piece of shit, you condemned him to existing, trapped in gold, in the darkness of the Vatican vault, for the rest of time?"

"That sums it up nicely."

She wanted to smack him. But it wouldn't do any good—he was broken enough already. He wouldn't even look at her. Dr. Gideon Raithe. Murderous lich. Selfish and compassionate. Kind and cruel. And he did it all for love of her.

It was too much. It was all too much at once. "When I smashed him, I tapped into my

magic to free him. That's why it worked."

"Yes."

"And you didn't tell me."

"You weren't—"

"I swear to fuck, if you tell me I wasn't ready I'm going to break that bottle over your head."

He swallowed his words, his Adam's apple bobbing, and began again. "I wanted to keep the truth from you as long as I could. Because I knew once you knew, this would be the outcome."

"Your options were this, or death."

"Now that I experience this choice"—he took a gulp of scotch from his glass—"I am not sure which I prefer."

She laughed. She couldn't help it. He just sounded so dejected. "Melodramatic asshole."

"Guilty as charged." He finally looked up to her, his silver eyes ringed in red. "On all accounts."

God damn it, why was that a kick to the gut? Why did she feel guilty for leaving him like this? She had no reason to, after all he had done. But she supposed, balanced on the scales with all the terrible things he had done...were all the memories she had of when they were together.

The laughter. The tender moments. Him.

I loved you not in spite of your darkness, but because of it.

But she had to deal with that on her own. She had to deal with everything on her own.

Reaching out, she put her hand on his shoulder. She knew she shouldn't. She should be punching him. Hitting him. Cursing him to the pits. But for all the damage he had done, she remembered him holding her while she cried. She remembered all the times he protected her. Cared for her. Made her smile when it seemed she never would again.

She remembered all his love for her. And, stupid as it was, foolish as it was, all her love for him. "I need time to sort this out."

He placed his hand over hers and squeezed it gently. "Go, Marguerite. Be who it was you were meant to be without my meddling. I will always be here."

And he would be. He'd sit there in that chair for the rest of time if she told him she would love him for it.

He shut his eyes, tears rolling down his cheeks. "Goodbye, Marguerite...send the priests my regards."

"Yeah. I guess I should deal with them." She let out a breath. "Great. That'll be fun." Heading to the door, she paused and looked back at him. "Goodbye, Gideon."

He didn't respond.

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Leaving the house, she shut the door behind her with a click that felt far more final than it should have. Heading to the car, she jerked in surprise as she turned to find a giant undead vulture perched on the railing, staring at her.

“Hi, Eurydice.”

The vulture puffed up, fluffing her feathers, and let out a low grumbling noise that Maggie could only assume was some kind of greeting, Or some kind of goodbye. The vulture was simply staring at her, as if asking her a question.

“I have to think things through.” Maggie looked off to the car. Harry was sitting in the passenger seat, playing on his phone, patiently waiting for her. Looking back to the bird, she smiled faintly. “Take care of that overdramatic dumbfuck for me, will you? Don’t let him crawl too far under a rock.”

The bird let out another grumble as if to say that was her entire job in this world. She spread her wings and took off into the air. Eurydice had never been one for small talk.

Climbing into the driver’s side, she smiled at Harry. “Hey.”

He tucked his phone back into his pocket and smiled back. “Where’re we going, boss?”

She thought about it for a moment. “First stop, we’re going to the Cape to find a nice hotel on the beach. After that? Anywhere we want.”

Turning the key in the ignition, she headed out. Yes, she could drive. But after



clipping the curb, she realized it had been a long time since she'd driven a car. Snickering, apologizing to Harry under her breath, she left Gideon's home behind her.

But something told her she would not abandon the man so easily. At least not for long. They had too much nonsense to resolve before she could walk away from him once and for all. That was her newest problem—dealing with the past she now remembered.

For now, though, she was free. She had control. And lich be damned, her mind was her own once again.

That was good enough for now.

“You gonna tell me what the fuck happened?” Harry glanced over at her as she drove.

She knew what he meant. But she let out a long rush of air. “I don't know if I can tell it to you in the hour it takes to the Cape, but I'll try.”

“What?”

“I remember everything. Literally everything.”

“You said.” He shifted lower in his seat, the leather upholstery creaking. His eyes were wide as he watched her. “What happened? What did he do?”

“I'll start at the beginning.” She looked over at him at a red light and smiled sadly.

“Your name is Leopold.”

He blinked then stared out at the road ahead. “Leopold.”

“Yeah.” Reaching out, she put a hand on his shoulder. She knew what it felt like to learn new facts about the past.

“I hate it.” He wrinkled his nose. “I think I prefer Harry.”

Laughing, she hit the accelerator when the light turned green and made her way toward the highway that would take them to the Cape and away from Gideon. “Harry, it is.”

Rinaldo tapped his fingers on the iron arm of the patio furniture he was sitting in. They were at a coffee shop downtown—some dumb little place the Cardinal had suggested might be a good place to meet Maggie. Somewhere his snipers could get a clean shot if need be.

He was nervous, to say the least. Ally was at his side but didn't seem to share his mood. As usual, she was smiling away, sipping her coffee, and launching into random conversations with the strangers around them.

Checking his phone for the millionth time, he finally turned it face down and slid it away. No outside communication for the half hour prior to a planned incident with a dangerous party. Or at least potentially dangerous.

Maggie was just a girl. A poor girl, caught in the crossfire of the world's most dangerous necromancer. A poor girl who was trapped in some strange cycle of death, but...Gideon was to blame for that.

When he had received a text message from her, asking to meet up, he'd been surprised. They lost track of the undead trio—Gideon, Maggie, and Harry—back in Northampton, Massachusetts, several months prior. He had expected them to jump the continent, head somewhere far away and quiet. Not head back to Boston.

But here he was. Sitting on the sidewalk of a café in Boston, drinking a not-nearly-as-good-as-the-real-stuff cappuccino, waiting for her to show up.

“Hi, guys.”

He jolted in surprise and looked up at Maggie. She smiled at them warmly.

She was alone.

Well, save for a rat on her shoulder, who looked far more alive than the last time he had seen it. “Is that...?”

“Hm?” She looked down at the rat, scooped him up from her shoulder, and smiled. For all intents and purposes, the creature looked fully alive. “Yeah. I’m getting better at this.” She tucked him into her bag and placed it down on the ground by the chair across from them. “Hi, Ally. How’re you?”

“I’m just peachy,” the demoness-turned-sister at her side said with a beaming smile. “You look good! You look fantastic, actually. What’s changed?”

“Oh. A lot. A lot’s changed.” Maggie rubbed the back of her neck. “Can I get a coffee before we launch into this, and you probably put a bullet in my head?”

Rinne stammered for a second before he gave up and nodded. Something felt off. Very off. Maggie had...changed. Ally was right. She did look good—the bags under her eyes were gone. She didn’t look so pale. Hell, the girl even looked like she had a tan, of all things. But that wasn’t the only thing that had shifted.

Her aura had changed. The colors around her were no longer muted but flared in fully saturated tones. He could barely see it before, the weathered tones grayed and lifeless. And her mood had risen to match. Her smile seemed natural and real. She wasn’t...afraid. Or morose. It was like some weight had been taken from her shoulders.

“She’s here alone,” Ally observed thoughtfully. “Interesting.”

“They might be lurking nearby.”

“Could be. Or not.” She hummed. “Something feels different.”

Maggie came back a moment later, carrying a coffee and a tray of various sweets. She put the pile of confections down in the middle of the table and sat across from them. “All right. So. Hi. Been a while.” She glanced up at the city skyscrapers around them. “How many?”

“Four,” Ally answered, ever chipper.

“Not bad.” Maggie snickered. “I feel important.”

“We assumed you’d have friends with you.” Rinnie was tempted to reach over and take one of the croissants, but...having sticky hands during a gunfight that might happen seemed like bad protocol.

Ally didn’t seem to have a problem with it and plucked a donut from the tray and began picking it apart to eat it. “Thanks for the treats.”

“You’re welcome.” Maggie snorted. “Not my money, though.”

“Raithe?” Rinaldo eyed the young woman, still trying to figure out what must have happened to change her in such a way.

“I’m having fun racking up his credit bill. Bastard keeps paying it off, though, so...I don’t know. Might buy a yacht tomorrow. Yachts sound fun. Oh!” Maggie snapped her fingers as she remembered something. “I never got to say, Ally, your demon form is epic.”

“Thank you.” His partner smiled almost bashfully. “It’s rare that I get to stretch my legs.”

“How is it that you can walk in your demon form, but not in your human one?”

“Ah. Well, I was cursed.” Ally shrugged. “A witch doctor from the village in South Africa where I was trying to save the sick.”

“And you can’t fix it?”

“I could. My kind are quite adept at breaking curses.” Ally smiled gently. “But I don’t want to. We are the experiences that make us, and this is part of who I am now. Part of my identity. It makes me...more human. More grounded to this world. I would hate to say goodbye to a part of myself simply because I’m annoyed I can’t reach the shelves in my kitchen.”

Maggie sat back, pondering that for a moment, and then returned her gentle smile. “I understand.”

“I figured you might.” Ally pulled off another part of the sugary donut and, when she was done eating it, chuckled. “Thank Gideon for the sweets, then, if you get the chance.”

“We’re not on speaking terms at the moment.”

“Oh?” Ally frowned. “What happened?”

