



Twisted Sorcery

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Category: Romance, New Adult, Lesbian Romance

Description: Midnight City has taken everything from Deni. Two months after being turned into a vampire by her abusive ex she's broke, starving, and one bad day away from ending up on the street.

But when her desperation carries her to the nightclubs of Elysium, where the wealthy pay to have their darkest fantasies fulfilled, she meets someone who could turn the tides of her fate: Celeste, a powerful witch with honey-sweet blood and a dangerous arcane smuggling ring at her command. Working for the beautiful woman could mean an end to Deni's downward spiral and, most importantly, safety in a city of monsters – human or otherwise.

But Celeste's charity comes at a high price. Every bit as demanding as she is beautiful, Celeste pushes Deni further and further away from her humanity – and toward the dark vampire instincts at the back of her mind. Yet no matter how hard Deni tries, the enigmatic witch is impossible to resist.

When Deni has nothing more to give up but total control, she can't help but wonder: is Celeste using more than her charms to keep Deni under her spell? Is the safety Deni was searching for further away now than it has ever been before?

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1. POOR BUT NECESSARY CHOICES

When someone sends you a postcard from Midnight City, it's all shimmering skylines or romantic cherry blossoms by the Styx. Fulfil your wildest dreams in the Nocturnal City, the City of Wonder, where the world of the natural and the world of the supernatural collide.

What people won't tell you about Midnight City is that, just like any other big city, it's cruel. It's dirty, full of rats, and poor. This is not a judgment – I still love Midnight City, even after everything it's done to me. Even here, sitting on a piss-stained mattress somewhere in the concrete hell of Tartarus, the smog-tinged view of skyscrapers that I can make out through the boarded window – boarded-shut because someone smashed it in with a vodka bottle – fills me with hope. As if I, out of the eight million people in this shithole, will be the one to make it.

Except –fuck– I don't know if I will. My vision is going blurry. I'm so hungry, I'm shaking. I don't even know if I'll be able to get up again. This was not how this was supposed to go. Just like everybody else in this concrete jungle, I came here to live my dreams. For a new start. And now look at me: dying without anyone ever even noticing because I can't afford to feed myself.

But that's not true. My mind grapples with the concept of immortality. It used to seem miraculous, almost something to be desired. Now I recognize its full ugliness: no matter how starved, how deprived, I will continue to suffer. I have become the kind of creature even death won't take pity on. Any human feeling like this might be inches away from the end but I will still be alive even when my body has shriveled up and turned to dust.

“Deni!?”

I blink and turn my head –when did I sink against the wall like a sack of potatoes?– to see Maverick standing above me. I never even heard him come in.

“You scared the shit out of me! I thought you were dead,” he says as he crouches to help me up.

My lip splits when I fake a smile. “Me too,” I joke dryly, though it doesn’t come out sounding nearly as funny as I wanted it to.

“Here.” Maverick hands me the crumpled remains of a blood bag, no more than half a teaspoon left inside. I notice he looks fresher, more colorful – I won’t ask him where he got the money for this. We all do what we have to.

Greedily, I close my lips around its ripped corner and suck out the dregs. I almost gag – it tastes old like it’s been left out of the fridge for a while – but manage to keep it down with a shudder. My body responds with a violent craving for more. It’s a vile sensation, animalistic and wild. It’s been there ever since I was turned, dark and ugly inside me, waiting for my will to weaken so it can burst out.

Even as exhausted as I am now, I fight the monster inside of me with every ounce of my being. I’m not ready to give up on my humanity.

Mav helps me sit up properly. “You need more,” he says with concern in his voice. “By the morning you won’t be able to move at all.”

I wrap my arms around myself, not sure whether I’m trying to keep the cold out or myself together. “I’m broke.”

“What happened to that job you had at the diner?”

Grimacing, I shake my head. “Fired when they found out—”What I am, I want to say, but the words don’t want to come out. The idea that I’m a vampire is still too foreign for me.

He sighs. “It’s OK, you’ll find something else. Hey!” He shakes me a little as the edge of my vision goes black. “Deni!”

“I’m fine,” I croak, although I’m not sure. “I just need to make it through until I get my transition payment from Welfare Services.”

He frowns. “When is that due?”

“This week,” I say. “But I never got it.”

Shaking his head, he says, “There’s ways to get blood other than buying it.”

“I’m not hurting anyone, Mav.” Not that I could, in this state.

His face hardens for a moment – almost everyone here has someone on their conscience, everyone but me. Among the hundreds of tattoos covering his skin and crawling up his neck are two teardrops sitting beneath his eye. His real tears are cried when he thinks I’m sleeping. Then he says simply, “Of course. That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean?”

He grimaces. “I’m going out to Elysium tonight. I could bring you some back.”

Going out. That’s certainly one way to put it. “I don’t know. One bag won’t do it. You could take me along?”

“I thought you didn't want to go down this route?”

“Just for tonight. I’m not sure I’ll make it until Welfare Services get their act together.”

He sighs. “Are you sure you can’t ask your family for help?”

I scoff. “I could if I wanted to be burned at the stake.”

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My eyes graze the window. Through the wooden boards I can see the sun dipping beneath the skyline and ripples of pink and orange light being scattered across the clouds. I knew this was what it would take eventually. Most places won't hire vampires and those that do want at least someone who's been around a few decades, lest they eat the customers. Half the people in this flat are strippers or prostitutes, and the other will get there in the end.

"I mean, if you're sure, I guess you could come along."

"Which club?"

He slicks back his long hair. "I've got a date at the Myrrh & Adder."

A date, I think dully. That's a nice way of putting what goes on in that club. "They won't let me in there." Swaying, I try to tuck my legs under me to get up.

"They will if you're with me. But I honestly don't mind bringing you something back." He jumps to his feet, his movements so quick they're blurry. Despite everything I feel a pang of envy – there's nothing like the rush of fresh blood and the power it gives you. Nobody moves like a vampire.

"No, I'll come. It's just this once, right?"

His pained expression tells me that that's probably what he tells himself every night – just one more time before I get my life together.

We've been making far-fetched plans to get out of this place and rent somewhere

together, just the two of us. We looked at flats and everything. Mag has a little cardboard box labeled "down payment" that never has any money in it.

“Actually,” he says thoughtfully. “Apparently, Charon’s Veil has got some kind of new product. Totally legal and worth heaps of money. Maybe they’ll let you do deliveries instead?”

“Hmm. Maybe,” I say without believing it. With shaking fingers I grasp his hand – the left one that has PAIN written across its knuckles – and try to get to my feet. Though the blood he gave me is helping, it’s not enough to fight the weakness of weeks of starvation. Helped along by Mav, I stagger through the hallway past rooms similar to the one we share, with not much more than mattresses on the floor and a few damp piles of clothes in the corners.

He waits outside the bathroom door in case I faint while I shower. I’m careful to touch as little of the filthy room as possible. The tub’s enamel has long lost its gloss, now matte and yellowed. I scrub myself as if I could scrub this whole neighborhood off me before drying myself off with a towel that is in dire need of washing.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Mav asks through the door as I put on mascara.

It’s not mine, but I’ve been watching it gather dust on the vanity for the past week, so I’m assuming whoever owned it has left, or worse. There’s a lot of turnover here.

My voice is bitter. “I’ll just check it out and see how I feel. There’s always the option of turning into a calcified mummy of pain and having Pavel throw me out into the street when I’m short on rent! Or, you know, I could off myself.”

I turn away from the mirror as I brush my teeth. I’m joking but the silence that follows my words feels heavy – we both know we’ve thought about it. Just walk out into the sun and be done with it. No more scrabbling for dregs of blood. No more

hiding in the dark. Probably, nobody would even notice. This city is full of ghosts.

“Wait, was that a threat? Do I need to come in there?”

With a sigh, I open the door. My arms are so heavy, even this feels like a chore. “Still alive,” I mumble as I stumble out into the hallway. “Or rather, not dead.”

“Well aren’t you lucky!” he chuckles and helps me back to our room.

In another life I used to have a long, hot bath before going out, to get rid of the stink of deep-fryer oil seemingly infusing my very essence at the end of every shift. But there’s no way I’m soaking in whatever is stuck to this bathtub.

Back in our room, we stay awkwardly silent as I balance myself on his arm while pulling on the only clean-ish pair of jeans I could find. Our awareness of the night ahead hangs thickly between us, squashing any conversation we might have otherwise had. I’m scared but I won’t tell Mav that.

Only when I pull on a sheer blouse made from black lace does Mav say, “Who knew you cleaned up so well?” He kicks the black t-shirt lumped at my feet into my pile of dirty laundry. “Have you considered not dressing like a hobo more often?”

“Shut up.” I sway slightly and my mattress calls temptingly to me. It would be so nice to just lie down and ignore the reality of having to pay rent and feed yourself. With a determined jerk, I head for the door. I don’t want Mav to see quite how weak I am.

Outside, the sky is bleeding from purple into black. I can feel the cold air begin to seep through the cracks in the hastily barred window and wrap my arms around myself. Once upon a time I used to like autumn in Midnight City, before I spent every walk through the neighborhood scouting out nooks and crannies that might be safe to sleep in, for the eventuality of not having anywhere to stay.

My reflection doesn't look quite right when I see myself in the cracked hallway mirror – too pale, thinner, and sharper than before I was turned. My cheeks are hauntingly hollow, eyes sunken and black, full of hunger.

It is what it is, I think as I turn away. I don't really have the bandwidth to worry about the circles beneath my eyes right now.

Mav pulls me toward the front door with persistence. "We gotta go, or we'll be late."

I frown and force my shaking knees onward. Most taxi companies charge double or more to vampires – not that we could afford regular prices – and we have to avoid the busiest transport because we both know I'll probably kill someone if they get too close. The thought of the pilgrimage we have ahead of ourselves to reach the other side of the city makes me want to lie down on the floor and curl up. Moving hurts.

As we stagger down the stairs, carefully avoiding the sticky, graffitied walls, heavy footsteps echo through the stairwell. My stomach twists, not aided by the persistent smell of ammonia. Not now.

"Ugh, fuck me..." Mav mumbles as a mountain of a man turns the corner and comes up the stairs before us. Pavel, our landlord – if you can call a dude renting out old mattresses that – is supposedly human, though I could swear he has ghoul blood in him. He's bald and hunched but somehow still manages to stand two heads taller than Mav. His long limbs always seem bent, as if he were ready to get on all fours at any moment. His stomach bulges over his pants, pushing up his shirt in the process.

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A garish grin splits his face when he sees me. With a voice rough like scraping river stones he says, "If this isn't just who I was looking for."

I shrink a little and try to push past him but he blocks our way with his arm.

"Rent was due yesterday, princess," he says as his grip tightens on my arm.

Cringing, I try to free myself. "I'll have it by tomorrow," I lie. "I'm just waiting to get paid."

He chuckles loudly. "Get paid for what, wallowing in self-pity? You know you can always work for me if you want to." He runs his hand down my arm suggestively.

"Look." Mav grabs Pavel's wrist. "She's not feeling so good, alright? I'll make sure she gets it to you by tomorrow."

Pavel ignores him. "Do I look like a damn charity to you, princess? I got my own bills to pay."

Before I can reply, Mav says, "How about this: I've got some Ghostshade under my mattress... why don't you roll yourself one and relax, huh? Take it as a down payment."

Pavel's eyes snap to Mav's face. "And why do you think I'd want some shit-laced old mattress Ghostshade more than the damn rent?"

"It's not laced with anything, dickhead. Fresh from the boatman himself."

I keep my eyes on the floor, feeling queasy. Surprisingly, Pavel grunts and lets go of me. Without his grip I nearly fall, needing to lean on the railing to stay upright. Quickly, Mav puts his arm around me.

Pavel uses his swollen forefinger to lift my chin, making me look up. His hands smell like Ghostshade smoke and greasy hair. “Tomorrow, princess.”

Instead of gagging dramatically like I want to, I manage a pained smile. “Thank you.”

He scoffs and pushes past us, the wooden stairs creaking painfully beneath his footfalls. I’m not even sure this building is safe or legal to live in but my real-estate options as a vampire are rather limited.

We wait until we hear the door fall shut before we breathe a sigh of relief.

“Scumbag,” Mav grumbles as he helps me take the final steps down to the ground floor.

“He’s not so bad,” I say. “He doesn’t have to let vampires rent his place.”

Mav shrugs and opens the door for me, and I ready myself for a long hike to the subway station.

“Can I ask you something?” I break the silence as we shuffle through the streets, narrowly avoiding dog-shit at every opportunity. Around us, the streetlamps have hesitantly flickered to life, throwing their dim light across the rough concrete slabs making up our block. It’s not so terrible on a sunny day – the city has planted trees in the streets and tried to paint some of the buildings in bright colors. Unfortunately, most days in Midnight City aren’t sunny – not that it matters to me now that I’ll never be able to go out into the sun again.

Mav is walking while staring down at his phone – though I try not to pry, I can see he’s getting messages from Noxium guy, whose name is followed by an eggplant emoji. Noxium is another of those Elysium clubs that prides itself on offering anything – absolutely anything – to its customers.

“Go on,” Mav says.

“You said the Ghostshade was straight from the boatman... I’ve heard you say that before,” I begin.

He gives me a quizzical look. “Yeah.”

“Is this like secret code or are you going to tell me what it means?”

He raises his eyebrows. “God, girl, how have you survived this long in this city?”

I bite my lip – evidently, my ignorance has come to bite me in the ass in every aspect.

“The boatman, like, Charon the boatman, who ferries the dead into the underworld?” he offers, as if that makes things make sense.

I blink at him.

“Like... Charon’s Veil?” His face is expectant.

“Oh.” I look at the ground, trying to hide how stupid I feel. I don’t really know what Charon’s Veil is, either, only that they’re the ones offering work to new vampires like me and Mav.

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Mav shakes his head. “Sometimes I forget you were raised in a good Christian household.”

I frown. “If only my parents knew where that would lead me.” I’m nauseous but I try to ignore the churning of my gut. It’ll be fine. This time next week, I’ll be back to working an ordinary job, and with my payments from Welfare, I’m going to start saving to get out of this dump.

2. (NOT) AN INSTRUCTION MANUAL FOR PROSTITUTION

The bar is crowded and thick with Ghostshade smoke when we arrive, a combination that quickly gives me a headache. The floor vibrates with the sound of the bass as Mav leads me across the dance floor. The building is five stories tall and hollow save the galleries lining the walls, allowing you to look from the dancefloor all the way up to the glass roof. It gives the club a cathedral feel, though it certainly isn’t filled with the faithful.

I watch as a succubus strolls up the stairs to the second gallery, a handful of people in tow. Their faces are eagerly empty, eyes dull with the power of her magic. She slips through a door along the gallery, giving me a brief glimpse of the red velvet furniture and rose-print wallpaper behind it before Mav pulls me onward.

Beyond the main dance floor, we find ourselves in a quieter, more tranquil room. Its center is filled with tall bar tables, while its walls are hollowed out with little apse-like niches, each extending into a small booth. I trail nervously behind Mav as he approaches one of the tables, three men seated around it, and then hesitates.

“Maverick!” One of them, a tall, pale man with slicked-back black hair and a sly little smile waves us over. His thin face is all sharp angles.

Mav looks the group over, his head lowered a little. Two of the men, both tidy and professional-looking, get up to leave.

“I didn’t mean to interrupt, Alastor,” Mav says. He seems different here. His smile doesn’t reach his eyes, his voice has lost its usual lilting, jovial tone.

Alastor rises and shakes the others’ hands. He looks like a vampire to me, though it’s not always easy to tell.

“We were just done here,” he says, turning to us. His eyebrows rise. “You brought someone.”

Mav clears his throat. “This is Deni. She’s looking for work tonight.”

The man’s smile quickly becomes wolfish. He gestures for me to sit with long, spindly arms. “There’s always work for pretty faces like yours.”

Mav helps me slide into the seat but remains standing himself, looking uneasy. “Well, I thought since you’re doing that... new thing, and you’re looking for people to—”

Alastor shoots him a warning glance.

“Anyway, I thought she could maybe do something like that. You can trust her.”

The vampire leans forward, looking me up and down. His gaze comes to rest on my shaking fingers and a knowing smile crosses his lips. “I think you could make us a lot more money here.”

I lower my hands under the table. His gaze is so intense I have to look away and instead fix my eyes on someone getting up in the neighboring booth. He's tall, his shoulders colossally broad. His dark, earthy skin shimmers in the dim light, or maybe that's just my vision. Darkness keeps creeping into its edges and I need to blink to keep myself alert.

"I don't know—" Mav begins, but I interrupt him.

"It's fine. I just need work."

Alastor smiles insidiously. "That's what I like to hear."

Looking around the room I notice someone watching us, a woman with long, auburn curls pinned up into an elaborate coiffure. Her eyes are piercing as they slip over me and find the man in the other booth. He stops midway through getting up and, as if having received some sort of non-verbal signal, sits back down.

Mav shoots me a pained glance, then he says to Alastor, "Do you need anything else? I have to go and meet someone."

Themansmiles. "You go, I'll just have a word with Deni here."

With a brief nod, Mav turns to leave. Before he's finished crossing the room my phone vibrates and I know he's texted me some biting social commentary. I squirm while Alastor lets his eyes wander over my body.

"How long ago were you turned?" he asks.

I bite my lip. This is not considered a polite question and something I hate talking about. "Couple of months," I say vaguely.

His grin widens. “Oh, you’re a real baby then!” He waves at someone across the room and makes a gesture I don’t recognize. “But you understand what kind of work you’d be doing for us?”

I nod stiffly, hands clasped together beneath the table. Not all of my shaking is caused by hunger.

“You’re lucky you’re young and pretty. Freshly turned vampires are a liability. When people pay for sex they’re not usually looking to put their lives in danger but...” he smiles, showing his teeth, “I think we can work something out.”

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“Ok.” My voice is hollow.

He leans in towards me, his fingers brushing my chin across the table. “Don’t be nervous. We’ll take good care of you.”

His words and the clammy touch of his hand bring an uneasy nausea to my stomach but I squash it down. It’s only this one time, I remind myself. I just have to pay my rent and get my hands on some blood, then I’ll get back on my feet. This time next week, I’ll have a real job again.

Someone appears beside our table and pulls me from my thoughts. A young man in slacks and vest sets down a mysterious red cocktail before Alastor and follows that up by slapping a blood bag on the table. Before I can stop myself, I find myself reaching for it.

Alastor catches my hand in a vice grip, tight enough that I let out a pained huff of air. He smiles with false congeniality. “This is for after. A little motivation to show yourself from your best side.”

I try to draw my hand away but he keeps it held firmly in place. I grimace. “It’s just... I’m starving.” I swallow. “I can hardly move by myself.”

With a chuckle, he lets go of my wrist. “Even better.”

Alastor practically has to drag me up the stairs and into one of the rooms, my legs no

longer willing to do the work. I almost feel relief when we arrive, finally able to sink down on a fancy-looking red leather lounge. The room itself manages to be trashy despite each component clearly having been expensive. The furniture is covered in real leather, the wooden floors are solid, the rose-print wallpaper is elaborately textured, and the large bed has an intricately carved bedhead in the shape of a heart. The pillows are plush with what looks like real fur. It looks like a rich person's caricature of what a room in a brothel should look like.

The back wall is covered in shackles, toys, and devices I don't understand and can't name. I swallow. Alastor leaves me with a reminder that the customer is always right and that there's money waiting for me on the other side of this. When I raise my concerns that I'm not ready – because I have no idea what the hell I'm doing – he just laughs, saying, “You'll learn soon enough,” and closes the door behind himself.

I rub my sweaty palms on my jeans as I wait, hearing my blood rush in my ears. What the hell am I doing? I try to squash down the panic rising in my throat. What did you think? I scold myself. That there'd be an instruction manual for prostitution?

I get weaker with every minute that passes. I've never been this starved before and it surprises me how rapidly my state is deteriorating. While I knew that this could happen to vampires, I never really thought about it much when I was still human. Like everyone else, I thought vampires were nothing but parasites. I assumed the hollowed-out shadows hiding from the sun under bridges ended up there because they screwed up in life, not because living like this is impossible.

I try to reason with my own panic. I've never been with a guy before but it's easy enough, right? People do this all the time. It'll be gross but it's just one night. People do this all the time, I repeat to myself. It's just sex. It doesn't matter.

The more I try to reason, the worse my panic gets. Eventually, the nausea becomes too much. I can't do this.

With shaking knees, I push myself out of the chair. I can't stay upright without holding on to the wall. Stumbling, I try to make my way to the door. I'll just find somewhere to wait for Mav and text him that I changed my mind. He'll help me get home.

Before I can make it to the door, I stumble straight into someone's broad, heavily perfumed chest. He smells like he's put on every expensive scent he could find at once, sweet and musky and nauseatingly strong. Only humans have noses so impervious to smell.

"And where do you think you're going?" He grabs me by the elbows, steadying me.

Another human, recognizable by the smell of sweat clinging to his skin, appears in my vision. He leans in close to me and grabs my arm, turning my back to the wall. His breath is acrid with expensive liquor.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, trying to push myself off the wall. "I'm not... I can't. I have to go."

The one with the bad breath pushes me back with ease. He clicks his tongue disapprovingly. "But we've already paid."

Slapping his hand off me, I turn and push myself along the wall toward the door. When I look up I see Alastor leaning in the doorway – for a moment I feel relieved, then I see the expression on his face.

One of the two grabs me from behind, wrapping his arm around my waist. I try to free myself, clawing at his arm, but I'm so weak it doesn't even leave a mark.

"Careful of her teeth, boys," Alastor says smugly. "What do they say? You can cut the head off a snake but it can still bite."

“Let go of me!” My voice is thin and quiet, not at all the way I'm trying to sound.

Alastor looks me dead in the eye before closing the door.

The guy behind me turns and pins me against the wall, his body pressed against my back. “Don’t be scared,” he says, his breath damp against my ear. “We’ll have fun.”

“No! Stop it!” I try to struggle free as his hand slides under my shirt. “I changed my mind! Let me go!”

With an annoyed grunt, he moves his other hand up my arm and then claps his hand over my mouth.

Fuck.

My body is too limp, my muscles refusing to do as I ask them. His hands are rough as they find my chest. I can feel him getting hard against the soft flesh of my hips. I have the violent urge to be sick. Desperate, I twist my head to seek the eyes of the other guy.

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Help me.

But there's nothing to appeal to in his face. He licks his lips as he unbuckles his pants and slides his hand beneath the fabric.

I can't move.I can't move!

My fingernails leave tiny tracks on the wallpaper as he pulls me toward the bed. My mind is empty, pure panic, like a caged animal.No. This isn't happening. No. No. No.

With the movement, his hand shifts on my mouth, fleshy palm pressing between my lips. Without thinking, I sink my teeth into him, fangs extending to puncture flesh. He yells and shoves me away from him.

I hit the foot of the bed with my head as I collapse like a puppet without strings. Pain shoots through my forehead and ear, then my ribcage as he kicks me. I want to scream but all that comes out is a small whimper.

“Fucking bitch!” he swears as he yanks me up by my hair.

His friend is laughing. “The guyjustsaid watch the teeth.”

The side of my head hits the wall as he shoves me back against it angrily. This time, he keeps far away from my mouth. Instead, he slips his hand between my stomach and the wall to find the button of my pants.

“No!” My voice is muffled by the way my face is pressed against the wall. I choke on

the word. I struggle, kicking haplessly. The movement is enough to make his task a little more difficult, making him fumble. With a frustrated grunt he steps back a little, pulling me away from the wall for easier reach.

Desperate, I throw my weight down, unsure of what I'm trying to achieve except for making him stop. He catches me before I hit the floor, reaching thoughtlessly for my hair again. It brings his wrist just close enough for me to twist my head and bite again.

He swears and tries to yank his arm away but this time, I'm not letting go. I sink my teeth not only into the artery at his wrist but into flesh and tendon, using all the strength left in me. Blood wells past my teeth reluctantly. The dark, animalistic presence in my head awakens with a vengeance. I try to fight it but quickly lose.

The guy stumbles backward, punching my neck and head, panicking now. When it doesn't work, he presses his other hand into my face, pushing. With every drop of sanguine liquid that I draw out, I can feel a little strength returning to my body.

But what if I kill him? It's a fear that's haunted me ever since my transition. I don't want anyone on my conscience, not even someone like him. And yet there's an angry part of me that enjoys hearing his panicked voice telling his friend to fucking do something. Terrified, I grapple with myself, trying to make myself let go.

I succeed just in time for his friend to yank back on my shoulders. Blood runs from my lips to my chin as he pulls me away. I watch with grim satisfaction as blood splatters from the guy's wrist onto the leather lounge and he tries frantically to stop the bleeding with tissues. There's a dark part of me that almost wishes vampire bites didn't heal so quickly, so that I could watch him bleed out.

Then his friend hits me with something hard in the back. My knees give and I double over on the floor, yelping. While one of them stills his bleeding, the other picks me up

and wrestles me face-down onto the bed. I'm still not strong enough.

"You're going to regret that," he hisses.

Really? I think grimly. This is what you're doing instead of helping your friend? I'm not sure why that surprises me.

His fingers slip under the seam of my pants and he begins to dig them down, when the loud click of a door makes him stop.

"What the fuck?!" The other guy snaps. Then, louder, "The room is taken!"

A moment of silence in which I can only hear my own panting breath. My mind scrambles. Someone is coming in. Help me. Help me help me help me!

I squirm and try to say something but what comes out is only an unintelligible whisper, not audible over the dampened music coming from downstairs. For a moment, the music rises as the door is opened, then it closes again.

"I thought there might be room for one more but," the low, velvety voice of a woman says. "I wasn't expecting such a mess."

I can feel the vibration of his voice as the guy above me replies, "The little bitch went psycho on us."

"I see." She laughs, light and happy and not at all the way someone coming to help me would laugh. The guy above me gets back to work on my pants and all my hope crashes and burns up in terror.

No. This can't be happening. Dammit, why can't I move?

There is a yelp and a gurgling sound loud enough that I can hear it, followed by retching and choking.

The guy above me stops again. “What the fuck are you—”

His words are cut off by sputtering and choking. I can feel his body twitch and convulse before he collapses, landing somewhere half on me and half beside me on the bed. At the same time, the distinct click of heels on wood approaches. My fingers claw at the sheets.

There’s a ‘clank’ and something skids across the floor.

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“What a dump,” she mumbles, disgust thick in her voice. The heavy weight of the body half slumped over me shifts and is rolled away, followed by the thump of it hitting the floor.

“Ugh.” The mattress dips as she sits down beside me. Cool hands turn me onto my side. I recognize her from before, the vibrant auburn hair and piercing eyes still fresh in my memory.

I didn’t even notice I was crying until she cups my cheek and wipes my tears away with her thumb.

“Ssshhh.” She brushes the hair from my face. “Don’t cry. It’s over, you’re okay now.”

I don’t stop crying. My skin crawls with the memory of that man’s body against mine, his perfume clinging to me. I don’t understand what’s happening and I still can’t move.

The woman clicks her tongue and bends over me, hands sliding gently under my torso and head. Cold prickles over my skin as she lifts me. Magic.

I don’t struggle as she pulls me onto her lap. All the fight has left me. Maybe whatever she’s about to do will hurt less if I just let it happen. I close my eyes and try to pretend I’m somewhere else.

Only the feeling of an artery pulsing against my cheek, its heartbeat steady, brings me back to reality. That base, invasive part of me that I’ve been working so hard to

suppress returns in full force.

My head is moved, turned so my lips touch her tender skin. Without so much as thinking I open my mouth and run my tongue over it, tasting her sweet perfume and feeling the rhythmic pulsing of her blood. My fangs are fully extended now, their sharp tips scraping my tongue.

Cool fingers run up my neck and into my hairline. Her breath is warm against my cheek when she says, “Drink.”

It’s not a question.

I shudder, the violent roil of my craving nearly blinding. Still, I hesitate, try to push back against it. I don’t want to have anyone on my conscience, I repeat to myself like a mantra.

Gently, she pushes my head forward, pressing my mouth into her skin, making me groan with hunger. “I won’t offer again.”

3. AN INEBRIATED KNIGHT IN SHINING ARMOR

Nobody is this generous and whatever she wants in return, I don’t have to give. I can feel in my bones that this will have consequences, that I should run. But of course, I can’t. And I no longer have the willpower to resist.

The skin of her throat bursts like an overripe peach under my teeth, implausibly delicate, hot blood welling up through the wound. Her grip tightens in my hair as I draw out the sanguine liquid.

It does not taste the way blood is supposed to taste. The usual overpowering tang of iron, something that would have made me gag as a human and still repulses some part

of me, is barely noticeable through sweet and floral notes, like delicate honey. How?

I remember the tickle of magic as she lifted me and desperately urge myself to pull back, though there is no hope for that now. Many creatures have blood different from that of humans – ghouls, djinn, demons, gods and their descendants. I'm sure there are others. But only ichor, the blood of the gods, is said to taste sweet. She's a witch.

It's overpowering. Sensations return to my body with force, first sound, clearer and more resonant than before. After, I am slowly able to control my limbs again, my hands having already dug hungrily into her clothes. Her perfume has become infinitely more complex, a perfectly delicate dance of sweet and musky, woven through with the now distinguished scent of her skin.

My mind seems determined to play back the events of the night. Don't worry, we'll have fun. My fingertips pop through the fabric of her dress as if it were made of tissue paper. My back remembers the man's touch, like a carbon copy, and the sensation just won't go away. I should have insisted on having blood first. I knew I couldn't trust Alastor. I should have never come here in the first place. How could I have been so stupid?

With a shudder, I lean harder into the blood rush, away from the downdraft of my thoughts, the choking fear of helplessness, and towards the part of me that is a predator, the part solely occupied by its need for blood.

When I open my eyes, the world explodes with color and detail. I can see every hair in the woman's red curls, every ripple in the textured wallpaper, every spot of dust on the wooden floors. Her hair is of an exquisite shade, complex and deep. And she smells absolutely divine.

For one ragged breath, I manage to pull myself away, to breathe. My chest heaves as blood drips from my lips, and in the runnels making their way down her neck, I can

see gold swirled through the red.Ichor.

“Venom.”It is not a question but an order. Her voice sounds like she is used to being obeyed without question.

Of course,I think. Vampire venom is a dangerous and unconventional way to get high, but popular nonetheless. There’s a risk, of course – consistent exposure over the long term forces your body into transition but if you don’t die, the changes are almost never permanent. And a little every now and then carries no risk, if you ignore that of becoming addicted. I have never injected someone before – mostly because I don’t feel like preying on the innocent.

I need to brace myself against the headboard behind her to stop myself from simply falling over her and drinking until she drops. “I’ve never done that before.” My voice is haggard as if I haven't spoken in days. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Her laughter is clear, sharp, and incontrovertibly condescending. “I’d like to see you try.”

Her reaction stokes something in me, an indignant burn that makes me sink my teeth back into her, harder this time. The headboard cracks under my grip. What the hell kind of blood is this? If I had this kind of power earlier... My mind, consumed by the animal – the vampire – in me, spirals into violent fantasies.

Horried, I shrink back from the thoughts. It’s not the first time I’ve frightened myself. After Casey turned me, for a while, there was nothing but violence on my mind. Sometimes, I’m sure it’s the vampire part of me, sometimes I wonder if those thoughts were there all along but I just never admitted it to myself.

I release my venom with a sense of defiance. To my surprise, it feels oddly gratifying, enough to make me groan quietly.

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She, too, lets out a soft moan. “More.”

I obey, dizzy and overwhelmed by the onslaught on my senses, and still my mind won't shut up. We'll have fun. I try to focus on the way my muscles feel, powerful, like a drawn bow ready to fire.

“That's enough,” she orders firmly. Her hand tugs at my hair as if trying to pull me away.

A growl rumbles through the room and it takes me a moment to realize that I'm the one making the noise. I'm strong now, stronger than any human. She can't stop me. I'm done being helpless.

“I said enough.” Her voice is cold as ice.

“No!” The word is muffled against her skin. With a loud pop, a piece snaps off the wooden headboard beneath my fist.

Slowly, she raises her hand to my throat, her fingers curling around it. I almost laugh – if her intention is to strangle me, she will be dead before she accomplishes her task.

The laughter dies before it can sound out, cold creeping up from my neck to my chin. The muscles in my jaw spasm, tightening furiously, refusing to move when I order them to. As the cold extends, it creeps into my windpipe. It feels as if ice crystals are forming in my throat, cold and sharp. Unable to swallow, the blood pools in my mouth until it overflows, dripping from my chin.

The pain is so sharp and urgent, my hands go to my neck, clasp the hand that is wrapped around it as I gasp for air. The moment I let go of her, she shoves me back with a surprising amount of force. Frustrated, burning with the need for more, I catch her wrist, lurching back forward. I grab onto her hair, tilt her head, and try to sink my teeth back into her neck. Before I can make contact, the ice returns to my throat. This time, I'm sure it's going to split my throat open.

With an undignified yelp, I startle backward, grabbing at my neck. I slip off her lap. Before I can get my bearings, she slaps me hard enough to send me stumbling the rest of the way to the floor. The pain is brilliantly sharp and bright, making my ears ring. I'm sure if she used her backhand, she would have dislocated my jaw.

Breathing heavily, I dig my fingers into my thighs, trying hard to stop myself from attacking again. Maybe I could overpower her. But getting hit has brought some sense back to me, reminding me that, actually, I don't want to do that. Breathing raggedly, I take stock of my body and my senses. I'm on all fours on the floor, blood on my lips, cheek burning hot. Blinding hunger fills me, nearly pushing every other thought out of my mind. I know this is my fault. I let it get too bad. This is why so many vampires are locked up in a tomb somewhere – because they lose control and hurt someone. I was so afraid of the monster I am now that I inadvertently made it worse.

Still getting my bearings, I raise my eyes to her. She's looking down with pursed lips, her face full of cold irritation. Her blue irises have nearly been swallowed up by widened pupils, a side effect of my venom.

She glances at the holes in her expensive-looking dress where my fingers were only moments ago. Some blood has dripped from her wound down to the neckline and left dark stains on the navy fabric. Her hand is pressing a tissue against her neck, red flecks quickly blooming on the white paper.

“So that's what I get,” she murmurs as she gets to her feet, dangerously high heels

coming to rest on the floor before me.

Anger and frustration flare in me at the thought of losing the taste of her blood – going back to being powerless – but there is also a tiny part of my brain present enough to realize that I’m being an absolutely ungrateful bitch. She steps past me and I follow her heels with my eye as they clack over the wooden boards to a sideboard. She uncorks a bottle of wine, pours herself a glass, and empties it in one swig.