Rinaldo sat there, amazed once more at watching Ally work. The demoness was very, very good at her job. He’d never understood the point of diplomacy until he met her. It wasn’t that she was faking her concern—or that she was manipulating Maggie through the conversation. But she had a target in mind, and she just got there with words.

He shook his head, sipped his coffee, and reached across the table to grab a croissant. Fuck it.

“Well, that’s...why I called you guys. I remember everything now.”

He blinked. “Everything?”

“Everything.” Maggie sipped her own coffee and looked off down the street thoughtfully. “It’s nice to not be plagued by blackouts anymore. I’m finally in control of my own mind for once. But yeah. Everything. And it wasn’t a fun ride.”

“I—I fear a single cup of coffee won’t cover the span of your tale, but someday I would love to hear it. If it is not too painful for you.” His partner frowned, true empathy in her eyes. God, he loved that demoness.

Maggie smiled sadly. “It’s more of a story for alcoholic drinks. If we come out the other side of this meeting still friends, we can go out to dinner, and I’ll tell you the whole thing. Maybe we can trade. I still want to know how you got to be here.”

“Done.” The demoness sat back in her wheelchair, beaming.

“The short of it, which applies to this conversation, is that he murdered everyone I ever loved. He did it all because he was desperate to have me. He loves me more than anything in this world.” Maggie tapped her fingernails on the side of her porcelain mug. She was talking without focusing on the world around her, lost in her thoughts.

Ally asked the question with all the trepidation of someone stepping out onto a shaky wooden bridge over a volcano. “And...you?”

“Complicated.” Maggie laughed, a short and sarcastic sound. “God damn it, he was right. It’s complicated.”

Rinnie felt the need to interject at least once in this conversation between the two women. “Why did you contact us?”



“Because you need to stop hunting him. And you need to stop hunting his phylactery. We need to come to some sort of truce.” She turned her attention back to him, emerald eyes clearer and more focused than he had ever seen them. It was like she had been taken out of a fog. He was happy for her, but it also made him nervous.

She wasn’t a damsel in distress any longer.

“A truce,” he repeated incredulously. “With him.”

“No. With his phylactery.” She snickered. “Sorry. I know where his phylactery is. I forgot to tell you that bit.”

Oh, no. Something in the way she said it tipped him off. Something about her wording. “Fuck.”

“Yeah.” Maggie laughed, smiling. “You got it.”

“But it’s not possible. That can’t be done.”

“Proof to the contrary.” She lifted her coffee.

“Where is it?” Ally blinked, oblivious. “I don’t get it.”

Rinaldo wiped his hand over his face and let out a long groan. The Cardinal would have to hear about this. “She’s the phylactery.”

\* \* \*

Rinnie was a big, gun-happy old—sorry, middle aged—priest, but he was quick to put things together. Maggie smiled at him as he sat there, glaring at her in frustration. She knew why he was pissed, and part of her was flattered. He’s supposed to capture the

phylactery to control Gideon, and he was still hoping I was just an innocent bystander he could save.

Nope.

Ally was staring at her, mouth open, eyes wide. “No.”

“Yup.” She was still chuckling at their reaction. “Found the phylactery as we agreed.” She opened her arms wide to gesture at herself. “Tah-dah.”

“But—no—what—how—why?” Ally went through all the words without putting them together, shaking her head in confusion.

Okay, it shouldn’t be as funny as it was. Her life—correction, freedom—was at stake. They had snipers on the roofs and probably a dozen other operatives in the Order nearby ready to swoop in and shove her into the trunk of a car. She shouldn’t be sitting here laughing, enjoying watching the two holy soldiers grapple with her reality.

She supposed it was kind of fun to see somebody else put the pieces together for a change. “The how, I don’t still quite know the specifics. Simply that he shoved his soul in my body and turned me into his phylactery. Our souls are tangled up together now, indistinguishable from each other. That was why he was so desperate to ‘fix his phylactery.’ If I died one more time, my mind would have shattered, and I’d be in a coma. I think that would have been too much for him to deal with for eternity. He’d have destroyed me out of pity, and that would have taken him out.”

The two priests sat there, staring at her in silence now, trying to wrap their heads around the reality of her existence. She shrugged and continued to talk. There was no harm in telling them. “As for the why? I guess it’s jumping to the end of the story I

owe you over vodka, Ally, but here you go. In—shit, I don't even know the year. 1560? 1560-something? I jumped to my death after learning about everything he did to me. He was desperate to keep me alive. He didn't want to be in love with one of his revenants. So...he did the only thing he could think of." She made a click with her tongue and pointed at herself with her thumb.

Silence.

Ally spoke first.

"Holy shit."

Maggie cackled again, unable to help it. She really, really liked the two soldiers. Even if they were going to cause her serious problems in short order. "About sums it up, yeah."

Rinnie furrowed his brow and frowned, staring at her as if trying to fill in the gaps himself. "And you're here alone. He just let you go?"

"I've been his prisoner for over four hundred years. It was trying to keep me leashed to him that got us into this mess. I think he finally learned his lesson. He's...giving me space. It's not like I can ever really be free of him. See previous comment about our souls." The humor left her as the familiar sadness of the topic of Gideon came back to her.

"Do you...want to be free of him?" Ally asked, once more wary, as she knew she was asking a really sensitive question.

She took a moment to think about her answer. "I honestly don't know." She shook her head. "Complicated. Like I said."

“You love him.” Rinaldo narrowed his eyes. “I can see it.”

Oh. Right. He could see auras. “Cheater.”

That got him to snort. “But you do.”

“Yeah, and he ruined my fucking life.” She rolled her eyes. “And he did it in a way that only a murderous, super-powered, evil lich can. I’m trying to reconcile that shit, Rinnie. Thanks for pointing that out. Really needed that put out on the table right now.”

Ally smacked him in the arm. “You shouldn’t have said that.”

“It’s fine.” She sipped her coffee. It was starting to get cold. She’d have to order a second one soon if this was going to be a long conversation. At least Rinnie stopped staring at the damn croissant it was clear he had wanted and was now munching away on it. “It’s true, anyway.”

“Still shouldn’t have said it.” Ally primly lifted her chin. “It’s a woman’s private business.”

God damn it, she really liked the demoness. “I really hope we get to stay friends.”

The sister chuckled. “Me, too.”

Rinnie, however, shook his head. “We’re going to need you to come with us, Maggie. We need to go back to the Vatican. You’re...you’re the phylactery of the most powerful necromancer in the world. We can’t just let you run loose.”

And there was the other shoe dropping. Leaning back in her chair, she watched him thoughtfully. “No.”

He parted his jacket, revealing the gun she knew he carried. “You’re immortal, but you still die. I can put you down and take you there in a box. But I really, really don’t want to.”

Maggie smiled at him. She put her coffee down on the table in front of her. And reaching out with her mind, she commanded every single patron of the café to turn to them and stand from their seats, metal chairs scraping on the sidewalk.

Ally and Rinnie froze. The priest’s eyes went wide as he stared.

“I told you I was getting better at this.” Maggie sat back in her own chair and watched them. “Here’s the one thing I need to correct you on, Rinnie. Gideon isn’t the world’s most powerful necromancer.” She smiled. “I am.”

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Maggie watched panic start to form in Rinnie's expression.

He reached for his gun. "The snipers—"

"Are unconscious or tied up by now. They aren't hurt. I promise." Maggie shrugged. "Same with your guys probably lurking in the alleys nearby. I really don't want to get a bullet put in my head and be dragged off to the Vatican vaults." She cringed at the thought of it.

"What did you do, Maggie?" Ally eyed the rows of silently staring people around them.

"Revenants. They aren't that hard to make. I'll let them go the moment we're done here." She turned her attention back to Rinnie. "Please take your hand off your gun. I just want to talk this through."

"You—" Rinnie shook his head. "No. Now it is even more imperative that we take you in. The Cardinal—"

"The Cardinal insists all this is not necessary."

It was Maggie's turn to jolt in surprise at the unexpected voice. In her dramatic reveal—which she'd worked really hard on—she hadn't noticed another man walking up to them. He was tall and thin, with long chestnut hair tied back in a ponytail and a splash of gray at the temples. He was looking at her with a warm, friendly smile. He

held a coffee in a to-go cup.

“Um...” was all she could muster.

“Hello, Ms. Valard. It is a pleasure to meet you.” He struck his hand out to her. “I am Cardinal Gabriel Moretti. I am the one in charge of the Ordo ut Solis. But you may call me Gabe.”

“I—uh—oh.” She put her hand in his, still stunned and confused. “Call me Maggie.”

“Fantastic. And so we are all met.” Gabe sat at the table next to her, and without hesitation reached over the surface to take one of the confections from the tray. “You may dismiss your creations. I think you will begin to cause a problem with the traffic before long.” The man had a thick Italian accent, and his English, while it was perfectly fine, felt a little stilted.

Right. Yeah. Her revenants. “The moment I send them away, you’ll put a bullet in my head.”

“I have no intention of taking you prisoner, Maggie.” Gabe turned in his seat so he could better face her while he talked. “And I would have no need of bullets.” He lifted his hand out in front of him, palm up, and she watched in shock as a ball of fire formed between his fingers. He clenched his fist, and it went out with a small poof.

“Pyro-priest.” Maggie grunted. “Shit.” She hadn’t planned for a pyro-priest. Dead people were generally pretty flammable.