The smell of the woman’s blood clings to the air. I can’t stop myself from inhaling as deeply as I can, indulging in its sweetness. Before I know what is happening, I’m growling again. This would be embarrassing if I had a single brain cell to spare for feeling anything else but desire. Fighting back the urge to just jump up and attack her, I curl up, burying my hands in my hair as if my arms could somehow shield me from this onslaught on my senses. I’ve had enough, I try to tell myself. But I want more, or rather, that darkness sleeping in me wants more. It wants excess.

“I’m sorry,” I manage to press out between my teeth, still fighting myself.

“What was that?”

I peer up at her through my arms. Her dress parts at the side with every step and maybe it’s the angle, but her legs look infinitely long and graceful as she comes toward me. She crouches and gently removes my hands from my hair.

My jaw opens involuntarily, ready to bite. I yank my hand back from hers and press it over my mouth.

“I’m sorry,” I repeat, voice mumbled. “About your dress and...” I’m not good at apologies. “I lost control, I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Her expression is as haughty as anything I’ve ever seen. “You didn’t.”

Ugh. “I know, I just... You...” Have I lost my damn tongue? Why am I stuttering like an idiot? But the thought is quickly drowned out by the memory of what she interrupted – that guy's hand creeping under my shirt, my nails haplessly scraping at the wallpaper.

I meet her ice-blue eyes with my own, almost nauseous from the rush of the blood. Slowly, I remember where I am and how I got here. “What do you want from me?”

Her expression softens a little. “I won’t touch you, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“Then what are you doing here?”

She shrugs and gets up. “It sounded like things were getting heated in here.” She nods toward the man lying unconscious on the floor. “Alastor won’t be very happy if he finds out you attacked your customers, so I made sure they won’t remember what happened here – only that it was the best night of their lives.”

“So what, you’re just a knight in shining armor?” My voice is more bitter than intended. Wiping the blood from my mouth with my sleeve, I steady myself to get to my feet.

Her expression is carefully neutral. “You could say that.”

“But?”

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“But witch blood is worth a lot of money.” Her hand goes to the slowly healing wound in her neck. “And I thought maybe we could come to an agreement.”

Of course. Nobody in Midnight City does anything merely because it’s the right thing to do. “Then what do you want? I don’t have any money.”

Her lips curl into a cold smile. “I accept other currencies.”

So now she’s going to admit to whatever dirty shit she wants me to do? “Like?”

She runs her thumb over my chin, catching the last of the blood, then pushes it between my lips. Before I can process the audacity of the act, my body has already responded, my mouth opening to admit her, tongue greedily licking the last sweet drops from her finger. Her smile is the same one you would give a well-trained pet after it performed a circus trick. “I’m sure you have your uses.”

I blush like a blundering moron. How obnoxious.

Before I can say anything else, she leans in close, breath brushing my cheek, and says, “Be safe, kitten,” and turns to leave. “I’ll come collecting soon enough.”

4. PAPERWORK OF THE UNDEAD WHO HAVE NOT YET BEEN FORSAKEN BY GOD

Being on a bus full of strange people who don’t seem to understand the concept of personal space – or personal hygiene – has always been a nightmare for me but it’s worse today. The only free seat has something mysteriously sticky glued to it, so I

stand. Every time someone brushes past my body, I get the urge to scream and flinch away, once again reminded of my night at the Myrrh & Adder. This is made worse by the fact that slowly, over the past week, I have gotten weaker and weaker again, without being able to secure work.

Despite its claim of being accessible to all Tartarus residents, the Welfare Services Centre is located in an obscure part of the neighborhood that is impossible to get to and also opens late only one night of the week. It takes me thirty minutes to cross half of Tartarus on the bus, and then another thirty to get from the bus stop to the ominous brick building. By the time I arrive, I'm ten minutes late for my fifteen-minute appointment, clutching a crumpled manila folder to my chest.

The building's inside is strangely dusty and full of garish eighties-patterns, from the dark green carpet covered in randomly arranged geometric shapes to the profoundly uncomfortable metal chairs, which are upholstered in vomit-green with entrail-pink dots. The woman sitting across from me at her desk is brusque and thoroughly unimpressed by my paperwork.

After taking an imprint of my teeth and a sample of my venom, she asks, "Why didn't you report yourself when you were first turned?"

I squirm in my seat, feeling oddly stupid under her patronizing gaze. "Nobody told me I was supposed to and... it was a difficult transition."

She sighs and slaps a flyer onto the desk. "There are resources to help with transitioning, honey." Her flat tone stands in direct opposition to her diminutive use of pet names. "They also would have sent you here sooner. Either way, you only qualify for Transition Aid within six months of being turned, so you need to produce proof of when you first transitioned. And to be frank, the program is mostly designed for lycanthropes, whose transition process often inhibits their ability to work. It rarely gets approved for vampires."

“But—”

She leans forward with a sincere expression on her round face. “Look, sweetie, I’ve already given you the minimum fine for failing to report your transition. But even if I wanted to hand you a cheque today, it’s not up to my discretion. Without the right paperwork, there’s nothing I can do.”

“How—” It takes all my strength not to add ‘the hell’, “—do I prove when I was turned?”

She sighs and shuffles around some papers on her desk. “You need two residents of the city who have known you at least five years to verify the date of your transition. What about the person who turned you? Would they be able to do that?”

I shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

“A family member, maybe?”

I shrink a little further. My family is deeply religious and if being gay hadn’t been enough to make them disown me, being a vampire certainly would. Midnight City was supposed to be where my dreams came true, far away from the restraints of home. “No, I don’t really have family here.”

“A friend? Maybe your GP?”

I clench my jaw. Mav is my only friend and I haven’t been able to afford the doctor since I got here. With a sense of defeat, I shake my head.

Another deep sigh sends the smell of onion and lunch meat across the desk. She looks like she’s heard this story fifty times already today and has become completely numb to it. “Why don’t you give these people a try?” She pushes the flyer closer to me.

“They offer coupons to blood banks. And when you can get all the supporting paperwork together, you can make another appointment with us.”

Her words brim with a bored finality that I don't have the strength to oppose. By the time I step out of the door, all my hope has evaporated and been replaced with a small but persistent burn in my chest. Somehow, I came to apply for financial aid and am walking away with a fine. And how am I supposed to prove when I was turned? It's not like Casey left me with a signed paper saying 'I'm a royal bitch and turned my girlfriend against her will.'

My whole world fell apart when I was turned. I can hardly remember the first few weeks – I do remember dying, though. Until then I had just thought I was incredibly sick with some horrible virus – constant nausea, light sensitivity, aching muscles, weakness, and shaking. Of course, because I didn't have health insurance, I never ended up getting checked out until eventually, it was too late.

Apparently, in the weeks missing from my memory, I also managed to lose my job, not long after followed by my apartment. Meanwhile, I couldn't bear facing Casey after what she'd done to me. I had nobody else to explain to me where I could get blood or how to even function. And in the middle of that mess, I was supposed to report to the city that I'd been turned?

Bullshit. I kick the garbage can outside of the building on my way out. All of this is bullshit.

A reedy figure in a green t-shirt stands on the sidewalk holding a bible. “Would you like a flyer?”

Without thinking, I reach out and take the piece of paper. GOD HAS NOT FORSAKEN YOU is written on it in bright yellow letters. With a huffed laugh, I drop it on the sidewalk. Out of all the cults and religions in this city, Christianity is

the one I know and have learned to hate. And if I've ever felt like God has forsaken me, it's now.

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Frustrated, I crumple up the paper from my application and fling it into the next bin. I'll regret that later because I also don't have coins to print anything else but for now, the motion feels satisfying.

The unpleasant cold of fall is starting to give way to the biting, painful cold of winter. It's still bearable on days like this but soon it'll start to rain, or worse, pathetically soppy snowflakes will begin to fall just to turn to mud at my feet. The thought alone makes me miserable.

Too angry to get back on the bus, I begin walking aimlessly up the sidewalk, staring down at the pavement to avoid the sad, starless sky. Like when I was a kid, I try to avoid stepping on cracks in the pavement, which helps keep me distracted from my thoughts. Sometimes, I look up to admire the graffiti of various skill levels that the city can't afford or isn't bothered to paint over.

It's while slowing down my steps like this that I notice a black SUV turn into the sidestreet behind me. This wouldn't be unusual if it didn't look brand-spanking new – and if I hadn't noticed it turn into the last street I walked, and the one before that. My stomach does a nervous dance but I try to calm myself. Why would anyone follow me? It doesn't work – my mind is already coming up with horror stories of where my staked body might be discovered tomorrow.

Forcing myself to stay calm, I continue to stroll through the streets, trying to stick to where people are. Around me, the neighborhood begins to turn into Asphodel, the part of town that bridges Tartarus, which is mostly community housing, and blingy Elysium. Slowly, the graffiti and cracks become less and less. Here, the bus stops mostly still have their seats and are much less sticky.

The small rows of townhouses have a cozy feel to them, almost as if you weren't in a city of eight million at all. People have flowers on their balconies, and there are playgrounds surrounded by trees as if we were in suburbia rather than a metropolis. In the day, the sounds of playing children can be heard in the streets – and they don't even get run over, most of the time. Elysium doesn't have the same appeal to me. When I dream of winning the lottery, it's always Asphodel I imagine myself living in.

Alright, let's not get nostalgic. I turn into a narrow alley between two rows of brick complexes that seem to have been erected by two architects with differing views on city planning. The result is a space narrow enough that a car won't fit. Unfortunately, the street lamps also don't properly light the space. Glancing over my shoulder for the SUV, I speed up my steps. It's not there – maybe I just imagined it.

Some old furniture is leaning against one of the buildings, disassembled. On a sheet of paper stuck to it, someone has written 'free', with a little smiling face behind it. It looks like a closet or cabinet. I pause to have a closer look – I could use a closet. Of course, even if this could be reassembled, I wouldn't have a car to move it. And I suppose Pavel's place isn't the kind where you bring your own furniture. With a strange ache in my chest, I think of my clothes piled on the floor.

Before I can contemplate it further, I notice something dark in a streetlight at the other end of the alley. Again I stop, pretending to still be interested in the closet. I glance at the end of the street to see the same car stopped there that has been following me on my way here. Shit.

My heart stumbles as I turn, planning to head in the opposite direction, already wondering if I have the energy to run – and walk straight into the arms of the red-haired witch.

She looks surreal in the dim light, with fiery eyes and rosy skin. Her full lips curl into a smile when I see her. "I told you I'd come collecting."

Like an absolute idiot, body-wired and terrified, I try to bolt. After spending every minute of every day in a state of emergency, my body is just waiting for an excuse to run. With one leap, I move past her – just to be caught in the steel grip of one icy hand. Before I can even think of screaming, she spins me around and claps her hand over my mouth. Suddenly, I’m back at the Myrrh & Adder, being pressed into the wall.

“If you think I’m abducting you, I’m sorry to disappoint.” Her voice is measured, almost bored. Her breath brushes my ear. “I just want to talk.”

Her other hand is wrapped around my waist, holding me against her. I can feel the cold tingle of magic that I felt the last time I saw her. What could a woman like this possibly want with me? I have nothing.

“I’m going to let you go now.”

She lifts her hand from my mouth and I can feel the pressure of her body disappear. Still in panic mode, I stand helplessly frozen.

“Come on!” She starts walking, beckoning me with her hand. When I don’t follow her, she turns around without stopping. “I’m not the kind of woman who does business out in the street. So if you want work, you’re going to have to come with me.”

I bite my lip and hesitantly follow her. How anyone can walk this fast in heels is a mystery to me. Her silhouette is sharp against the night lights as I try to keep up. Inadvertently, I feel like a bumbling idiot, clumsy and inelegant.

When we reach the car parked at the end of the alleyway, I blush to find her opening the car door for me before she walks around to the other side. I squirm in the leather seat, trying desperately to calm my nerves. It feels like I’m watching myself from

outside of myself, wondering why I'm making the stupid choice to get into a stranger's car without being able to stop myself.

Once she's inside, the witch signals the driver, who is a young woman rather than the elderly gentleman I would expect to be a chauffeur. She's separated from the back by a pane of glass.

The car slips into nighttime traffic smoothly. Outside, the streets of Asphodel begin to roll steadily by, idyllic front yards and cobbled alleyways passing my window. I press into the furthest corner away from the witch. "What do you want from me? I already told you I don't have money."

Her expression seems amused. She reaches out and touches the seam of my shirt, where the thread is fraying. "Oh, I know, kitten."

I set my teeth. Even though I'm trying to put on a brave face, I feel like I might throw up at any moment. In my mind, I'm already conjuring up all sorts of things she could want as payment – sex being the least bad of them all.

"Do you know who I am?"

I wave my hand at her, trying my hardest to seem unimpressed, despite the fact that I'm absolutely shitting myself. "You're some kind of witch, right?"

Rather than being offended, her smile only widens, her eyes sparkling with suppressed laughter. "You've gotten braver since the last time we met." Something about her face tells me that instead of brave, she actually means stupid.

"So who are you then?"

I catch the driver throwing me an incredulous glance in the rearview mirror.

“I’m Celeste,” she says simply.

Since I’m apparently supposed to know who she is, I rack my brain to try to remember where I’ve heard that name before but come up empty. “And what do you want?” I repeat.

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“I have a job for you, to work off your debt. If you do well enough, there’ll be more – it looks like you could use the money.”

I blink, trying to gather my thoughts. What do I have that nobody else has in this damned city? It doesn’t make any sense. “What kind of job?” I ask suspiciously.

“Alastor will text you tonight offering you more work and I need you to say yes.” Seeing my face, she adds, “Not at the club. Charon’s Veil are selling a new product and they need people to move it. I just need you to do a few runs for them.”

“Why would they askme?”

Celeste’s face is unreadable. “You’re desperate for work, easy to manipulate, and according to your very satisfied customers, you don’t cause problems. And if you get picked up by the police, they’ll have a hard time tracing it back to them.”

I swallow. “And what happens to me if I get caught?”

She waves her hand. “You won’t.”

“How can you be so sure?”

She clicks her fingernails on the plastic of the door. “Because I’ll make sure.”

“Out of all the people in this city, you have got to have better options than me.”

She lifts her hand to my chin and runs her thumb over my cheek. For someone who

claims not to want to fuck me she's awfully handsy. Embarrassingly though, I don't absolutely hate it.

"You underestimate your own strength, kitten. I've seen it myself." As if suddenly realizing what she's doing, she lowers her hand and adds, "Besides, you've earned Alastor's trust. That's useful for me."

"Useful how?"

She smiles. "Useful by reporting every detail about the work you do for them back to me."

"What if I don't want to do it?"

She shrugs. "You could try and repay my favor with cash, though you'd still have to find a job that pays." Tilting her head, she adds, "Does sucking cock at the Myrrh & Adder sound preferable to you?"

Her words shock me – she seems too pretty and refined to be so vulgar. But she's not wrong. Not only do I have no other options but I will probably take Alastor's job anyway. Outside, the city begins to fall asleep, windows blinking out one by one.

"Fine," I say. "I'll do it."

5. WALKING MISERY

Just as Celeste predicted, I get a text from Alastor that same night asking me if I want more work. My finger's shake when I text back. This doesn't mean I'm doing this forever, I think. I just need to get through this until I find a real job.

The stupid charity that the Welfare Services lady sent me to handed me a bunch of

coupons that would get me blood if the blood bank didn't run out every night before I got there. By the time I get off the bus, everyone and their mother is already waiting in line. There are a few plastic coins for the laundromat though, and I'm dying to use some fabric softener so I can stop smelling like this moldy apartment. It would certainly help the job search, too.

While I'm separating colors from whites, Mav stirs to life on his mattress. He's been outnearly every night this week, coming home bleary-eyed. Despite the cold, he slept shirtless, a thin layer of sweat slicking his tattooed skin. He looks spacey and disoriented, making me wonder how much Ghostshade it took to make his night bearable.

"You look fresh," he croaks as he pushes himself up.

I grimace. "You look like crap." Waving my plastic coins, I add, "Got any washing?"

His smile is crooked and tired. "What's the occasion?"

"The occasion is not wanting to have a repeat of the other night." I stare determinedly into my laundry pile, hands moving fabric senselessly this way and that, as memories of that night barrage me, just as clear as if it happened yesterday. My skin still remembers every touch – it would be bizarre if it weren't so disgusting. "There are a few bars on Norns' Ave I haven't applied to yet, maybe I could drop my resumé off this week? But I don't think they'll hire me if I smell like this place."

Mav sits up. His voice is sheepish. "Did it go ok? At the club, I mean."

"Fine," I lie, not looking at him. "I don't wanna talk about it."

"Fair." He gets up and picks through his laundry. Unlike me, he keeps his clean clothes folded and organised.

Feeling both of our discomfort curdle and thicken the air, I decide to change the topic. “Hey, does the name Celeste ring a bell with you?”

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He throws me a couple of his shirts. “One night on the job and you’re already looking for baby names?”

I realize that I don’t really have enough clothes to separate them in whites and colours, and the whites are barely white anymore anyway. Flinging everything back together into a pile, I reply, “Not funny.”

“I’m just saying, Celeste sounds a little bit posh for your bastard child.”

I throw his shirt back at his head. Even though it’s not funny if I think about it for too long, there’s really not much left to do but laugh. “It’s better than Maverick!”

He gives a little bow before pulling out a small bag of Ghostshade and accidentally scattering rolling papers all over the floor. “Smoke enough of this and anything sounds great. That was my mom’s philosophy, anyway.”

I sigh. “So there’s no, like, criminal supergenious in this city with that name?”

He carefully picks up each piece of paper, straightens it out, and puts it back in the package. “Why?”

“Just a name I heard around.”

“Hmmm.” Mav gets up and tiptoes over to the window. “There’s Celeste de Villiers but I don’t think criminal supergenious is the right description.”

“What is the right description, then?”

Mav peels back some of the wooden boards closing our window and lights up his freshly rolled joint. “She’s a witch,” he says between inhales. “Kinda notorious.”

“Notorious for?”

“What is this about?” He narrows his eyes at me. “Is Alastor making you mess with her stuff or something?”

“What? No, why would he?”

For a few seconds, he studies my face as if trying to determine whether I’m lying, his joint smouldering by itself. “They have some kind of turf war going on, I think. He said you’d be picking up more work, is that what he’s making you do?”

“No. I don’t even know what you’re talking about.” I begin flinging my clothes into a duffel bag that has been in this apartment longer than me. It smells like gym shoes and cheetos.

He shrugs. “I’m just saying, I don’t think you want to get involved in this.”

“Get involved in what?” The duffel’s zipper is broken and gets stuck half-way. I yank at it nervously, underestimating my own strength until the zipper tears free from the fabric. “Dammit!” I mumble.

He takes a gratuitously long puff of Ghostshade. “I don’t know, she brings witchy stuff into the city, herbs and whatnot. Banned stuff. Charon’s Veil like to mess with her, sabotage her shipments, that kind of thing.”

“What? Why?”

“Apparently, a few years ago, she killed a bunch of big vampire bosses. Just—” He

runs his thumb over his throat as if cutting it and clicks his tongue. “Which is why, if they need someone to set her warehouse on fire or steal from her, I am nowhere to be found. And I suggest you do the same.”

“How do you know all of this?”

He shrugs. “I spend a lot of quality time with some important people.”

I clear my throat. “Is that why you usually work at the club?”

He throws me my sunglasses, which I’ve hung over one of the wooden boards. They’re cheap and plasticky, but will help me get through the last fading daylight. “I don’t know. Prostitution is decriminalized. But if you get caught doing one of their drug runs... I’m not ready to spend twelve years in a tomb.” He shakes his head. “And I hope you’re not either! If we’re going to save up for a deposit on a better place, it would help if you’re not in prison.”

I frown. So far, I haven’t told him that I’ll need to pay off my ridiculous fine first. “Then why’d you suggest me for it when we were at the Myrrh & Adder?”

He waves his hand. “Oh, for this new thing? It’s not drugs.”

“Right.” I shake my head, trying to remember what we were talking about. “So, Celeste is bad news?”

“Yeah. Dangerous territory. Like, finding-a-chopped-off-horse-head-in-your-bed kind of territory.”

“That’s... oddly specific.” I draw my hood deep into my face, trying to shield myself from the memory of the setting sun. Then I sling the old duffel over my shoulder and head for the door. “But I promise I’ll be careful.”

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As I head up the hallway, Mav shouts, “That was a Godfather reference, you uneducated child!”

With an uncomfortable pressure in my stomach, I slip outside. So I shouldn’t get involved – but I’m pretty sure I already am.

The uneasy feeling that my conversation with Mav has planted only grows with every time I work for Charon’s Veil. The job itself is suspiciously easy: I collect a brown paper bag, which contains syringes filled with clear liquid – I couldn’t not look – and deliver them somewhere across the city, usually in one of the worse neighborhoods. In exchange, I receive a parcel – that I haven’t yet figured out how to unwrap without leaving a trace, so I have no clue what’s in it – which I then deliver and get paid for, usually in one of the better neighborhoods. The money is good, and the money I get from Celeste is even better. And, as Alastor reassures me, it’s really not drugs, which is ideal – Mav is right, if I’m planning to turn my life around, I better not end up locked up.

The whole thing feels like it’s too good to be true.

The first time I meet with Celeste to tell her all the boring details of carrying a brown paper bag on the bus, I can’t help but wonder about what Mav said.

“Stop staring at me.” She’s holding a smoldering joint in one hand and her phone in the other, taking notes as I talk. The phonescreen illuminates the blue Ghostshade smoke that billows from her lips, wafting through the car. She hasn’t bothered to look

at me once.

I cross my arms defensively and look away. “Can I ask you something?”

“That’s not really what I pay you for but sure, go ahead.”

“Someone told me you killed some big important vampires a few years ago. Is that true?”

“Yes.”

So it is her. “Why?”

With a shrug, she says, “I don’t like vampires.” She tilts her head. “No offense.”

“So you don’t work with Alastor? What were you doing at the Myrrh & Adder, then?”

She sighs deeply. “No. And unlike what most vampires seem to believe, the Myrrh & Adder is supposed to be neutral territory.”

“So why are you having me spy on Charon’s Veil?”

She looks up, eyebrows raised. “That’s not how this works, kitten. I pay you enough to not ask questions. Speaking of which.” She reaches into her coat pocket and hands me a roll of cash. “See you next time.”

This sets the tone for every meeting thereafter – she's cold, disinterested and pretty. Not that I'd notice the latter, of course, because I find her obnoxious, though increasingly less so the more time I spend with Alastor. At least she doesn't try to hassle me into prostitution or make inappropriate remarks about my body. She

probably couldn't – I'm not sure she even knows what I look like, considering she mostly just listens without ever looking up from her phone. But being invisible is fine by me.

But like anything else that's too good to be true, it doesn't last long. Three weeks into the job and I find myself walking around Rán, an industrial neighborhood not far from Tartarus, searching for the address I'm supposed to deliver the paper bag to. It would help if my button phone had GPS and could actually help get me there.

When I find the entrance, I almost walk past it. It's a small entryway between an auto repair shop and a grim-looking office building with the words 'Thanatos Logistics' painted in faded letters across the facade. After double checking multiple times that I have the address right, I go up to the glass-brick entryway and ring the bell. The label beside the intercom has been ripped off, leaving only a trace of frayed paper behind. I see no lights in the hallway beyond and I'm not sure the bell actually rang.

With a lump in my throat, I bang on the door. Nothing happens. Straining my ears, I lean against the wood and listen. Somewhere deep inside the building I can hear the muffled sound of voices, laughter and music.

I try the handle and, to my surprise, it's open. My heart pounds as I enter, unsure what I'll find on the other side. I clear my throat as I step into the empty hallway. "Hello?"

There is no response. Following the sound of the dampened music, I make my way up the corridor, which is lit only by the emergency exit sign. Each of my steps echoes and with each echo I expect someone to come out of one of the doors along the wall but nobody does. Did I get the wrong address?

After turning the corner at the end of the hallway, I spot a door that is left open a few

inches, light and music spilling out. “Hello?” I repeat, louder this time.

When nobody answers, I stick my head through the door. It opens into a short hallway, with a tiny kitchen to the right and what seems like a living space up ahead. The music and laughter is coming from inside. As I enter, a girl no older than twenty steps out of the kitchen. She’s frail, almost emaciated, with deep circles under her eyes, and an apprehensively hunched posture.

“Can I help you?” Her voice is timid, as if she’s expecting to get yelled at in response.

I hold up the bag. “I’m looking for someone named Leslie?”

“Oh.” She gives me a hollow smile and waves at me to follow her. With an uneasy pressure in my stomach I notice an IV catheter in the crook of her arm, though it’s not attached to anything. I watch her bones move under her skin, every vertebra in her neck jutting out sharply. She looks like walking misery.

I wait nervously in the hallway while she leans into the living room. Usually, this takes no longer than five minutes and Alastor has been more than clear about not bothering clients. I’d really prefer to get this over with.

“There’s someone here.”

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After a few moments, the door is opened further and a tan, weathered-looking woman with blonde highlights squeezes through the opening. She looks irritated but her furrowed brow smoothes over when she sees the paper bag in my hand. “Ah, crap. I totally forgot.”

She takes the bag from my hand and grabs the girl by her shoulder, pulling her towards the kitchen. “I just need five minutes.”

“I do have somewhere to be,” I say.

“Won’t be long,” she repeats, her voice sounding like she’s chain-smoked from the day she was born. She pulls up a stool from beneath the kitchen counter. “C’mon darling, gotta earn your keep.”

I watch with increasing nausea as the girl sits down while the woman pulls out a messy box of medical supplies and rummages through it. What the hell is happening?

Once she finds what she’s looking for, she fiddles with the IV for a bit, removing and attaching bits I can’t identify but that I’m sure she’s not qualified to, before hooking up a glass vial. With barely suppressed horror, I watch as she fills vial after vial with blood before stoppering them and sitting them on the counter. The smell seeps through me like the winter cold, making my fingers shake. The vampire in me rears its ugly head, full of desire. I bite down hard to stop the urge to release my fangs, swallowing hard. It takes a lot of effort to not even indulge the thought of how I could get my hands on that blood. Why does it smell so good?

The girl leans her head on her free hand, looking like she might faint at any moment.

When Leslie is done, she digs through the kitchen cabinets for a moment. “Do you know if we have any more of those styrofoam boxes, hon?”

The girl lifts her head with what seems like an inhuman amount of effort. “Above the fridge?”

Leslie clicks her tongue when she opens the cabinet doors above the fridge and pulls down a whole stack of styrofoam boxes. Giving me an apologetic smile, she says, “Knew I had them somewhere.”

I suppress the urge to show my disgust on my face. Whatever is going on, I don’t like it.

The woman makes me hold the box while she slips the vials in purposely cut-out holes. I catch a glimpse of golden swirls in the red of the blood before she pushes on the lid. “There, now where is the packing paper?”

The whole ordeal would be incredibly awkward if I weren’t busy being horrified. Leslie makes me tape the box shut myself, which I do while watching from the corner of my eye as she gets out one of the syringes.

“Can’t we do that later, mom?” the girl asks, her voice quietly pleading.

“You know the drill,” Leslie says matter-of-factly as she attaches the syringe to the IV.

The girl’s scrunched up face is enough to let me know that whatever is inside doesn’t provide an enjoyable experience. I guess Alastor wasn’t lying – this really isn’t about drugs.

After making my final delivery, Celeste offers to pick me up from Elysium and drive me home after – well, only to the fake address I've given her but it's better than the nightbus. While I shiver in the cold, I go through the events of the night.

The girl called that womanmom. What the hell? Selling your daughter's blood for money? My parents certainly don't win any prizes for my upbringing but that is some next level stuff. Worse, though, is the knowledge that this whole time, that's what I've been carrying around the city.

Technically, selling your blood is not illegal. Everyone – that is, everyone who actuallyhasblood – does it sometimes. Easy cash. But that girl did not seem like she was doing itsometimesfor gas money.

By the time Celeste's car pulls up, I'm almost too deep in thought to notice. Only when I hear the pop of the door opening do I return to the present. I scurry across the sidewalk and slip onto the leather seat.

She goes through her usual round of questions: what address did you bring the bag to? What address did you bring the parcel to? Did you recognise anyone? Did you catch anyone's name? Did anything seem weird or suspicious to you?

I pause on the last question. Rather than answering, I ask, “Do you know what it is I'm delivering?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

She waves her hand at me. “It doesn't matter. Is that everything?”

“No!”

She finally looks up, her expression unreadable. “Well?”

I swallow. “I don't think I want to keep doing this.”

Her eyebrows narrow. “Oh?”

“I no longer owe you, right? You said everything after the first job was just for extra money. So I can walk.”

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She looks irritated, which gives me the stupid urge to do something that will please her just so she'll stop looking at me like that.

I expect her to come up with some other reason to hold me hostage but she just says, "You certainly can." As usual, she hands me the money.

My heart has picked up its pace. She's really just letting me walk away?

"Okay, then that's what I'm doing."

Usually, this would be an excellent moment to end the conversation and leave but we're still not at the fake address I gave her so I have to sit and stew. I look determinedly out of the window until a long sigh catches my attention.

When I look over, Celeste is watching me. "Fine," she says. "Why do you want out? Do you want more money?"

Is more money an option?! But no, that's not as tempting as I thought it would be. "I just don't want to be involved in what Charon's Veil is doing."

My vampire eyes recognize the almost imperceptibly brief, surprised raise of an eyebrow before her face returns to its usual mask. "And here I thought I was the problem."

I shake my head. After sitting in silence for a moment, I say, "When you said that witch blood was worth a lot of money, I kind of took that as a metaphor."

She scoffs. "Oh, no. There's a whole market out there."

"So I'm right, that's what they're selling?"

"That's part of the equation, anyway."

I cross my arms. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I didn't think it mattered to you."

"You didn't think I cared whether what I was doing was exploiting people for their blood?"

For the first time since I got into the car it seems like she's really seeing me. "You do realize that you're avampire, right?"

"That doesn't mean I agree with this! The girl whose blood I picked up today looked *so* sick. It was awful."

Celeste lights herself some Ghostshade and I don't have the wherewithal to tell her how much the stuff stinks. "Let me guess," she says. "The one actually taking it was her boyfriend?"

I grimace. "Her mother."

"Hmmm. Not as unusual as you'd think."

"I don't understand this. Why would anyone do that to themselves?"

"They don't do it to themselves, kitten. Usually, it's someone they love and trust. Someone they depend on who takes advantage." Celeste takes a deep inhale. "And

what happens if they leave? They often have no other support system, so they'd end up homeless or dead.”

I sink deeper into my seat, kicking my knees up against the seat in front. “What part about me not wanting to be involved in this surprised you again?”

“Working for me doesn't mean being a part of it. I'm looking to sabotage rather than participate in their operation. I thought that was obvious.”

I shake my head. “It's not only that, though. It's...” I can't find the right words. It's Casey and Welfare Services and Alastor. It's texting Mav when he doesn't make it home to make sure he's not dead somewhere. Checking out underpasses that might be safe to sleep under. “I feel like it's this whole damn city. Like there's this total sum of misery that we all share and your only option to be less miserable is to pass yours on to someone else.”

I think of my night at the Myrrh & Adder, tightening my hands in the fabric of my jumper. “My options are either be taken advantage of or take advantage myself. I can keep working at the Myrrh & Adder and suffer, or do this job selling witch blood and improve my own situation by taking advantage of theirs. But I don't want to do that, I just don't think it's right.” Self-conscious about my rambling, I fix my eyes on the back of the seat in front of me. “I guess it doesn't make sense. I just don't want to do it, alright?”

When she doesn't respond for a while, I look up to find her watching me. She's smiling, though it certainly isn't a happy smile. “That was surprisingly insightful, for a vampire. And I know how you feel.”

I scoff. Alright, whatever you say, lady-who's-being-carted-around-by-a-chauffeur. “If I had your kind of money, I wouldn't feel like this. Then I could do something about it.”

She looks thoughtful for a while, just smoking and watching the city pass through my window. Then she pushes the stump into the ashtray and says, “You want to do something about it? Fine. How about a promotion?”

6. THE LAST THING ANYONE NEEDS IS RIVERSIDE MUCK IN THEIR BULLETWOUNDS

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:58 am

Below my feet, the railway sleepers begin to buzz and vibrate. Dammit.

I look over my shoulder to see the bright lights of the midnight train to Elysium fast approaching in the distance. Nervous, I spin Celeste's lighter in my hand, popping the lid open and shut again with a click. The money she offered me for this would take care of my fines and my rent. Below, the Styx glistens in the moonlight, a single barge cutting silently through the water, lying low just beneath the surface. Just a few more seconds.

To my right, Elysium sits mute and silent like a glass corpse, its limbs jutting into the sky, offices and banks having long gone to sleep. On the other side of the river lies Asphodel, its skyline more modest, the lights of people's windows shining like stars. Further up the river, the promenade is still buzzing with light and life, chic bars and quirky foodstalls drawing out the more comfortable residents of the city.

Considering it's nearly one in the morning, the midnight train should be long gone but LunarLink is tragically underfunded and therefore chronically late. I slip the lighter back into my pocket and cling to the metal beams holding up the bridge as the vibrations get stronger, closer to rattling than buzzing now. Determined, I clench my jaw so I won't bite my tongue. C'mon, I think as I watch the ship's deck creep out from under the bridge. Hurry up.

I lean forward with anticipation, my feet nearly slipping off the rails. Just a little more. Behind me, the train's horn blares with ear-splitting volume as the driver notices me on the tracks. Frustrated, I glance over my shoulder to watch it barrel towards me, waiting until the coupler is within an inch of my leg – then I throw myself off the bridge. The whole exchange takes less than three seconds.

I land at the very front of the deck with a thump, trying to absorb as much of the shock as possible with my knees before rolling over my shoulder, then squat motionless and listen. It takes some effort to not cheer for myself for pulling that move off, though admittedly I couldn't have if Celeste hadn't fed me her blood earlier. Behind me, the ship's flat deck descends into the cargo hold that is carved deeply into its hull, pitted like fruit, and covered with tarps. A lonely light burns in the bridge at the back of the ship. After a moment, voices carry over the water.

"...told you the tarp wasn't tied down properly, I can hear it!"

As quietly as I can manage, I crawl towards the thick tarp, heart pounding. It's tied down well enough that I can't slip beneath, so I try to untie it. It takes me a few tries as I fumble with it nervously, until I give in and tear it with my fangs. I try not to think about what else has touched the rope over the years. Then, I slip into the cargo hold and crawl as deep into the ship's belly as I can. My hood is drawn deep into my face, which should remain concealed in shadow by Celeste's magic – if I wasn't absolutely terrified, I might appreciate how cool that is.