“Pyro-Cardinal,” Gabe corrected with a grin. “Now, please send your friends away so that we may talk without being stared at.” He glanced over at the rows of the undead who were waiting for her command. “It is hardly the strangest thing I have ever witnessed, but it’s quite discomfoting.”



She was now officially outmatched. With a long, heavy sigh, she did as he asked and released them. They all walked away at once, heading back to their respective graves. The illusions that kept them from appearing human—even to Rinnie—would fade the moment they crawled back into the dirt.

“I expect there are some very dismayed park service employees today...” Gabe said thoughtfully, scratching his chin.

That got her to laugh despite herself. His eyes flickered in amusement, happy to see his joke landed. She didn’t trust him—she didn’t know him—but she was starting to believe him. “You’re not what I expected from the Cardinal.”

“I certainly am not what you would have received ten years ago. I am far more open-minded and reasonable than my predecessor.” Gabe gestured across the table at Rinnie and Ally. “I allow these two, a demoness and a priest of my order, to maintain a relationship, do I not?”

“Wait—” Rinnie stammered. “What?”

Gabe blinked, surprised. “Am I mistaken? Are you two not romantically engaged?”

Ally’s face went bright red. Rinnie was getting there. The older priest shook his head frantically. “It is against the rules of the priesthood to—”

“Oh, God above.” Gabe sighed and put his hand over his face. “You really are immensely dense, Father Lenci, aren’t you?”

Shocked at the insult, Rinnie clearly didn’t know what to say, and just made strange noises. Ally, meanwhile, looked like she wanted to slide under the table.

Maggie was just glad she wasn’t the only source of drama for once.

“I paired you two up for a reason, Lenci.” Gabe sounded almost annoyed. No, not annoyed, angry. “Do you honestly believe I did not know how you felt for each other? Or that I did not condone it?” He rattled something off in Italian that sounded like a teacher scolding a student, even though it looked like Rinnie was five years the Cardinal’s elder.

But Rinnie’s shoulders still dropped, his eyes wide, his cheeks crimson. When Gabe was done ranting in Italian, he stared down at his lap like a humiliated child.

Gabe threw up his hand, as if giving up, and turned his attention back to her. “I swear. We mortals can be thick as bricks, and just as thoughtful.”

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Maggie couldn't help it. She said the first thing that came to mind. "Who the fuck are you?"

Gabe laughed, his smile lighting up his eyes in a way that almost felt mournful. "Someone who has seen what love can do and would never think to stand in its way. And that goes for you, as well, Maggie. You have your truce. We will not seek to imprison you or harm you."

She stared at him blankly. "...Thanks."

"I fear I have also come to discuss another matter with you, one that you might find far more troubling." He placed his paper coffee cup down on the table in front of him. "But if we are to go forward on level ground, I dislike the idea of starting such an arrangement with you in the dark."

"Great. More secrets. I love secrets. What is it? The Vatican is run by a giant evil sea monster? Or I'm an evil sea monster?" She snickered. "I'm not sure you can tell me anything that would surprise me at this point."

"We shall see. Out with it, then?" His eyes flickered in mischief.

"Yes, please. No more nonsense. Just rip the bandage off."

"Very well." Gabe smiled faintly. "Gideon and I have been working together this entire time."

All three of them at the table exploded in various stages of shock and anger.

For Maggie, it was, “Oh, fuck me!”

For Ally, it was a whine of dismay and a slump of the shoulders.

For Rinnie, it was shooting up from the table so fast that he knocked the metal chair over backward, and it was his turn to yell at the Cardinal in Italian.

Gabe gestured as if to try to calm the priest down and kept trying to interject in his own right. Rinnie was now pacing, storming around in a circle, shouting furiously.

Maybe I should learn Italian. I’ve got the time.

Rinnie’s extreme reaction rather outshined her own. Or maybe he was vicariously expressing her rage for her.

At some point, minutes into listening to the two Italian holy soldiers shout it out, Rinnie picked up his metal chair, slammed it back down on its legs, and then sat in it. Whatever were the last words out of his mouth on his most recent rant were clearly obscenities. Or at least instructing Gabe what he could do to himself.

Meanwhile, the Cardinal only smiled. “Are we done?”

“We’re done.” Rinnie snatched up another pastry from the tray. “And you’re an asshole.”

“You needn’t swear at me in English as well. I understand perfectly how you feel.” Gabe turned his attention back to her. “And you, Maggie?”

Opening her mouth, she paused and shut it again. Was she mad? Sure. She had been shot at, chased, and generally threatened by the Order for months. But was she that mad? Not...really. She wasn’t even that surprised, either. Gideon was a scheming,

manipulative piece of shit, especially when she was involved. “I’m going to take this up with the wraith.”

“Lich,” Gabe corrected her with a smile, rightfully not understanding her running joke. “And I am to bear the blame as well.”

“Yeah, but something tells me it wasn’t your idea. I do want you to explain it to me.” Maggie finally reached for the tray, opting for a cheese danish.

“Dr. Gideon Raithe has been an individual of great interest to the Order for centuries. But he is...pernicious. When I took over ten years ago, I thought it best to redirect our efforts from seeking to eliminate him, to perhaps come up with a partnership. An understanding. He is many things, including a savvy businessman. He eagerly agreed. We would cease our attempts to capture or kill him, and he would keep us apprised of his political, international, and metaphysical dealings. He is oddly harmless and gregarious for a lich.” Gabe gestured when he talked. It was kind of adorable.

“And, from time to time, we would do business together. We would purchase information from him, or vice versa. He even helped us eliminate a demonic infestation in Mauritania.” He glanced at Ally. “No offense.”

“None taken,” the demoness murmured.

“You two are friends, then?” Maggie arched an eyebrow.

“No. Hardly. Associates. Which was why I was very shocked when he came to me, in person at the Vatican, and asked for my assistance with a particular project that was of the utmost importance to him.”

“Me.”

“You.”

“You knew I was the phylactery.”

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Gabe nodded. “My order was to provide you the...sense of urgency he felt was necessary to finally inspire you to heal your mind. You were not to be harmed. None of my people were to die.”

“People were mauled, Cardinal.” Rinnie clenched his fists. “People lost eyes. Limbs. That monster hurt our people. And you agreed to it?”

Gabe’s jaw twitched. “It was not meant to go that far. Things took unexpected paths.”

“But you knew you were putting us in danger!”

“It was what needed to be done.”

“For what? For her? For that thing? What did we gain in return? Why did you agree to it?”

“We gained a true ally in him. Think of it. A lich of that power, owing us a favor of that magnitude? It could save lives in the future—it could save the world. I would sacrifice a hand or an eye to save humanity itself, Father Lenci. I traded the wellbeing of soldiers to have access to the power of a demigod. As much as it pains me, I think it was very well worth the trade. They are soldiers. It is the sad fact of their existence that they are expendable.”

“You—” Rinnie snarled in rage and had to stand up to pace away once more, leaving the conversation. Ally went after him.

More pain because of me. More means to an end, where I am that end. Her heart

sank, and her shoulders along with it, as she put a hand over her eyes and leaned back into the metal chair, propping her elbow up on the armrest. Suddenly, she had the urge to cry, but she kept it down.

It was just one more thing.

What was one more thing?

She'd worry about finally getting to the breaking point, but she had already gone far past it and come out the other side. "You shouldn't have let people get hurt. He's right, you know."

The Cardinal sighed. "In my heart, I agree. In my soul, I am certain of it. But in my mind? That which I must use to command the Ordo ut Solis and protect this world from the dangers that place it under siege? It demands I do what needs to be done."

"He's still right to be pissed."

"Of course. He will likely quit. And then, perhaps, he will pull his head from his ass and ask the young demoness to be his."

Maggie laughed. It was halfhearted, but it was still a laugh. "You're a weird guy, Cardinal Moretti."

He grinned playfully. "You should not talk."

That was fair. She straightened and let out a long breath. "I need to call Gideon later and ream him out. But until then...what happens now? Do you put a tracker in the back of my neck and keep tabs on me?"

"No. I thought perhaps we could start with a friendship and take it from there. We



have too many enemies in this world, us mortal humans. I would dislike to make another.” Gabe paused and then corrected his English. “I would dislike making another.”

“English sucks. I get it.” She watched him for a moment. She still didn’t trust him. From his own mouth, he said he was ruthless when it came to furthering the motives of his organization. “Fine. Friendship. I don’t want any enemies either. I’m immortal, but I still don’t like dying. Trust me, it sucks.”

“So I’ve been told.” He stretched his hand out to her. “Allies?”

She shook his hand. “Yeah.”

They paused for a long time as they watched Ally and Rinnie talk in the distance. He was ranting, waving his hands, and she was desperately trying to calm him down. Ally gestured for him to come closer, and without warning, she grabbed him by the lapels of his coat and dragged him down into a kiss.

Maggie smiled. “Finally.”

“You have no idea.” Gabe let out a thoughtful hum. “How is Harry? I thought he might accompany you.”

“Asleep in the hotel. He’s fine. I just thought it was better to come alone. He really doesn’t like Rinnie that much, and these things are rocky enough without adding another hothead into the mix.”

“Quite true. Well.” He slapped his palms onto his thighs. “Now that all that is resolved, let us move on. To begin our new friendship, I thought I might ask a favor of the world’s most powerful necromancer.”

“You heard that bit, huh?”

He smiled.