The cargo hold is filled with concrete pipes, all of which are neatly stacked and tied down with ratchet straps. There's barely enough space between them and the tarp that I can lie flat on my belly.

The voices get louder as they stop by the damaged cord, arguing now over something I can't make out. I stay motionless, holding my breath while they fiddle around, trying to fix the damage I caused, until their voices finally recede.

I hope Celeste isn't wrong. I can't really see but I get the picture: the space is tightly packed from wall to wall. As I crawl along, I notice there is a small gap between the stacks of pipes, too narrow to see into even if it weren't so dark but just wide enough for my arm. Heartbeat pounding in my ears, I shove my hand into one of the them.

For a painfully long moment I feel nothing, until my fingers touch crumpled packing paper and smooth glass. I tug, freeing a small bottle of clear liquid, the same viscosity as that in the syringes I've been delivering. I unscrew the cap and take a whiff – acrid, bitter, and medicinal. Just like Celeste described it. Bingo. I suppose it makes sense for Charon's Veil to bring things into the city via the river, being named after the Stygian boatman.

Slowly and painstakingly, I pull out as many bottles from their respective pipes as I can reach. Then, I open each one and pour it into the ends of the pipes, in between the stacks and on top of them, until the whole place smells like an apothecary.

Then I take a deep breath, clamber back to the end of the cargo hold, and tear the bungee cord tying down the tarp again, this time unwinding it from each eyelet, until the wind picks up the end of the tarp and yanks it into the air, flapping loudly. I fiddle with the lighter.

“Hey!” One of the crewmembers is standing on the deck nearby, staring at me in disbelief. “What are you doing?”

I give him a charming little wave because that's what I feel Celeste would do, then turn and toss the burning lighter onto the soaked pipes. One moment it's dark, and the next fire mushrooms out over the cargo hold, spreading across the spilled liquid in the fraction of a second.

I jump out onto the deck to get away from the flames as quickly as possible, trying not to think about how many laws I'm breaking. Celeste said this would help the girls whose blood I've been selling and I felt like I needed to do this for my karma. Behind me, I hear the sound of glass shattering as the heat spreads, turning the pipes into loaded canon barrels and the bottles into their ammunition, each burst bottle scattering more of the liquid and so fuelling the fire. As I make my way towards the railing, two members of the crew scramble to put out the fire. Of course, this ship

isn't equipped to deal with chemical fires – the downside of smuggling arcane compounds with dry cargo.

Before I can make it into the water, someone grabs me by the arm. The sheer strength of the grip is impressive for a human. He's tall and shaped like a Ken-doll, his blonde hair slicked back into a solid formation of hairgel. "You thought you were being clever, huh?"

He yanks me towards him by my arm and tries to pull down my hood. I swat his hand away and throw myself forward, slamming my forehead into his jaw. He lets out an angry yelp, his eyes reflecting the raging fire as he wipes the blood of his nose.

Again I try to get over the railing, again he holds me back, this time by slinging his arm around my waist. My heart screeches to a halt, my mind immediately back at the Myrrh & Adder.

Can't you just get over that already? I scold myself.

When I remain frozen from the panic, the vampire in me uses the occasion to take over, awakened by the presence of a warm-blooded body near mine. The orange and red flicker thrown across the deck intensifies and the smell of smoke suddenly takes on new nuances. My pulse rushes in my ears as I thrash like a trapped animal, flailing and kicking. His shin cracks as I hit it with my heel and he lets me go.

Acting on sheer instinct, I turn and tackle him to the ground. His head slams into the deck, leaving smudges of blood sticking between the anti-slip tread. My fangs are out before I even think about it, the sweet metallic scent of his blood seeping to the back of my throat. I can hear his pulse, panicked now. Though he can't see my face, he must have thought from my figure that I'm a woman – he didn't expect me to be able to overpower him.

We wrestle for a few moments as he tries to push me off him. I would also like to get off him, to get the hell out of here, but I can't. All I can think about is just one taste. I lurch forward and bite thoughtlessly, my teeth catching his shoulder

He yells and shoves me back, skin tearing under my teeth. Enough, I think to myself. That's enough.

But when I attempt another jump off the deck, he's back for more, grabbing the fabric of my jumper and pulling me down from the guardrail. Something hard hits the back of my skull with a crunch. For a brief moment, my knees give out, then I catch myself. It hurts like absolute hell.

With a frustrated grunt, I launch myself at him. We spin for a moment, until he hits the rail, coming to a stop. I bury my teeth in his neck, my body filled with white, hot rage. I don't even care about the blood, I only care about the way he flinches, yelping in pain. The rush I get from his helpless flailing is enough to frighten me back to my senses. Horrified and disgusted with myself, I pull back from his neck and shove him to the ground, far away from my teeth.

Further back towards the bridge, someone has let a lifeboat into the water and few other crew members are evacuating, only one of them running over the deck towards us with a flashlight in their hand. I climb onto the railing and throw one last look back, trying to assure myself that the man I attacked is alright.

Too late I realize that the flashlight is actually a gun. The first bullet sends me falling backward over the guardrail. The second hits my shoulder, the third my stomach, impact catapulting me out over the water. For a moment, my vision is taken over by flashes of red and black, my body trying to curl around itself to protect itself from damage that is already done. Then, I hit the icy surface of the Styx.

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Dragging myself up the muddy shore of the Styx is an exercise in misery. The last thing anyone needs is riverside muck in their bulletwounds. Though vampires aren't prone to infection, I'm sure even the utmost supernatural bodies have their limits and I'm very certain mine lies somewhere between drowned electric bicycles and rotten riverbank trash.

I groan as I make it up to the Apshodel promenade and slowly curl up on the pavement. Someone is walking their dog – someone in Midnight City is always walking their dog – and changes to the other side of the road when they see me. My body purges blood and water from its wounds for a while until I finally have it in me to limp to the parking lot that Celeste is supposed to be waiting in. Before I reach the car, the door has already flown open.

“What happened?” She walks around the back and steadies me with her hands.

God, she smells nice. “I got shot.”

She lets out a grunt of frustration and gestures to the leather seats. “Sit.”

I steady myself against the car, looking down at my dripping and bloody clothes. “But I'll ruin your car.”

Her face is stern as she manhandles me onto the seat. “I said sit down.”

With a groan I curl up and lean my head against the seat in front. My torn muscles seem to convulse around the bullets. Stars dance behind my eyes.

Leaning in through the door, she lifts my hoodie. “Let me see.”

I flinch back before I can stop myself. “I’m fine. I’m a vampire, remember? Can’t die. I just gotta wait for my body to work the bullets out.”

Her expression looks appalled. “Or you could just let me help you. Lean back.”

I don’t want to. I want to lie down and cry until it’s over. But I have a hard time refusing hot women, even under the worst of circumstances. Trying to keep my breathing steady, I lean back and steady myself against the backrest in front.

Celeste runs her hand over my stomach and I can feel the distinct prickle of magic. As if it weren’t cold and miserable enough, it seems to zap the last bit of warmth from my skin. At the same time, pain shoots through my abdomen. I grunt and dig my fingers into the leather until it breaks. A moment later, the bullet falls into my lap.

Briefly, I sigh with relief, before Celeste gets started on the other two, making me take off my soggy hoody. I’m quite certain I look like a drowned rat and it’s not an attractive look for me. I’m sure the whimpering doesn’t help, either. Once the other bullets have also come out, leaving me curled up and weeping quietly, she says, “There,” and slams the door shut.

By the time the pain eases enough that I can take stock of my surroundings, the car is moving.

“I didn’t expect to get shot,” I groan. “Sorry someone saw me.”

Her eyebrows narrow slightly. “They’ll know it was me either way. I’m just surprised there was someone there with a gun. Maybe they were expecting sabotage.”

We drive in silence for a while, with me too focussed on the pain to make

conversation, until Celeste signals the driver to stop. I look up. We're still in Asphodel, having wound our way up one of the hills.

Celeste brushes my shoulder and nods towards the back of the car. "Look."

From where we're stopped, you can't see the river. But you can see Elysium's glossy skyscrapers on the other side – and the flickering orange and red light thrown across them by the roaring flames of a boat burning up on the water.

Celeste's gaze is burning in my neck and I turn to meet her eyes. "You did it."

As the car begins to continue up the hill, I watch the flickering light disappear in the distance. "So how does what I did help those girls whose blood Charon's Veil is selling?" I ask, trying to distract myself from the pang of guilt I fear at biting that man.

"It's the essence of a plant called bindweed, something we call an insulator." She looks thoughtful for a moment. "Magic, at its very basic, is the transformation of energy from one type into another. Insulators prevent that from happening."

"So... it's like an anti-magic elixir."

Grimacing, she begins, "No, elixirs are more like catalysts—" She shakes her head, stopping herself. With what looks like great pains, she says, "Sure, I guess you could say that."

"And injecting it means you can't use magic?"

"There are some very rare exceptions and I've been trying to figure out a way around it but, essentially, yes."

“Wouldn’t these injections make the girls realise that the way they’re being treated is not normal?”

“Witches have been persecuted for hundreds of years, kitten. There’s so much misinformation out there, it’s easy to spin some false narrative. Their abusers make them feel guilty for having this power, so they can force a cure or a medicine on them.”

“So that’s the reason you had me destroy it? You’re being the knight in shining armor again?”

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Celeste shrugs. “Witches are my customers. If this city is unsafe for them, my business goes under.”

After driving for a while longer and watching the sweet little townhouses roll by, I say, “You can drop me up at the townhall. I’ll walk from there.”

She looks me up and down. “And where are you going to sleep, under a bridge?”

I shoot her an angry glance. “No.”

Her expression softens. “You’ll catch your death walking in the cold like this. You’re coming home with me.”

I bite my lip and don’t remind her that I can’t, in fact, catch my death because there is no death for me. Because, actually, I don’t mind the thought of drying off in some flashy Elysium apartment. Besides, that hungry darkness that took over again tonight is still stirring and I’m afraid it could come out again tonight.

7. A TOTALLY NORMAL REACTION TO PLATONIC TOUCH

I’m not sure what I expected but the moment I step into Celeste’s home, I can’t picture her living anywhere else. Rather than in Elysium, it sits behind large iron gates in Asphodel, the building itself obscured by old trees and climbing roses. It looks exactly what you’d imagine a witch’s house in the twenty-first century to look like.

The interior strikes a remarkable balance between antique and stylish, full of dark

wood, intricately woven rugs, and a bizarre amount of bookshelves. I can't say I've been interested in interior design lately, mostly because I've come to appreciate virtually any furniture at all, but I have to admit I like this.

And I hate the fact that it does but it makes me like her more, too. Bad people don't live in cozy homes, right?

Celeste marches ahead of me without ever looking back and I follow like a well trained puppy, though I'm afraid she'll turn around any minute and reveal that this is all a practical joke – of course, I am not welcome in her home!

Instead, she brings me up a flight of squeaky stairs and bids me to wait before a broad fireplace, the coals inside reigniting with a snap of her fingers. The mantelpiece, like most of the house, is covered in books. It's while I'm standing there, trying to wind down from the rush of the night, that I notice something is different with my mind. That moment when he grabbed me and I lost control feels like it hasn't ended. I'm still fidgety and hyper-alert, jumping at every sound.

After shivering there for a few minutes, Celeste returns and leads me into what I can only assume is her bedroom. The thought of why she had to go ahead and make sure I didn't stumble onto something improper in there makes me feel surprisingly bashful.

"Just find something dry to wear," she says as she opens her closet, a heavy-looking colossus of beautifully marbled wood.

Though I can't wait to wear something that costs more than my life, it's something else that draws my eye: her bed. If the closet is large, the bed is made for giants – though it's carved with remarkably fine detail. Its four posts hold up a thick strip of red fabric. There are more pillows than I've ever owned, silken sheets, and thick duvets. Looking at it, especially in my cold, wet state, nearly brings tears to my eyes.

“What is it?”

I notice Celeste has been watching me. “Nothing, sorry,” I say, already turning to face the clothes.

Her hand brushes my arm. “Don’t do that. I don’t like it.”

What? I try to read her face but can’t figure out what she means.

“Don’t dismiss me when I ask you a question,” she clarifies.

I give her an apologetic smile, though frankly I want to tell her to mind her own business. She’s not entitled to the contents of my head. “I like your bed,” I explain dully. “I’m a bit jealous.”

She nods, eyebrows raised.

Like the idiot I am, I do not take that as a sign that I’ve said enough. It’s as if the more control I give over to the vampire part of me, the more compulsively, stupidly honest I get. “I don’t have one. I mean, I have a mattress but it’s pretty old. Which isn’t as gross as it sounds because I have a sleeping bag but... yeah, jealous.” I laugh awkwardly.

What the hell is wrong with you? I scold myself. Why did you say that?

Her lips curl a little, softening her stern expression. “You’ll stay here tonight.” It doesn’t sound like an offer but rather like a decision she’s already made.

I swallow, my mind suddenly going places I wish it would rather not. The images seem to come from the same base, primal place my violent fantasies have arisen from. She doesn’t mean inherbed, idiot.

As if reading my thoughts, she adds with a chuckle, “My guestrooms also have beds.”

While Celeste excuses herself to get my room ready, I’m left to comb through her closet. Most of the items within are far too feminine for my style and could really only be worn by a witch or a baroque noblewoman. Still, I appreciate them as I rifle through them – their seams are clean and unfrayed, the fabric far from the polyester hell of my own wardrobe. There is nothing that strikes me as offensively expensive and no brands one would recognize but the clothes’ quality speaks for itself.

Hoping I’ll find something more modest and comfortable, I open a few of the drawers at the bottom of the wardrobe, just to promptly close them again when I come across only leather, lace, and latex inside. Biting my lip, I try not to imagine what Celeste would look like in those. You need help, Deni.

Finally, I settle on a thick cashmere jumper and loose linen pants, which make me feel like I’m forty and about to meet my very fancy friends for brunch and champagne. Just as I’m wondering if I should get undressed right then and there to relieve myself from the misery of my sopping clothes, Celeste returns and leads me back out into the hallway. I can hear the sound of running water from one of the rooms but we go through the door opposite. The guestroom is similar to her own, with a large, heavy-looking bed and a deep chest of drawers by the tall windows.

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“You’ll have to forgive the mess,” Celeste says as we enter, though it looks immaculately clean and tidy to me. “I don’t often invite people to stay, least of all vampires.”

The thought of what she’d think of the absolute hole I live in makes me mortified. Even the cash she’s placed casually on the dresser to pay me for tonight looks ordinary here, while it would look dirty and suspicious back home.

“It’s perfect, really.”

“How are you healing?” she asks, already lifting the wet fabric of my shirt.

Oh Lord. So close to the surface tonight, the monster in me struggles for dominance at her touch, full of hungry desire. I clear my throat. “Fine, it’s fine. Almost gone, really.”

She runs her thumb over the spidery scar-tissue on my stomach. “That’s quite remarkable, witch blood or not.”

“It is?” The words come out without my permission while I’m too busy staring at her.

“It is.” She lets go of the shirt and takes a strand of my hair in her hand with a frown. “I let you a bath, though I think you should probably wash the river off first.” She gestures towards the bathroom. “You can use anything you need.” Looking like she just remembered something, she adds, “Oh, and the curtains should block out any sunlight.”

“Are you sure me staying here isn’t too much trouble?”

She waves her hand with a frown. “Don’t do that, either. I don’t offer things I’m not actually willing to give.”

I bite my lip as I watch her saunter off towards the door, not sure about the origin of my disappointment. “Thank you!”

Her smile is enigmatic as she looks back through the door. “Good night, kitten.”

I lie back in the hot water and sigh, closing my eyes. It feels fantastic to finally be warm. The smell of whatever expensive oils Celeste has put into the bathwater is soothing and makes me feel like I’m at the spa. Amidst my comfort, there's a little bit of disbelief. How did I go from being half-dead in the Myrrh & Adder to being here?

Not that I have any delusions about what this is: a visit to the land of the wealthy, nothing more. None of this is mine to keep and soon enough I’ll be back in the moldy shower of Pavel’s apartment, watching the door because it doesn’t lock.

But there’s something else there, in my melancholy. Yes, these comforts are temporary, but much worse is that this power is also temporary. I think of throwing that lighter, tackling that man to the ground. I did something tonight, even if I’m not sure of the impact I actually had. I was strong. It makes the thought of shaking with hunger and scrambling for blood so much more unbearable.

Licking my lips, I savour the lingering taste of blood in my mouth. That ever-present animal part of me wants more with reckless abandon. More blood. More money. More... I think of that drawer at the bottom of Celeste’s closet and then quickly dismiss the thought.

I stay in the bath so long I run the risk of dissolving, trying to savor every minute. Even if I still had my own place, a freestanding bath with copper taps and propped up on little carved griffin feet does not come by every day. I feel like a queen.

And I feel even more like a queen when I get into the bed. For a while, I just roll around, trying out different positions and testing every pillow. But all the comfort does nothing to slow down my heartbeat or the thoughts rushing through my brain. It's like a vortex, sucking my thoughts downward into the darkness in some kind of hellish spiral: rehashing fights with Casey, remembering myself dead on my apartment floor before my final transformation, losing that very apartment, my night at the Myrrh & Adder... The last has taken on new and ugly proportions in my weeks of work with Charon's Veil. I'm not sure what Celeste replaced the memory of those guys with but from Alastor's lewd comments, it sounds very graphic. I've been telling myself not to bring it up with Celeste because it's not a big deal. But it haunts me anyway.

When it comes to my insomnia, I might as well be sleeping back at Pavel's apartment. I look at the time on my phone: nearly six in the morning. Maybe it's just too early for me.

After staring at the ceiling for a while I get up and stick my head out of the door. The light above the stairs is still on. I tiptoe out into the hall, peering over at Celeste's bedroom door. It's open, the lights off. She must still be awake.

Slowly, I make my way down the stairs, instinctively avoiding the squakiest of the steps. Quiet music spills out from the living room, the door to which stands open just a crack. Celeste is sitting on a chaise lounge by the fire –I guess regular chairs are for peasants– and reading. On the side table next to her sits a glass of wine, half-drunk with lipstick on the rim. Alright, I think awkwardly. I'm just not going to bother her.

Before I can begin my retreat, she says without looking up, "Can't sleep?"

I sigh. Of course, she has some witchy sixth sense to know I'm here. Slipping into the room, I say, "No but I never can."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"You're not asleep, either."

Her smile looks pained. "No."

My eyes slip to an ashtray on the coffee table, cold stumps of Ghostshade sitting in it. The Centaur tribes who first cultivated the plant named it 'Plant of the Untethered' after the effect they perceived it had on a person's soul– the way it detached from their body. I once saw a documentary on how they used it for minor surgeries because though people could still feel pain, they no longer cared. The affairs of the body become irrelevant when you're high on it – making it possible to bear hunger, pain, and sleeplessness to the point of collapse.

"Sit." Celeste gestures to one of the chairs. "Wine?"

I shake my head, though I'm mildly flattered to be mistaken for the kind of person who drinks wine. "No, thanks."

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“Let me make you some tea, at least.” She places her book on the side-table and is already getting up.

She’s changed out of her usual elegant dress into an elegant silk robe, her bare feet delicate on the parquet floor. I’d half expected her to still be wearing heels.

I look around the room while she’s gone. One of the walls is taken up by ceiling-high windows and a pair of sliding doors leading out into a small conservatory, which has been stuffed to the brim with potplants. A large ginger tomcat lies curled up on a rusty chair and stares in at me spitefully. The garden beyond looks a little overgrown, though it’s hard to tell from the bare winter branches.

The opposite wall is covered floor to ceiling in shelves, though there are less books here. Rather, the shelf is filled with paintings, vases, bizarre little dancing sculptures that walk the line between cool and creepy, and a record player which is the source of the music. I pull my legs up onto the chair and place my chin on my knees. I would turn the figurines around so it doesn’t feel like they’re staring at me but otherwise, I would solve here. Maybe I should become a hot crime lord –of course, I am in my thoughts, I don’t think Celeste is hot. But I would be.

She returns not with a simple cup of tea but with a tray – teapot, milk, sugar, fancy little spoons, the whole nine yards. After placing it on the coffee table between us, she returns to her seat.

“It’s honeysuckle, you’ll like it.”

“Thanks,” I say, though I notice she didn’t let me choose which tea she actually made.

She smiles and takes a sip of her wine, picking up her book from where she left it. I pour myself a cup of tea, including spilling some, and then promptly burn my mouth on it. Though I suppose we don't have much to talk about, I still feel awkward as she begins reading again. The silence makes me feel like someone has sucked all the air out of the room, even though Celeste seems completely unbothered by it.

I take out my phone and check my texts. Mav wrote, "Are you coming home tonight? Do I need to be worried?"

"Staying at a friend's house," I lie, then delete the words and write, "Got a work thing," just to then also delete those words. Finally, I retype the first message and send it.

Mav replies immediately. "But I'm your only friend??"

I suppress a smile and put my phone away. The cat in the conservatory has gotten up and positioned itself before the sliding door. It blinks at me with big, yellow eyes.

"I think your cat wants to come in."

Celeste looks up and throws a narrow glance out of the window. "He's not my cat and he knows that. Besides, he leaves hair everywhere."

"Whose cat is he?"

She shrugs. "Not mine," she repeats.

"He's probably a stray. He doesn't have a collar."

Celeste gestures at me while returning her gaze to her book. "I have a one-stray-a-night policy. He'll have to come back tomorrow."

The cat looks grumpy, although no more than he has been the whole time. ‘Sorry,’ I mouth at him and return to my tea. Celeste turns the page, eyes scanning from side to side.

“Can I ask you something?”

She briefly closes her eyes, letting out a long, deep sigh and shuts the cover of her book. “I can’t stop you, can I?”

I squirm. “Uh...”

She holds my gaze, her head slightly tilted, until I can finally get the words out.

“That time at the club, you said... you said those guys would remember it as the best night of their lives.”

She nods slowly. “Yes?”

I bite the nail of my thumb. “Did you createthose memories?”

“Oh, no.” She shakes her head. “That would be impossible.”

“Then what do they remember?”

“They should remember nothing real from the moment I entered the room. I used monkshood and vervain to cause a sort of... ecstatic waking dream. I saw them taking some kind of pill before going in, I thought they’d probably think they got too high to remember the details and fill the rest with their imagination.”

Struggling to make sense of that with the comments I’ve received from Alastor, usually praising my hard work while grabbing my ass, I keep chewing on my nails.

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She leans forward in her seat, placing her elbows on her knees. “Why?”

“I think they made some comments about that night to Alastor because he keeps talking to me about it.”

“That’s a good thing, isn’t it? My goal was for nobody to ever find out what really went on in there.”

“You’re right.” I’m being ridiculous.

“But it bothers you?”

I take a long sip from my cup of tea. “It’s just that... I think some of the things they told him about sound very...” I rub my hands on my knees. “Degrading?”

Celeste narrows her eyes, brows drawn together. I’m beginning to learn to read her face, the subtleties of what I first thought were neutral expressions. Now, her face bears the hallmarks of disgust. “Oh?” She picks up her glass of wine and takes the last sip. “Well, either they dreamed it up or they’re lying.”

I shake my head. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter, right? It never happened.”

“But it does bother you,” she repeats.

“I just hate that they really think they got away with...” I shake my head again, not wanting to finish that sentence. “And they’re gloating about it like... like it’s some kind of achievement?” I set my cup down a little too hard. “It makes me angry. I want

them to know they got their ass kicked. I want to kick their ass. You were right, they got off easy.” The speed and volume of my words surprises me.

She smiles sadly. “Justice can be hard to come by in this place.”

“I suppose,” I say. “I’m glad at least that stuff didn’t come from your mind.”

“Of course not. Did you really think that?”

Staring into my tea, I say, “No, not really. But you said yourself that you can’t stand vampires. And you only saved me because you wanted a spy—”

She raises her hand to stop me, getting up with her glass. “Now you’re just being unfair.”

I shrink at the thought that I made her angry, but as she walks past me towards the kitchen she pauses to place her hand on my shoulder. “I think vampires cause a lot of pain in this world, inadvertently or otherwise. But that doesn’t mean I stand by while you suffer. I’m not a monster, kitten.”

While she’s gone, I carefully prod the darkness in me. The topic of that night seems to have stirred it up again and I can feel the anger brewing in me. Celeste returns with another glass of wine and sinks back into her seat with the kind of expression that signals she’s had a very long day.

Before I can bombard her with more questions, I hear the opening of the front door. A moment later, a mop of dark curls pokes into the living room. The woman it belongs to looks briefly from me to Celeste, then says with furrowed brows, “Am I interrupting?”

Celeste sighs and gets up, throwing a disappointed glance at her full wine glass. “Not

at all.”

“Did you still want to do the... uh...” She glances at me briefly, “the new moon ritual? Because the sun is up soon.”

“I won’t be a minute,” Celeste says as she gathers her glass. She thoughtlessly runs her hand over my arm as she passes me, saying, “Sorry, kitten. I have business to attend to.”

I stiffen as goosebumps spread over my skin, trying to suppress an involuntary shudder, not sure whether it’s pleasant or unpleasant. Totally normal reaction, I tell myself sarcastically.

Though I assumed that Celeste did have to interact with people to be a smuggling mogul or whatever it is she does, I am surprised to find someone just snowing into her house this early in the morning. Even after I’ve returned to bed – Celeste gives me an apologetic wave as I pass the kitchen, where she is standing over a collection of flasks and bottles with the other witch – I continue to hear the front door opening and closing all throughout the day. Though the soft bed really helps with my sleep, I occasionally wake to hear voices in the house, Celeste’s always cool and even among them. Each time, it’s as if she whispers directly to the vampire side of me, awakening that primal hunger.

8. VERY BEAUTIFUL AND INCREDIBLY TOXIC, DO NOT DISTURB

The days after Celeste drops me home pass in nervous anticipation. I agreed that I’d keep working for her as long as I didn’t have to do runs for Charon’s Veil anymore. The more time passes, the more convinced I become that I’ve screwed it up and she will never ever get in touch with me again, for no logical reason except that I can’t stop wondering if I was awkward or rude during our late night conversation. Not that I care what she thinks – I just need the money.

And though I had high ambitions about finding other work, after two days of handing out resumés to unwilling managers, I get the sense that every workplace is run by an Alastor-type who I'd rather not have anything to do with. Meanwhile, Mav has been dreaming of teaching himself how to code but has no computer and the public library only opens late only one day of the week. After paying my fines, rent, and getting blood, there's surprisingly little money left. I spend it on a set of sheets, one fitted which I keep, and one flat which I give to Mav. The days where we're both home, we lie on our backs, staring at the dead flies in the ceiling lamp and make plans about how we're going to furnish our dream apartment when we finally save up enough money.

After a lengthy argument about whether or not we should get a Nintendo 64 or SNES to go with our super wide flatscreen that we'll definitely be able to afford, Mav declares me a lost cause and decides to watch cartoons on his phone until I come to my senses. Since the best my phone can do is a pixelated version of Snake,

when it finally buzzes with a message from an unknown number, I'm so surprised that it slips from my hands and lands on the floor with an unsavory smack, the battery popping out and scattering across the room.

Mav takes off his headphones. "You need to replace that old thing."

I frown as I piece it back together. It survived a jump into the Styx, I want to say, but then I realize that I can't tell him that, being a secret spy and all. "Would you rather I save for a security deposit or a phone?"

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He shrugs. “Both. Get a nice rich boyfriend?”

“Ew.”

He laughs.

When the phone finally gets through its pixelated startup animation, the message reads, “I could use your help tonight – C”

Rich girlfriend?

“With?” I type back. By now, I was really hoping I’d have a proper, at least semi-legal job, not only because I’m worried these jobs are going to get me in legal trouble but because every time I’m with Celeste, the vampire in me seems to take over with a vengeance. I’d hoped that I could get it under control – instead, it seems to grow more unruly every day.

I fiddle with my Pokemon phone charm while trying to follow the plot of Mav’s show from across the room and without audio.

“I need some backup muscle,” she writes. Then, moments later, “I’ll pick you up at six.”

Mav lowers his phone. “Who the hell are you texting?”

“Nobody.”

“Then why are you smiling?” Mav wriggles his eyebrows. “Tell me this nobody is the rich lover who’s getting you a new phone?”

Embarrassed to realize he’s right about the smiling, I stick my tongue out. “I happen to like this phone. Social media is bad for you anyway.”

To Celeste, I simply write, “Ok.”

Meeting at six proves to be difficult because I can’t leave the house while it’s still light out – and I still haven’t told Celeste where I live. Maybe if she didn’t live like a Victorian noble I wouldn’t have felt the need to keep hiding that I live in the absolute worst part of Tartarus in a building that may or may not currently be in violation of the Building Code.

This means that by the time I walk around the corner – almost skidding – to where I’ve pretended to live, Celeste is already parked there. Though, this time, in a different car. When I open the door to the most expensive looking vehicle in the neighbourhood, I’m surprised to find her sitting on the passenger side upfront.

She turns back to me with one eyebrow raised. “Let me guess, you lied about where you live.”

I blush. “Well... stranger danger and all that. You don’t need to know where I live.”

She shrugs. When I slide into the backseat, the woman in the driver’s seat grins at me in the rearvision mirror – friendly but slightly unnerving on account of the fact that her mouth is filled with hundreds of sharp, pointy teeth. Long, silver curls roll over her shoulders. She’s beautiful in a terrifying way – a siren? “I’m Mel.”

“Deni,” I say, unnecessarily short. For some bizarre reason, I wanted Celeste to be alone.

Through the mirror, I can see her raise a questioning eyebrow at Celeste. “Fraternizing with the enemy, I see.”

Celeste sighs. “It’s certainly useful to have someone immortal on staff.”

I cross my arms, a little embarrassed that they’re talking about me. “You work together?”

“Sometimes,” Mel replies as she pulls into the street. “Though I have to warn you, Celeste is an incredibly dubious employer.”

Celeste scoffs and they both chuckle, laughing at a joke I’m not a part of. This only stokes the surprisingly hot embers in my chest. Stop being ridiculous, I tell myself.

Our drive takes us over the highway, bypassing Apshodel to get to Elysium. It’s not a particularly long trip and shortened even further because Mel drives like she’s determined to kill us all, honking at anyone who dares obey the law of traffic. She swears an ungodly amount, though she never seems seriously angry – not that the people in the other cars would notice by the way she floors the gas. By the time we come to a stop in a narrow sidestreet, my hands have left sweaty imprints on the edge of my seat, my feet pressing imaginary breaks underneath the backrest in front. Celeste seems amused and throws Mel a tender glance. I catch myself scowling.

While walking up the sidewalk, Celeste explains, “I’m meeting someone who wants to buy some antiques from my collection. Because of the history of persecution for witchcraft, a lot of the knowledge that was used to create these devices has been lost. Even partially functional ones are incredibly valuable.”

Mel sighs. “Boring! Let me know when it’s time to get the guns out.”

“I think it’s interesting,” I say.

“No you don’t,” Mel replies, putting her hand on my shoulder and leaning in towards me. “You think Celeste is interesting.”

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I cross my arms, blushing. “I like to know why I’m doing a job.”

“Leave the girl alone, Mel.” Celeste stops on the sidewalk above a set of stairs leading to a basement entryway. Turning to me, she says, “Basically, there’s a lot of money involved tonight and that can go south really fast. All I need you two to do is be there and intervene if someone tries to kill me.”

“Can’t you defend yourself? I feel like I’ll weigh you down more than anything.”

She shakes her head. “Magic is a little like chemistry. It can be incredibly powerful – mostly with lots of preparation – but it’s also easy to counter by those who know what they’re doing.”

Dampened saxophone music comes from the basement of the building. She reaches into the inside of her coat and produces two vials of blood, handing them to me. “If something does go wrong, you’re responsible for me and Mel is responsible for the car.” She glances at the siren. “For obvious reasons.”

Mel throws her hands up. “Just because I’m the only person in this city who knows how to drive!”

I look at the vials with unease, trying to conceal the way my mouth begins to water at the sight. It takes some effort not to rip the stopper out right then and there and downing the contents.

“My own blood,” Celeste clarifies. “I need top reaction speed tonight.”

With a flippant gesture, she takes a joint from Mel's mouth that Mel was about to light. "The same goes for you," Celeste says.

I turn away to drink, hiding the expression of pure greed that I'm sure my face is showing as I open each vial. Though my fangs are not needed, they made their presence – and their readiness to tear into skin – known. Clenching my fists as I fight the urge to chase after Celeste and get more of that sweet, sweet blood, I hear them descend down the steps.

"Have I ever let you down?" Mel asks. "You know I'm a better shot when I'm just a little high."

"And yet I'd like you to be surewhoit is you're shooting."

I clench my jaw, shaking my head to try and ground myself. The music becomes clearer and now I pick up voices and laughter as well. The air smells faintly like rubbish and smoke. I still have the desire to hunt and chase but try to bury that to the best of my ability.

"You're not sober," Mel argues as I scurry down the steps behind them.

The door at the bottom of the stairs is opened by a very large man with an incredible amount of body hair, including the most spectacular beard I've ever seen.

"I'll be sober when I'm dead," Celeste replies as she enters.

The man holds me back as I try to follow them. "No vampires."

Celeste waves her hand dismissively. "She's with me."

His grip on my shoulder stays steady. "Not even as pets."

“Excuse me?” Celeste stops in her tracks.

Mel, who’s stepped aside, watches with naked amusement on her face as Celeste walks back to me, putting her arm around my waist, and stopping less than an inch from the man’s barreled chest.

She stabs her finger at him, sparks flying from the tip. “I didn’t get that. Did you want to repeat it?”

They stare at each other for a moment – though I’m a little distracted by Celeste’s hand on my waist – until something in his face changes. He shrinks a little. “Never mind, come on in.”

“That’s what I thought,” Celeste mumbles as we walk past him.

The room she leads me into is filled with the saccharine smell of Ghostshade smoke, a tightly packed space that looks like we’ve travelled back to the roaring twenties. Elaborate glass chandeliers hang from tin ceilings, drawing long shadows over the brick walls. The furniture is cozy – leather chairs around small round tables. A cherry-wood bar runs the length of the room and one of the corners is taken up by a small, raised stage. The band’s singer is a siren, filling the air with dizzying, wordless song.

Siren song and Ghostshade don’t seem to be the only illicit items on the menu – it looks like at least one table is dedicated to fortune telling, while the sparks and smoke being produced as the drinks are being mixed hint at magic in the cocktails.

Either way, it looks like the kind of place that charges twenty-five dollars for a glass of water. My heart cinches – I have about eight dollars in cash, if I want to pay my

rent tomorrow. I squirm and sink into my leather seat while Mel deliberates what to drink.