With a huff of a laugh, she reached down and picked up her bag to place it in her lap. She took a large chunk of the danish she had been eating and handed it to the very eager Algernon who waited inside. She scratched his head as he started to devour the treat. “Sure. What do you want?”

Gabe’s smile faded. “There...is an old friend I wish to speak to. One to whom I was never given the chance to say goodbye.”

It turned out that Rinnie and Ally did both quit the Order in the end. But not for the reason Maggie expected. It had nothing to do with Cardinal Moretti's disregard for the wellbeing of his soldiers in his dealing with Gideon.

Oh, sure, that had something to do with it, she was sure.

But the real reason was she was sitting on a stone bench on an outdoor patio, outside of an expensive hotel in Hawaii, drinking a mai tai.

At the afterparty to the wedding reception of Rinaldo Lenci and Ally Whatever-Her-Fake-Last-Name-Was.

Neither of them dressed like holy soldiers anymore, but Rinnie still carried a gun. And he still, apparently, worked with the Order on a daily basis. Just as a “contractor” and not an official member.

“Better to be hired by God than living in sin,” he'd said. Ally had rolled her eyes and muttered to her afterward that Rinnie was secretly just a giant romantic and couldn't stand the idea of not being married.

Over the past few months, Maggie had found herself growing closer with Ally and Rinnie—Ally in particular. There was something comforting in having a friend who she knew she wouldn't eventually outlive.

Getting up from the stone bench, she made her way over to the bride and sat down

next to her. Ally smiled at her, beaming, looking resplendent in her white gown. She turned the wheels of her chair to face her by a few degrees. “Are you having fun?”

“I’m having a blast.” Maggie laughed as she raised her drink. “My own wedding was shit, so it’s nice to see what it should’ve been like.”

The corners of the demoness’ eyes creased as she smiled, reaching out to take Maggie’s other hand. “You miss him.”

When she went to protest and claim she didn’t, Ally cut her off.

“It’s fine that you do. You’re literally carrying a part of him around with you, wherever you go. No wonder you miss him. You’d be lying to us both if you said you didn’t.”

After a moment, Maggie nodded and gave up trying to save her pride. No point. “I guess—I see you and Rinnie, and part of me can’t help but be lonely.”

“Of course. At least you have Harry.” Ally looked around the patio with a slight frown. “Where’d he go, anyway?”

“Not sure. I’ll find him in a minute. He’s probably asleep in a shrub somewhere.” She chuckled. “Bastard is like an old cat. Just moves from one place to sleep to another. I used to think he slept too much before, but now that things are pretty boring, it’s just getting worse.”

Ally looked thoughtful for a moment then let out a breath. “It’s odd, being immortal, sometimes.” She turned her attention to her husband, who was standing thirty feet away, glass of hard alcohol in his hand, chatting with Gabe.

They might have their differences, but it didn’t stop Rinnie from asking Gabe to

perform the ceremony.

“He has...forty years? Tops?” Ally sighed. “I love him with all my heart. And I will for a long time. But he will age, he will die. I will continue, as I am, until I surrender to the void and burn to cinders. Even then, I can only pray to God that he and I will be together. And I...have to be okay with that.”

Maggie picked up Ally’s hand and kissed her fingers. “I’m sorry.”

“No. Don’t be.” Her expression returned to the forever-bubbly one she usually wore. “I have found love. So what if it’s fleeting? It’s worth it.”

“Yeah. It is.”

“Sometimes we have to say goodbye to those we love. That is part of what it means to care for them at all. It is a rare thing that we immortals find companions. Our lives can be...so very lonely.” Ally leaned back in her chair and watched the group around them.

Some were demons, some were angels—Maggie had legit met an angel, who was dressed like a hardcore goth from the nineties, which she had tried not to laugh too hard about at the time—but most were mortals.

“You’ll find it hard to keep up sometimes,” the demoness continued. “The world just changes so fast. Their lives are short, and they live it running at full speed. Sometimes I blink and everything has changed, and everyone I knew is gone.” She shrugged. “And...either you find a way to live, or you don’t.”

“I’m not even sure I’d know how to perma-kill myself if I wanted to.” Maggie snickered and sipped her drink. “God only knows I’ve died enough times to knock off most of the options.”

“There’s a way. There’s always away. Well. Unless you’re Vlad, but he seems to have his business sorted out now.” Ally snickered. “He’s finally got someone to keep him in check.”

“Huh?”

Ally smiled knowingly and gestured her hand to Maggie. “Give me your phone.”

With a shrug, she fished it out of her pocket, entered in the pin, and handed it to the ex-sister.

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Ally immediately went to the contacts section and started typing. “You’d get along. And if anybody could give you life advice about the lich, it’d be her. If nothing else, you could commiserate.”

When she handed Maggie her phone back, she looked down at the screen. A name and a number that was labeled as a cellphone. Maxine Parker.

“I really don’t understand, but sure.”

“She’s a good friend. A good friend to us all, in fact. I think they’re in Chicago now?” Ally let out a hum. “No, wait. San Francisco. They moved a decade ago.” She laughed. “See? Things change too fast. And that’s just between us immortals.”

“And I can just contact her out of the blue? Say ‘hey, my friend gave me your number, let’s be buds?’” Maggie sipped her drink again. It was fruity and amazing, and she had to remind herself that it was stronger than it tasted. “Kinda weird, innit?”

“Not for immortals. We’re either ignorant of each other, always searching for kin...or making enemies. We have no middle ground.” Ally let out a long breath. “I guess, what I’m trying to say here is...you don’t have to be alone, in the end.”

“But I’m not alone. I have Harry, and Algernon, and you guys.”

The knowing smile on the demoness’ face gave her pause, however. There was sadness in the woman’s eyes. As if she pitied Maggie for some reason Maggie herself didn’t understand.

She shook her head. “No more sad talk. You just got married, lady.”

“That is true!” Ally laughed. “And I am entirely too sober.” She reached out for a hug, and Maggie didn’t hesitate to meet the gesture. “You go find your old cat. I should probably talk to my father at least once tonight.” She made a face.

Maggie chuckled, standing up from the bench. “Not a fan?”

“Oh, it’s all right. Astaroth is just so angry all the time. I guess that’s what happens when one is an aspect of wrath.” Ally gripped the wheels of her chair and headed off. “See you in the morning?”

“You bet.” She had booked the hotel for a few weeks. She had never been to Hawaii, and she wanted to spend some time really exploring the islands. And maybe take up scuba diving. It’s not like I can permanently drown if something goes wrong. Sharks might be a problem. That seems like it’d hurt.

Getting a refill on her drink, she began searching for Harry. He had come down to the afterparty and then disappeared. She’d gotten distracted talking to an angel about what Heaven was like, and totally lost track of her friend. Finally, she resorted to texting him. “Where’d you go?”

A pause, three dots, and then “Left. Beach.”

With a shrug, fetching a beer on her way past the drink bucket—figuring he’d want one—she headed off across the stone patio into the darkness. She made it a hundred and fifty feet, far from the reach of the lights of the hotel, before she saw movement by the line of high tide. Harry was sitting on large piece of driftwood.

“Hangin’ out in the dark?” She snickered and walked up to him, handing him the open bottle of beer.



He took it and sipped it. “Just thinking.”

Sitting down next to him, she leaned on his arm. His tone was faraway, and instantly she frowned in concern. “About what?”

After a very long pause, he let out a breath. “I’m tired, Mags.”

“Well, you can go back to our hotel suite, and—”

“No. Not like that.” His jaw ticked. “Not like that.”

She could barely make him out in the darkness, but her eyes were starting to adjust. The stars overhead were beautiful, and even in the shadows the rush of the dark ocean was beyond peaceful. The warm tropical air was a nice change to the frigid New England winter they had come from.

“Oh.” That was the best she could do. A rush of fear washed over her. Fear, and the familiar prick of tears in her eyes. “I...” She knew what he was asking for. He didn’t have to say the words.

“I promised to be at your side as long as you needed me.”

“You’re my best friend, Harry. My best friend in the world, and you always have been.” The tears she tried to fight broke free and rolled down her cheeks. “I—I don’t want to be alone.”

“But you aren’t alone. Not anymore.” He wrapped an arm around her, hugging her close to him. “You don’t need me.”

She put her drink down in the sand to wrap her arms around him, twisting sideways to squeeze as tight as she could. “That’s not true.” She buried her head against his

chest. “I need you.”

“Do you? Honestly? You’re—you’re healed. You’re better now. You’re powerful. Nobody wants to mess around with you. Did you see how those freaking demons and angels looked at you? Like you were something special.”

“I’m just Mags. I haven’t changed.”

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“Nah, not changed. You’re Mags, but now you’re Mags, Über Necromancer.” He snickered. “You’re standing on your own legs.” He kissed the top of her head. “You don’t need me, Mags.”

She clung to him, afraid that if she let go, he’d vanish into thin air, even though she knew that was silly. He couldn’t go. Not if she didn’t let him. “But I want you here. You’re my best friend.”

“I know.” He chuckled. “And I guess I don’t really have a say in the matter.”

“Of course you do.” She looked up at him in the darkness, now able to see his tired, weary smile. “I wouldn’t keep you here against your will.”

“It’s time to let me go.”

“But—no, please—”

“It’s all right.” He slowly stroked a hand over her hair, watching her as if it would be for the last time. The expression on his face made her tears flow faster. “Hey, don’t cry, Mags. Don’t cry. I’ve been dead for a long, long time.”

She couldn’t help it.

Because she knew he was right.

He was her teddy bear. The thing she clung to in desperation. Something she could rely on when she was afraid of the dark. But she wasn’t afraid of the dark anymore,

was she? And it was...it was cruel to keep him like this. She didn't know how long revenants were meant to last, but four-hundred-and-something years had to be pushing it.

It was childish. But she couldn't help it. "I don't want to say goodbye."

"I know." He picked up the enchanted necklace he wore, fishing it out from underneath the ridiculous tropical shirt he bought in the airport, and pulled it from around his neck. As he took the talisman off, his form...melted away. The living man disappeared, leaving his true self sitting beside her.

A yellowed skull, missing its lower jaw, perched atop a matching spine.

Even through the tears, she had to laugh.

"What?" He looked down at himself and realized what was funny. His Hawaiian shirt was draped over an empty skeleton. It looked even dumber than it had before. "Oh." He joined her in a laugh.

Lifting a hand, she touched his cheekbone, stroking a thumb over the porous surface. He was battered and worn, the bones cracked and chipped, pieces floating in space where they should go, though they had long since broken away from the whole. But how many bits of himself had he lost over the centuries? How many shards of Leopold de Lorges had been scattered around the globe?

This was what he really was. The illusion was just that—an illusion. The teddy bear was just a teddy bear. Worn, and battered, and missing pieces, the fur long rubbed off to the raw webbing beneath.

She ran a hand over the ridge of his skull and pulled him in to rest his forehead against hers. "I don't want to say goodbye," she whispered.

“But it’s time,” he replied, his voice hoarse from emotion. “And I’ll always be with you.”

She sniffled, trying to keep the sobs at bay, at least for now. “If you—if you see dad, tell him I love him. And—and go tell that bitch Medici she can fuck a brick, and I don’t mean lengthwise.”

He laughed quietly. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She knew how to let him go, but she hesitated. “Harry...I love you. You’re my family. You always have been. And I—I’m going to miss you so much.”

“I love you too, Mags. And I’m sorry. But I’m just so tired.”

It was selfish to keep him here, long after he had been meant to die. It had been selfish to raise him in the first place; she just hadn’t known what she was doing. But now? Now she was keeping him here on purpose, and it was wrong. She sniffled again.

“I already texted that egotistical, pedantic, cunt of a lich to tell him I hate his ugly-ass face and I’ll never forgive him. And that if he ever hurts you again, I’ll come back to rip him apart.”

“I’m sure he took that well.”

“He said he wouldn’t ever miss any part of me for a split second, but that he wished me safe travels and peaceful harbors.” He paused. “God, I hate him. Pretentious fuck.”

She laughed, brokenheartedly, and shut her eyes. “I know.”

They sat in silence for a long time, his bare skull still resting against her head, forehead to forehead.

“I love you, Mags.”

“I love you too, Harry.”

And with that...she let him go.

He crumpled to the sand beside her, the magic holding his bones together releasing their bonds. As the bones fell, she watched as they crumbled to dust. They were too brittle—too abused by centuries of forced animation by magic—to survive. She watched the dust wisp away in the breeze, caught in the tropical air.

And then he was gone.

Her shoulders wracked with sobs as she placed her head in her hands and wept.

Maggie hadn't had the wherewithal to be terribly social for the two weeks following Harry's...uh...re-death. She hadn't wanted to stay in Hawaii, either. After saying goodbye to Rinne and Ally, she caught the next plane off the island and went home.

Home-ish, anyway.

First, she went to France. Wandering around the museum that was once her childhood home, she had to keep her tears to herself. It made the tour guides uncomfortable. Standing in front of a tufted bench she remembered sitting on and reading fairytales to young Henri and the other children, though, she found herself lost in her bittersweet memories.

Henri the Third had apparently lived a wild goddamn life. The flamboyant boy had briefly been the King of France, holding lavish and crazy parties, kept an entourage of male lovers, and eventually wound up being assassinated.

Wild, but brief. All of the children she remembered had died young, leaving Catherine de Medici as de facto Queen of France for most of her life. Bitch. Oh, well. Couldn't be helped.

She supposed she could raise Medici from the grave just to give her a talking-to, but there wasn't a point. Besides, that grudge was well and truly over.

There was a strange kind of closure, though, walking the halls of her old home. She took the tour several times over the course of a week, giving the staff some kind of

line about how she was researching family lines, and she was distantly related to King Henri the Second. It was mostly true.

She even visited his grave, knowing the carved sarcophagus was empty. But it was nice to see his face again, even if it was made of marble. But after a while, the portraits and the furniture didn't hold any sway over her anymore, and she left.

And traveled to the next spot in her past that she knew she had to see again.

The castle in Germany.

His castle.

It had taken her several weeks to figure out where it was—or rather, what was left of it. What she remembered of its towering spires and vast halls were now crumbling bits of foundation and overgrown weeds on the jagged remains of rock walls.

She did a bit of research and found out that it had burned to the ground in 1561. She knew it hadn't been by accident. Sitting down on a boulder, she looked out over the mountain range beyond the valley on which the castle had once stood. She could see the spot where she'd jumped and fallen to her first death.

Opening her bag, she reached in to grab the sandwich she'd packed. The ruins were a bit of a hike from the road, now part of a national park. Well, half a sandwich, anyway. Algernon had already gotten into the other half and was munching away on the crust of what was left. He jumped from the bag, dragging his food with him, and sat down on in a sunny spot on the stone beside her.

He loved anywhere that was warm. Made sense. He had no body heat of his own.

It felt weird, being out in the world by herself, her familiar notwithstanding. With



Harry gone, it left her alone to her thoughts more than she liked. But she was supposed it was good for her. This was the time she needed to sort things out, wasn't it? All this closure?

But it didn't feel right.

Not really.

Something was missing. She frowned. No, not something. Someone.

Picking up her phone, she took a picture of the ruins of the castle whose name had even been lost to time, and, surprised that she had cell signal, texted it to a number she briefly had debated deleting, but then realized she needed it for more reasons than one.

She followed it with "The old stomping grounds definitely have looked better."

Three dots began to cycle, then stop. Then cycled, then stopped. Then cycled, then stopped. Maggie laughed, fishing out a soda from her bag, as she watched a visual depiction of someone struggling for words.

Then finally, a message came through.

Gideon: I think it's an improvement.

It'd been nearly a year since she left Boston. In all that time, she hadn't heard a peep from him. Her cellphone bill was always paid, and there was always space on her credit card. It was so strange seeing his name on her phone.

Stranger still that she was smiling.

She wrote back. “I miss Harry.”

Gideon: “I know. I’m sorry.” A pause, and then three dots appeared and disappeared as he clearly grappled with something. Then, the dots went away, and nothing came through.

She frowned. “What?”

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Gideon: “Are you all right?”

The poor bastard had been afraid to ask her how she was doing. She supposed that was fair. They hadn’t parted on explosive terms by any means, but it still hadn’t exactly been smooth. For all he knew, she had decided she hated him. Knowing his mooney ass, that was probably what he assumed.

Did she hate him?

No. She should. She really, really should.

But she didn’t.

Clicking the little image she had uploaded onto her phone to represent him—a screen shot of a Nazgul from the Lord of the Rings movies, she hit “call.” It rang for a split second before he picked up. Silence.

She smiled. “Hey.”

“Hey.”

More silence. She looked down at her lap, picking at the rat-chewed-through edge of the Ziploc bag her sandwich had been in. “I’m all right. I mean. I guess I’m great, actually. Here I am, being the world’s most powerful necromancer, going where I want, making spooky friends, doing whatever I want. But...”

“But?”

I'm doing it without you. And it feels so empty sometimes. She wasn't ready for that. She took a sharp left turn in the conversation to avoid that particular pothole. "Rinnie and Ally got married. They officially quit the Order after we learned you and Gabe were in cahoots. Oh, by the way, fuck you for that."

"Ah. Yes." He cleared his throat. "It was necessary to impart a sense of urgency to the whole ordeal, and, well." He paused. "I'm sorry I had to deceive you again."

"Was that the last of it?"

"It was, I promise."

"I get why you did it. I don't like it, but I get why. And of all the bullshit you've pulled, that's probably the most harmless lie you've told."

"Thank...you?"

She smirked. "And besides, honestly, Gabe's a nice guy. I like him. We met up for drinks a few weeks ago near the Vatican. They won't let me within a mile of the grounds, though." She snickered. "I can't imagine why."

"Couldn't possibly begin to fathom."

Silence reigned again for a moment as they sat there, each not sure what to say. She took a sip of her soda, glad she had something to fidget with. She started twisting the little metal pull-tab around in a circle. "I went home. Weird to see it as a museum now. I remember sitting in the chairs, running around the halls, knocking things off tables. Fuck, I've probably broken a hundred thousand dollars' worth of antiques in my life. It's a weird thought."

"Being ageless like we are is a strange thing to adapt to. I once saw some random

pieces of my mail featured in a glass case at the Smithsonian.” He chuckled. “It was unnerving, bizarre, and vaguely offensive. The letters weren’t even interesting.”

She laughed. “God damn, I didn’t even think about that. I bet I’ve got a dress on a mannequin somewhere. Shit.”

“Why did you go to the castle?”