“What about you, kitten?”

“I... uh...” Uneasy, I rub my hands over my jeans. I’m not at all dressed to be here.

“Water?”

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Mel blows an apalled raspberry. “Water?!”

Celeste raises her hand to silence Mel and leans in towards me a little. “Are you sure? Drinks are on me.”

Not ready to confess that I’m worried about money, I nod. “I should probably be sober when making sure you don’t get killed, right?”

With a shrug, she makes her way to the bar, leaving me and Mel behind. I lean back in my chair and force myself to stop looking at Celeste every twenty seconds. Instead, I notice the way people around us look at her: like she’s a very beautiful but incredibly toxic snake, not to be disturbed. Feeling a little in over my head, I look around the room. “So, how do you know who’s a potential threat?”

Mel smiles. “You’re so dutiful! Adorable.”

Ugh.

“Okay.” She takes her chair and scoots closer to me. “See that guy at the bar?”

I follow her gaze to a short man with a neat suit and long coat who looks like he’s here for a business meeting. As Celeste walks up to order, he doesn’t look at her but stops stirring his drink and stares intently at the bar.

“He’s eavesdropping on her,” I note.

“Good. What else?”

I tilt my head. “He’s still wearing his coat? Could be hiding a weapon.”

“Yes. Notice anything else about the coat?”

After staring intently until the bartender sets the drinks down before Celeste, I say, “No, not really.”

“It’s ugly. No gay man would wear that.”

I shake my head. “What?”

“Don’t worry.” She pats my arm. “I actually don’t think he’s a threat to you because Celeste usually likes her men tall.”

It takes me a moment to catch up with what she’s saying. Mel shoots me a wide grin as I cross my arms with as much dignity as I can muster. “That’s not what I meant.”

Celeste returns, setting down a glass of water for me and a bizarrely colorful concoction for Mel. She throws a suspicious glance at the siren. “Are you being rude?”

Putting on an innocent expression, Mel says, “I don’t know what gave you that impression.”

Celeste puts her hand on my shoulder, leans down to me, and says in a false whisper, “She actually is a really good shot or I would have fired her a long time ago.”

Mel waves her hand. “Oh, you love it.”

Celeste looks up as another group enters the bar, led by a woman that looks like she’s walked straight off an ad for men’s streetwear. Some of her jewellery is faintly

reminiscent of what I'd imagine a witch to wear, with various amulets, necklaces, and bangles, but otherwise she looks like she might as well be in a motorcycle gang. The sides of her head are shaved and tattooed with floral patterns that weave down her neck and shoulders. She gives Celeste a small nod.

Her entourage is composed of two men with similar attire, both bulky and bald, and the third a young woman that has the fox-like features of a shape-shifter.

"Wish me luck," Celeste says as she heads for another table. "And Mel?"

Mel tilts her head. "Hm?"

"Don't be a dick, please."

The siren props her chin on her hand and watches Celeste walk away. With my arms still crossed in front of my chest, I watch the other group split, their leader joining Celeste at a nearby table while the others sit down at the bar, their eyes keenly trained on the pair of witches.

"Fine," Mel says. "Here's what I look for: when they came in, did anyone react strangely or take particular notice? It could be that they already have people in the crowd preparing for some kind of ambush. Other than that, it's mostly common sense." She crosses her legs and picks up her drink. "Is anyone acting suspiciously? Does anyone look like they could be concealing a weapon?"

She points toward the back of the room. "We chose this place because it has only two entry points, the front entrance and the staff entrance leading up into the courtyard. No windows. There's less to keep an eye on."

I scan the room as I listen. Her words make me nervous because to me, it looks like anyone could be concealing a weapon. Everyone seems to be wearing a dress or a

lose jacket. And aren't two entrances just two ways we could get trapped? Maybe my nerves aren't cut out for this job.

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Not sure what else to do, I return my attention to Celeste's table. With a deep breath, I feel gently for the raw instinct slumbering inside me, dipping into the power provided to me by Celeste's blood. On one hand, it makes being around a crowd more difficult, the faint smell of blood seemingly everywhere around me, saliva pooling in my mouth. On the other, I can now make out what they're saying.

Celeste, who is sitting with her back to me, sounds calm and mildly disinterested – as always – while the other witch speaks in a husky and casual tone.

"I won't sell it if I can't trust it will be kept out of the wrong hands," Celeste says as she places a small wooden box on the table, no larger than a pack of cigarettes. It's hard not to notice the way she holds herself, upright, controlled, confident.

The other woman pops it open and inspects the contents. "Maybe it's already in the wrong hands? I see you hire parasites now."

She doesn't need to look up for me to know that she means me. Her words provoke a growl in me that I barely manage to suffocate before it escapes my lips. My hands are twitchy, ready to seize their prey. This is exhausting.

There's a long pause before Celeste replies, "I don't think insulting the people that work for me is going to be an effective way to negotiate with me."

Snapping the box shut, the woman says, "I'm not negotiating. You're out of your mind if you think I'll pay what you're asking for a broken inquisitor without proper provenance."

“I can trace it all the way back to the sixteenth century, which is the best provenance you’re going to get for one of these.”

Shrugging in a youthfully defiant way, the tattooed witch says, “It’s still broken.”

Celeste scoffs quietly. “Good luck finding one that’s not.”

“I know you have at least one.” The woman crosses her arms.

Celeste shakes her head and leans back in her chair, drumming her delicate fingers on the armrest. “If that’s what you came here for, I can’t help you.”

“Actually, I came here to see if the rumours are true. Hiring vampires, selling part of your private collection... you’re getting desperate. Charon’s Veil is starting to get to you.”

“Believe what you want.” Celeste takes the box back and slips it into her coat. “That doesn’t make this any cheaper.”

A sound in the distance distracts me for a moment. I close my eyes, trying hard to make out where it came from. There seems to be a cacophony of car doors being slammed. I hear footsteps marching down a pair of stairs and along the street above. There’s a shout somewhere in the staff area –police.

I jump to my feet, grabbing Mel by the arm.

“What are you doing?” she hisses.

The tattooed witch looks up at me, causing Celeste to turn around.

“Police raid,” I explain. “I think they’re coming for both exits.”

Mel's expression goes from shock to frustration in the blink of an eye. "Get her out," she says. "That magic thingy will probably land her in jail otherwise."

When I arrive at Celeste's table a moment later – Celeste already having gotten to her feet – the other witch says, "I wonder how interesting your provenance is going to be for law enforcement."

"Fucking petty," Celeste swears.

The door to the staff area behind the bar flies open and officers, both human and otherwise, flood out into the room. There are at least two minotaurs and a handful of terrifying-looking seraphim. Within a moment, the music dies and the bar breaks out into chaos. It takes me digging even deeper into my reserves of blood for me to hear the footsteps out on the sidewalk, which sound like they're about to arrive at the stairs. Celeste is close enough that I can smell her blood and I have to fight the urge to release my fangs.

How the hell am I supposed to get Celeste out of this room in the three seconds before they get down here?

In a split second, I decide to do the only thing I can think of. Picking Celeste up, I let my thoughts subside, giving in to the animal desire to hunt and kill. She becomes my prey – prey that I'm not willing to share. I launch forward with enough force that I surprise even myself, nearly colliding with some of the other patrons as I zigzag my way to the door. Luckily, Celeste has the wherewithal to wrap her arms around my neck. Less than three steps are enough to carry me to the door, which I kick open.

I take all the steps at once, barreling straight into one of the officers at the top. He swears loudly. The rest of them blur as I bolt past, stepping out onto the street before the door has even fallen shut behind me. The city flies by in a flurry of light and colors, cars honking as I slip across multiple sidestreets.

I make it a whole two blocks before suddenly realizing that if I keep the tempo up, I'll probably collapse in less than a few meters. I groan with exhaustion as I slow my steps, suddenly swaying.

Celeste nestles her head against my neck. "See, kitten? I knew you had your uses." Unable to force my shaking knees onward, I set Celeste down and lean against the closed entryway of some fashion chain, suddenly burning up with heat. My vision darkens. Worse, though, is the hunger. It's as though I burned through all the willpower I had while forgetting to put the monster back to sleep.

9. MISDIRECTED APPETITE

Celeste steadies me, the musky sweetness of her perfume wafting over me. Desperately struggling to regain some semblance of control, I try to fight back against the images of my lips pressed against her neck.

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Somewhere through the sharp and keen desire to tackle and bite, I notice that Celeste actually looks quite pleased.

“You like being carried around?” I ask, my voice labored.

“I could certainly get used to it.”

Running my hand over my face as I battle with my self-control, trying to calm my hammering heart, I say, “Maybe we should get you one of those carriage things that are lugged around by people.”

She chuckles. “A palanquin?”

“Yeah, that.” I hug myself, trying to keep my fingers from cramping into claws and just reaching out to grab her.

Taking me by the shoulders, she says, “Are you alright?”

I shake my head, suppressing a growl. Why won’t it stop?

She lifts her hand to my hair, brushing aside the strands that have fallen into my face. Her body is so close that I can feel her heat. “What is it?”

My muscles react before my brain does, one hand reaching for her delicate wrist. I press my lips to her skin, feeling the pulse beating beneath it. She left her coat hanging over her chair, so she’s wearing only her evening dress. My other hand reaches around her waist, pulling her close. Her perfume envelops me.

“Deni!” Her voice has a warning undertone to it.

It takes everything I have to let go of her wrist but the rebound is even worse. Before I even realize I’m doing it, I have her pinned to the wall, hand in her hair. Briefly, I struggle with myself to slow down, to be gentle, but the hunger has taken full control of me.

My lips wander from her shoulder to the crook of her neck. I breathe deeply, inhaling the scent of her hair and her skin. My lips trail over the gentle swell of her artery.

Her breathing is heavy and quick, chest rising notably against my own – though not, I think, from fear.

“Deni!” she repeats, more breathless this time.

I follow her neck to her jaw and then her jawline to her chin, brimming with want and need.

What is happening to me?

My lips find the corner of her mouth. Too late I realize that the overwhelming hunger is not hunger at all. By the time it dawns on me what my stupid, impulsive, useless vampire brain is doing, I’m already kissing her.

Why? I don’t even like her. She’s arrogant and stuffed full of money and literally hates all of my kind... and she smells so, so nice.

For a brief moment, I can feel her stiffen with surprise – and then very quickly, I’m the one with my back to the wall. She grips my chin with one hand and slips the other behind my back, pulling me close to her. Even if I weren’t weakened from my sprint, I’d be amazed by the force she pins me to the wall with. Her mouth is hungry and

demanding. She bites my lower lip, making me gasp involuntarily.

The repeated, angry beep of a car horn interrupts us. Celeste pulls back and turns to look in the direction of the sound, leaving me to watch her curlstumble over her shoulders, mesmerized by the delicacy of her neck.

Another loud honk pulls me away from my thoughts. Looking into the street, I spot Mel's car, with Mel sitting in the driver's seat. Though I can't hear what she's saying, her expression makes it clear that it's somewhere along the lines of 'what the fuck?'

Celeste looks at me with a strange fire in her eyes, her chest still heaving.

"Sorry," I say, catching my breath. What the hell was that? "I... When I drink blood, it's like I lose control... I didn't meant to do that."

"You should get a grip on that," she says. Then she clears her throat. "We need to go, just in case they start searching the streets."

But you kissed me back.

I straighten out my clothes, tugging down the seam of my jumper where she inadvertently pushed it up. "Yeah," I agree, flustered.

To avoid awkwardness and steer the conversation away from anything relating to the past few minutes, as we get into the car, I say, "How did you get out so fast, Mel?"

Mel looks like she's not sure whether she's lost her mind or not. After throwing both of us a couple of desbelieving glances, she seems to decide not to bring it up. Instead, she replies, "Actually, the siren who was singing saved me. She went full scream mode."

I shudder. I've only ever heard of the effects of a siren's scream and I'm not keen to experience it. They say some people never regain their sanity.

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“How come sirens don’t just scream constantly?” I ask. “Seems pretty useful.”

“You can’t, not without driving yourself insane. You probably can’t do more than a few minutes at a time and at least days apart. It’s a pretty horrific experience.” She grins into the rear-view mirror. “Luckily they’ve since invented guns.”

We pull out into the road and I keep looking through the rear window to make sure nobody is following us. Though I’m still confused about what on earth just happened, I am pleased with how quickly I got Celeste out of there. Surely that means I didn’t blow it completely?

Celeste shakes her head, her voice bitter. “That was a disaster.”

I shrink a little.

“I take it negotiations didn’t go well.” Mel turns the wrong way into a one-way street, forcing someone to stop by the curb to make way to avoid a head-on collision.

“Not at all.”

She gives the other driver a what-is-your-problem shrug before asking, “The thing you were trying to sell, what was it?”

“It’s called an inquisitor. It’s able to detect women with magical ability.”

I can see Mel narrow her eyes through the rear-vision mirror. Her expression looks like she’s trying not to be suspicious of Celeste. “What would a witch want with

that?”

“I’ve hunted them down from all across the world. It’s better I have them than someone who would abuse their power.”

There is a long silence. Then Mel asks in an unusually quiet voice, “But what would another witch want with them?”

“Nothing. It was my bad,” Celeste says. “I thought she was there on behalf of whoever is running this new trafficking ring, that maybe I could bait her into revealing information. I wasn’t actually going to sell it. Now I’m not sure who was baiting whom.” She pulls out a packet of rolling papers and a bag of dried blue Ghostshade flowers. “I suppose getting me arrested would be quite useful for Charon’s Veil.”

Mel glances over at her. “You didn’t tell me that’s what you were trying to do.”

Celeste shrugs. “You don’t need to know every detail of what I’m doing.”

“Celeste—”

“Don’t start,” Celeste interrupts bitterly. “Not now.”

Feeling the tension in the air rise, I sink lower into my seat, looking uncomfortably back and forth between them. Mel doesn’t seem like the kind of person who asks too many questions and more like the kind who follows into any situation with gun’s blazing. It surprises me that she seems to feel so upset about this. I certainly never truly expected to be let in on Celeste’s plan.

Mel lets out a deep sigh. “You’re not law enforcement, Celeste.”

Celeste rolls her eyes and turns on the radio. “Oh, you know they bribe the police. Somebody has to do something.”

“Does it have to be you? This obsession isn’t healthy.”

After turning up the volume, Celeste leans against the window and watches the city pass. “Let’s not talk about this right now.”

Unsure of what just happened, I, too, turn to look out of the window. All the excitement from Celeste’s kiss has evaporated into a sense of awkward embarrassment as the mood in the car tanks. What was I thinking?

After Mel drops me off in Tartarus, I don’t hear from Celeste for a week. It doesn’t surprise me – I totally blew it. Sure, I saved her but I don’t think kissing her was in the job description. The more I contemplate it, the more I wonder if it wasn’t some kind of mis-projection of my hunger. Clearly, the vampire in me thinks only about sleep, blood, and sex. Maybe in the moment, while trying to suppress my urge to drink her blood, that urge manifested into something else.

She did kiss you back.

I squash that thought as hard as I can, even if it’s true. It was a strange moment in a rush of adrenaline that probably cost me my job. The one positive is the money that earned me. For the first time in a long time, I have cash to spend – not a lot, but enough that Mav gets a little suspicious.

“You do have a rich lover!” he speculates. “You haven’t taken any jobs from Alastor in weeks. Where is all this cash coming from?”

“I do not!” I argue a little too vehemently. It’s an unfair assessment – I don’t like Celeste. I just think she smells nice and she’s pretty. And I think about kissing her almost every day while waiting to hear from her. But when I do, it’s always with a little pang of annoyance.

There’s always the issue of the unruly darkness in me that never seems to want to rest anymore.

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“Do you ever feel like you’re different since you were turned?” I ask Mav one night after we celebrate putting our first bit of cash into our cardboard savings box with bags of almost-not-expired blood.

“You mean other than going up in flames when I touch sunlight, needing to drink blood, superhuman strength, and a rocking bod?”

I sit up with false exasperation. “They must have forgotten to deliver my rocking body when I got turned!”

Mav laughs. “I guess you mean personality-wise?”

“Yeah, sort of.”

He shrugs. “Not really, no. I suppose I’m a bit more cynical.”

“You don’t ever feel like you have something sort of... evil inside of you?”

He pushes himself up on his elbow. “Why, do you feel like you do?”

I stare at the ceiling. “Maybe. It feels like the old Deni is still there but there’s also this other side of me that comes out when I’m near blood. Like I’m sharing my body with some kind of ravenous creature that I need to keep under control.”

“That’s not evil, Deni. It’s just part of being a vampire. Maybe it just feels that way because you’ve been fighting so hard against your transition?”

“Could be. So if there was someone who I feel like brings this part out in me, you don’t think I should avoid them?”

“Oh my god, I knew there was a secret lover!”

I cross my arms. “There isn’t.”

“Really? Because it sounds to me like you’re just horny and you think it’s evil because of your weird Christian upbringing.” He grins. “Do you know what horny means? See, when we get older and our bodies start changing–”

I throw my phone at him, finally accepting that it is probably more useful as a projectile weapon than as a mobile. “Shut up!”

The phone vibrates in pitiful protest as it lands on his mattress. He picks it up and looks at the screen. “Oooh!” he says, sitting up. “Your secret lover has a gift for you!”

I jump up from my bed and launch myself across the room, slapping the phone from his hand. “Don’t look at that!”

We wrestle, both trying to get to the phone first, laughing all the while, though I feel a mild sense of panic. Did he see who the text was from? He can’t know.

My panic is resolved when I finally see the text, which has been sent from a new number, as happens every few weeks when Celeste gets a different burner phone. “I have a gift for you – C.”

Sinking back onto my mattress while Mav pouts over having lost, I deliberate how to reply. “I don’t need anything.”

“I so disagree,” she answers. “But I understand if you don’t want to see me.”

With a frustrated grunt, I fling my phone onto my mattress and flop dramatically after it. That’s not what I meant! I think, even though reading my message back it certainly sounds like that’s what I meant. And it’s not true – I do want to see her and money is only about seventy-five percent of the reason why.

Mav throws me a knowing grin. I stick my tongue out at him.

“I do want to see you,” I type, just to then immediately delete the entire thing. Since the whole kissing situation was only a dumb accident that my stupid vampire brain caused, I don’t want to sound needy or give the wrong impression. “What is the gift?”

“Surprise.”

“Well, now I’m curious,” I reply. “How do I get this mystery gift?”

“Meet me at six at your fake address? And wear something nice, please, if you own such a thing.”

I grimace. Of course, she couldn’t just be nice. “Six-thirty?” I reply. “I need to walk there from my real address.”

Of course, Mel is here, I think when I get into Celeste’s car. What was I expecting?

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The siren is, once again, placed in the driver's seat. "Deni!" she says with a wide, scary smile.

"Hey," I say, slipping into the back like the perfect third wheel I am.

"Hey, kitten." Celeste meets my eyes in the rear-vision mirror. I look away, trying hard not to blush - which never works. Does she think I'm into her now? Do I think she's into me? She did get me a gift.

Our drive takes us past the smoking factories and out to the commercial port, where shipping containers and crates wait to be picked up and shipped across the state. Despite the shortness of the trip, I've looked death straight in the eyes more than once by the time we arrive at the gates of the shipyard. I much prefer Celeste's usual driver.

A security officer steps up to the driver window. He looks at each of us in turn and, coming to Celeste, gives her a quick nod. Without a word, he steps back and opens the gate for us. We roll into the shipyard and come to a stop beside a yellow container with the words Yanwang International written across its side. Around us, the city has gone dark, only skyscraper windows in the distance shining like stars. A few flickering lanterns illuminate the shipyard.

After turning off the car, Mel pushes back her seat, cranks her backrest to be almost horizontal, and kicks her feet onto the dashboard. "Have fun!" she says with an ominous voice. "Yell if you need me."

I find myself shivering as I step outside, my breath beginning to crystalize in the air.

Celeste opens the boot and hands me a coat, plush fur lined with silk.

“Thanks.” It smells like her when I drape it over my shoulders. When I slip my phone into the coat pocket, it slips down with a heavy thud. I reach into the pocket to find it has no bottom, my phone having slid between the lining and the fur. “Wait, are you giving me your hand-me-downs now?”

“What?”

“This has a hole in the pocket.”

“Not it doesn’t.” She slips her hand into the pocket with mine, our fingers brushing as she reaches into it. “Ugh.” She looks displeased. “I’ll have to get that fixed.”

I spin around. “Well, if you decide to ditch it, let me know. I like it.”

“YIt is my favorite,” she says. “But you do look much cuter in it than me.” She leads me over the muddy gravel toward the container. It’s a miracle she doesn’t fall in her heels, though she makes it look easy. “You still don’t like Mel?” she asks. “She’s the one who found him for me.”

My stomach lurches. “Found who?”

With a flick of her wrist, the locking mechanism keeping the container doors closed creaks and the doors open, just enough to admit both of us. A lonely lightbulb flickers on overhead. As the room lights up, my stomach sinks further. In the center lies a single chair tipped to the side. Tied to it is a man, the front and armpits of his shirt wet and clinging to him with sweat. He blinks at us for a moment before starting to squirm and wriggle, babbling unintelligibly into the fabric that's gagging him.

My feet freeze to the floor. Even though I’ve only seen him once, his face is burned

into my mind. I remember the wolfish expression on it as he unbuckled his pants while watching his friend pin me to the wall.

“He’s all yours,” Celeste says, leaning against the side of the container. Then she looks back at the door. “Unless you want me to wait outside?”

I stare at her, speechless. It takes me a few moments to find the words I’m looking for, all the while listening to him whimper. “What is this?”

“Justice, if you want it to be.” She shrugs. “Or dinner.”

My eyes find him again. It looks like he tried to escape but didn’t get very far. He looks pathetic the way he’s lying there, sweating and whining as if he were the victim. It makes me angry – it makes me want to hurt him. All the images of breaking his bones and tearing his arteries I’ve been trying to suppress come flooding back. It’s like I’m back in that room again, my skin crawling with the touch of them. I’m unable to look away as I back out of the door. “No.” I shake my head. “No, I’m going home.”

The wind whips my hair as I step out into the dark shipyard, away from the image of that pathetic man. The image of him at the club, though, won’t leave me so easily. It already haunts me in my sleep most nights. Unable to face Mel in the car and not knowing where to go, I step outside of the circle of light thrown by the lantern overhead and just squat down, burying my face in my hands. Fuck.

“You’re ruining my favorite coat.”

I look down to see the bottom of the garment sitting soggly in the mud. “Shit,” I mumble, getting up. “I’m sorry.”

Celeste lifts my chin and cups my cheek with her hand. The blue in her eyes is almost

grey tonight and her expression is surprisingly tender. “You’re frightened.”

The way she’s looking at me makes me want to cry, like when someone asks if you’re okay and you’re absolutely not okay. Blinking back the tears, I say, “Is this meant to be funny?”

“Of course not.”

“Then why did you bring me here?”

Her thumb traces my cheek. “If you want to survive, you need to learn to control your impulses. And that can’t happen if you don’t embrace what you are.”

I narrow my eyes. “Are you punishing me because... because I kissed you?”

She tilts her head, her expression full of pity. “No, of course not. You said you wanted to kick their asses.”

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I shake my head. “I didn’t mean... I don’t actually want to hurt anyone!”

“He was happy to hurt you.”

I wrap my arms around myself, replaying that night over and over again in my head, like a high definition movie reel blocking out reality. I shouldn’t have gone.

She raises a lone eyebrow. “You’re a vampire. You’re never going back to being human. It’s time to come to terms with that.”

“You’re the one who hates vampires, why are you suddenly so eager for me to embrace being one?”

“Because not doing so is hurting you, Deni.”

“Bullshit!” I run my hands through my hair as if searching for something to hang onto. I can’t explain to her that I might be lying – that maybe I really do want to hurt him. That the monster in me is just waiting to break out. But it’s one thing to lose control of it and another to deliberately let loose. What if I embrace being a vampire and lose myself in the process? “I just don’t understand why you’re doing this to me.”

“I need to be able to trust you if we’re going to keep working together. And that means not being worried you’re going to tear into me at any moment.”

“How the hell is this supposed to help with that?”

“Because if you can manage not to kill someone you hate as much as him, you can

hopefully manage not to kill me. Supposing you hate me less than him.”

“Ugh! I don’t hate you!” I throw my hands up, tears in my eyes. God, this is so embarrassing. “I didn’t lose control, alright? I was never going to bite you, I just wanted to believe that because... because...” I shake my head. “Forget it.” Angry, I turn on my heels. “I can go home on foot.”

“Don’t walk away from me.” She holds me back by my shoulders. “Please,” she adds with what sounds like inhuman effort.

With my hands in fists, I turn back around.

She cups my cheek with her hand. “I’m sorry, kitten. I’ve known a lot of vampires in my life and I haven’t exactly seen their best side. I thought revenge would be something you enjoyed but you’re different. I should know that by now.”

“So what you’re saying is you haven’t listened to anything I’ve said to you,” I say, voice thick with tears. I don’t even know why I’m saying it like this – I work for her. Why would she care what I have to say and why would I care if she doesn’t?

“I promise I did,” she sighs. “But old beliefs die hard. This wasn’t meant to be traumatising for you.”

I wipe my tears. “How couldn’t it be?”

She winces slightly. “I don’t know. To be honest, I’ve had some informants pick up what they were saying happened that night at the Myrrh & Adder and... well, you were right. It was degrading. It put me in the mood to watch you tear his throat open.”

“Why?”

Now she's the one defensively crossing her arms. "Because I'm protective of the people that work for me, alright?"

"Well, you show that in a really messed up way."

"Okay, I admit screwed this up. I just wanted to show you that you're not as helpless as you think you are. You have power and you can control it."

"But I am helpless! You're the one who saved me. Mel found him and brought him here. I couldn't get revenge on my own."

Celeste finds my hands and winds her fingers through mine. "Exactly. You're only helpless if you're alone." She squeezes my hands. "You saved me from getting arrested in that club. Nobody can do it alone, kitten. That doesn't make you weak." She smiles. "And wanting to kiss me doesn't make you weak, either."

I let out a frustrated grunt and withdraw my hands. Ugh. She's the absolute worst.

Huffing, I turn around and march towards the container.

"Are you sure you want to go in there?"

"Yes," I hiss. "I'm hungry. But if you let me kill him, I'm done working for you."

"I won't."

With a hammering heart I step back inside, where her prisoner has tried to scoot towards the open door. He squirms as we enter. Sweat is beading on his forehead despite the cold winter air. My legs slow until I am rendered motionless, stopped only a few steps from him.

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Celeste walks past me, squatting down before him. “Remember her?” she asks.

He shakes his head, rapid and panicked, his face showing that he knows exactly who I am.

Celeste reaches down, buries her fist in his hair and lifts him up, straightening up the chair with him. His chest heaves, his eyes trying to follow her every step as she walks behind him. She yanks his head back, exposing his throat.

With a shiver, I notice the way his adam's apple bops as he swallows. I've never let myself view another person as a meal before – have gone out of the way to suppress those thoughts – but it's easier than I thought. My muscles twitch with the urge to attack.

Celeste bends down to him until her lips are level with his ear. “Two on one... that's not very fair, is it?”

He whimpers, his eyes finding mine, expression pleading. Anger flares in me like a wildfire, to a thousand degree heat in barely a moment. How dare he look at me like this?

“Here's an idea, to give you a fighting chance...” Celeste reaches into the pocket of her coat and I see the flash of a knife in her hand. Before I realise what she's doing, she's cut the rope securing him to the chair. Everything after that happens so fast, it's over before it's even started.

He runs. Of course he runs. Slow and cumbersome and heavy-footed, the way all

humans run. He even makes it past me and within a step of the door.

Feeling the tug of prey drive like electricity in my muscles, I let myself go, giving in to the urge to chase. In the time it takes him to take the next step, I whip around and lunge after him. My body acts without conscious thought, muscles twitching through pure instinct. My skin prickles with adrenaline. His body folds like a ragdoll beneath me, flinching as my teeth rip into his neck.

He hits the side of the container with an audible crunch, something in his fragile body breaking. He cries and fights, but this time, he's the helpless one.

The way he struggles as I pin him against the wall and drink in deep swigs reminds me of myself, weak, unable to move. I can still feel his friend's body pressed against mine, every touch running over my skin as if it's happening right now. Fleeing from the nausea and shame, I bite down harder and feel him jerk in pain. I hate him, I hate both of them, and fucking Casey, everyone who's ever hurt me. My mind spirals further into this unholy amalgamation of shame and anger, until I feel his muscles go limp beneath me.

I jump back, fingers shaking. Warm blood drips from my lips to my chin. As if time has slowed down, I watch his body crumple and sink to the floor.

My eyes helplessly scan the container until I find Celeste, who is leaning by the door and impassively sucking on a joint. Mel is standing outside and reaches in to take the Ghostshade from Celeste's hand.

"You said..." I begin.

Celeste smiles gently when she sees my expression. "He's just unconscious, kitten. They tend to do that when they lose too much blood."

I look down at him. I don't feel better – the sense of justice I was hoping for never comes – but I do feel stronger. His blood, though not nearly as good as that of a witch, is starting to go to my head. I've never drank this much in one go before.

“What... what do I do with him now?”

Celeste shrugs. “Don't worry about it. He's my gift, remember? I'll clean up later.”

She steadies me as I step outside and I let her lead me to the car. That's it? I think. Behind me, the doors of the container snap shut.

“We can't just leave him there... It's cold and—”

“What do you think, that they would have driven you home after they were done with you?” Celeste flicks the stump of her joint into the dirt.

I flinch at the thought, images flashing through my mind that I would pay to be able to forget. Maybe I should have just killed him. The car's doorhandle crumples as I grip it, shards of plastic splintering and crumbling to the floor.

“Shit,” I swear, finding Mel's eyes. “I'm so sorry.”

She gives the damage a perplexed look, then turns to Celeste. “You're the one paying for that.”

Celeste's hand finds my back. “It's alright, kitten. You work for me now. Everyone in this city knows not to go near you.”

While I try to open the door with the stump of the broken doorhandle, unsure of what to do with my onslaught of emotions, Mel pauses by the driver's side, rubbing her neck. “I think I'm too high to drive.” Her eyes find Celeste.

“Don’t look at me,” Celeste replies.

Mel shrugs. Before I can say anything, she has thrown the keys and my hands have plucked them out of midair.

I look at them with unease. “I haven’t driven since I got my license years ago.”

“You’ll be fine,” Mel says, already on her way to the back, where my hand is still sitting on the broken handle. “You’ve got that vampire reaction speed, right?”

10. THE IMMORTAL ARE BAD DRIVERS

It takes me a while before I stop shaking enough to drive, though I still bury myself deep enough into the vampire part of my mind to avoid the flood of feelings that has come with this evening. I feel a little ashamed for doing so but there is no way I could drive otherwise. Somehow, the prospect of stalling three times at an intersection doesn't ease my nerves at all.

Mel watches me in the rear-view mirror as I adjust the seat and fumble with the height of the steering wheel – are all siren's so short? I can feel Celeste's gaze on me from the passenger seat. This is going to be so embarrassing.

On the upside, having to drive distracts me from how I feel, at least a little. Mel does the rest. As we roll out of the shipyard, I notice she is sitting perched in the middle of the backseat, pushed forward so she's nearly between us, her elbows resting on the front backrests.

Of course, she's not wearing her seatbelt. Nobody is – nobody but me, who needs it the least, being immortal.

As we drive up the suburban roads, she says, "What are you doing?"

I look nervously over the dashboard and check the mirrors. I thought I was driving exactly as I should. "What do you mean?"

She throws her hands up. "My grandmother drives faster than you and she's practically a fish!"

Celeste chuckles. “I’m telling her you said that.”

Wincing on the inside, I speed up a little.

Mel lets her head sink against the backrest. “Poseidon have mercy.”

“If we have an accident you’ll both be dead,” I say defensively, slowing down awkwardly early for an intersection and forgetting to indicate. Being flustered certainly doesn’t help my driving.

“Pfff,” Mel scoffs. “You think the most powerful witch in the country would die in a car accident? She hexes all our cars, they couldn’t crash if they wanted to.”

I throw a sideways glance at Celeste, trying to gauge whether Mel is mocking me or not, but her face is unreadable. Indignant, I let the needle creep up a little higher.

“Left here.”

“What?” I glance at Mel in the rearview mirror and nearly miss the turn. “But Asphodel is the other way.” Too late I notice the signs to the highway.

“I can’t let this stand,” Mel says. “I’m gonna teach you how to drive the way a resident of this damned city should.”

Celeste shakes her head and sinks further into her seat.

“Come on,” Mel says, watching the dashboard. “You can go at least a little faster than that.”

I let out a frustrated huff. At least the highway is unusually quiet in this part of the city. “There’s a speed limit for a reason.”

“The reason is because humans and ghouls have terrible reaction times. You’re a vampire, you don’t need those.”

“I don’t... think that’s true.”

“C’mon,” Mel massages my shoulders from behind. “There isn’t even anyone on the road. Pleaaaase, Deni, for me? Just for a few minutes?”

Letting out a deep sigh, I push the speed a little higher, simultaneously burying deeper and deeper into my vampire mind. The constant low-grade dread that usually lives in my stomach is drowned out, and so is the nausea brought on by seeing that horrible man again, replaced by hyper-intense colors and an extreme awareness of my entire field of vision.

“Now we’re talking,” Mel says.

Weaving past a couple of other cars – slow-lane losers, as Mel calls them – I find myself almost smiling at the smoothness of the motion. Driving feels suited to this part of me, only acting and reacting to the car and the road. With my thoughts more quiet, it feels as if I’m experiencing the world more directly. Under Mel’s insistence, I take it up another notch, the car beginning to feel like an extension of my body. The road out this way is so quiet, it feels like we’re the only people in the world, the inside of the car a little capsule of life against the vastness of the dead city. Mel’s voice is ecstatic as she explains the language of the car, the vibrations in the steering wheel, the sound of the engine, the feedback of the pedals. Her excitement is half the fun, the other half is feeling like flying.

Celeste only rolls her eyes at Mel and watches the city fly by, smiling to herself.

Under Mel’s cheerful encouragement, I overtake a dark sedan. Moments later, the previously ordinary car suddenly lights up in red and blue. The sound of a siren cuts

through the purr of the engine.

Fuck,I think.

“Fuck!” Mel says.

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Heart dropping, I take the foot off the gas and scan the side of the highway for somewhere to pull up.

“What are you doing?” Mel looks back over her shoulder. “You can’t let them pull us over!”

“Yeah,” Celeste’s voice is calm. “I think we have a pound or so of Ghostshade in the back.”

“But—”

Mel waves her hands. “Drive!”

Mind scrambling, I push down on the gas. The car lurches forward inelegantly and I grip the stirring wheel tighter. As we approach the turn to Asphodel, the traffic slowly becomes more dense. My pulse rushes in my ears as I weave through traffic, the police car not far behind me.

“Faster!” Mel demands, her sharp-toothed grin wide in the rearvision mirror. “Go!”

My skin prickles with sweat. Already, the highway is turning back into a city street, buildings beginning to crowd the side of the road. Not far ahead, an intersection approaches at nauseating speed. My stomach drops as the light turns red.

“I have to stop!”

“You can’t!”

I glance over at Celeste, who looks amused and utterly unaffected.

These people are fucking insane.

“No! Nonono!” Mel yells as I begin to slow down. I desperately scan the intersection for an opening.

Just as the police car catches up behind me, I notice a gap in the cars crossing. Again, I give in to the vampiric side of me, this time lurching myself toward it. Bile rises in my stomach as I floor the gas and we leap out onto the intersection. Mel screams and hides her face behind her hands. In the corner of my vision I see that even Celeste sits up a little straighter. We miss an eighteen-wheeler by a hair’s width but come out the other side unscathed.

Despite myself, I join in when Mel starts to laugh. As I continue to shoot up the road, the police car remains stuck on the other side. Mel directs me down a narrow set of sidestreets, through the parking lot of an office building and into a parking garage. Here, she changes the numberplates.

“I thought people only did that in movies,” I say, watching her from the driver’s seat.

Celeste shrugs. “I think Mel’s whole life is a heist montage.”

When I attempt to get out, Mel says, “What are you doing?”

“You’re going to make me keep driving?”

“I live about ten minutes away,” she says. “And then you’ll have to drop Celeste home anyway.”

“Isn’t this your car?”

Mel tilts her head. “Work car. One of them, at least.”

“How many cars do you have?”

Celeste sighs. “Enough for Mel to have her fun.”

I look over at her. “And you?”

She shakes her head. “I haven’t been sober enough to drive in a long time.”

I catch Mel grimacing at that. With a sigh, I resign myself to my fate. For a while, at least, it seems I’ve frightened Mel into silence. Despite the fact that I’ve nearly had a heart attack on multiple occasions tonight, the whole drive has been a surprising lift to my mood. Maybe, I’ve even had a little fun.

As Mel leans forward between the seats to play with the radio, I let my eyes wander over to Celeste. She’s leaned her head against the window and is watching the houses pass by. A single curl has freed itself from the pin holding back her hair and is falling languidly over her shoulder. Her face looks implausibly delicate in the stroboscopic lighting of the passing lights.

”...a song for all the lovers out there...”the radio mumbles before the first notes Tracy Chapman’s ‘Baby Can I Hold You’begin to play.

Noticing that I’m looking at her, Celeste’s eyes find mine, the corner of her mouth curving upward. She winks and blows me a kiss.

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“Eyes on the road!” Mel shouts.

My heart drops through the floor as I swerve back into my lane, the long, angry honk of the car behind me blaring in my ears. The plastic of the steeringwheel cracks threateningly as my grip tightens. My cheeks glow with heat as the mortification of the moment catches up with me. I have the overwhelming urge to swerve into a lamppost.

In the corner of my eye, I notice Mel slapping Celeste on the arm. “Stop distracting the girl,” the siren says. “Or I’ll put a bag over your head.”

Celeste only smiles and turns her gaze back to the passing cityscape.

‘Maybe if I told you the right words, oh, at the right time,’ Tracy sings. ‘You’d be mine.’

Heartbeat still stumbling, I keep my eyes glued to the road. Our near-accident shuts Mel up for a whole two minutes before she begins demanding I go faster again.

My heart is still racing when I get to Celeste’s house after dropping Mel off, mind alight with excitement. I’m surprised to find myself not wanting the night to end.

I stand a little awkwardly by the driver door after we get out, not sure what to do with myself. I could, of course, leave and take the bus home...

“Come on,” Celeste says as she passes me, walking towards the house. “Or should I tell the cat that it’s his lucky day?”

While I’m still deliberating, my body is already mindlessly walking after her. She stops halfway up the path, swearing. When I reach her, she steadies herself on my shoulder.

“What is it?”

She holds up her broken heel. “I should get this repaved,” she mumbles, looking down at the perfectly adequate path.

I laugh, still high on the rush of the drive. “You’re just trying to get that... what is it? Paladin?”

“Palanquin, kitten,” she chuckles. Then, with a challenging look in her eyes, she puts her arm around my shoulder. “Well?”

Shaking my head, I pick her up. I don’t know how she manages to make me feel like a servant rather than a total badass doing this but she does.

Celeste unlocks the door with a flick of her wrist and I carry her inside, agonizingly aware of how close we are. The more time I spend like this, the harder it becomes not to think of the way she pinned me against the wall in that alleyway. I carry her into the living room, where a fire is already crackling in the hearth, and set her down on her chaise lounge.

She lets her head fall back and laughs when I slip off her other heel. “What are you doing, kitten?”

I take her shoes out to the hallway, saying over my shoulder, “Don’t pretend you

don't like to be waited on hand and foot.”

She smirks when I get back, an expression delicately balanced between wicked and sweet. “On hands and knees, actually.”

After having tried so hard to claw control back from my vampire self, it seems inappropriate to feel grateful for it. And yet, when I go to my knees before her chair, looking up at her expectantly, I am. Without it, I’d have never had the audacity for this.

Celeste furrows her brows in an expression of pain, her eyes slipping from my face to my neckline and then over my body. Maybe this is why she wanted me to wear something nice.

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” she says quietly.

She’s not entirely wrong but I’m not about to admit that. “What am I doing?”

She bites her lower lip. “Tempting me.”

“Then I do know what I’m doing.” I feel almost giddy. It’s like the terrified girl living on some shabby mattress has been replaced by someone else. Giving in to the darkness might be a mistake but it’s so easy.

She leans forward and reaches down to curl her fingers around my neck, inspecting my face. “And what do you think you’re tempting me into? Sweet, boring sex and then holding you after?”

I blush, inadvertently trying to turn my head away in my embarrassment but she buries her other hand in my hair, gripping it and forcing me to keep looking at her.

“Let me guess,” I begin breathlessly, “You’re not sweet?”

She smiles insidiously. “No. But you might need to be held after I’m done with you.”

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My stomach feels like I'm looking out over a ledge. "That sounds like a threat."

She lets out a half-chuckle, half-scoff. "Maybe it is." Tugging at my hair so I'm forced to tilt my head back, she leans forward and kisses me. Her grip tightens around my throat as her lips touch mine, soft and sensual in contrast to the ferocity of her hold on me. Heat spreads through my stomach, then lower and lower.

I part my lips when her tongue demands entry into my mouth, willingly opening myself to her invasion. Her tongue traces my lower lip, then meets mine. Before I can stop myself, a quiet groan slips my lips, the sensations of her touch overwhelming. The vampire in me stakes claim to every part of my body and mind, displacing all rational thought with burning desire.

And then she stops. I try to follow her lips when she pulls back, to keep kissing her, but she forces me to stay in place. My chest rises and falls rapidly.

"I'm sorry," she sighs, letting go of me.

"Don't be—"

She brings a finger to my lips. "I'm going to bed, kitten. The guest room is still made up." Getting up, she adds, "Good night."

I sit there baffled for a moment, still dizzy from being kissed like that. "Why?"

"Why am I going to bed?"

“Without me,” I clarify, amazed by my own audacity. It feels like playing with fire – any moment I’m going to ridicule myself and it will be unbearably embarrassing. But for now, it feels thrilling.

She stops, looking back at me on her way into the hallway, seemingly also surprised by my boldness. Her laughter rings clear like bells. “Oh, kitten.” She tilts her head. “You don’t really want that.”

“Why not?”

“Because I like to make my girls beg, and I don’t think you’re ready for that.”

I swallow and watch her disappear around the corner.

11. A REWARD AND A PUNISHMENT, THOUGH I DON’T KNOW WHICH IS WHICH

Trying to shut down the vampire part of me after the night I’ve had is an impossibility. I toss and turn, trying to remind myself that tonight was a loss, that attacking that man was bad. But all I can feel when I think about that moment is a fire in my chest, a fire that doesn’t want to be put out. I liked getting revenge. I felt like I could get some of my power back.

And that’s not all. The car chase. Kneeling at Celeste’s feet. It feels like giving in to that side of me means winning. Like I have power, even if it’s the power to give myself over to Celeste willingly.

Her words play over and over in my mind. I like to make my girls beg. It’s a messed up thing to say, isn’t it?

And yet all I want is for her to make me beg. Though my mind is too innocent to

imagine how she might do that, the thought is dizzyingly hot. Every time I've felt embarrassed around her, it's only made me want her more. It doesn't make sense.

Maybe becoming a vampire has crossed my wires wrong. Maybe the horror of the last few weeks has played some kind of Freudian trick on me, messing me up for good.

I'm confused. But the vampire side of me isn't. It just wants and it knows exactly what it is that it wants.

"Ugh!" I kick my legs, too hot under the fancy down duvet. The fireplace crackles quietly. Still too hot, I take off the loose linen shirt I've borrowed to sleep in and tossing it onto one of the chairs under the window with my pants. I know how to get rid of this tension but...no.

How long since I've had any privacy? I run my hand over the soft skin of my stomach and my chest before frustratedly biting the first knuckle of my index finger. No. I can't, not in Celeste's goddamn House. Get it together, Deni.

With a groan, I roll onto my stomach and bury my face in the pillows. I like to make my girls beg. I can feel the implied meaning of her words looming at the back of my mind, something dirty, something to do with that stupid drawer of hers that I haven't been able to stop thinking about.

The harder I try not to think about it, the more impossible it becomes. I've seen her in that silk robe and I've seen it fall open just a little, showing a hint of the lace beneath it, even if I pretended not to see. And I have definitely traced the outline of her curves through one of her tighter dresses. If I really let my thoughts go down that route, I even remember what the curve at the small of her back felt like when we kissed.

Shut up, I curse my vampire brain. Just shut up already!

But I know deep down that Mav was right. There is no other part of me that is responsible for my behaviour. It's just me. I kissed her because I wanted to kiss her. And I knelt at her feet because I wanted to see where she would take it. So what if I don't like her – I think she's hot. There, I think defiantly. I've admitted it to myself. Happy now?

The reverse psychology I'm trying to pull off on myself doesn't work. Fuck it, I think. She'll literally never know.

Biting my lip, I slip my hand beneath my body, letting it snake down between my legs. I suck in a sharp breath when my fingers reach their destination, touch enhanced as much as my other sensations by all the blood I've had. As I push the fabric of my panties aside, I imagine my finger's are Celeste's. You're so wet, kitten. I blush with my face buried in the pillows but that doesn't stop me.

And the Celeste of my imagination isn't wrong. I'm so damn wet. I shudder as I find my clit, blown away by how sensitive I feel. I suppress a groan, reminding myself that I need to be quiet – which somehow only makes this more fun.

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Defiant, I give in to all the lurid images I've been holding back, of Celeste's skin against mine, my face buried in her hair, her hands on me, inside me. With a shiver, I stifle a quiet moan in the pillows. I roll my hips greedily. While I've never thought of her hands around my neck before, just tonight has me wanting nothing more. I picture her pinning me down, choking me, that damn arrogant smile on her lips.

I wouldn't say I've ever been the kind of person who struggles to keep quiet, but damn if I don't struggle tonight. And the dirtier I feel, heart fluttering at the thought of her just in the other room, the better it gets. I like to make my girls beg.

My legs tremble and I bury my fist in the sheets, imagining her hungry lips on my body, her tongue...

"You're thoughts are incredibly loud."

I spin around, at the same time ripping the duvet off the bed to cover myself, breathless, messy, and mortified.

She leans in the doorway, eyes shamelessly wandering over my body, just the same smile on her face that I was just imagining.

Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck. Screw Casey turning me into a vampire – this is the worst thing that's ever happened to me.

"What are you doing here?" My heartbeat is suddenly high in my throat. I want to vanish, I want to die, anything not to have to look at her right now.

She walks over slowly, her hips swaying softly. Her robe is tied loosely around her waist, the fabric falling open just a little as she bends over me, leaning one hand against the bedhead behind me. Her gaze snakes over my naked body or the parts of it that aren't obscured by the duvet. I pull my bare leg under it to try to hide.

"Thinking of a witch is like calling her name," she says. "I was curious why I was so acutely on your mind."

I swallow, looking everywhere but at her face. "I just... I mean, I wasn't..."

She grabs my chin and lifts it until I have to raise my eyes to hers. My face is burning so hot it nearly brings tears to my eyes.

"You weren't thinking about me just now?" Her face is amused, almost mocking.

It makes me blush even more. I shake my head, like the idiot that I am.

Her lips curl into a pitying smile while her hand goes from my chin to my temple. For a brief moment, it feels like my brain is freezing over and she is at the heart of the ice-storm. Her presence in my mind is sharp and refined, like a diamond amidst the rubble. "What were you thinking about, then?"

All the dirty images I've been conjuring up for my own pleasure flash through my mind, like an old movie reel being wound back. I try to resist her powerful tug on my consciousness but it's futile, my mouth is already moving. "I thought about what it would feel like if you fucked me," I begin. The heat spreads from my cheeks to my neck as I listen to myself recount every single fantasy in vulgar detail. Of her undressing me, pinning me down, choking me, making me say her name. It's horrible and so hot and I want to die but I also want her.

When I'm done and she withdraws from my mind, I find my thoughts strangely

languid and pleasantly quiet, a little like after giving in to my vampire side.

She bites her lip. “That’s so adorable.”

I clench my jaw, surprised by her assessment.

“I suppose I was right about sweet and boring, then,” she says simply before straightening up and turning to leave. “Sorry to interrupt.”

She can’t be serious.

“No!” I’m surprised how desperate I sound. Great, I think. I have officially lost my goddamn mind.

She stops.

“Please don’t go.” Never in my life did I think I’d do this. “Please?”

When she turns, her expression is amused again, though I can see by the pained furrow in her brow that my words have had the desired effect. “Is this your best approximation of begging?”

I bite my lip and nod.

Shaking her head, she sighs, “You’re going to wish you hadn’t done this.” She nods at the door. “Come with me.”

I climb out of the bed, still dressed in nothing but my panties, and walk after her. She holds up her hand, making me stop in my tracks.

She points at the floor. “Hands and knees, remember?”

Swallowing, I get to my knees and crawl after her.

She makes me kneel by her bedside while she goes through the door to what I thought was her ensuite. Instead, it leads into another short hallway, the room beyond which I can only see a fraction of – but the fraction scares me.

She returns holding a bunch of jute rope. “Get on the bed.”

I do as I’m told, something that is not a given for me. But I’m beginning to realize I might regret it if I don’t behave. My stomach flutters, heat spreading through me.

With slow and deliberate movements, she ties my hands onto my back, not just connecting the wrists but pulling back my shoulders and elbows, winding the rope around and around, as well as weaving an elaborate harness around my chest. Her fingers are deft and quick as she works and there's something meditative about it, which only makes the anticipation in me rise.

When she's done, she inspects her work, running her fingers over my skin until I’m covered in gooseflesh. She grabs my chest possessively, squeezing my nipples. “Gorgeous,” she remarks quietly.

I blush, trying hard to slow down my rapid breathing. While I find her dedication to knots admirable, watching her tie me up has changed my state of mind from ordinarily turned on to just-fuck-me-already turned on.

My first disappointment comes when she says, “You know I hate being lied to.”

I swallow, too dizzy to comprehend. “I lied to you?”

She chuckles. “You said you weren’t thinking about me.” Leaning in towards me until her lips brush my ear, she says, “When really you were being a dirty little slut and thinking of me in all the worst ways.”

If it was possible to burst from having all your blood rush to your face, this would certainly be the moment. “I’m not a slut, I–”

Her slap is sharp, brief, and dizzying. “Did I ask you a question?”

Despite the indignant burn in my chest – which is somehow only stoking the hot fire of pleasure in between my legs – I manage to say simply, “No. I’m sorry.”

“That’s better.”

She reaches between my legs and enters me with her fingers in one smooth movement. Startled, I moan, already rocking my hips forward for more but she only pulls away. She brings her glistening fingers to my face. “See? Slut,” she concludes.

“I–”

This time she interrupts me by bringing her slick fingers to my mouth, forcing them between my lips. I moan, running my tongue along them and sucking them clean. Fuck.

Grabbing me roughly by the harness she created, she spins me around so I’m facing away from her, then grabs my hair and pushes my face down into the sheets. With my knees still beneath me, I can only imagine the view this gives her.

Her hands brush the skin of my thighs and ass while she explains, “Let me give you

something to consider the next time you think about lying to me.”

I’m about to ask what she wants me to consider when my question is answered in her flat hand coming down hard on my ass. I flinch, gasping with surprise – though looking back I should have seen this coming. She does not give me much time to recover before the second slap and then the third. For the shortest while, I contemplate whether I find this hot or awkward, but then I very quickly lose my ability to contemplate anything at all as her hand comes down harder and harder.

Flinching and shuddering, I try to keep my dignity at least somewhat intact, though I very quickly descend into whimpering. My skin burns hot and the more often she strikes, the longer the pain lasts.

“Ah!” I find myself involuntarily squirming to avoid the pain, which only leads to her grabbing me by the rope and holding me in place. “Fuck!” I protest. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry I lied, please!”

She sighs and runs her fingers up my thigh and over my sex, parting me and finding my clit. I moan as her fingers draw slow circles. The way she holds me down makes it impossible to move to the rhythm of her touch but I try anyway, desperate to have her finally fuck me.

When she withdraws again, I let out a frustrated groan.

She chuckles and pulls me up by my hair just to turn me around again and lay me on my back. Her expression is insidious. “You’re going to have to learn some patience, kitten.”

I watch in awe as she steps back from the bed and drops her robe, the fabric pooling loosely at her feet. Goddamn. Not only was I right about the lace but I was right about how stunning she looks in it. My heart flutters in unison with the butterflies in my

stomach and below.

Indulgent, I trail the soft curves of her hips and stomach to her chest, my eyes searching to find her nipples through the sheer lace. She smiles when she sees the look on my face. I inadvertently squirm in my bonds with the desire to touch her.

She joins me on the bed, kissing me briefly before sliding her briefs down her legs. I lick my lips, already anticipating where this is going. Slowly, she places each of her knees on either side of my head, hands resting on my hips, before lowering herself over my face. A shudder goes through her as my lips find their destination, my tongue parting her to taste her before settling on her clit.

I groan, licking greedily as she begins to move her hips, slicking my chin with her pleasure. Her voice is quiet and raw. “Good girl.”

Her words make me shudder and I work twice as hard in the hope that she might repeat them, trying hard to get a breath in as she rides me, less making me eat her out and more simply using my mouth to get herself off. Her nails trail over my stomach as her moans become louder, her fingers finding my nipples and tugging, twisting, until I cry out from pain, stopping the movements of my tongue.

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Rather than letting go, she slaps me hard across the chest. “Did I say you could stop?”

The pain nearly brings tears to my eyes but I force myself to keep going until I can feel her her hips jerking, her moans turning into a breathless staccato. She trembles as her movements slow, her hands finally letting go of my chest and finding the sheet beside my body. For a moment, she stays still like this and I gently run my tongue over her clit until I’ve drawn out the last of her shivers.

“Such a good little slut,” she whispers in my ear after having recovered from her climax, her hands finding their way over my body again.

This time, I have the wherewithal to swallow my protest. Besides, I’m no longer sure her assessment is that wrong – by now, the wetness between my legs has begun spreading down the inside of my thighs. I’m pretty sure that I’d blindly do anything she asked me, if only she promised to finally fuck me in return.

Somehow, I find myself back with my face in the sheets, legs spread, and finally, finally, her hand settles between my legs, first entering me with two fingers, then after sufficient pleading for more, three. I no longer try to be pretty or dignified. My hair is a mess, bruises have begun spreading my skin from her spanking, still tender and raw, and my moans have reached a level of desperation I didn’t think they could.

She kisses and bites my neck as she pushes me closer and closer to release, my body trembling in anticipation. “Sssh,” she whispers in my ear. “Slow down, kitten. Not yet.”

I groan. As if I had any control left. When I try to resist the tidal wave of pleasure threatening to overwhelm me, it only seems to come on faster, my legs beginning to twitch.

“Not yet,” she repeats, this time with a threatening undertone. “You can come when I tell you to.”

Letting out a frustrated grunt, I mumble into the sheets, “I can’t, I’m gonna come...” Biting my lip, I try to stop the heat from spreading through me, the stars from dancing behind my eyes. “Please,” I moan, neither sure if I can endure whatever punishment she has in store if I don’t follow her orders, nor whether I can bear disappointing her. “Please, I need to come! Please!”

She sighs quietly. “Fine. Go ahead and come for me, little girl.”

Her permission comes not a moment too late. Within moments, I’m blind with pleasure, my climax shaking me in waves, making my back arch, my legs spasming. I try to stifle my cries in the sheets, not wanting to wake up the whole neighborhood. Fuck, is all I can think. Fuck, that feels good.

Celeste’s voice is husky and breathless against my ear. “Hmm. That’s a good girl.”

Her words draw out one last wave of tingling, mind-bending pleasure before I collapse, panting, shivering and limp – and perhaps more satisfied than I’ve ever been. Dizzy and stupefied, I try to catch my breath. I don’t like her, I try to remind myself in the warm afterglow of my orgasm, I don’t like her at all.

After stilling only for a moment, her fingers begin to move again, still inside me, still sopping wet. I shudder and try to pull my legs together, oversensitive to her touch. Rather than stopping, she slaps the inside of my thigh hard enough to make me yelp, forcing my legs apart again.

“I’m not done with you,” she whispers in my ear, her wicked smile audible in her voice. “I haven’t even gotten started yet.”

11. I THOUGHT MAGIC WAS MORE FUN THAN THAT

I wake in a rush of terror. The world is bright, too bright. Behind my eyelids dance golden and orange flecks. When I open them, the curtains are opened slightly, sun streaming directly onto the bed.

With a terrified yelp, I flee the sheets and across the room, pressing myself into a dark corner. With a rattling breath I raise my hands to see that they are... fine.

“I enchanted the windows.” Celeste is sitting in one of the lusciously carved chairs beneath the open curtains. Her hair is rolling loosely off her shoulders, pale skin radiant in the sunlight. In the brightness, the blue of her eyes is an impossibility. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

With a fluttering heart, I reach out and touch the rays of light cutting through the air. My fingers remain intact, no pain and no fire bursting forth from the sunlight upon them. Before I can stop myself I stick out my arm, my shoulder, then bathe my body in the sunlight. It’s only the cool winter sun but after months of darkness, it nearly brings tears to my eyes.

“You can do that?” I ask, laughing in disbelief. “I haven’t seen the sun in months!”

“Only this window, so far. It is a fairly complex spell.”

Fascinated, I tiptoe up to the window frame. Runes are carved into the wood, their edges charred. When I bring my fingers to them they are cold as ice.

“Careful.” Celeste’s expression is grave. “You don’t want to touch that.”

“Why is it cold?”

“Magic requires energy. It’s the First Law of Thermodynamics – energy can neither be created nor destroyed. It has to come from somewhere. Using heat is one of the more easily accessible sources.”

I grimace. “That sounds like... maths. I thought magic was more fun than that.”

“It is fun but it does take study.”

With a sigh, I lean against one of the posts of the bed frame, closing my eyes. Did she do this... for me?

“When did you do this?” I ask.

“Last night after you fell asleep.”

I open my eyes to slits, inspecting her. “Didn’t you sleep?”

A shadow of pain flashes across her face, almost invisible but not to my vampire eyes. “I don’t sleep much.”

When my eyes trail over the side-table beside her, they come to rest on the stump of a joint sitting in the ashtray. Already?

She gets up and wanders out of the room while leaving me to admire the sunlight, saying she’ll come back with tea. I feel like a toddler who has never seen the sun before – I just can’t believe it, running my hands through the light over and over again. Too late I hear the click of a camera shutter.

“Hey!” I say as I see Celeste in the doorway holding a camera. “What is this?”

“Purely for scientific documentation,” she replies, though there is a smile playing at the corners of her mouth. “I’d have to dig through my books but you might be the first vampire to ever touch sunlight!”

I cover my face as she raises the camera again, feeling silly.

Once she has her scientific proof, she sets the camera aside and picks up a tray with tea she left by the door. After setting it down, she sinks back into her chair and

watches me bask in the sunshine, my eyes closed to enjoy the bright orange behind my eyelids, something I never thought I'd miss.

When I open my eyes, Celeste extends her hand in an expectant gesture and my body trails over to her almost on its own. She holds me at arm's length, her eyes wandering slowly over my curves. As if touched by her gaze, my skin breaks out into goosebumps, my nipples pressing hard against the thin fabric of my chemise. Embarrassed by my visceral reaction to her closeness, I cross my arms across my chest as if to hide.

She smiles contentedly when she sees the blue bruises on my thighs, in the shape and formation of her fingertips. With one finger she slides up the fabric to follow her little trail of destruction. The other hand undoes the crossing of my arms, pulling my wrists down to my side. She inspects the bruises on my backside, the scratches on my shoulderblades. Bitemarks mark my chest and neck.

Having worked my chemise all the way up to my collarbones, she says, "Bruises look pretty on you."

With flushed cheeks I grab the fabric and pull it the rest of the way over my head. She smiles wryly and draws me onto her lap.

It's different from last night – she's gentle, almost sweet as her hands work their way over my body. I bury my face in the crook of her neck, gasping quietly to the rhythm of her fingers curled inside me. I'm still raw, so every thrust is a little reminder of the humiliation and ecstasy of the previous night.

"How do they make you feel?"

What? Is she still talking about the bruises? I don't want to talk right now. I want her to speed up and make me finish.

“I’m talking to you, Deni.” Her voice has a warning undertone. The fingers of the hand holding me in place find my nipple and squeeze.

I let out an irritated groan. What does she want to hear? “Good,” I pant, trying to hide the frustration in my tone. I roll my hips in the hopes it will encourage her to speed up.

Instead, she twists my nipple harder, tugging on it.

I grunt. “I... I don’t know, great?” The pain only gets worse. “Dirty? What do you want from me?”

The rhythm of her hand remains steady, though this conversation has begun to thoroughly ruin my enjoyment of it.

“I want to know how the marks make you feel,” she repeats, her breath warm against my ear.

Ugh. I straighten up and let my head roll back, eyes closed. The sun falls over my face, heating my skin ever so slightly, tinging the inside of my eyelids orange and yellow. Dizzy from her touch, I try to think about her question rather than what I think she wants to hear. I blush. The answer is not something that feels appropriate to say to someone I know so little.

“They make me feel like... like you own me. Like I’m a thing that exists only to please you.”

Rather than laughing at me, like I had almost expected – don’t we barely know each other? – she sighs. “That’s right, little girl. You’re mine now.”

I moan, biting my lip. All that pleasure that I thought she ruined comes rushing back.

I can feel myself tightening around her fingers.

“How do you like being owned?”

I’m far beyond being able to form a coherent sentence. “I... Yes...” My words dissolve into unintelligible gasping and whimpering as the wave of my pleasure crests. I shudder and collapse into her arms, languishing in her kisses as I slowly come back to earth.

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Celeste's house has all the traits of a haunted old mansion, without actually being haunted – at least I haven't encountered any ghosts so far. There are mysterious locked doors, two libraries, a regular kitchen and a kitchen for the servants – without the servants – and a basement with lots of unidentifiable flasks, herbs, and creepy bits floating in jars. But its biggest miracle is the enchanted window in Celeste's bedroom, which is why I spend most of the afternoon sprawled on her bed in the sunshine, reading a history on vampires I found in one of the libraries, and drinking tea.

Out of the corner of my eye I watch the sun creep towards the horizon and toward the moment I will have no excuse for staying any longer. Not only does the thought of my mattress back home make me feel gross but this whole room is like a refuge from the ugly, dirty, dangerous city – and the fear that comes with it.

“You're interested in history?”

I look up from my book. “The history of how the present times came to be so shitty, yeah.”

Celeste laughs. “That book won't help you much there. You'd have to read my whole library to even make a start on an answer.”

I leaf through the pages thoughtlessly. How could someone living in this kind of house, with clothes like hers, understand what answers I'm looking for? “Ok, history is complicated. But like...” I sigh. “There has to be a reason it's so hard.”

“What is it?”

“It just feels like the system is rigged if you’re a vampire. Either you’re already rich, in which case you can buy blood and keep getting more rich, or you’re poor and you can literally never improve your situation because you’re useless without blood, so you can’t make a living, and without any money you can’t buy blood, so you become more useless...” Catching my breath from my ramble, I throw my hands up. “And the city won’t help you. So your only option is to just attack someone in the street. And then they track you and lock you up and say, Vampires are statistically more likely to be violent than any other race.” I do the last bit in my best posh-asshole-imitation voice.

Celeste smiles sadly. “I think the system is rigged against anyone who doesn’t have money, not just vampires.”

“At least before being turned I was just ordinarily poor and not also completely dependent on other people.” I rub my temples.

“What did you expect it to be like?”

I look up to search her face, thinking I’ll find the same condescension that usually comes when I talk to people about this. Her expression is unreadable.

“I didn’t expect anything. I didn’t choose to be turned.”

“You were addicted to venom?”

This is what people think. You either get yourself turned into a vampire because you’re delusional and want to live forever, or you’re an addict who’s taken it too far. I shake my head. “No. My ex turned me. I didn’t realise what she was doing until it was too late.”

Celeste narrows her brows. “How do you turn someone without them knowing?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. “By choosing someone stupid.”

Celeste opens her mouth to respond but seems to think better of it. She gets up from her chair and walks over to the bed, where I'm lying on my belly over the book. She cautiously sits down beside me. “It's not stupid to trust someone you love.”

I sigh. “It is if you chose the wrong person.” Sensing that I'm in for a long conversation, I close the book. “Growing up in a small Christian community in the Sunshine Belt, I didn't know a single vampire before I met Casey. My church basically pretended vampires didn't exist and if they were mentioned it was only to make it clear that they're an abomination and going to hell.” With a frown I remember some of the dryer sermons. “There was no education about how being turned works because it only happens to sinners anyway, apparently.”

“Hmm.” She tilts her head, sunlight like a halo around her.

It's hard to focus with Celeste looking at me so intently. “When I left and moved here I knew nothing. I didn't really get what being a vampire meant.” I frown. “I didn't understand all the crazy ups and downs Casey had, flying high as a kite one day and then crying and smashing plates the next. When she told me how desperate she was for blood, I let her drink mine as often as I could. She never explained the whole turning-through-venom part to me.”

“Didn't you notice that it made you feel high?”

“I did but she just said she couldn't control it. And if I said no, she'd sometimes just lose it and start yelling and crying. She said she needed me, that if I didn't help her nobody would. Didn't I love her anymore or why did I want her to starve?”

Celeste makes a face and shakes her head.

“I tried to break it off a few times but I always took her back in the end. Eventually, I started noticing weird stuff. I felt weak and had cravings for raw meat... sometimes I could suddenly hear voices or strange sounds, which later turned out to be the TV from two flats over. Even when I confessed to her that I was scared I was losing my mind she didn’t tell me what was going on and kept giving me her venom.”

I fiddle with my hair, trying to keep my nervous hands busy. “In the end, we had a huge fight. I just knew that she was lying to me but then I thought maybe I was having a mental break or something. She called me paranoid. I kicked her out.”

“But it was too late?”

“It’s technically possible to reverse a transformation if you’re still alive. But even if I knew what was happening, I couldn’t have afforded all the blood transfusions and the hospital care. And I didn’t know. It was terrifying. I had all these... crazy violent thoughts, or I’d wake up after breaking all the furniture with no memory of what happened. And my body hurt.” I shudder at the memories. “She called and swore up and down that she’d change. First thing she’d do was take me to the hospital to get me help for my mental health. So I let her back in.” Without noticing it, I lift my fingers to my forehead, feeling for a scar that is no longer there. “That’s when she killed me. She said it would be perfect – we could be together forever now.” I wince as I remember my human body collapsing and watching my blood pool around me on the floor.

Celeste brushes a strand of hair from my cheek. “Tell me you’re not still in contact with that woman.”

I shake my head. “Realising what had happened made me terrified of her. For weeks after she’d come banging on my door, yelling at me to stop being dramatic. I just sat on the floor and cried until she left again.”

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Too late, I realize that my voice is cracking. Celeste gathers me into her arms.

After a moment, she says, “You remind me so much of myself when I first came to the city.”

I lift my head from her shoulder. “Except I never got to kill a bunch of mobsters to announce myself.”

I’d expected her to laugh, to tell me how cool she was, coming here guns ablaze. To my surprise, her body stiffens beneath mine. When I look up at her, she’s looking straight ahead, at something that’s not really there.

Her voice is flat. “I’d already been here for a while when I did that.”

She kisses my forehead and slips off the bed, leaving me craving her warmth. She doesn’t look at me while she speaks. “They were running a trafficking ring, picking up young witches, often girls who were disenfranchised and wouldn’t be missed. This was before they discovered bindweed, of course, so they had to find girls that were easy to manipulate or unaware of their power.” From one of the drawers of her dresser, she produces a small ziplock bag, dried blue Ghostshade flowers inside. “There’s always been huge money in witch blood. Some of the richest people in this city are vampires and they will do anything to get their hands on it.”

I watch her fingers work deftly as they spread the flowers across the paper. My stomach feels ominously heavy as I watch her roll it. “So you just... took them out?”

Celeste taps the finished blunt on the top of the dresser, then brings it to her lips. The

lighter hisses and she inhales deeply, eyes closed. Immediately, I can see the tension in her forehead dissipate, her creased eyebrows straightening out.

It takes a few moments before she replies, “Actually, I was dating one of the guys running it.”

Unsure how to reply, I only watch her, waiting for her to tell me the rest of the story. For a while, it seems like maybe she won’t. She just leans against the dresser, smokes, and looks off into the distance.

“I’d run away from home and was waitressing at a truckstop diner up north. Having heard the horror stories of what happens to witches out in the world, I didn’t tell anyone.” She shrugs. “I thought meeting Dante there was fate, when he probably just sniffed me out from a hundred miles away.”

“Why did you run away?”

She flicks ashes into her glass ashtray. “I was raised by a single mom in a small coven of witches. After decades of persecution, there weren’t many left of us, so they were very protective. I was homeschooled, didn’t have any friends my age or even ever got to leave our small town. I was their prodigee and I hated it.” She laughs. “I didn’t want to be a witch. I wanted to get my license and go to high school, like a normal teenager.”