“I don’t know, honestly. Closure? Curiosity?” She looked out over at the ruins again. “I guess I expected to feel that tragedy all over again. To feel like I did the night I jumped.”

“And?”

“And I don’t. I just feel...I don’t know. Not what I expected. It’s hard to reconcile the fact that, to me, I just remembered that part of my past, and now it’s nothing but rubble.” She was rambling a bit, but it felt cathartic. “The village is gone, too. It’s just a field. Time moved on, and my head is still struggling to catch up.”

“You’re adjusting to the reality of your existence. Grappling with these changes is what it means to be immortal. How you chose to handle it will decide what you become.”

“What do you mean?”

“Some creatures like us become tyrants—seeking to control the world around them in a desperate attempt to keep it from changing. Some, like me, are prone to occasional meddling, but are mostly peaceful observers. Most withdraw completely, choosing to become recluses in lieu of watching time whiz by them.”

“I’m afraid to make mortal friends, I won’t lie. Gabe and Rinnie are going to die

someday.”

“Just try not to think of mortals as pets. That’s another trap we fall into.” She heard glassware tinkling in the background. He was probably mixing himself a drink. She didn’t blame him. “Toying with creatures that will die before us or adopting them like a cat or a dog. Humans aren’t lesser than us.”

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“Never said they were.”

“In another hundred years or two, you might need a reminder.” It sounded like he was smiling. “It’s good to hear your voice.”

She paused, before finally admitting the truth out loud and to herself in one fell swoop. “Yeah. You, too.” Swallowing the lump in her throat, she broke the pull tab of her soda and toyed with the piece of stamped aluminum, enjoying how it felt when she dug it under her nail. “Um.”

He stayed quiet.

This was her call. Her decision. And she was so very, very grateful for that. “You still in Boston? ’Cuz I’m craving clam chowder, or a lobster roll, or fried clams, or something. Don’t get me wrong, I’m enjoying eating my weight in schnitzel and pretzels, but I could go for some seafood.”

“Union Oyster House?”

“Meh. Barking Crab? I know you clash with the décor, being all fancy-pants and all, but Algernon likes to play with the harbor rats.” She chuckled. “Even if they are four times his size.”

“I’ll dress down.”

The hope in his voice was killing her. It wrenched something inside her heart, and it was only then she realized that...the tone in her own voice matched his perfectly. She

shut her eyes.

She wanted to forgive him.

But she should hate him. “What day is it? Shit, I need to get a job. I’m losing all track of time.”

He laughed. “I’d claim that as another symptom of immortality, but I’m afraid that’s just what happens when no one keeps you to a schedule. It’s Tuesday.”

“Friday night, maybe? Gives me enough time to sleep off the jetlag.”

“Friday night. Seven. I’ll make a reservation.”

“I don’t think they take reservations.”

“Have you forgotten who I am? Wave enough money at anybody’s face, and they’ll change the rules for you.”

That made her laugh. “Good. I thought you were about to say you were going to kill the host and make him your revenant just to get us in.”

“Well, I could. But that just seems a bit excessive.”

“Look at you, learning restraint in your old age.”

His indignant tone was still playful. “I beg your pardon. I am not old.” He paused. “All right, very well, but I’m hardly the oldest.”

“Age isn’t judged by comparison, buddy.” She tucked her trash into her bag. She’d eat her sandwich on the walk back to the car.



“Yes, yes.” Another beat passed between them. “Thank you, Marguerite.”

“For what?”

“For this. I thought I would never hear your voice again.”

“Melodrama,” she warned, still teasing him. “Your soul is stuck in my body. Kinda hard to fuck off for the rest of time without talking. The world isn’t that big.”

“You’re capable of anything when you put your mind to it.”

“Flatterer.”

“Always.”

Plopping Algernon onto her shoulder, she started back toward her rental car. The path she took was both foreign and familiar. She remembered that night she spent running through the woods, terrified of the monster that had married her.

Now she was a monster, too.

And maybe that was okay.

She smiled. “Friday at seven it is.”

Gideon sat nervously at the picnic table of The Barking Crab. It was one of Boston's oldest seafood establishments, and at least it was early enough in the spring that it wasn't beset by the locust that were the seasonal tourists.

To say that he clashed with the décor was to put it mildly. The Barking Crab seemed to pride itself on how washed-out, faded, broken-down, and rat-infested it was. Not a single surface wasn't covered in chipped, sun-bleached paint, or had enough splinters to make you wonder if the picnic table benches weren't going to collapse under normal use.

But the food was incredibly good, and Marguerite never was one for pointless elegance. And so, he stared in half-hearted disgust at his bottle of beer and waited. He had arrived early, too anxious not to, and had made sure their seat was the best one in the house. It had only taken a few hundred dollars and some patience to get it. No murder involved.

He smirked. Marguerite would be so proud.

His heart cinched painfully. He knew she would be here soon to join him—if she didn't stand him up, but that didn't seem to be her style—but still...he missed her. The past year had both oozed and sped by at the same time.

That was what heartbreak did. Sometimes he would find he had spent hours simply sitting in a chair and staring at a wall, thinking. Remembering. Regretting.

Mostly regretting.

When there was movement at his side, he jolted out of his thoughts, looking up at the young woman who approached him. For a split second, he barely recognized her. He had lived for centuries with the ghost of the woman who came toward him. She had been sallow, shadowed, haunted and forlorn. He had thought her resplendent, only because he didn't know any better.

The woman who came toward him, however, to stop at his side with a shy and lopsided smile, was something else entirely. She was breathtaking. Her eyes shone brightly, there were no bags beneath them. She wore a low-cut black blouse tucked into dark green pants. A bright silver necklace hung around her neck, emblazoned with a delicate skull caught in twisting vines and lace. She wore a long, black jacket, and a black purse with a Colonial American winged death's head stamped on it in white ink was slung casually over her shoulder. Her long hair flowed around her in well-kept curls. The offensive orange was gone and was now replaced with a deep green that matched her eyes.

She was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen.

He stood so fast he nearly knocked over his terrible beer, and he had to scramble to catch it before it spilled.

The woman he had known had indeed been a ghost.

And this woman was a so very, very much more than that. And far more than he expected.

And to be frank, he did not quite know what to do with himself.

Turning back to her, he cleared his throat and attempted to regain his dignity, but she

was already laughing at him. Not in cruelty, but in amusement. In...fondness.

He could not allow himself to hope. He could not. And yet, like the terrible poison that it was, it sank into his veins in an instant.

This is already going terribly.

\* \* \*

Maggie almost felt bad for the poor bastard. He had already tripped over himself in the four seconds she had been in his presence. “Hi.”

“I—ah—” Smoothing one hand over his tie, he gestured to the table with the other. “Would you care to join me?”

“Nah, I figured I’d sit on the other side of the restaurant, and we could just awkwardly stare at each other all night.” She moved to sit on the other side of the picnic table, placing her bag down on the ground as she did. She tipped it over on its side, letting Algernon skitter out. She scratched him on the head. “Don’t get into too much trouble, and don’t let them push you around.”

He let out a squeak and took off to the fence that surrounded the outdoor patio, squirming under the slats of wood and toward the harbor. She smiled. It was still a little chilly, but the restaurant had heaters set out nearby. It was going to be a nice night.

Well, the weather was going to be nice, anyway.

The rest still remained to be seen.

Gideon took his seat across from her again, silver eyes flicking between hers as if he

didn't believe what he was seeing.

"What?" She arched an eyebrow quizzically. "Did I smudge my makeup?"

"No, no. You look...good. That's all." And now he looked embarrassed.

She smiled. "I'm a whole person now. I don't think I've been that way for a long, long time. Maybe not even since I was really alive, back when I was a kid."

"You were twenty."

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“I was still a kid.” She paused as the waiter came up to ask what she wanted. “Can you guys do a bramble?”

The waiter blinked. “I—don’t think I’ve heard of that. I’ll ask the bartender, though.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” She thought it over for a moment. “I’ll take a basic martini.” Once the waiter walked away, she turned her attention back to Gideon. “You’re right, Americans can’t mix gin drinks to save their lives.”

He chuckled. “I would have attempted to order for you, but I think I despise the menu.” He eyed the piece of paper in his hands. “I suppose I’ll order the fried fish.”

“Hard to go wrong with fried.”

“Hard to get sick from it, as well.” He wrinkled his nose.

“Oh, come on, you can’t get food poisoning.” With a hum, she realized she honestly didn’t know if he could. “Wait, can you?”

“No, but I can have my body—summoned as it might be—insist that what I’ve put in must come right back out. Which is hardly pleasant.”

“Huh. I learned the other week I could still get the flu, so that was fun.” She smiled. “Poor Algernon was so worried.”

“I see you’ve crafted an illusion for him. Well done.”

“I mean, he’s a rat. It’s not like I have to get the facial features right.” She chuckled. “And people wig out enough when a rat jumps out of your bag, let alone one that looks like it came from the reject bin of a Halloween Outlet.”

“Pah. Be kind. He’s a mid-grade Halloween prop.” He sipped his beer, made a face, and put it back down. “I think I will switch to hard alcohol, on second thought.”

“Not a Sam Adamsfan?”

“Apparently not.”

“Snob.”

“Guilty as charged.”

Propping her elbow up on the table, she plopped her chin in her hand and watched him. “How are you, Gideon?”

“Oh, quite fine. Work has kept me busy. I spent a few months in Morocco, dealing with a bit of a mafia uprising. It was a nice change of pace.”