I try to imagine Celeste when she was younger but it seems impossible for her to ever have been anything but the person she is now. “So you left?”

“As soon as I turned eighteen. I completely underestimated how difficult it would be to make it on my own. But then he showed up and I didn’t have to. He was charming and funny and completely taken by me.” She grimaces. “Until he wasn’t.”

She takes another puff and sighs, a cloud of smoke billowing out from her nose. I scrunch up my face. It smells so sweet.

“He took me to the city, promising to show me the world. All he needed was a little blood. First only for himself, then later for his friends. He said we’d use the money to travel, to finally get out of here. Of course, there’s only so much your body can endure. I was always cold and started fainting all the time. Eventually, I told him I couldn’t do it anymore.”

“And he didn’t stop?”

She scoffs. “Not unless he thought I was going to die otherwise. It took me a long time before I tried to stand up for myself. To be honest, I didn’t think I could.” Her face is carefully blank as she twirls the joint in her fingers, watching the ash rain down. “He’d already made it very clear that I had very little say over my body.”

I swallow, pulling up my knees to my chin. “That’s horrible.”

“I loved him, so I made excuses for his behaviour. Besides, if I’d admitted to myself that he was hurting me, I’d also have had to admit to myself that running away was a mistake. If everything was fine, I didn’t have to feel like it was my fault.”

“It wasn’t.”

She shrugs. “No but it certainly feels that way when you let someone like that into your life, doesn’t it?”

I think of Casey and dying on my hallway floor. “Yeah.”

“Anyway, in the end I found out I wasn’t the only one. Him and his friends had been bringing other witches into the city and selling their blood for money. And unlike me,

those girls hadn't spent their whole life training in the arcane. Most of them didn't even know they had the gift. They couldn't defend themselves.

"I wasn't really planning on killing them. It was a kind of magic I'd never used before and it turned out a lot more powerful than I expected."

"So uh... you can just snap your fingers and a bunch of people drop dead?"

She laughs quietly. "No. It took a lot of preparation. And as soon as people find out how a spell works, it becomes easy to counter. That's the problem with magic, it's powerful only against the uninitiated."

"Oh." I rest my chin on my knees, thinking back on what I just learned. My stomach feels tight with anger at people I've never even met. "Sorry. If I'd known, I wouldn't have brought it up."

She waves her hand, the dead stump of the Ghostshade now sitting cold in the ashtray. "I'm fine, kitten. Water under the bridge."

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I study her carefully blank face, not sure if I believe her.

Before I can say anything, she looks out of the window, at the sky turning pink in the evening sun. “Do you want a ride home? I’ve got business at the port tonight.”

I’m a little hurt and immediately feel stupid because of it. I remind myself that I have no right to her. She probably fucks every girl that works for her. “Yeah, that would be nice.”

12. THOUGH SHALT NOT GROVEL IN THE DIRT LIKE AN ANIMAL

I sit on my bed for a long time after getting home, knees under my chin, unsure of what to do. Home feels grim and pessimistic after the night I had with Celeste. When I check the fridge, the blood bag I had in it has disappeared. I know who took it – Mav’s half of the room looks extra messy, which it always does when he’s having a bad week. But I can’t be mad, not after everything he’s been through. Especially not since it’s birthday tomorrow.

He looks like hell when he returns the next day, face bruised and his right eye swollen.

I grimace and give him his gifts: a hideous purple jacket from the thrift store that I knew he would love, a little bag of Ghostshade, and one of those kid’s magazines that come with a toy. “Happy third twenty-first birthday!”

He looks pained at the mention of having been twenty-one for three years but the magazine seems to cheer him up. After putting on the jacket and striking a few poses

for me, he gleefully rips off the little plastic gun and shoots his first foam bullet at me. “Thanks, dude!”

“Did something happen? You look terrible” It’s a stupid question because, of course, something happened. But I don’t know what else to say.

He shakes his head and loads up another foam bullet. “Just fucked up a little. It’ll be fine.”

“Fucked up how?”

“Well, since you’re no longer doing their runs, Alastor asked me to do some and... Whatever, it’s stupid.”

“Just tell me, Mav, you know I don’t think it’s stupid.”

“Well, one of the guys I’ve been seeing works for the Municipal Bureau and I got him to check on my mom’s file for me, you know, because she still has to pay all those court fines. And she’s been falling behind.”

I shift my position on my mattress, watching Mav, who’s laid down and is aiming at a piece of gum that’s been stuck to the ceiling since I moved in. He squints.

“I wanted to help since it’s my fault. He said he really wanted to try witch blood, maybe we could work something out. And he said he’d pay market value, too. I didn’t even know that’s what Charon’s Veil are selling. Where do you even get witch blood from?”

Do I tell him? My stomach feels heavy. Hearing him talk about his mom nearly breaks my heart every time. “So what did you do?”

“I tried to set him up but Alastor said it was only for premium customers, limited supply, whatever. He just wouldn’t do it.”

I have an ominous feeling about where this is going. “So?”

“So the next delivery I was supposed to make... I ‘lost’.” He makes airquotes around the word lost. Pushing himself up a little to look at me, he says, “I had no idea how much money that shit is worth. It’s nuts.”

Grimacing, I say, “Mav! Alastor is going to kill you.”

He shakes his head. “It’s fine, I’ve already spoken to him. I apologized and told him about mom. He said he understands and is letting me work it off if I do some of the more dangerous jobs. But,” He tilts his head from side to side, “I did kind of get made an example of.”

“I can see that. Have you visited your mom lately?”

He shakes his head.

“Well since it’s your birthday I thought I could take you out to the blood bank? We could swing by her house after.”

He doesn’t look at me, guilt on his face when he says, “I already took some of your blood from the fridge. I’ was going to refill it—”

“It’s alright, Mav. Sorry you’ve had a shit week.”

His third bullet bounces of the wall and hits me in the head.

After taking the bus and stopping by the blood bank, we walk through Hel holding tumblers of hepatitis-B infected O-positive blood. Some people swear that they can taste the difference between healthy and diseased blood but I don't believe it. It's all the same to me and blood that's ineligible for human donations is a lot cheaper.

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When Mav's old block comes into view he elbows me, pointing out his mom's window – third from the right on the seventh floor – even though he's shown me a thousand times already. There's a park bench nearby that gives you the perfect view. We sit down and pop our straws through our cup's lids.

"She had me when she was seventeen," Mav tells me – another thing that I already knew. He pulls his feet onto the bench and tucks his knees under his chin. "We always used to celebrate our birthday together. Except while she was in nursing school but I barely remember, I was so small."

I raise my cup towards the window. "Happy Birthday, Mav's mom!"

He follows suit with his own cup. "Happy Birthday, mom."

Her window is lit up with the light flicker of the TV. "Do you want to see her this time?"

He shakes his head. He never does, we always just sit on this bench watching the window. "It's better if she thinks I'm dead."

I want to disagree but we've had this discussion so many times, I know his arguments by heart. Before turning, he had leukemia. The medical bills would have probably put his mother out of a home – after she worked so hard to turn her life around for him. So he took the cheap, easy cure: becoming a vampire. He thinks she would feel guilty that he felt he needed to go down this route. I think she'd probably be glad to know her son is alive. "Alright," I concede.

Leaning his head against my shoulder, he says, “Thanks for being here today. I’m sure you’d much rather be having steaming hot sex with your mystery woman than sitting here being bummed out by me and my sad life.”

“Eh.” I lean my head against his. “Who doesn’t like watching strangers in windows?”

After spending a few days running errands for Celeste, all much less intense than the previous jobs, I realize Mav and I have missed each other every day since his birthday. This happens when he works a lot but it makes me worried, anyway, especially after he got in trouble with Charon’s Veil. And since Celeste, too, has been too busy to see me, mostly leaving Mel to deal with me, I’ve had plenty of time to worry.

Seeing me on my mattress when he walks past, Pavel stops in the doorway. “It’s wednesday.”

I count out the bills from the my last pay and hand them to him.

“Where’s your friend?” Pavel nods at Mav’s mattress. “He better pay me on time this week.”

“Hasn’t he been here?”

Pavel shrugs. “Not for a couple of days.” He wags a smelly sausage finger at me. “Same rules for everyone, princess, you remind him of that. He’s gotta pay or he’s out.”

I nod and wait for him to leave my personal space before I pull out my phone. Nothing from Mav. “Where are you?” I type. “Rent is due. Pavel is getting pissed.”

The only unopened text I have is from Alastor. “Call me.”

I spin my phone in my hand while waiting for Mav to reply.

My phone buzzes. “Busy. Be there soon.”

His words never come true. He doesn’t show up by the time morning rolls around and Pavel pays me another unwanted visit, during which I manage to negotiate one more day for Mav.

“Are you ok?” My fingers hover over the keys for a moment, then I add, “I’m worried.”

That night, Mel and I oversee the safe arrival of a shipment of dried tarantulas, which apparently are used for purposes other than creeping me out. Here, we also meet Ibrahim, a djinn who I recognize as the man who was eavesdropping on our table that very first night at the Myrrh & Adder. He provides a soothing calm contrast to Mel’s insanity.

Mav never replies. The morning after I come home from the delivery, Pavel gets to gathering Mav’s stuff into a black rubbish bag and won’t stop until I hand him all of my newly won cash, which amounts to two-thirds of Mav’s missing rent, and plead with him to wait until he comes back.

Finally, when he still hasn’t returned after three days, I start to look for him. He still doesn’t reply to any of my texts. Even though it makes me want to vomit, I ask around outside of the Myrrh & Adder, then the Noxium, and finally, after not finding a single sign, I start checking empty doorways and park benches in our neighbourhood. The jacket I got for him isn’t in our room so at least he should be easy to spot, or that’s what I hope. Did something happen to him?

I also find myself getting antsy to hear from Celeste. All my texts only earn me short ‘thanks’ and ‘good girl’s, which is profoundly aggravating. After the night we had, moments of which still occasionally pop into my mind and make me shudder with pleasure, it would be nice to get something more. All this only confirms my suspicion that Celeste probably does that kind of thing all the time. Not that I want a relationship – I’ve sworn off of those after Casey – but I do think some better morning-after-manners are in order.

One night while checking for Mav under all the underpasses I can think of, I finally work up the courage to text her. “Can I see you?” I type, then lock the screen and put my phone in my pocket without sending it. Forget it, I think. It’ll just make me look stupid and desperate.

Alastor has texted again, too, asking me to call him.

It feels very uncomfortable and profoundly invasive to closely stare at the homeless people gathered under one of the foot bridges – and I’m not sure whether I’m happy or concerned to not find Mav there. One of bodies lying on a yoga mat by the side of the road doesn’t breathe or move, staring blankly into the distance. It looks like most of his stuff has been stolen, half empty rubbish bags scattered around his space. Feeling a little sick, I squat down and gently nudge him.

His body is calcified and stiff. Usually, if you’re a vampire and get to this stage, the authorities pick you up and throw you in a tomb somewhere – though word is that if you have friends on the street, they’ll stake you out of mercy before it comes to that. I shudder. Maybe if I was a bigger person I’d do it myself but instead, I just walk a little faster.

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Where the hell are you, Mav?

I pull out my phone as I walk and send my stupid text to Celeste.

Not a minute later, my phone rings. I stare dully at the screen for a while, trying to work up the courage to just pick it up.

“Hey.” Her voice is velvety even through the shitty phone speaker.

I clear my throat. “Hi.”

“How are you, kitten? I meant to text but I’ve been dealing with the fallout of our little arson attack.”

I dodge a puddle that may or may not have a dead rat lying in it. “Good. Great, really. Just... the usual.” Why, Deni? Why are you the most awkward person alive?

Celeste sighs. “I really thought fucking you would make you less nervous around me.”

I bite my lip. At least she can’t see me blush. What a stupid assumption to make. And anyway, what am I supposed to say to that?

“Actually, there’s something else I wanted to talk about. I think I’m a little closer to finding out who’s behind all of this.”

Oh, that’s why she called. “Really? How?”

There's a moment of silence on the other side. "Let me catch you up later tonight. Can you still eat? Food, I mean."

"Uh... Yeah, I can eat."

"Let's get dinner then. I'll pick you up in an hour."

"What—"

The line goes dead. Ugh. Why does my stomach feel all tingly? That was rude. She didn't even ask me, she just decided! Despite myself, I make a stupid little squealing noise and hold my phone to my chest, immediately followed by cursing myself out for being such a damn sucker.

I'm on my way to the place I've been pretending to live, still too proud to tell Celeste my actual address, when I notice a shadow trailing mine in the light of the streetlights. The road I'm on is quiet but leads up to the train station, where it's bustling with people even this time of the night. From there, it's only a couple of blocks to where she'll pick me up.

I throw a glance over my shoulder and startle to a stop. With an uneasy nausea in my stomach, I turn. "Alastor?"

He reveals his fangs as he smiles. "What a coincidence!"

He stops too close to me, forcing me to take a step back. "What are you doing here?"

"Funny," he says, his smile wolfish. "I was going to ask you the same thing."

I crease my brow in fake confusion, my stomach sinking slowly. “I’m on my way to the train.”

He grabs my arm. “Let’s have a word before that, shall we?”

He knows. He knows, of course he knows. She said nobody would have the gall to touch me, I reassure myself. Trying to free myself from his grip, I say, “I’m actually in a bit of a rush.”

His fingers are painfully tight around my arm and won’t give no matter how deeply I lean into my vampire reserves. Useless human blood, I think spitefully.

“Don’t make a fuss, Deni!” His voice is threateningly low. “I just want to talk about your little spy mission.”

Fuck. I kick his shin as hard as I can and try to run. He wraps his arm around me, picking me up, and claps the other over my mouth. I scream into his palm but he only yanks me to the side. Again and again I get transported back to that night at the Myrrh & Adder, every time something like this happens. Why can’t I just forget already? Struggling, I try to kick at his shins but it doesn’t seem to bother him at all. He carries me toward one of the buildings as easily as if I were a doll. His arm around me is so tight it nearly crushes me. Of course, he’s had witch blood.

With a frustrated grunt he kicks down the doors of an abandoned shopfront to our right. The windows are covered with newspaper, the door now hanging crooked off its hinges. He throws me onto the floor – now I scream.

He rolls his eyes. Rather than hold his hand over my mouth again, he kicks me, the heel of his boot landing right in my face. “Shut up!”

Source Creation Date: July 13, 2025, 3:59 am

It is not a human kick that might break my nose and give me a concussion. No, it's strong enough that I can feel the front of my skull cave, nose crushed, jaw shattered, cheekbones splintering. If I were mortal, it would have killed me in one blow.

Cracking reverberates through my skull, followed by blood welling up in my mouth, though through the cataclysmic pain I can't tell what it is that's bleeding. I spit and watch a tooth splatter onto the bare concrete amidst thick gobs of blood.

I scream again, this time while trying to scramble to my feet. The wordhelpslurs on my split lips, garbled by my broken jaw, as if anyone would or could.

I'm still as fast as the most well trained human athlete but he is faster. He grabs me by my hair and yanks me up. His fist moves so fast a human might not have seen it, but I watch its hyperbolic curve as it flies towards my throat. My screams die in a pitiful retching sound as the force of his blow caves in my windpipe. Now I scream from pain, and suffocation, though nothing but choking comes out. Every inch of my body above the shoulders feels like it's been in a head-on collision – raw, distorted, and more painful than I could have ever imagined.

He sighs like a mother that has heard her first moment of silence in days and drops me to the floor. "That's better."

Horrified, I clutch at my throat. It feels wrong and uneven under my hands. When I try to move my jaw, it seems to slip from its sockets and pull in the wrong direction. When I try to breathe, my lungs scream, tight and empty as if I am drowning. My hands come away slippery with blood.

Panicked, I scramble for the door. He lets me get all the way across the room before catching up and throwing me against the wall. “Will you settle down or do I need to break your legs?”

I don’t dare to move again. Frozen with pain and fear, I watch him saunter through the dusty room. There is half a counter left from the previous owners, cables sticking from holes in the walls. At the back, there was once a wall separating the shop from what looks like a kitchen, yellow tiles and one stainless-steel counter left. Now, the wall is nothing but a shin-high stump, steel rods sticking out into the dusty air.

“Do you like history, Deni?” He steps over the broken wall, turning his back on me.

With an ache, I think of Celeste’s library. No, I try to say, though it sounds only like wet, swollen lips smacking together. More blood drips from my face to the floor. It begins to dawn on me that I might have really screwed up.

This is the curse of immortality – for some, it means a life of beauty and wellbeing. For most, it means being forced to keep living in moments when you should no longer have to. To keep on living when the body has been disassembled, into gorey mush or dust, when your lungs have collapsed and your brain stopped firing – as long as your head is still on your shoulders and there is no stake in your heart.

He bends over something in the kitchen and I take the moment to pull my feet under me. I need to get out. It’s hard to orient myself as my left eye socket is busted and the other has begun to swell, but I manage to stumble towards the door. A loud clanking noise makes me look back. He is standing among the rubble, twirling a broken metal pipe in his hand, concrete lumps still stuck to it where he pulled it from the wall. His grin when he meets my eyes is animalistic and wild.

My hands find the doorhandle and for one sweet moment I might make it – then he is behind me again. He’s so fast. He grabs me by the shoulder and hurls me back. I land

on the remains of the wall, my back cracking as it snaps over the concrete stump. I roll over and slump to the floor, choking on my blood, the muscles of my back screaming.

He steps over me slowly. "I think there is a lot to learn from history." With a menacing smile, he squats down. I flinch as he runs the bent end of the metal pipe over my cheek. "All this 'hashtag justice-for-witches' nonsense seems to have given witches the impression that they can get away with anything nowadays. They think because they're descendant from Hecate or whatever rubbish it is they believe, they are better than us."

His hand shoots forward and he grabs my face, his fingers digging into the swollen flesh of my cheeks. I can feel where the two halves of my fractured jaw grind past each other. Stars dance before my eyes as he forces me to look at him.

"I'm sure you know that humans used to burn witches. You want to know what they don't tell you in history class? Humans might have been dumb enough to burn witches but us? We used to enslave them. That is the natural order of things. Vampires aren't meant to grovel in the dirt like animals." He jerks my head forward as if to underline his point. "You're here right now because you're too weak and cowardly to take what is rightfully yours. Blood is meant to be taken, not begged for. And as if that isn't pathetic enough you cuck yourself out to some witch like her little puppet." He grimaces and spits on the floor.

The words roll off me like rain, my mind too occupied with the pain to comprehend what he's saying.

He leans in, his breath cooling the blood that is going sticky on my face. "Should she ever find you, tell Celeste that she has no idea what's coming for her. If she's smart, she'll leave this city and never come back."

Should she ever find you. It never even occurred to me that I might be lying here for weeks before someone discovers me, half-dead but unable to die. This pushes me to make one more attempt at fleeing, hoisting myself up even though the muscles in my back seem to be crushed. He laughs and shoves me back down with ease.

The pipe comes down in hard, even blows. He could make this faster but seems to be taking his time, enjoying himself. In the beginning, I still try to shield myself, raising my arms and pulling up my knees to protect my vulnerable stomach. But his attacks are hard enough to break my arms and the ribs beneath them in one hit, like being struck by a car – except he does it over, and over, and over again.

I hate the sensation of fainting, I've always hated it. The cold shivers, the tunneling vision. Now, I pray for the mercy of unconsciousness. I've never wanted death more. If there is such a thing as hell, I'm sure this is it, having to feel and feel and feel. Each blow results in a cracking sound, or the wet sound of skin splitting.

Somewhere, through the absurd, almost insanity-inducing amount of pain, I remember something Celeste said. Thinking of a witch is like calling her name. As my body flinches and shakes, not from the strength of its own muscles but under the force of the blows landing on it, I try to conjure up her image. The vivid auburn of her hair, the shimmer of the city reflecting in her bright blue eyes, the deep velvet of her voice.

In time, I can no longer tell when the pipe hits me. It makes no difference, as there is no part of me left that isn't broken and already burning hot and bright with pain. I can no longer feel the floor beneath me or hear the sound of my body being ground into pulp. There is only pain, and at the core of it, a tiny fraction of my mind clings to the image of a beautiful woman who can light a fire with the snap of her fingers. It is like a mantra keeping me anchored to reality. Celeste. Celeste. Celeste.

13. POOR, POOR KITTEN

It's hard to say whether I lie there for an hour or a year. At times, it feels like I have always been here and will remain here for the rest of time.

And then, through the veil of agony, comes a slow, quiet, creeping cold. It sinks through me, soothing the pain, easing the madness. Reality comes back, even if only a little. I can tell that my head is still above my shoulders, my legs beneath my torso, my arms... well, they are present, anyway. Through my swollen eyes and the blood crusted around them, I can see movement, blurry and confusing.

Something touches my face, gentle and soft. It feels like cool water in the throat of the parched. "Oh, poor kitten." Celeste's voice is like music.

I try to say something –helloperhaps, or something equally mundane. My mouth makes a wet, blubbering sound.

"Sssshh."

My body is lifted. It doesn't feel right, bent at all the wrong angles, but at least the pain is distant now.

“It’s ok. You’re ok.”

The relief of not having to feel the pain anymore is delightful. If it weren’t for the strange motions and jolts of being moved, I might have fallen asleep, my mind desperate for a refuge from the horrors of today. Instead, I indulge in the sweet scent of Celeste’s perfume that is seeping through the smell of my own blood and listen for the occasional calming words from her lips. There are other voices – Mel but also strangers – and in my slightly delusional state, fear flares in my chest every time I hear the deep, rough voice of a man, too similar to that of Alastor.

Eventually, the rich red and brown tones in my blurry field of vision tell me that I’m in Celeste’s home. Or at least, that’s where I hope I am. I’m laid down and arranged carefully but can’t see well enough to know where. Something liquid and prickling with magic works its way over my lips and – after sitting pooled in the back of my concaved throat for a while, down into my stomach. My throat opens agonizingly slowly.

Having been desperately waiting for this moment, my lungs expand, the deepest, most satisfying breath I have ever taken rushing through my healed windpipe. Almost immediately, I start to cough up blood.

Celeste’s gentle hands roll me onto my side, allowing me to cough until, finally, the gurgling blood in my airways is expelled.

“I’m sorry,” she says quietly. “That’s all the healing I can do for now. Your body will have to do the rest.”

Moments later, I can feel her skin against my lips and the steady rhythm of her pulse beneath it. Praying that her blood will help me heal quickly, I sink my teeth into her artery.

Recovering feels like a fever dream. Celeste stops the pain for hours at a time, giving me herbs and tinctures that help me drift into a light sleep. When she's not there, though, I have to feel my bones shift and my muscles weave back together, just to later be torn apart again to make way for some misplaced tendon or other. To escape the suffering, I roll and roll in the bed with nowhere to go.

But even sleep doesn't give me much respite. My dreams are bizarre and often terrifying – I might be chased and captured, pinned to the wall, helplessly trapped as some horrible creature comes for me, or on the floor of my apartment watching the blood pool around my face as I die. Alastor's grinning face haunts me. Celeste often wakes me before the peak of the horror, holding me – or what is left of me – as I regain some of my sanity.

But as immortality would have it, my life goes on and I get better, or at least my body does. Soon enough, I'm well enough to walk around the house and sit in the sun, which makes me feel somewhat less terrified that Alastor is going to come and find me. Celeste floats in and out of her home at all hours, always stopping by my side to see how I'm doing.

One night, I startle awake to find her asleep on the chair beside my bed. I bite my lip and bury my face in the pillows so my crying won't wake her. I feel incredibly stupid for being so shaken by what's happened – I can't die after all, so what's there to be afraid of?

"Oh, kitten!" I can feel the covers being lifted and the comforting dip of the mattress

under the weight of another body. She gathers me into her arms and kisses my sweaty forehead. By now, most of the swelling has gone down and returned my body to somewhat normal, if bruised, proportions.

Embarrassed, I hide my face in the crook of her neck and let her run her fingers through my hair.

“It’s ok. You’re safe here, I promise.”

I peel myself away from her, wiping away my tears. “Why? Why did he come after me?”

She sighs, long and full of exhaustion. “I didn’t think he’d have the audacity, I’m so sorry. They’ve never targeted anyone who works for me like this.” Her face is solemn, looking almost luminescent in the moonlight. She seems to hesitate. “I’m afraid I might have given someone the impression that... that I care about you. It seems this is all a lot more personal than I thought.”

I search her face for a long time, though I’m not sure what it is I’m looking for. “Don’t you care?”

“Of course I care.” She pulls me back into her arms. “And trust me, when I’m done with Alastor nobody is going to ever go near you again.”

She envelops me and I lean into the soothing softness of her body.

“Sleep now, kitten. I’m here.”

The next time I wake, Celeste is gone again. With a groan, I push myself out of the

bed and take a few shaky steps across the floor. All my bones and tendons hold under the pressure, which is a relief. Desperate to clear my head and soothe my aching body, I make my way to the bathroom. It's dark outside and the silence in the house tells me Celeste has gone out. Even though she's assured me a hundred times that even if Charon's Veil knew where she lives, they'd not be able to enter, her absence makes me queasy.

I shiver under the cool water of the shower, the temperature shocking myself into the present and away from the memories of Alastor. Drying myself off is a delicate and painful affair, my body still tender, but I manage. After, I grab my phone and tiptoe down into the kitchen. Celeste has prepared some kind of special loose-leaf tea for me, all I need is to add hot water.

While I wait for the kettle to boil, I check my phone. Nothing from Mav. I bite my lip. What's going on with him?

"So, I've been keeping secrets," I type. "If you already know, please don't hate me or at least still let me know you're ok."

A sound over the boiling of the water catches my attention and I sit there frozen for a while, listening for signs of an invader. When the water in the kettle settles and I still hear nothing, I force myself to get up and stop freaking myself out. I pour the water into the teapot and load everything onto a tray to take upstairs when I remember something.

"You didn't tell anyone at Charon's Veil about my secret lover, did you?" I hover my thumb over the button for a few moments before sending it. I can't think how else they would have known that there's a little – super tiny – bit more than just a work relationship between me and Celeste.

A quiet buzz draws me from my thoughts. Before I can react with more panic, there's

the sound of a key being turned in the door. Despite the fact that I know it is Celeste – because she told me she'd be back from a coven meeting at exactly one in the morning – I still jump at the sound.

She smiles when she sees me. “You’re up.”

“Barely,” I joke.

Just as she’s about to close the door, the orange cat bolts past her feet and into the house.

“Hey!” Celeste shouts after him. Ears pressed madly against his head, he skids around the corner into the living room. With an exasperated sigh, she sets down the paper bags she’s carrying and follows him, though not without stopping by in the kitchen to kiss my cheek.

Curious about the interaction that is about to follow, I tiptoe after her. In the living room, I find Celeste squatting on her heels and looking into the corner behind the chaise lounge.

“You can’t be inside,” she says sternly. “This is not your house!”

She reaches into the gap, a motion that is quickly followed by a hiss and then a curse from Celeste. She stands up, inspecting her hand. I peer around her at the cat, who has puffed himself up and is trying very hard to appear frightening.

“He scratched me,” Celeste says. “Maybe you should talk to him. You seem to have a lot in common... though at least the cat didn’t bite me.”

I narrow my eyes at her but decide to let her little stab slide. “I’m not sure cats can be talked into things.”

“He can’t stay here, what if he pees on my carpet?”

Pulling her back a little, I say, “Why don’t we give him some space and maybe once he calms down, we can shoo him out?”

“Hmmm.” She gives him a suspicious look. “I don’t trust him.”

This makes me chuckle. “He’s just a cat, Celeste.”

She shakes her head but lets me lead her back to the kitchen. Helping her place the bags on the kitchen island, I ask, “How did the meeting go? Did you find a solution to the bindweed problem yet?”

She shakes her head. “No. None of the exceptions are really reliable. Usually, there’s another loophole somewhere but this weed is insidious.”

“What are the exceptions?” I ask, as if I could contribute to this discussion in any way.

She starts to unpack containers of hot food onto the counter. “Well, there’s the connection you can make with the plant itself by drinking it, which serves no real purpose unless you want to grow some bindweed. The rest is mostly unscientific or doesn’t apply.”

“Like what?”

She shrugs. “It doesn’t seem to affect Djinn magic, which is great but doesn’t help us much. Then there are things like being the seventh child of a seventh child, true love, or the appearance of Halley’s Comet. None of which are particularly helpful.”

“Oh,” I say. “Yeah, I guess those aren’t very helpful.”

“So, before Alastor attacked you and resigned himself to a violent death at my

hands,” she begins as she picks out a clear container from its bag, “I asked you to have dinner with me.”

I tilt my head. “You did?”

“I did.”

“No, if I remember correctly, you ordered me to have dinner with you.”

“Same thing.” Grabbing another container, she continues, “So I thought we could have dinner tonight. I brought some takeout from downtown.”

I cross my arms. “You’re not asking me again, you’re just deciding!”

“Do you not want to have dinner with me?”

“Ugh. Of course I do.”

She smiles mischievously. “Then let’s have dinner.”

“Can you really not just ask me?”

Putting the food aside, she comes over to me, carefully pinning me between herself and the counter. “Have dinner with me.”

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I lean back so she can't kiss me. "Celeste!"

She kisses my neck instead, mumbling, "Just have dinner with me, kitten."

"No," I say. "I won't, not until you ask me properly rather than demanding."

"I want to have dinner with you." She follows the neckline of the jumper I'm wearing with her lips, her fingers running over my skin with a touch as light as feathers.

"Now you're doing it on purpose."

"I don't know what you mean." She picks me up and sits me on the counter. "We should have dinner together. I think you'd enjoy having dinner with me. I brought you dinner."

"Stop it," I laugh. "It's not charming. Maybe if you'd asked the cat nicely to get out, he would have."

She pushes me back until I'm lying on the counter and kisses my stomach with a wicked smile. "I don't want to be nice to you."

"Why not?"

She pulls my pants off in one motion and drops them on the floor. With her lips against my knee, she says, "Because being mean makes you come that much harder."

I cover my face with my hands, embarrassed, feeling the blood rush to my cheeks.

Her tongue trails over the inside of my thigh with incredible lightness. After so much pain, being touched so gently is a reprieve. I shiver when her mouth finds my sex, biting my lip as her tongue draws slow circles over my clit.

She's languid, taking her sweet time. I need to work hard for it, moving my hips, seeking out the pleasure. I grip the edge of the counter for support. Any sign that could remotely be seen as me getting close makes her pause.

"Are you torturing me because I haven't agreed to have dinner with you?"

"I wouldn't dream of it."

Despite her words, she continues at the same sedate pace, withdrawing any time the slightest moan slips my lips.

Frustrated, I push myself up on my elbows. "You are torturing me."

"Well," she kisses the inside of my thigh. "I would whip you into submission but I think your body might need a break."

I shudder. "Yeah." Then I add, "So you're admitting it?"

"Fine. I'm torturing you." She runs her fingers up my thigh and enters me with one forceful thrust.

I flinch and let out a sharp gasp that dissolves into a low groan.

"You get to finish when you agree to have dinner with me."

My voice is labored. "I will agree if you ask me nicely!"

“You should know you can’t win this game.”

I want to reply but my words turn into nonsense as her tongue finds her way back to my clit, her fingers thrusting to the same rhythm. Knowing the only way I can win is to deceive her, I try my hardest to stay still and quiet, which quickly turns out to be an impossible task. The moment my legs begin to quiver, she withdraws.

As if we weren’t just in the middle of something, she goes on to wash her hands and begin taking out plates for the food, ignoring me lying breathless and frustrated on the counter.

“Are you serious?”

She smiles wickedly. “I always get what I want. You can get used to that right now.”

Her words give me pause, making my stomach flutter strangely. You can get used to that right now.

Once she’s done getting out the plates and preparing the dining room table, she turns her attention back to me. This time, she pins me down by my neck and watches my face as I struggle, her expression wicked. I have no chance.

We continue this game until I have to pull out my last ace because with every degree the food gets colder, she gets a little more devious. In the end, I find myself naked and tied to one of the table legs, Celeste thoughtlessly playing with the remote control of the vibrator inside of me while checking wine labels.

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“Cab Sauv from Bordeaux with hints of blackcurrant and cardamom, or Pinot Noir from Burgundy? Cab Sauv sounds nice, don't you think?”

“I think I don't know the fucking difference,” I groan. “And I hate you.”

She chuckles. “The Bordeaux it is then.”

“Please, Celeste. Just ask me.”

“Why would I? I'm having so much fun making you suffer.”

This is why I don't like her, I remind myself. And why the stupid butterflies in my stomach can piss off. At least Casey deceived me into thinking she wasn't so selfish – and look how well that went. How could you be in a relationship with someone who can't even manage that?

“Because,” I moan. “It would make me really happy. It feels nice to be considered, you know.”

With a sigh, she sets down the wine bottle and unties me.

Did that really work?

She pulls me back into the kitchen by my hair and lifts me on the counter, trailing kisses over my stomach until her head is between my thighs again.

“I do consider you,” she mumbles before running her tongue over my clit, making me

shiver with pleasure. “That’s why I asked which wine you want.”

“I don’t even drink wine!” I groan before hiding my face beneath my forearms, trying to hold back the sounds of my delight.

She digs her nails into my thighs as she continues to circle my clit with her tongue in an organized symphony with the vibrator. This time, she doesn't pull back and I have to bite the knuckle of my index finger to stop myself from crying out as she finally pushes me over the edge, my orgasm so powerful I see stars dancing behind my eyelids.

Leaving me breathless and panting on the counter, she comes up with a smile, her lips slick with my pleasure. “Kitten?”

“Hmm?” I say, still recovering.

“Be a good girl and have dinner with me.”

I give out a mix of a groan and a chuckle. “Seriously?”

“Well?” She pokes at the container. “Keep in mind that it’s gone a little cold, though.”

I let out a defeated sigh, rolling my eyes. “Fine. You win. I’ll have dinner with you.”

14. THE DRUGS DON’T WORK

Despite the lingering ache in my body, the days I spend waiting for my bruises to fade are somewhat blissful. Alastor still lingers in the back of my mind and I flinch at every sound but every time Celeste tells me that I’m her girl and she’ll make sure everyone knows never to touch me again, I feel a little warmer. Only when she’s not

there do I find myself suddenly startling at the outline of coats on their hangers or drawing all the curtains because it feels like someone is watching.

I've been afraid that as my body returns to normal, Celeste will return to her cold and distant self, something that seems unbearable now that I've seen another side of her. The few days following our dinner, my worries seem to be unfounded and I almost let myself believe that this could be... something.

That is until one night, she returns late from 'business' that she has refused to elaborate further on.