She watched him flatly. She almost believed him. Almost. But there was a crack in his perfect veneer. “Are you telling me the truth, G?”

Stunned, he processed the words that came out of her mouth. “Did you just call me ‘G’?”

“Seems like it.”

“I’m not entirely sure how I feel about that.” He shrugged a shoulder. “I suppose it isn’t terrible. There are worse things you could call me.”

The waiter came back with her martini, Gideon ordered one to match, and they placed their food orders. She got a plate of onion rings for the table, she ordered the whole-belly fried clams, and he got the fish 'n chips. They were both relieved to find out they had malt vinegar.

“Can’t get fat,” she said with a grin as the waiter walked away. “Might as well enjoy it, right?”

“One of the greatest joys of being as we are.” His silver eyes glittered in amusement. “And no, I was not lying to you. I did spend the better part of three months in Morocco being shot at, or convincing people to stop shooting at other people.”

“That wasn’t the bit I’m dubious about. It was the first part. Where you said you’ve been ‘quite fine.’”

“Ah.” It seemed he couldn’t keep eye contact as he stared down into his martini, spinning the glass between his fingers. It was still getting dark fairly early, and the firelight from the gas patio heater reflected off the surface of the drink.

His jaw ticked, and he shifted uncomfortably on the wooden bench. Finally, after it seemed like he was going to ignore her, he finally answered. “It isn’t any of your concern.”

“Ouch.”

“What am I to say, Marguerite?” He looked up at her then, and she was taken aback by the hurt in his eyes. “What is it you wish to hear from me? That I sit alone, unsure of what to do with myself, or that I still reach for you in the night only to find you missing?” He grimaced and looked away again, turning his attention to the view of the Fort Point Channel next to the restaurant. He rolled his shoulders back, cracking them. “I have kept busy. I am immortal. I am fine.”



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Now don't I feel like the bitch?" "I didn't leave to hurt you."

"I know. Nor do I blame you. Nor did I expect anything different. Nor do I expect that anything will come of this dinner more than the 'closure' you seek." He still wouldn't look at her, instead staring off at the little boats and weathered dinghies that dotted the stone wall of the channel.

"I haven't decided yet." She sipped her martini and realized she was drinking it maybe just a little too fast. Oh, well. She figured she earned it. And she figured she'd need it. "I don't hate you, Gideon."

Now it was his turn to look at her incredulously.

"I don't." She picked up the little spear that held the pimento olives from her drink and ate one off the end of it. "I should. Believe me, I know I should. You did absolutely terrible shit to me, G."

"Still don't know how I feel about that, but go on," he murmured.

"You murdered my father, my best friend...you lied to me, manipulated me, torched an entire village in jealousy, and drove me to commit suicide. And then, too afraid to let me go, you...did this to me." She gestured at herself. "You turned me into an undead whatever-the-fuck against my will. Then, while trying to 'fix' me, you spend hundreds of years making it catastrophically worse."

He cringed, as if each listing of his sins was another nail in a coffin. "Believe me, I am acutely aware of all this. Do you think it hasn't gone through my head, playing

over again and again? I may not have suffered the blackouts you endured, but...I relived it all just the same.”

“That’s one of the three reasons I don’t hate you. See, I—” Their food arrived, and the waiter placed a giant pile of fried clams in front of her. “Oh, fuck yes.” She laughed, the waiter joining her. “Sorry, been away from Boston for a while. I missed this.”

Once the waiter was gone, she found Gideon ignoring his food entirely. He was staring at her, his expression confused and unreadable.

She smiled. “Eat. Fish ‘n chips has a short temperature shelf life. The colder it gets, the weirder it gets.”

With a long sigh, he picked up his knife and fork and listened to her advice. Dipping one of her clams into the tartar sauce—she’d need to ask for about twelve more containers of the stuff—she did the same.

“The first reason I don’t hate you is because you know what you did was wrong. It didn’t stop you from doing it, and it doesn’t change what you’ve done, but if you were stomping around telling me it was ‘justified’ or that you didn’t regret it, I wouldn’t be here.”

“But I would do it all again, Marguerite. If you lay dying in my arms, I would repeat my actions. I—” He gritted his teeth then shook his head, cutting himself off.

“Go on. Please.”

Every muscle in his body went tense and then slack. With a shrug as if to say nothing could possibly get any worse, he finished his thought. “I love you, Marguerite, more than anything. More than myself. And I can’t exist in this world without you. I would

bind my soul to yours again in a heartbeat if it meant I would ensure we were, at least in some tragic way, always together.”

She wanted to tease him for his melodrama, but he looked like he was about to snap. Either in anger, or in tears, she didn’t know, and she decided she didn’t want to find out. “Hey.” She reached over the table, placing her hand over his where he was gripping his blunt dinner knife hard enough his knuckles were white. “I’m here.”

“I am a child. Nothing more than a weak, insipid toddler, throwing blocks because I can’t have my favorite toy. Eurydice is right.”

She smiled. “How is the big grumpy bird?”

“She’s lovely, and quite grumpy, thank you.”

She wormed her fingers into his, forcing him to let go of the knife and relax. He stared at their hands as though he didn’t recognize them. With a dumbfounded shake of his head, he lowered his voice. “Marguerite, I do not regret the terrible things I did—I regret that I had to do them.”

Silver eyes flicked to hers, edged in tears. She squeezed his hand gently. “Don’t you think I know that?”

Dumbly, he shook his head. “I don’t understand...How could you...”

“You’re desperate, not cruel. That’s the second reason I can’t hate you. Nothing you ever did to me was out of malice. It was just a man, clinging to smoke. You didn’t want to kill my father, you wanted to marry me. You didn’t want to kill Harry, but he got in your way. I really, really disagree with your methods, but you never meant to torture me. I know you love me, and I’ve never once doubted that.” She slowly let go of his hand. Namely, so she could keep eating her dinner. He begrudgingly went back

to doing the same.

“And the third reason?”

She smirked. “A secret. For now. Maybe I’ll tell you later, maybe I won’t. Food and drinks first.”

Gideon downed his martini in one go and gestured for the waiter to get him another.

“You’ve been doing a lot of solo drinking, haven’t you?” She laughed.

“You have no idea.”

They ate in silence for a moment. With a sudden grunt, he tapped his finger on the wood surface of the table. “I neglected to say how sorry I am about Leopold. Harry. Whatever he wished to be called.”

“You hated him. It was mutual.”

“I’m not sad he’s finally gone. It was a long time overdue. But I know you must still miss him.”

“I do. Every damn day. But that’s grief, isn’t it? That’s the nature of loss. We don’t stop crying. We just cry less.”

“And for your grief, I am sorry. Not because he’s gone.” He huffed a laugh. “Trust me, I won’t miss him.”

“I think you will, just a little.” She grinned, reaching across the table to steal one of his French fries, even though she had plenty of her own. “But you don’t need to admit it. That’s fine.”

He smiled for real for the first time since they sat down. It lit up his face, but not his eyes. He was staring down at his fried fish like it was an open grave.

God, I hate seeing him like this. I hate that he’s in pain. I should be rolling around in it like Scrooge McDuck, but instead it breaks my heart.

“All right, fine.” She sighed. “I’ll tell you the third reason I can’t hate you. I wanted to revel in this a bit, but I just can’t. It’d be like kicking Mephisto.”

He furrowed his brow, puzzled, but said nothing and simply waited.

It was her turn to down the rest of her martini. “The third reason I can’t hate you, Dr.

Gideon Raithe, is because I love you.”

\* \* \*

“Excuse me?”

Gideon stared at her, unable to believe what he had heard. Certainly, she was only tormenting him. Turning the tables on him and toying with him for a change.

But instead, she shrugged and let out a breath. “Tried to deny it, tried to pretend I didn’t. Tried to pretend I hated you. None of it stuck. I needed time, and I’ve had that time. And I guess I’ve finally made up my mind. I miss you. It feels like...” She paused, thoughtfully picking at the mound of ridiculously hideous fried food in front of her. “It feels like how I miss Harry, but worse. Because I know you’re still here. It’s weird to be immortal and feel like you’re wasting time.”

“Marguerite, I—” He stopped. He honestly didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. It wasn’t possible. “After all that I did?”

“That’s the thing that gets me. That’s the thing that really, really gets me, Gideon. If you could have just gotten out of your own goddamn way, and waited for a hot fucking second, everything would have been fine.” She took a gulp of her martini.

“I—I don’t—”

“If you had just seen me sketching at that fountain, and sat down beside me, and said hello? If you had just introduced yourself like a normal person, dated me like a normal person, and been a little less, well, you, I would’ve fallen in love with you. I would’ve married you.”

“You can’t possibly know that.”

“I can. And I do. Because every time you and I have just been together? Every time you and I have just had a chance to ‘be’?” She shook her head, her smile beleaguered and tired, as if she were sick of climbing a mountain that she could never reach the peak of. He empathized. “When we were living together in that castle, or the quiet times we spent together, or most recently when you had me go on that stupid lie of a vision fetch-quest? Each time, each goddamn time, Gideon, I fell in love with you. And then you had to go and wreck it.”

He would not cry.

He would not cry.

He would not cry.

He wiped at his eyes with the back of his sleeve, glad for the rough fabric of his suitcoat. The pain of it was a stiff reminder that he was in public, and his injured dignity would not abide with weeping.

Maybe later.

If she could have hurt him more, he did not know how it could be accomplished. The simple fact of what she was saying—you never needed to fight for me—tore something loose inside his heart. Tore it straight out, like those priests had done, and plopped it on the table next to his overly breaded and oily fish.

The breath he pulled in was shaky, and the one he let out was equally so. “Is this goodbye?”

“No.” She reached for his hand again, and he numbly let her take it. She squeezed it. When she smiled at him, her expression was dazzling. “This is hello.”

### Epilogue

Maggie was getting ready for her wedding.

Again.

It wasn't exactly a second wedding—it wasn't like they'd been divorced, or whatever. Separated, maybe? Social media apps didn't have a button for what they had been. Either way, what they were now was much simpler.

Together.

A do-over. She smiled at her reflection in the mirror. Ally was fussing over her makeup in a mirror on the other side of the room, grumbling about how the artist Maggie had hired to help them had put on far too much eyeshadow for her tastes.

Maggie chuckled. "You look fine. Bridesmaids are supposed to be colorful, aren't they?"

"I look like a succubus!" She wiped at her eyelid with a tissue.

"You don't."

"How do you know? Have you ever met one? I have." Ally switched eyes, wiping off some of the bright blue tones. "And that's exactly what I look like."

She couldn't help but laugh again and reached down to pick up a white gold bracelet



from the table. Gideon had given it to her a few months prior. It was a colonial style death's head—her favorite—bound up in vines. An hourglass perched over its head. On the back, there was an engraving. Memento Mori. Remember that you must die.

Except she never would again. Oh, well, that wasn't true. She'd die plenty of times, she was certain. She was accident prone already, and being immortal made a person a little bit reckless. But the important part was that she wouldn't stay dead.

Strangely, that made her feel more connected to death, not less. She was a necromancer. By all accounts, from what she could figure out from the other supernatural freaks she had met over the past two years, she was the necromancer.

Two years. It'd been two years since she sat down with Gideon in Boston and told him she wanted to try again. And it had been the two happiest years of her life that she could remember. With everything out in the open—with no more secrets, no more lies, no more games—she quickly found that they were just as inseparable as their souls.

She touched the hourglass on the bracelet. Tempus Fugit. Time Flies. And it really, really did. It had felt like just the blink of an eye, before Gideon was on a knee before her, offering her an emerald engagement ring, asking her to marry him.

The word “yes” had come out of her before she really even processed what was happening. A few months of planning, another month postponed because an old acquaintance of Gideon's who “had to meet her” couldn't make the original date, and here they were.

Getting married.

Again.

Kind of.

The first time didn't really count. They had chosen new rings—the old ones felt tainted to them both. There was a knock on the door, and the wedding coordinator, who was a lovely werewolf from Scotland, poked her head in. “Are you ready?”

“I'm not getting any younger.” She snickered. Someday she'd give up all the childish immortality puns.

Today was not that day.

\* \* \*

Maggie walked out onto the balcony of the reception hall, desperately needing a little bit of fresh air. That, and a bit of a break from all the commotion. She was just a little drunk, and sad she hadn't had a chance to eat any of the fantastic food it looked like was being served to the guests. She'd been warned that she wouldn't have time to eat, but she hadn't quite believed it.

Now she believed it.

Leaning against the railing, she looked out at the autumn hills of France and smiled. France would always be her home. And being married here made her feel more connected to the people she wished could have attended. Even if they wouldn't approve of the man she was marrying, she knew they would at least be happy for her.

“Ms. Valard? Or is it Mrs. Raithe, now?”

Turning, she blinked in surprise. She didn't know the man who had followed her out. She didn't recognize him from the reception, either. A long gray peacoat hung from a form that was on the thin side of average. He had light brown hair that fell across his

forehead in a style that said he neglected it. He had razor-sharp blue eyes behind thin-framed glasses. He was handsome, in an average kind of way. Everything about him would look nondescript to a normal person. Almost too nondescript. But something about him made her hair stand on end. There was a tiredness to him. No, not a tiredness. An oldness.

Whoever this man—this creature—was, he was ancient. And ancient meant dangerous. She straightened, squared her shoulders, and braced herself. “Can I help you?”

When he smiled, her concerns faded. There was a warmth to it that made her think of a cozy blanket on a cold night. “Sorry to interrupt your night. But I’ve been waiting to talk to you for some time. You’ve caused me a great deal of headaches over the years, you know.”

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“If it makes you feel better, it wasn’t intentional, seeing as I don’t even know who you are.” Yup, she was a little drunk.

He laughed. “Oh, I’m not upset.” He walked up to stand beside her at the railing, looking out at the rolling fields. “It isn’t my place to judge. Just collect.”

Oh.

Oh.

“Oh, fuck.” Like the proverbial lightbulb, she figured it out in a flash. She went rigid, watching the man, wide-eyed. “Oh, shit. Oh—”

He raised his hands in a show of harmlessness and laughed. The corners of his eyes creased when he smiled. “Calm down, calm down. I’m not here to start any trouble.”

“But—but you’re...”

“I am very happy to make your acquaintance.” He held out a hand to her. “Azrael, the archangel of death, at your service.”

\* \* \*

Gideon nearly collapsed atop Maggie. He was utterly spent, feeling the sweat that beaded on his back begin to cool. Resting his forehead against her shoulder, he let out a long, satisfied groan.

He enjoyed honeymoons, he decided.

He enjoyed them a great deal.

Maggie was panting beneath him, coming down from her own cloud of ecstasy. He rolled over, sprawling onto his back beside her, and stretched his arms out in an attempt to cool down. “You’re going to kill me someday, Marguerite.”

“Better—like this—than other ways.” She was still gasping for air. He hadn’t been kind to her tonight. To be fair, she had asked for more. “Trust me.”

Chuckling, he shut his eyes and simply basked in the afterglow. Not just in the act of vigorous lovemaking they had just completed, but in everything. In her. In their new lives. In the love that they had found, against all his best efforts, could still be stitched together and made anew.

“I love you.” He reached for her and hugged her to his side. With a contented hum, she rested her head on his shoulder and draped an arm over his chest. They were both in need of a shower, but it could wait.

“I hadn’t noticed.” That was her way of saying it back to him. She loved to tease him every chance she had. And he couldn’t have minded any less.

Kissing the top of her head, he let out a long, sated sigh.

“What happens next?”

Surprised at the question, he opened his eyes to look down at her. “Hm?”

She traced a circle along his chest in a slow pattern. “It’s so weird. I have the whole world ahead of me. I have nearly unlimited resources and actually unlimited time. We

could do anything. Go in any direction. But...”

“You feel as though you have no purpose? No goal?”

“Right.”

“Why do you think I meddle in international affairs, and pull the strings of organized crime? I needed a hobby.” He smiled and kissed her head again.

“Can you teach me to be a spooky mob boss?” She grinned. “I wanna be a spooky mob boss.”

“May all the gods forgive me if I do. I would be unleashing an agent of chaos upon the world. I would almost feel bad for your enemies.” The mental image was astounding, however. He rather did think he’d like to see her in stilettos and dress, ordering around grown men like they were children. “You might have to not call yourself a ‘spooky mob boss,’ though.”

“Pah. People need to take themselves less seriously.”

“I agree. But still. Decorum is key.”

“That’s why I have you.” She propped herself up on her elbows. “Don’t forget, I can make you teach me to be a spooky mob boss.” She tapped her finger on the end of his nose.

“We talked about you using my soul to compel me to do things. It’s unnerving, generally uncomfortable, and I despise it.”

*Source Creation Date: July 10, 2025, 3:19 am*

“I know, I know. I only did it that one time. And you deserved it.”

“I had neglected to do the dishes for two hours. I hardly think that deserves being ordered about.”

“It was also funny.” She kissed him, smiling against his lips. He returned the gesture, holding her tighter for a moment. “Shower?” She climbed out of bed, stretching as she did. He greatly enjoyed the view.

“Shower.” He followed her. He wouldn’t take bets on how much showering would actually be done.

“And then you’ll teach me to be a spooky mob boss.” She shot a mischievous smile at him over her shoulder and reached out to him.

With a shake of his head, he took her hand and let her lead. “We’ll start first thing in the morning.”

As they climbed into the shower, he pressed her against the tile, barely giving her enough time to turn the knob. As the hot water poured over him, he lifted her up by the thighs. She wrapped her legs around him, inviting him in, and he wasted no time.

He would never tire of filling her. He would never tire of the way she gasped at the sudden fullness. Or how her eyes grew lidded and dark as he pinned her to the wall and began his onslaught.

There was no telling what the future would bring to them. They had an eternity

stretching out before them. But if it was an eternity with her, he did not care what tragedy might beset him. Nothing else mattered.

You will never die alone. He had whispered those words to her as he forced her to take his soul. He meant it then, and he meant it now. He would stay at her side until the sun expanded and swallowed the Earth if he could.

As she gasped his name, as she cried out in bliss, he drove himself inside her as far and as hard as he could go.

When ecstasy consumed them once more, and he had spent himself deep inside her, he held her there against the wall, not wanting to part from her just yet.

She kissed him, a slow and languid embrace. It didn't last nearly long enough for his liking. "I love you, wraith."

"Lich."

"Whatever."

"And I, you, my princess."

"Necromancer."

He grinned. "Whatever."

Fin.

Thank you as always.