"Hi," she says as she sees me standing in the kitchen through the open door, flinging her keys onto the secretaire by the entryway.

I jump at the sound. Dammit, Deni. "Hey."

Celeste looks weary. Her expression is, as usual, carefully neutral but also strangely vacant. Her eyes quickly scan the room, over the kitchen benches and my body, to a cabinet door above the fridge. It's the kind of very fancy fridge that makes icecubes for you, a function I definitely haven't been excessively abusing just because I can.

"How are you feeling?" She asks, bypassing me to open the cabinet. Her shaking fingers rummage around between mixing bowls and other unwieldily large kitchenware, taking out stacks of each at a time.

I hug myself to suppress the urge to be held. "Well, I'm feeling more alive. Or... less dead, I guess."

"Good."

I watch as she fails to find what she's looking for in the cabinet and, shoving its

contents aside on the bench, squats down and begins to dig through the cupboard beneath the counter. Her movements are quick and unusually unrestrained, almost angry. Not sure what's going on, I stand there for a few moments, holding my teapot and watching her search through the kitchen.

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She looks up, the slightest crease in her brow. “Do you need something?”

While her words are nice enough, her tone is one of clear dismissal. I’m surprised to find my stomach clenching at it. Why are you bothering her, you idiot?

I shake my head and she flicks her wrist, making all the cabinet doors fly open at once. Then, she gets back to raiding their contents. Before I leave the kitchen to lick my wounds, I pause in the doorway. “Can I... can I help you with whatever you’re doing?”

Celeste stands up and regards the mess of decanted kitchenware on the counter with an irritated expression before meeting my gaze – looking no less annoyed with me than she does with the mixing bowls. “I’m sorry, Deni.” She rubs her temples, looking infinitely tired and strangely weak. “I just don’t have time right now.”

“Oh. Sorry.” Ouch. By the time I’ve recovered enough from her tone to retreat, she’s already marched out of the kitchen and started digging through the wardrobe in the hallway.

I return to my room with a tucked tail, drinking my tea while quietly cringing to myself. I guess having her climb in bed with me to soothe my nightmares gave me the wrong impression.

What? Did you think she actually likes you? My inner voice is especially acrid today, still full of scorn from having my naivete beaten out of me. Obviously, I let my stupid hope get away from me, thinking that maybe my life wasn’t such a mess and I could work out this vampire thing after all. When in reality, I’m utterly dependent on some

neurotic witch who I have a dumb crush on and who, in turn, probably just feels sorry for me because of how inept I am at taking care of myself, and who I'm burdening with my mere existence.

Stop spiralling. I take a deep breath and sip my tea.

Outside of my room, I can hear the occasional sound of something heavy scraping over the floor or of something being slammed down. When the sounds don't stop after over an hour, I force myself to get up and check. Something is going on. I've seen Celeste smile through an almost-deadly car chase, so whatever is making her this stressed must be bad.

The upstairs hallway has been left fairly unscathed but downstairs, every cabinet, shelf, or cupboard has been emptied and its contents scattered. It looks like a tornado has swept through the house. There is no logic to the destruction and no obvious pattern to be detected in her search – she could be looking for a tupperware container or a particularly dangerous high heel.

Not finding her anywhere in the house, I follow the mess into the basement. Most of the shelves lining the low walls are intact, their bizarre contents floating unperturbedly in their jars. Only a chest at the end of the room has been opened and upturned, dried herbs dispersed around it.

As I enter, I see Celeste standing over one of the desks with her back turned to me, dumping a box onto one of the large desks and digging through its scattered contents, haplessly pushing paper bags, jars, and vials from side to side. In her urgency, one of the bags tears and scatters seeds over the floor. After rummaging for a few moments, she sweeps the contents off the desk and onto the ground with an irritated gesture. Multiple glass beakers are caught in the cross fire and shatter as they hit the floor.

“Fuck!” she swears, bending over the table and burying her face in her hands. Her

whole body is shaken by violent shivers.

“Celeste?”

She doesn’t turn. “What do you want?”

Her tone stings but there’s also something in it that makes me stand my ground.

I approach the table carefully, eyeing it for things she could throw at me. “I wanted to see if you’re okay.”

“Fine.”

For a moment, I stand there lost, working up the courage to keep going. I step through the mess of herbs and broken glass on the ground until I can reach her and gently put my hand on her back.

She flinches, turning her head away from me and curling around herself more tightly. “I said I’m fine, Deni.”

“You’re not.” I try to turn her towards me, though it only makes her turn her head further away from me. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“Ugh!” She throws her hands up and finally looks at me. I’m surprised to find her eyes red and glistening. “Can you really not see what is going on here, kitten? Are you blind? Do I really need to spell it out for you?”

I flinch, realising that she's never raised her voice at me before. It immediately takes me back to the drawn out, intense fights I used to have with Casey. Usually, they ended with her throwing stuff at me. Swallowing, I look at the mess around us.

Celeste's hands shake violently as she runs her fingers through her hair. I've seen these kinds of tremors before with people in our flat. But Celeste has money to pay for drugs.

"It's the Ghostshade," I say, my voice carefully neutral.

She throws her hands up in a way that says duh. Her gaze is directed everywhere but at me.

Ignoring the hurt in my chest, I reach out and steady her hands, weaving my fingers through hers.

It takes her a while before she seems to accept the fact that I'm not going away. With a quiet voice, she says, "They cut me off."

"Who?"

"Charon's Veil. They have a complete monopoly on Ghostshade in this city. And they won't sell to me or anyone who has ever worked for me or been seen with me or even looked at me, apparently."

“Oh.”

She pulls her hands away and waves one at the mess. “And I’m out, not a single gram left anywhere.” Placing her face back in her hands, she says with a hollow voice, “But it’s fine. I’ll be fine.”

“Is the withdrawal dangerous?”

Her face is angry when she looks up. “I’m not in withdrawal, I’m just... I...” She stops herself. After a moment, she places her head back into her hands and says defeatedly, “No, it’s not dangerous.”

Cautiously, I place my hands on her shoulders. “That’s good. So you just have to ride it out. Maybe this is a good thing?”

She scoffs. “Oh, shut up. What would you know about this?”

I flinch.

Celeste raises her head, her expression pained. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean that. You should probably stay away until this is over.”

I step a little closer and wrap my arms around her. “I’m not going anywhere.”

She nestles her head against the crook of my neck. It feels strange to hold her but also surprisingly easy.

“Mel doesn’t think I see the face she makes when I light up.” Shivers go through her.
“As if I don’t know I have a problem.”

“So why do you keep using it?”

“Because I’d be dead without it!” She lifts her head again, her movement agitated.
“Dante gave it to me the first time I had it. It made everything hurt so much less.”

I gently push aside as much broken glass as I can so I can hop up on the table beside her.

“When you take it you don’t feel whatever happens to your body because you’re not really there. Like you’re watching yourself from the outside.”

I remember her stories of how Dante brought her to the city. “I see how that could be... desirable.”

She sits and stares at the wall opposite us for a while before continuing. “With relationships like that it’s not over even when it’s over. He’s been gone for so long and I still feel like he’s waiting behind every corner. Watching those girls suffer is like it’s happening all over again and I can’t protect them. I can’t protect you. What is the point of any of this,” She gestures at the elixirs and jars around us. “If I’m still just as weak as I was?”

“You’re not.” I run my hands through her hair. “Remember? Because you’re no longer alone. You said that. We protect each other.”

She shakes her head. “I don’t even know if I believe that myself.”

“I believe it.” I kiss her hair, inhaling her scent. “Is there somewhere you have to be today?”

Celeste shakes her head.

“Good. Come on.” I get up and tug on her elbow, half expecting her to ignore me. But she follows me and lets me lead her through the mess on the floor and up the stairs.

She grimaces at the stuff lying around everywhere. “Sorry about this.”

I wave my hand dismissively. “Can’t you just... you know, magic everything back?”

“I wish.”

Because it’s the only room that has survived Hurricane Celeste, I sit her down in the guest room, which I can’t help but consider my own now. She kicks off her shoes and climbs onto the bed, pulling her knees to her chest. I make tea in the kitchen while she waits, carefully avoiding anything shattered or broken in my path. When I get back, she has her eyes closed and is leaning her head back against the headboard. Her expression looks pained.

“You know,” she starts when I set down the teapot, “I don’t think I even remembered what emotions were anymore before I met you. Well, other than spite.”

I pour the tea a little too early, the liquid pale yellow and not strong enough. Can you do one thing right?

When I hand her the cup, she grasps it like her life depends on it.

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“Why?” I ask jokingly. “Because I make you so irritable?”

She chuckles but it sounds hollow. “No, kitten. Not most of the time, anyway.”

I wait a few moments for her to explain herself before I realize she’s just going to leave it at that. “You can’t say that and then not explain it, that’s not fair.”

She stares into her teacup like it will tell her the future. “I don’t know. I just feel more like myself when I’m with you, that’s all. Less like a bystander in my own life.”

I can’t help but scoff. “Are you kidding? You’re not a bystander. You’re, like, in charge of this city.”

She furrows her brows in a way that looks like she might cry any moment but then quickly runs her hand over her face, hiding her expression. “I’m glad you think that.” The movement of her hands, together with her shaking, is enough to make her cup spill over. “Ah, fuck!”

The anger and irritation in her expression makes me want to shy away. But when I take the cup from her hands to set it aside, I recognize that anger for what it is: self-directed. She spilled the tea. She’s addicted to Ghostshade. She got me hurt. She ran away with Dante. I can almost see the dialogue she’s having with herself on her face.

I take her shaking hand in mine. “Hey, it’s ok. It’ll come out in the washing mashine.”

She looks infinitely exhausted when I pull her into my arms. “I’m so tired.”

“I’ll call Mel,” I say. “I’m sure she can keep everything afloat for a few days. And you just stay right here and let me take care of you until you feel better.”

Her face is mortified when she lifts her head. “Don’t let that woman anywhere near my business. I’ll go under. The whole city will!”

With a chuckle, I ask, “Alright, is there someone else who can help?”

“Ibrahim works with a lot of the same suppliers as me. I trust him.”

I take another sip of tea, trying hard to hide that I have no clue how to actually help her. “I’ll speak to him.”

“You shouldn’t have to do this, Deni. I should be taking care of you.”

I kiss her temple, saying as seductively as I can, “I thought you like service,” in an attempt to lighten her up.

She sighs. “Not like this.”

I pull back. “Is there anything else I can do to make this easier? Other than keeping you entertained with my infinite charm?”

Her smile is worth every stupid and embarrassing joke I’ve ever made to her. She opens her mouth but then hesitates.

“Tell me,” I insist.

She clears her throat. “Venom might help.”

Oh. I grimace. “Are you sure replacing one substance with another is a good idea?”

Rolling her eyes, she says, “Oh come on, you can't take away all of my vices at once!”

I sigh. “And you’re sure it will help?”

“I think so.”

After hesitating for a moment, I turn to face her. She straddles me with her knees, allowing me to get close enough to touch my lips to her neck.

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, kitten, I am.”

I sink my fangs into her artery as gently as I can, making sure to create the smallest of punctures. She doesn’t react but tightens her grip on my shoulders, then sighs as I release my venom. When I’m done, I carefully pull back, making sure not to do any more damage to her skin than I have to.

She has her eyes closed but her whole body language has relaxed. When she lowers her fingers, I notice they’ve stopped shaking.

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“Does it feel different from Ghostshade?”

Opening her eyes just barely, she says, “Hmmm. It’s more relaxing.”

I make an attempt at moving back but she holds me in place. “Stay with me for a bit? I’m sorry I was a bitch earlier.”

“Of course.”

As if he’s been waiting for his cue, the orange cat slinks out from beneath the bed. He must have gotten frightened when Celeste was rummaging through the house, I think. Celeste doesn’t know that I’ve been giving him table scraps and letting him in and out the living room door. After stretching leisurely, he jumps on the bed.

“What is he doing here?” she asks with narrowed eyes.

“I thought we could name him Pumpkin,” I suggest.

As he attempts to get comfortable at her feet, she says, “No! You’re not getting a name! Go away!” She waves her hand at him in a shooing motion. “There are so many houses around here who would love to take you in. People that are so much less selfish than me. I’m bad at taking care of others.”

He stretches out his front paws and begins kneading the blanket.

“I. Will. Fail. You,” Celeste enunciates to the cat. “You’re making a bad choice, Pumpkin.”

I tilt my head. “That’s why you don’t want him?”

She shrugs. “There’s nothing more hurtful than letting down a cat.” Nudging me, she adds, “Or a kitten.”

Carefully, I lean back and reach out to the cat. He sniffs my fingers and bumps his head against them.

“You could never disappoint us.”

15. THIRTEEN MISSED CALLS FROM THE ONLY PERSON THAT CARES

If I’d thought that would be the end of Celeste’s withdrawal, I was dead wrong. I spend the next two days nurturing what can only be described as a frightening and profoundly ungrateful dragon, who, though being no less beautiful than the woman it evolved from, threatens to bite off my head at any moment. Despite this, she has her moments of clarity, during which, after cursing at me for not letting her have enough venom to basically turn her into a vampire and then for foiling her plan to heist some Ghostshade out of the Charon’s Veil headquarters, comes to her senses enough to apologise.

It’s more exhausting than one might expect and yet, somehow, I never have the urge to leave. It occurs to me that despite all her struggles, I don’t once fear having a plate thrown at my head. Not once do I have to hear her drag out the most vile and hurtful personal insults she can come up with just so I’ll give her what she wants. The worst is when she calls me a bitch for trying to make her eat something after two days of starvation, just to then immediately start crying about what a horrible person she is. What helps is that I’ve done this dance with Mav before and know that there are better days coming.

Also surprisingly, it doesn’t make the stupid tingly butterfly feeling in my stomach go

away. It only takes her thanking me and being nice to me exactly once to shackle me to helping her for the rest of eternity.

By day three, she looks more tired than I thought a person could look but begins to behave like a functional, if highly irritable, human again.

“Are you sure this is really a good idea?” I ask as I watch her don a long coat, wide-brimmed hat, and dark sunglasses. She looks like she’s off to solve small town murders.

“I can’t let them see me weak.” Her voice is rough. “If they want war, they can have it. Although just the thought of Mel with a machine gun makes me see flashing lights.”

I shudder at the mental image. “Sounds delightful.”

“On the off chance that I don’t come back, just wait for Ibrahim or Mel to come and get you, alright?”

“How off is the chance?”

She smiles and kisses my cheek. “I’ll be fine. Just promise me you’ll stay here, where you’re safe.”

“Promise,” I say.

The house feels oddly quiet after she’s gone, full off ominous anticipation. Unsure of what to do, I find myself in the kitchen, tidying up the last of the scattered kitchenware. Now that I don’t have Celeste to look after, my mind has plenty of time to roam back over the events of the last few weeks. Annoyingly tinted by the strange tingling feeling that’s been stuck to me, they feel like the beginning of something good

that not even Alastor can take away. Even though I still need to look over my shoulder every few minutes to make sure nobody has crept into the house to beat me back into Deni-flavoured jam, I allow myself to feel a little bit happy, no matter how out of place the emotion.

Because of this, I almost forget to send my daily ‘Where are you?’ text to Mav. There is some comfort in knowing your friend is immortal, though that doesn’t mean he can’t be irreparably harmed, at least mentally. Still, I’ve lived the last few days under the illusion that he must be fine.

The first sign he might not be comes as I’m standing in the hallway, two seconds after texting him, in the form of a low buzzing sound. Eyebrows suspiciously narrowed, I send a simple, “Hello?”

A moment later, the buzzing sounds again. A small but pervasive pit opens in my stomach and I decide to call him. My phone dials for a moment, then signals me it is ringing. The sound of something vibrating echoes through the house.

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With shaking knees I wade my way through the scattered contents of the hallway wardrobe, up the stairs and into Celeste's office. Usually, the door remains closed – locked – but in her desperate search for Ghostshade, Celeste left it open. Most of the folders lining the shelves remain intact and a few Manila folders lie undisturbed on the desk. Only a couple of archive boxes have been ripped from their usual place on the shelf and dumped on the floor. The sound, however, is coming from one of the desk drawers.

I stare for a moment before opening it, hoping until the last moment that this is all some bizarre coincidence. But even though it has stopped ringing and my phone has begun reciting Mav's voicemail recording, I recognize the phone the moment I see it. Despite Mav's insistence that I get some sugar daddy to get me a new phone, he himself has stuck with a bizarrely out-of-date touchscreen phone that severely tests your patience with every task you give it. Attached to one corner is another Pokemon phone charm, which I gave him to cheer him up after he came home black and blue from some job he refused to tell me about.

I pick it up. Among the onslaught of notifications on the lock screen, one reads, "13 Missed Calls from Deni", with my name followed by a sparkly pink heart emoji.

What the fuck.

Unable to comprehend what is happening, I search through the rest of the drawer, then the piles of paperwork on the desk. How did this get here? It doesn't make any sense. They don't know each other. They have nothing to do with each other. Frustrated, I try to unlock Mav's phone, first trying his year of birth, then Mariah Carey's, then four zeros. No luck. Device will be locked for 1 minute.

But he's been missing for weeks, how could this have been here the whole time? I'm already halfway through dialling Celeste's number when I remember that she is out trying bust one of the Charon's Veil witch blood 'production centers' – their words, not mine – and calling her will probably not help.

Because I can't calm down, I pace up and down the upstairs hallway, stepping over whatever is lying around on the ground. Where is he?

I spend hours going through scenarios in my mind and none of them make any sense. Celeste is not a serial killer who murders vampires, right? Mav and her aren't having an affair, that's insane. Why won't the sinking feeling in my stomach go away?

My spiral ends when the door opens and Ibrahim comes into the hallway. After suppressing the instinct to hide because someone might be here to beat the crap out of me again, I bounce down the stairs, clutching my phone in one hand and Mav's in the other.

Celeste isn't there.

Ibrahim looks around at the mess in the hallway. Rather than saying hello, he raises his eyebrows at me and says, "She's that bad, huh?"

I'm surprised to find myself feeling indignant on Celeste's behalf. "Well maybe if she'd had her friends to help her—"

He laughs. "Celeste doesn't let anyone help her."

I'm about to protest – I helped her! – but Mel appears in the doorway, a frail young woman by her side. It takes me a moment to recognize her in the light – she's the girl

that I saw get her blood taken when I was delivering the bindweed.

Mel, too, looks around at the mess. Her eyes find mine. “Uh, Celeste told me to bring you something but I’m not sure she’s quite...with it at the moment, so I’m just gonna tell you what it is instead.”

I cock my head, uncertain whether or not I want to find out. “Yes?”

Mel tugs at the girl’s arm and leads her into the house, pointing her into the direction of the living room –sitting room, as Celeste calls it. Her voice is gentle. “Just have a seat, darling.”

The girl looks shellshocked, and, after staring blankly into the direction of the living room for a moment, walks off.

Mel leans in toward me. “So... I have Alastor’s severed head in the trunk of my car.”

I open my mouth to reply but can’t find the right words. His what?

“Yeah,” Mel rubs my back. “I didn’t think you needed to see that but, uh, Celeste sends her regards. She was very clear to make sure everyone knows never to touch you again.” She speaks the last words in her best impression of Celeste’s somber tone, which would be funny under different circumstances.

I’m not sure if I should be flattered or horrified. And somehow, her words make Mav’s phone in my hand feel even heavier. A ridiculous but very loud thought rises above the others in my head: maybe I was wrong about her, the same way I was wrong about Casey. It wouldn’t be the first time someone made me believe they were better than they actually are.

“You look upset,” Mel says cautiously.

Ibrahim pats my shoulder. “Don’t worry, she’s not usually so blasé about ripping people’s heads off. That man was just a real piece of work.”

“Oh,” I say, my voice hollow. “Okay.”

“Yeah, that’s usually my job,” Mel adds with a grin.

I look towards the open door. “Is she... coming?”

“Actually, she’s still trying to figure out who’s behind this whole mess, so she’s meeting with an informant right now.” Ibrahim rubs his hands together. “But with Alastor gone you shouldn’t have to worry so much.”

I look over my shoulder towards the living room. “And the girl?”

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“Right, we picked her up in Rán. Most of the girls trust or even love the people exploiting them for their blood, so it’s impossible to get them out. But this one actually found Celeste and asked for her help, so Celeste had us pick her up. Celeste thought she could stay here until things cool down.”

Mel gives me an apologetic grin, “Do you mind looking after her until she gets back?”

I sigh. “Of course I don’t.”

“Brilliant, thank you!”

Mel is already on her way to the door when I hold her back. “Wait!”

They both turn to look back at me.

“I... I found this in Celeste’s office.” I hand the phone to Mel.

Mel turns it in her hand and looks at me with a questioning expression. “It’s a phone. Celeste has, like, a hundred burner phones.”

“Yes, I know it’s a phone!” My voice is more irritated than intended. “And I happen to know the person it belongs to. So why does Celeste have it?”

Ibrahim takes the phone from Mel’s hand. “What are you suggesting is the reason?”

I throw my hands up. “I don’t know, that’s why I’m asking you!”

Mel looks at me like I'm the dumbest person on earth. "We don't exactly do petty crime, Deni, so it's not like Celeste stole your friend's phone."

"I know that!" I snatch the phone back from Ibrahim's hand. "Forget I asked."

Ibrahim gives me an encouraging smile. "I'm sure it's nothing. Just ask her about it."

I spin the phone in my hand. Nothing. "I will." Then, worried that they think I'm some kind of paranoid nutjob, I add, "I'm just a little on edge with everything—" I gesture at the mess, "that's going on."

To say goodbye, I walk to the door and see them off. Before going, Mel elbows me and says, "She must really like you to let you see her like this," with a look on her face that suggests this is somehow an achievement on my part.

I slip Mav's phone into my back pocket. "I guess."

16. THE FORGOTTEN ART OF VAMPIRE DELINQUENCY

It takes a while for the girl – Emelie, I think, I'm too wired to remember – to find her tongue, which is perfectly understandable and yet profoundly awkward. I make tea and continue to tidy up, even though I have no clue where anything belongs, just so I don't have to think about Mav. It doesn't make sense.

After everything that's happened, I find I have a surprisingly good grip on situations like these and try to put her at ease with meaningless chatter. Eventually, our conversation turns to witchcraft.

"I knew about Miss De Villiers only through her books. It's a little crazy to think I could meet her in person."

I blink dumbly at her. Miss De Villiers? Books? “Which... uh... books in particular?”

She smiles shyly. “I have them all. Well... except for the banned one, obviously. But I think maybe *Casting Shadows* is my favourite?”

Squatting awkwardly, I try to sweep most of the broken parts of a vase into a dustpan. Why, Celeste? Was there meant to be drugs inside the vase? “That’s a good one...” I spitball. “What in particular do you like about it?”

Emelie, who has lit up the moment we started talking about Celeste, rubs her hands on her knees. “I know it’s controversial and a lot of people are angry that she shares all this knowledge that is meant to be a secret but... I know a few witches who would have never had access to that kind of knowledge otherwise, certainly not me. It changed my life.”

“Oh! Would you excuse me for a moment?” I gesture to the dustpan. “I just have to get rid of this.”

“Yeah, of course.”

When I get to the kitchen, I fling the shards into the trash with unwarranted aggression. Why am I angry?

Avoiding the living room, I go through the hallway and into the library. Of course, Celeste has her books sorted alphabetically – even though anyone sane would sort them by colour – and I’m not sure whether De Villiers starts with D or with V. When I do eventually find them, it feels a little surreal.

“*Casting Shadows: The Art of Spellwork and Ritual*” is nestled beside “*Lunar Magic: Harnessing the Power of Moon Phases and Cycles*”, both by a certain C L De Villiers. There is also “*The Complete Grimoire: A Personal Journal of Magic and*

Craft”, which I gently pull from the shelf. It is an exquisitely bound volume, something even I can appreciate.

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Reading her name on the cover page is simultaneously super hot and weirdly upsetting. I read the opening sentences, which sound suitably fancy and smart – and way above my paygrade. Frustrated, I shove the book back into its place on the bottom of the shelf. I don't understand this, I'm just a stupid vampire. My life revolves around hurting people to survive, not 'Spellwork and Ritual'. I don't understand her. How did I trick myself into thinking we had a connection? Arguably, there's a huge part of her life I haven't even really thought about.

Worse, there are other witches out there, like Emelie. Superfans. It makes me strangely angry at them for merely existing. I shake my head and get up. You're being psychotic, Deni.

Before I get back downstairs, my eyes fall on another volume, bound in black leather and placed behind the others. I'd not have noticed it if I hadn't taken out The Complete Grimoire first. I carefully pry it out from behind the others.

"The Forgotten Art of Blood Magic" has no author marked on the cover.

I open it to the first page of the introduction. "In witchcraft, we channel our power through many mediums, both organic and inorganic, though it can be said that the organic provides a better funnel for spiritual power. And while there is a point to be made for the safety and stability provided by inorganic materials, I have yet to meet a witch that, in a bind, would prefer to work with gold or copper rather than myrrh or sage.

"It seems, however, that despite all our loyal devotion to the mediums provided by mother earth, we have forgotten – or deliberately omitted – the most reliable,

powerful, and versatile organic medium of all: blood.

“While I go into detail about whether the disappearance of blood magic from our records should be considered forgetting – or rather, as I believe, erasure – in Chapter Seventeen, I want to use this introduction to caution the reader to approach the subject with an open mind. Because of the stigma that witchcraft has faced in recent centuries, it might be tempting to shy away from discussions about topics so archaic as ritual sacrifice, bloodletting, or augury. I believe, however, that this kind of caution is harmful rather than helpful.

“Casting Shadows argued that if we want our craft to survive in the modern world, we need to be able to evolve and adapt. This includes, in my opinion, a duty to not deprive ourselves of any of the tools we have at hand, no matter how apparently base they might seem. To discard any potentially powerful vessel for our will at the mere assumption that it might face scrutiny – scrutiny, no less, from a society that already regards our craft as corrupt – is nothing short of self-defeating.

“Blood magic, in the hands of a skillful practitioner, will give her unprecedented power over her subject, an unparalleled source of energy, and a reliable vessel for her craft–”

I look up at the sound of footsteps behind me.

“Sorry!” Emelie looks embarrassed. “I didn’t mean to snoop but this was ringing and I thought it might be important.”

She holds out a phone – Mav’s phone – with an outstretched arm. It’s stopped ringing now and instead displays a new notification on the screen: One missed call from Dante. Dante is followed by a bat emoji. The name rings a bell but I can’t place it.

“Oh,” I say, reaching for it. “Thanks.”

Before I can say anything else, Emelie runs her fingers over the leatherbound cover of the book I'm holding. "Is that the banned one? The Forgotten Art of Blood Magic?"

"Uh... yeah. I thought you might want to see it," I lie.

She takes the book from my hands with a look of complete and utter awe. "That's so cool. You can't get this anywhere! Not legally, anyway."

I read the title imprinted into the leather, then read it again. Something about this feels off.

"You know, I actually do need to make a phone call," I say, holding up the phone she just handed me. "Why don't you have a look through this and I'll be right back to set up one of the rooms for you?"

Her voice is quiet. "Oh, I'm fine on the lounge, really."

"Nonsense," I wave my hand at her, already on my way to the stairs.

I dial while taking two steps at a time. I don't care who she's in a meeting with – I need to know.

"Deni?" Celeste's voice is full of concern, almost fear. "Is everything alright?"

"No. I mean, yes. I have a question."

"Kitten, I'm kind of in the middle of something—"

Having stepped out into the garden under the light of the full moon, I take a deep breath of fresh air. It's uncharacteristically warm for this time of the year, a sign that we're headed for spring. "This is important. A friend of mine is missing and I've been trying to reach him--"

"Deni--"

"Just listen! He works for Charon's Veil, or at least he does sometimes. And I found his phone in your office."

"What were you doing in my office?"

Ugh! I plop myself down on a rusty garden chair. "Actually, I was trying to be nice and clean up the absolute mess you made, and I happened to call him and hear his phone ringing."

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There's silence on the other side of the line.

"Celeste! Why was his phone in your office?"

"He's a short kid with a bunch of tattoos?"

Without noticing that I'm doing it, I jump back up from the chair. "Yes!"

She sighs. "I caught him sneaking around in my warehouse. Remember we were going to have dinner that night when Alastor got to you?"

My stomach feels like it's been punched. "Yeah."

"Someone had broken into my warehouse that day and I was hoping you and Mel could find out whether Charon's Veil were behind it. Well, turns out you didn't have to, because he came back a few days after that."

"So... what did you do?"

I can basically hear the shrug through the phone. "I dealt with it."

"What do you mean you dealt with it?" My voice is more agitated than I'm trying to let on. "Did you hurt him?"

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

I can't tell whether she's angry that I'd think she'd hurt him or that I think he doesn't

deserve to be hurt. “Did you?”

Her scowl is practically audible. “No! For crying out loud, Deni, who do you think I am? I got some intel out of him and let him go.”

Considering that she just sent me Alastor’s severed head, I don’t think her defensiveness is entirely appropriate. “What about the phone?”

“I didn’t even know it was his, I just knew someone left it in my car.”

“But—”

“Nobut, Deni! What do you want from me? You realize he’s involved in trafficking people, don’t you? He’s lucky I didn’t kick his ass.”

I kick the chair before turning back towards the house. “He’s just trying to survive! How the hell am I supposed to find him now? He could be dead in the streets for all I know!”

Her voice is bitter when she replies, “I’m sorry I’m not keeping track of all the vampire delinquents in this town, Deni. It seems I have my hands full with one.”

Ugh! I hang up before she can say anything else and give the chair another kick. It skids a little over the tiled terrace, letting out a high-pitched scraping sound in protest. Vampire delinquents? Unbelievable! From the woman who just spent three days cursing me out and begging me for drugs?

Rather than storming into the living room and scaring the life out of Emelie, I force myself to take a few deep breaths before stepping back inside. I’ll find him.

The girl is curled up on the lounge with her knees tucked against her and hardly even

notices me, she's so engrossed in Celeste's book.

"How are you liking it?" I ask to announce myself.

She startles, nearly dropping the book, even though I've kept my voice low. Poor thing.

After gathering herself back up, she replies, "It's incredible. No wonder it's banned." Her voice is bitter. "Imagine witches actually having any kind of power. Nobody would like that."

I clear my throat. "I've actually never read that one." Or any of the others.

"Oh! It's a lot more like her Grimoire. It feels very personal."

Oh look, I'm jealous again, even though Celeste just called me a vampire delinquent. Why? I can read. "So... fewer instructions?"

"There is some spellwork in it but also just a lot about the theory and methodology of blood magic, controlling your connection to the medium and stuff. It's interesting, I always knew it felt weird when vampires drank my blood, like all these sensations crashing in on me, but it never even occurred to me that I was feeling what they were feeling!"

I pause in the middle of angrily gathering a bunch of loose cables that Celeste spilled from their box at the bottom of a shelf. "Wait, what?"

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Emelie blinks at me. “Yeah, it’s eerie, right? That’s how Celeste figured it out.”

“What did she figure out? Sorry.” I laugh, trying my hardest not to sound too pressed. “I’ve had a really long day.”

“You know, the whole basis for her study in blood magic was figuring out that when a vampire drinks your blood, they’re basically giving up all control of their body to you. That’s how she got rid of those vampire bosses.” She motions with her hand as if cutting her own throat.

I’ve never gaped before but I do now. “They do?”

She squirms in her seat, rubbing her hands on her jeans. It looks like she wants to climb out of her own skin. Her voice is quiet. “I suppose most vampires don’t know this? But the ones dealing with witch blood definitely do, that’s why now they keep you drugged up with bindweed twentyfour-seven.”

I reach out and take the book from her hand with shaking fingers, reading the page it is turned to. “The astute practitioner will notice that spilling your own blood comes with unusual sensations – commonly, you will feel a shiver of cold, or a strange pressure that can’t be traced to its source. If you’re well-practiced, you might recognize these as somatomagic projections.

“Unfortunately, the in-tune witch will be confronted with these sensations at all times she’s awake, meaning their origin might be obscured or confused for something else. This is precisely why trauma can be so detrimental to our ability to practice our craft, as we can often no longer differentiate the sensations that come from within and those

that come from without – what is somatogenic projection and what is somatic memory?

“I believe this plays an important role in the historical deterioration of our craft, about which I will talk in more detail in Chapter Sixteen. One specific example I would like to draw attention to here, however, is the historical exploitation of witches by striges, most commonly vampires.

“In theory, this should be impossible, due to the intrinsic power of our blood. Anyone possessing the knowledge laid out in this volume would deem drinking a witch’s blood ludicrous, a voluntary attempt to turn yourself into a puppet on strings. And yet our history books are rampant with this abuse—”

No longer able to focus on the words on the page, I lower the book.

“Is everything alright?” Emelie asks. “You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Anyone possessing the knowledge laid out in this volume would deem drinking a witch’s blood ludicrous, a voluntary attempt to turn yourself into a puppet on strings. The words play like a broken record in my mind. A puppet on strings.

“I... have to go.” Unable to explain myself any further and unable to hear Emelie’s response, I turn on my heels, grab my jacket –my own, not Celeste’s fur coat – and walk out the front door.

17. COMPLETE AND UTTER CONTROL, APPARENTLY

Think, Deni! It’s well past midnight and, for once, the train to Tartarus was on time, leaving me to do the route on the nightbus. She said she caught him in her warehouse, which has to be in Tartarus near the port somewhere.

Already, I'm not as sure about my assumption as I'd like to be. And then there's another problem – he left his phone in her car. Why was he in her car? Did she take him somewhere? My stomach feels like it wants to turn inside out.

A puppet on strings. How? I've been drinking her blood for months, just like I let Casey drink my own blood for months. Because I'm an idiot, a naive idiot who trusts any woman who gives me a scrap of her attention.

I try to comb through my memories of the last few weeks and try to discern if any of my decisions felt like they weren't my own. But would I even know? With bile rising into my throat I remember that very first night I stayed at her house, the images my brain conjured up, the way I kept touching myself even though she was watching. I thought that had been the bizarre and hard-to-control vampire part of my brain just overwhelming me with its primal desires after being suppressed for so long.

Now I'm not so sure.

Did I ever want her at all?

"I need to get off," I shout when the bus takes a particularly precarious corner. "I think I'm going to be sick."

There is a collective groan from the passengers and the driver mumbles something incomprehensible, then he slows down and opens the doors, stopped in the middle of his lane. Someone honks behind us.

"Thank you," I mumble as I stumble off, clutching my stomach.

Maybe she didn't kill Alastor because he hurt me at all but because he nearly gave her away. And you cuck yourself out to some witch like her puppet. He'd known that I had been drinking her blood.

I lean against the signpole signaling the bus stop and bend over, ready to dry heave. After finally having begun to fade in intensity, the image of those guys in the Myrrh & Adder once again plays over and over in my head. I never stopped being helpless at all. When my stomach vehemently refuses to purge itself from my panic, I straighten up and march off into the direction of the next stop. Only six stops to Tartarus. I need to find Mav.

One of the buildings, a tall, skinny community housing project jutting into the starless sky, catches my attention. Third from the right on the seventh floor. Mav's mom's flat.

Once, he confessed to me that whenever he didn't know what to do, he'd come here to remind himself why he gave up everything to be a vampire. Every time we came together I could see in his face how badly he wanted to just go home to her. I speed up my steps. Maybe he went home?

It takes me a while to weave my way through the concrete jungle of Hel to the towering building. Throughout my trip, my phone occasionally vibrates in my pocket. I take it out. Three missed calls from Celeste. I scoff loudly before shoving it back into my pocket. Right now, I feel like I would cry if I heard her voice and I'm not giving her the satisfaction.

My fingers glide over the nametags next to the intercom until I get to a sign reading Kolesnik/Ramirez. My heart beats into my throat as I press the button.

After a few seconds, there's a click in the intercom. "Hello?"

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“Hello? Mrs. Ramirez?”

“That’s me,” she says with a friendly tone.

I nearly cry. “I’m so sorry to bother you but... you haven’t by any chance heard from your son?”

There is a long pause before the voice replies, “I’m sorry dear, who is this?”

“It’s Deni, I’m a friend of Maverick’s? I just want to make sure he’s okay.”

Another pause, then the sound is muffled as if the speaker has turned her head away.
“Maverick Ramirez?”

I clutch my jacket.

A man’s voice replies to the woman but I can’t hear what he says. Another mumble from the other voice and she replies, “I think you have the wrong apartment, dear. There is another Ramirez family in 17B, I believe. Maybe try them?”

“Oh.” My heart sinks. “Sure, I’ll do that.”

One last click indicates that the intercom has been cut. Again, I scan the names next to the doorbells. Then another time. There is only the one labelled Ramirez.

With a sigh, I ring the same bell again. This time, the intercom is picked up straight away, “Hello?”

“I’m so sorry, it’s me again. There is nobody else with the name Ramirez on their label. Do they live with someone else, maybe?”

There’s a ruffling sound and then the thick, accented voice of a man responds, “I think maybe they move, eh? Family tragedy. Actually, I was sure the woman’s son already died but is good to hear I was wrong.”

“Oh.” I can’t keep the defeat out of my voice. “I didn’t know they moved.”

“Yes, was maybe one year ago? I’m sorry I don’t know the new address.”

Fuck. “Oh. Thank you for your help, though.”

“Of course! I’m sorry we cannot found your friend.”

Click.

When did she move? How often did we sit on that park bench and watch her window since? I let my head sink against the wall of the building, only a few inches away from a piece of gum stuck to the concrete. This can’t be it.

I’m not even sure there is a point in going home to Pavel’s apartment since I’m quite certain he’s thrown out all my stuff in a trash bag – but there’s nowhere else for me to go. By now, Celeste has relegated to texting me.

“Where are you?”

“I’m sorry about what I said. Call me back?”

“I need to know you’re safe, please—” The last one I don’t even open, just delete it after seeing the preview in my notifications. I’m safer the further I am away from her. At least I didn’t tell her where I lived.

Just in case, I check every park bench and every underpass on the way home, just out of habit. Maybe I can find one for myself, since I haven’t paid my rent and I’m never going back to Celeste’s house again. I make it about halfway when I notice something hideous and purple in the entryway of a corner store. Despite my best efforts not to get my hopes up, my heart leaps at the sight.

My steps get quicker and quicker the closer I get. It’s a jacket. It really is a jacket! The street light illuminates the ugly rose print on the back. It takes everything for me not to start running. The jacket is draped over a red sleeping bag and I can see the tattoos poking out from beneath it.

“Mav?” Now I am running, closing the last few steps between me and the person with that horrible jacket. I grab them by what I assume are the shoulders. “Mav!? Is that you?”

I yank back the puffy fabric from the person’s face. It’s him. He blinks at me deliriously, his pupils darting around my face.

“Mav?”

“Mom?” His voice is raw and quiet.

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“What?” I grab him by the shoulders again. “No, Mav! It’s me, Deni!”

He pushes himself up in the same motion as he scrambles backwards, further into the entrance of the closed store. “No, no no no!” He shakes his head. Confusion is written across his face. “You can’t have my body f-for yourself, I won’t let you.”

What the fuck?

“Mav, don’t you recognize me?”

“I didn’t do it, he looked like me but he wasn’t!”

Before I can get a grip on what he’s talking about, something hard hits me in the side. I startle and jump to my feet, swearing.

A wooden walking stick is pointed at my chest. It’s owner, a man with a tattered beard and pajamas, glowers at me. “You can rob the kid when he’s dead, alright? Don’t you people have any sense of decency?”

“Rob him? He’s my friend!”

The man narrows his eyes. “People with real friends don’t usually sleep in doorways.”

I swat the cane away with irritation. “It’s not my fault he’s here, I was searching for him everywhere.”

“Huh.” He sets his cane down and gives Mav a sad look. “He break out of some kind of institution?”

I, too, turn to look at Mav, who’s pulled his knees to his chest and started crying.

“No. I don’t know what’s going on with him…”

“Well, you should take him home. He’s been very distressed and, frankly, I could use that sleeping bag back.”

Slowly, like approaching a frightened animal, I squat down and reach for Mav. “Hey, it’s ok. I’ll take you home, how does that sound?”

He gives me a frightened look and frantically shakes his head. “You can’t take me!”

The old man puts his hand on my shoulder and pushes me aside. “Let me.” He reaches out and takes Mav’s shaking hands in his. “You know the people who control your mind?”

Immediately, Mav begins to look around as if looking for danger.

“They’re looking for you, buddy, and they’re coming from that way.” He points in the direction I’ve come from. “You have to go.”

Mav starts to cry a little harder but gets to his feet. He mutters something.

I glare at the man. “You just made him more upset, why would you say that?”

His expression is one you’d give a very dumb child. “They tell you not to feed into people’s delusions but out here, the most important thing I can do for someone is to keep them safe. When I found him, he was blabbering on about someone controlling

his body and ice in his head or whatever, and was only a few minutes away from getting cooked alive by the sunrise.” He shakes his cane. “Told him he had to hide from the people who want to control his body by staying out of the sun – lo and behold, the boy is still alive.”

Ice in his head. I know what that feels like. I swallow. “You found him?”

He shrugs. “He was wandering around looking lost and confused. Thought maybe he was just having a mental break. Decided it would be a shame if the kid died out here when he didn’t have to.”

I look at the plastic bags stuffed with clothes and other belongings scattered around Mav’s feet. Meanwhile, Mav tries to wander off into the street and I need to hold him back. How did he get here? We’re still a long way from Tartarus. Could he have tried to see his mother?

“So this is your... home?”

“Don’t be condescending.” The man’s voice is bitter. “Yeah, this is my stuff. I sleep here some nights. I kept an eye on him, just to make sure he was alright.”

I take a deep breath to calm my nerves. “Thank you so much for looking after him.”

He shrugs and, with great effort, lowers himself down onto the step of the entrance. “Ah, well. I’m glad someone gets to have his happy end. Been waiting for twenty years for someone to take me home.”

While I fumble with my pocket to take some cash out, I ask, “Do you remember exactly what he said when you found him?”

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Tilting his head, he scratches his beard. “Nothing that made sense, really. That someone was in his head and controlling his body.”

Like a puppet on strings.

“And he kept complaining about his head being frozen. Poor kid, the drugs must have really done a number on him.”

I know what that cold feels like.

Having gone far beyond the capacity of my body to feel dread, I’ve simply gone numb. I hand the man as much money as I can spare.

He takes it without hesitation. “Thanks, kid. Good luck with your friend, eh?”

“Yeah,” I reply as I try to steer Mav up the road. “I think I need it.”

18. SMILE, SUNSHINE, SMILE!

Celeste’s voice is relieved when I pick up eventually. “Deni? Oh, I’m so glad you’re alright. Listen—”

“No,” I interrupt her. “I don’t want to hear it.”

Celeste sighs on the other side of the line. “Look, I’m sorry about—”

“Shut up, Celeste. I said I don’t want to hear your apology.”

I can hear how hard she tries to rein in her irritation. “Then why pick up the phone at all?”

“Because I found my friend. Remember the one you dealt with?”

“Okay?”

Mav is curled up on my bare mattress. Both of our stuff is gone but Pavel has rented out only Mav’s side of the room so far, so he agreed to let us back in. When I asked him where the money went that I hid in my mattress, he shrugged and told me I should’ve hidden it better.

I grind my teeth. “I also read *The Forgotten Art of Blood Magic*.”

“Deni—”

“Just tell me what you did to him.”

“I did exactly what I told you I did, kitten. I gathered some intel and let him go.”

With a groan, I suppress the urge to yell in frustration. “How, Celeste? How did you gather intel?”

There is a long pause before she says, “I fed him some of my blood and used it to listened in on one of their meetings.”

“So it’s true? You can control someone when they’ve drank your blood?”

“It’s...” Something scrapes the microphone. “It’s a little more complicated than that.”

Mav stirs in his sleep. I squat down and rub his arm, trying to calm him down. It’s

been a week in which he hasn't gotten better and has refused to drink any blood unless I force it down his throat. "It didn't sound complicated in your book. Actually, I'm sure it pretty much said that exactly."

"Look, I'm sorry I spied on your friend. After what Alastor did to you I needed to know who was behind this because I wanted to make sure I could keep you safe. Which is why I need you to come home to me."

"Bullshit! You're honestly trying to tell me you didn't influence his actions?"

"I mean, I had to make sure he didn't tell anyone about drinking my blood and that he actually went and met the people he was working for. Otherwise, what's the point?"

"The point is that you wouldn't have broken his brain! Right now, he has no idea who he is or who I am – he was sleeping in the street somewhere when I found him!"

There's another pause. "Are you sure? That's never happened before."

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“Oh, so you’ve done this a lot?”

“No, I—”

“How often would you say you violate someone’s autonomy? Once a month? Once a week?”

“Stop it, Deni! That is not what I said.”

“Have you done it to me?”

Silence.

“Answer me!” I hate how my voice rises in pitch. Mav stirs again and I bite my lip to be quiet, stroking his hair.

“I would never make you do anything you didn’t want to.”

“How would you know what I want?! Oh right, because you’re inside my head!”

She takes a deep, slightly rattling breath. “Can we talk about this in person? It’s not safe for you—”

“No!” I wipe the tears from my face with my sleeve when something dawns on me. “When you came into the room at the Myrrh & Adder, you did that because you wanted me to spy on Charon’s Veil! I could see you watching the table before... But you weren’t planning on offering me work at all, were you? You didn’t want to help

me, you just wanted to use me.”

“I would have helped you no matter what.”

“But I’m right, aren’t I? That’s why you gave me your blood in the first place.”

“I…” She sighs. “Fine. That very first time you drank my blood I was planning to use blood magic to spy on Charon’s Veil. But I never did, alright?”

“And then you lied to me about it every day after that.”

“I wasn’t lying. I didn’t think it mattered, I was never going to use it against you.”

“Oh, you don’t even believe that yourself!” I hiss. “If you didn’t think it mattered then why keep it from me? Tell me you didn’t use it on me.”

“I already told you I’d never make you do anything—”

“That’s not what I asked you!” Remembering Mav’s words about the ice in his head, I ask, “What about that time you walked in on me in the bed, when you made me say those things? That wasn’t blood magic?”

Silence again.

“Celeste!”

“Would you feel differently if I’d done the same thing with a different kind of magic? Does it matter?”

“Yes it matters! I would have never freely given you that kind of power over me, I just assumed you already had it!”

She lets out a long sigh. “Yes, that was blood magic. But I only influenced what you said, everything else was your choice.”

“Oh, how fucking generous of you!” If I would pause for a moment I might notice that the anger filling me until it bursts over is really panic. How did I let this happen again? How did I put my trust in someone who would so blatantly go behind my back? “All this time you were bullshitting me, telling me that I wasn’t as helpless as I thought I was... when really it was so much worse! You basically had complete and utter control over me from the day we met! How can I trust anything that I’ve done or thought since then?”

“You can because you know I would never make you do anything you didn’t want to do!”

“Except for making me spy on Charon’s Veil.”

“But I didn’t make you do that, did I?”

“You did it to Mav! Why is that different? Does he matter less than me?”

“I panicked and made a mistake, alright? I’m sorry. I didn’t think it would hurt him. If you come here, I can explain more. And I’m sure I can help him. But right now I need you to tell me where you are so I can come and get you.”

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“Or what? Are you going to make me?”

“Oh, for the love of god, Deni!” Finally, there’s real anger in her voice. “I’m trying to protect you!”

“From what? The danger that you put me in? The reason I don’t feel safe is you, Celeste. You’re right. You are selfish and if this is your idea of how to take care of someone, I fear for those who depend on you.”

She takes a rattling breath. Her voice is quiet when she replies. “What can I do to fix this?”

I hate myself for it, but I like that she sounds hurt. “You know what would help? If you could, for once, respect my boundaries and stay the hell away from me.”

“Deni—”

I hang up, just to immediately burst into sobs. Trying to be quiet, I bury my face against Mav’s shoulder.

“It’s ok,” he says, patting my head. “If you stay in the dark, they can’t find you.”

He appears early in the morning that day, when the sun has not yet started rising but the sky is just barely beginning to lighten in hue. I startle awake to find him standing in the doorway of our bedroom, leaning casually and watching me. Mav and I have

slept curled up next to each other, shivering while I tried to keep both of us covered with the purple jacket.

He's devilishly handsome, with a square jaw and high cheekbones. Black curls frame his face. He has a sort of uncaniness to his overly symmetrical features, like a doll, something that I've noticed before in really old vampires. Something inhuman.

"You must be Deni," he says.

The new girl who is sleeping in the mattress opposite grumbles and pulls her blanket over her head. I sit up. My hands tingle, my stomach is hollow, but overall I just feel numb. Like I'm not there at all. I can hardly be bothered to care who he is or what he wants.

He walks over to where I'm sitting, his eyes intent on Mav, and squats down beside me. When he places his hand on Mav's shoulder I can't tell if the gesture is friendly or threatening.

"Who are you?"

He smiles a brilliant white smile, incisors sharp and long. "I'm a businessman, Deni. And you've messed with my business."

Oh. "Didn't your henchman already beat the crap out of me for that?"

With a slow nod, he says, "He did. But we're not even just yet. I don't think you know quite how much damage you've done." He claps his hands, getting another annoyed grunt out of my new roommate. "But first, let's help out your friend, shall we?"

I scoot to the side a little, trying to block his access to Mav, who is sweating through

a feverish dream right now. “What do you want with him?”

His smile is deeply, unnervingly friendly. “Nothing, dear. I just know what it’s like to have the witchy-blues. And I happen to have one or two anti-witchcraft tricks up my sleeve.”

He produces a small vial of pale yellow liquid and takes out the stopper. Before I can intervene, he’s shoved me aside, flipped Mav onto his back, and is forcing the vial’s contents down his throat.

“What are you doing? Stop it!” I try to push him off. All the while, Mav has woken and is fighting back in a panic but the man can not be moved. He’s solid as stone. Fighting both me and Mav seems to cost him no effort whatsoever.

Our roommate yanks down her covers. “Can you guys be quiet?”

The man, having succeeded at his task, gives her an apologetic smile. “Of course, I’m so sorry.”

I stare at Mav as he rolls over, coughing, and then goes limp.

“Don’t worry, he’ll be back to his old self in no time. Now!” He gets up and wipes his hands on his clothes like he’s touched something filthy. The outfit he’s wearing could be nice on someone else but on him it just screamsasshole. Turtleneck, slacks, and suit jacket, all black. “If you’d come with me, please.”

His smile makes me want to turn inside out. “What if I don’t?”

He shows some more of his teeth. “I don’t think you want to find out.”

He drives a sportscar, of course. Well, he doesn't drive it, his driver does. I sit in the backseat clutching my knees while he leans back on the other side, smoking – cigarettes, not Ghostshade. Despite the pungency of the smoke, the whole situation reminds me so much of Celeste it hurts. I want her to get me out of this mess, take me home, and I want to bury my face in her hair... I force myself to think of something else. It doesn't matter, it's done. She's not who you thought she was.

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“You know,” the man says between puffs, “Celeste would probably deny that she has a type. But I think we have a lot in common, you and I.”

I narrow my eyes at him. What does this wanker know about Celeste? “We do?”

He shrugs. “We’re both pretty vampires, to start.” His expression is conspiratorial. “But I saw the aftermath of what you did to my man on that boat after setting my shipment on fire. Oh, and the guy from the club that you got your revenge on? Come on, Deni, you’re not as much of a goody-two-shoes as you’d like us all to believe. You can trick Celeste... but I know a bad girl when I see one.”

I cross my arms in front of my chest. “That was self-defense.”

“Ha! You hunted that guy from the club down, darling!” His laugh is bright and clear.

“No, I didn’t...” Celeste found them for me.

He waves his hand. “Either way, you had your revenge and you enjoyed it, too.”

“Are you suggesting that’s the same as building a criminal empire built on abusing and exploiting witches? Not to mention the shit that goes on in the Myrrh & Adder?”

His smile doesn’t waver even a moment. “Oh, what Charon’s Veil does with the Myrrh & Adder is well outside of my purview. As for witches... are you trying to tell me you stuck with Celeste all this time because you care about her?” He laughs, as though that is the most absurd thing he’s ever heard.

“I...” Frustrated, I clench my fists. Do I? Does it even matter? Clearly, the people I fall in love with are not necessarily worth it.

“I suppose you haven’t had a wide sampling of witch blood yet, so you think they’re all the same.” He grasps my shoulder with his cold hand, leaning in towards me. “You’re going to be sorely disappointed when you realise you’ve developed a taste for the best of the best and there’s only one way to satisfy that hunger.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying you can lie to yourself, Deni, but you can’t lie to me. You only care about one thing and that is blood.”

I shake my head a little too frantically. “That’s not true.”

His expression is knowing. “Whatever you say.” Extinguishing his cigarette in the ashtray, he adds, “You know, I really didn’t think she’d be stupid enough to go down this path again.”

“She’s not... what are you talking about?”

“She used to be so dramatic, you wouldn’t believe it. I can’t do this anymore.” For the last part, he imitates a woman’s voice. It sounds nothing like Celeste.

It also makes me want to smash his head through the window.

“You’re going to kill me.” He rolls his eyes and brings the back of his hand to his forehead, mock-fainting.

Maybe, after smashing his head through the window, I could use the shards to gouge out his eyes.

“Who are you?”

Tilting his head, he replies with an irritated voice, “Oh, come on, Deni! I thought you were smarter than this.”

My stomach feels like it will drop through the floor of the car as I remember the phone call on Mav’s phone. I thought the name sounded familiar. “Dante? But... you’re dead. She killed you.”

“Is that what she told you?”

I rack my brain – no, she never explicitly told me that. He’s been gone for so long and I still feel like he’s waiting behind every corner. “I thought...”

“Well, you thought wrong. You know what the best part is, though?”

I don’t want to hear it but he doesn’t wait for me to give him permission – why would he?

“She could have killed me but she took pity on me!” He claps his hands, laughing. “Witches are stupid, Deni, they always will be.”

Outside, the outer suburbs roll by in a dark blur. Fuck.

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I try to run the moment he stops the car, even though I already know it's pointless. That's why I went with him, after all. But there's something so cold and psychopathic about him, I wouldn't be surprised if he sent some dismembered part of my body to Celeste in the mail, and I would prefer to keep all my limbs.

We stop outside of the city, where the landscape has flattened into rolling fields and the occasional grain silo. The horizon is ominously orange, sunrise so close my skin feels hot and prickly. He lets me get all the way from the lonely hangar he's parked his car beside to the road. When he does follow, he trails behind me for a while. I know he's playing with me and I still keep running, too proud to simply give up.

When he's finally had enough and catches up with me, he wraps his arms around me, pinning mine to my sides. He's strong enough he could probably pop me like a party balloon. Now, if I'd had some of Celeste's blood... but no.

He drags me along the abandoned street and back over the gravel driveway to his car. I kick and bite, trying to wind my way free. It makes him laugh.

"What are you trying to achieve?" he asks. "We're moments away from sunrise. Do you really want to cook yourself alive rather than spending some time with me?"

"Yes," I spit.

"That's the spirit." He kicks open the sidedoor of hangar and throws me inside.

Immediately, I get up and try to run. He holds me back with ease, catching me by my hair and dragging me further inside. Overhead lights blink awake, illuminating the

dreary space. My feet slip on the polished concrete floor as I try to fight back. There's nothing to hang onto in the wide open space. Only the walls are lined with tool benches, metal drums, and other similarly unhelpful items.

He drags forward a chair and tries to sit me down on it. Twice both the chair and I topple as I resist being slotted between the armrests. The third time, he kicks me a few times while I'm down so I'm too busy with seeing stars to fight.

He's not sloppy when it comes to tying me down. I'm cocooned in rope, each arm firmly attached to the wood beneath it. There is no moving.

"What do you want?" I try to bite him when he gets too close as he wraps me tighter but miss by a hair's width. "What's the point of this?"

He cups my cheek with his palm, carefully avoiding my teeth. "The point is that I know my girl, Deni. She's a sucker. If I want to hurt her, I have to hurt you."

I kick at him and shake my head. "You're wrong. She doesn't care about me."

He laughs. "Whatever you say."

"It's true!" I'm not sure anymore whether I believe what I'm saying or not. "She's no better than you. She was just using me."

"I do agree that she's no better than me." He steps back and admires his work. "By the way, you haven't had any of her blood lately?"

Before I can reply, he seems to have an epiphany.

"Actually, it doesn't matter!" He pulls his phone from his pocket. "I forget how far technology has come sometimes. We didn't even have telegrams when I was growing

up!”

He rolls up one of the toolbenches and props up his phone so the camera is facing me. I squirm, flexing against the rope.

“Do you want to say hello?” he asks. “You could beg! She might like that.”

I glare at him. “Fuck you.”

With a shrug, he walks past me and toward the rolling gate. I try to crane my neck – what is he doing? An electric whirr tells me the gate has begun opening.

What? He can’t do that. It must be light outside by now.

A narrow strip of newborn sunlight appears to my right, widening with every second. It’s not particularly bright –it’s not even spring and the sun is only just creeping over the horizon. But on a bluebird day even a sliver of winter sun is a death sentence.

I wriggle in my bonds. “What are you doing? Stop it!”

There’s no response. A moment later, the strip is wide enough to touch my elbow. I clench my jaw so I don’t scream. It feels like someone has taken my arm and is pressing it against a hotplate. The pain radiates through the bones in my arm and into my shoulder, hot and white. Smoke starts to rise from my skin and I watch in horror as it begins to bubble up and blister.

Still, the doors are continuing to open. With every inch the sun claims of my body, the smell of burnt flesh becomes more intense. My skin cracks and recedes, leaving fat and muscle bare. Flames lick up of my forearm as it disintegrates, the burns weeping plasma and blood. I howl, unable to contain the pain. The sun creeps over my shoulder and back, blistering the side of my neck and face. Heat and pain radiate

through my ear and jaw.

I've long forgotten my determination not to beg. "Stop it, please! Stop!"

The vision in my right eye flares orange and then darkens like a dying star as the flames lick over my skin. I can hear the sizzle and burn of my flesh.

"Please!" I sob. Am I crying or melting?

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A loud screech echoes through the hangar as the door slides to halt. I burn for one agonising moment longer, then it begins to slide shut again. The heat slowly recedes, leaving only blistered skin and weeping flesh. My right hand and arm are no longer recognizable as such, skewed and melted by the heat.

His steps are sharp and echo as he returns to his phone. My one working eye follows his figure, my brain labouring to remember who he is or why I'm here, consumed by the pain.

He picks up his phone, bringing the camera closer to my face. "Smile, sunshine!"

I let my head roll forward and try to breathe through my own whimpering sobs.

"Now," he says after putting his phone away. "Let's go for a drive, shall we?"

19. CELESTE

I'm alight with the burning of Ghostshade withdrawal, muscles weak and twitching, head buzzing with a dull ache. I take up three parks when I pull up mindlessly at an old pharmaceutical factory, not even bothering to lock the car. None of it matters, not in the face of Deni's screams.

I try to feel for sources of energy as I make my way up the patchy sidewalk and around the side of the building, struggling to sense them through the aching in my joints. But the physical pain is nothing compared to the feeling in my chest. Like I'm being crushed. I might as well be nineteen again, scared stupid by my boyfriend and scared even more of the world – going back to him even though his love hurts

because I have nowhere else to go and nobody else to love me. Because I'm not strong enough. Because he always wins.

Why don't you ever learn?

I flick my wrist, drawing on the power of the half-moon, throwing open one of the doors to a hunched shed leaning against the main building. The effort to do so drains the little energy I have left dangerously low. Once inside, I straighten my back, holding my head up high even though my body is screaming at me to run, to protect myself. In my mind, I see Deni go up in flames, the visceral pain audible in the way she cries.

You knew he was coming for her from the moment you realized it was him running the trafficking ring, you selfish coward. Why didn't you find her first?

Seeing him feels like someone has jammed their fist down my throat and is ripping my heart out. For nine years I thought myself safe – not that I did not still scream in my sleep or cry in the shower – because I thought he'd learned his lesson. His smug smile still looks exactly the same as it always has.

“Hey, babe.” He's sitting on a rusty flight of stairs, his fingers spinning a lighter.

“Where is she?”

His eyes narrow. Jealousy – his favourite trait of mine. “How have you been? You look tired.”

I taste my own blood before I realise I'm biting my cheek. “I'm not playing this game with you. If you're so desperate for my company, let the girl go.”

“I don't know. Maybe I like her company better than yours after all. She's awfully

sweet.” He licks his lips. “And such a tight little cunt, don't you agree?”

The wave of nausea nearly knocks me off my balance. Before I know what I'm doing I've thrown him up against the wall with my power, the corrugated iron walls tearing to wrap themselves around him. Their sharp edges cut into his skin as they squeeze but I never even see it. Using my own body's energy for my magic, the effort zaps me to the point of almost fainting. I stumble, the edges of my vision blurring. The rest of my vision falls victim to my rage.

When I get myself together I'm standing in front of him, hands balled into fists as the strips of metal squeeze him. I'll kill him and I'll make it hurt.

His grin hasn't even faded one bit, though perhaps it's a little strained. “I'm kidding, Celeste, I'm kidding,” he chokes. “It's a joke.”

My blood is boiling, though I'm faintly aware that my fury is only a hair's width away from collapsing into utter desperation. “I'll kill you.”

“You could do that. But then how will you find your little pet? Right now, I've got her tied up to a comfy little chair somewhere, lightly smouldering in the daylight.” He swallows as the metal digs into his flesh. “I'd say she has about three hours before the sun falls through the window at an angle that'll kill her.”

Fuck. I step back, still shaking with anger, and unfurl the torn metal.

He drops to the ground with an irritating chuckle, ignoring the rips in his suit and the blood dripping from the cuts in his skin. “I forgot how feisty you could be!”

I have not an ounce of patience left in my body. “Just shut up and tell me what you want.”

He walks around to the back of the shed and opens a suitcase that he's propped onto a dusty workbench. Stripped machinery parts stand around, their limbs torn off to expose loose cables. I have no clue what any of this does but none of it lends itself to magic, all cold steel and heartless rubber.

Not that it matters. He's already won – I'll do anything to get her as far away from him as possible.

He comes back holding a vial of bindweed, its essence stubbornly refusing to cooperate with my powers. The thought of ingesting that makes me shudder.

He pulls the stop and holds it out for me to take. "Cheers," he says with a wink.

I take a step back. "And how are you going to guarantee to me that she's safe?"

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“Here’s what we’re going to do.” He pulls out his phone and turns the screen towards me.

Just like he said, Deni is sitting tied up in some kind of large store-room. The doors are wide open, allowing the sun to draw a long beam of light over the floor. Just as he said, in a few hours the angle of the sun will mean the light falls directly on her.

My heart squeezes at the sight of her. She looks like she’s only semi-conscious. The right side of her body is hideously burned, the blistering skin having pulled back to reveal raw flesh. I rip the phone from his hand, fighting back my tears. She lifts her head a little as if sensing that I’m watching her, black hair streaking her face. God, she must be in so much pain. I want to tell her that it’s going to be alright – no matter what she thinks of me, I will always protect her. But it’s too little, too late, Celeste.

“You can’t talk to her,” Dante says, taking the phone back. “But if you drink this, I’ll give you her address and you can have someone pick her up.”

“Why would I trust you?”

“Because you have no choice, babe.”

My voice is full of spite. “I could torture you until you tell me where she is.”

His laughter is hyperbolic, making him double over as if he’s never heard a funnier thing in his life. “Sorry,” he says, dramatically wiping the corner of his eye. “Of course you could, how did I not think of that?”

With a cock of his head he turns to the tools at the back of the shed. “Let me see...” He saunters over to them and thoughtfully runs his hand over the handles. He picks up a hammer in one hand and pliers in the other. “Would you prefer to break my fingers or rip out my fingernails?”

I ball my hands into fists. “Don’t tempt me.”

His grin is cocky. “Oh, please.” He comes back still holding the tools. Leaning in towards me and jabbing the point of the pliers into my chest. “We both know you don’t have it in you.”

“I killed Alastor.”

His breath is warm against my cheek. “But you didn’t torture him, did you?”

Fuck. I know he’s right. Three hours of torture? He deserves more after everything he’s done and yet I know I could never inflict that much pain anyone, even him.

With a scoff I step back and pull out my phone, unlocking it to my chat with Ibrahim. I ignore the lengthy messages explaining how exactly I’ve been an asshole to Deni – as if I don’t already know – and simply write, “You’ve got three hours before Deni’s dead. Pick her up for me, please?”

He responds within the second with three question marks, followed by, “What’s going on??”

I pass my phone to Dante and walk over to the workbench that he’s set the vial down on.

“Write the address,” I say, nodding at the phone. “You can send it when I’m done.”

He complies with a shrug.

I twirl the bindweed in my hand until he's stopped typing. I've got one more card up my sleeve. It might not save me but maybe, just maybe, it will make this bearable. With one motion, I down the acrid liquid, grimacing at the horrid taste.

Immediately, it feels like I've been hit by a truck. The world seems to flinch back from me, all my senses intact but the one allowing me to sense the earth's power. It's like my soul has gone blind.

Dizzy, I watch Dante slip my phone in his pocket. "Sent. Let's hope your friends can do a seven hour drive in three."

"Bastard," I mumble, swaying.

He catches me before I fall, wrapping his arm around my waist. Smelling his perfume makes me want to scream, my skin crawling with the memory of his touch,

"Easy, babe." His lips press against my neck, teeth scraping my skin. "You might want to save your energy."

20. WHERE IS SHE, PUMPKIN?

Celeste won't save me. I keep repeating the words in my head so it won't hurt so much when I die alone. Maybe this isn't so bad – what do I lose, really? Another few years living like a rat beneath the feet of others, prostituting myself and visiting Mav on whatever street corner he begs on?

And for what? Hope is for idiots. I knew this would end badly from the moment I tasted her blood for the first time but I just had to believe that things could turn around for me.

I thought what Casey did was an anomaly. But looking back, isn't that what's always happened? My parents spent eighteen years raising me and the moment they found out I'm gay, it turned out their love wasn't real after all. Casey spent every moment of our relationship lying and manipulating me. And Celeste? Even after everyone had thoroughly proven that loving me is an impossible task, I threw myself at her feet like the dipshit I am.

She won't save me.

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It doesn't matter how often I repeat the words, my hope just won't die, so the moment the ray of sunlight touches my pinky finger the disappointment still kicks me in the gut harder than any vampire ever could.

But there's relief also. No matter how angry I am with Celeste, I didn't want Dante to win. I can't begin to imagine how much he hurt her. She deserves not to have to see his face again.

My thoughts don't last very long. After a few minutes, there's only the pain of fire licking my skin extinguishing every thought inside my brain. All my pride doesn't stop me from crying. I'm so tired and this hurts so much. What a shit way to go.

Then, over the crackling sound of my cooking flesh, I hear the sound of screeching tires. I'm in too much pain to make sense of what's happening. Is he back to hurt me more?

The hangar's side door is thrown open and someone short marches in, her white hair in a messy ponytail. She starts running the moment she sees me, followed by another, much larger figure.

"Look at her!" she snaps. "We could have been too late!"

I blink at her deliriously as she grabs the chair and pulls me out of the sunlight.

The other person is now somewhere behind me. "Mel, if we'd driven any faster we'd now both be dead." His deep voice is calm and soothing. Ibrahim?

Mel makes a face. “If we’d driven any faster we’d both be dead,”she imitates mockingly. “That’s because you don’t know how to drive!”

“Deni?” He comes around the chair, squatting before me to cup my unharmed cheek with his palm, lifting my head a little. “What happened?”

I groan. The corner of my mouth on the burned side of my face splits as I speak, my skin weeping wound fluid. “Dante happened.”

Ibrahim turns to look at Mel, his expression confused.

Mel’s face looks like she’s seen a ghost. “Like, vampire ex-boyfriend Dante?”

I nod as best as I can.

She lets her face sink into her hands. “Oh my god, I’ve been telling Celeste she was just being paranoid for months.”

Ibrahim clears his throat. “Would someone tell me what is going on?”

Mel waves her hand at him dismissively. “I’ll explain on our drive home.” She, too, squats down before me. “Where is she?”

My mind labours through the pain to understand and answer the question. Do I know where Celeste is? Should I know? I shake my head, as if I could swat the pain away. “She’s not with you?”

“She texted me where to find you a few hours ago,” Ibrahim says. “But she’s been AWOL since.”

So... she did what he asked her to do?I wade through my thoughts like through

molasses. “He said he’d let me go if she came back to him.”

Mel looks like she wants to cry while Ibrahim has taken to undoing the knots keeping me in place. The polyester rope has melted and merged with my flesh in places. Parts of me come away in chunks as he unwinds the rope. My vision goes dark and I can’t stop myself from fighting, tears streaming from my one whole eye.

“Stop it,” I whimper, forgetting what is happening. “Please.”

Ibrahim brushes the hair from my face. “It’s alright, Deni. It’ll be over soon.”

When it’s done, he catches me, stopping my body from sliding to the floor. Somewhere in the distance, I can hear the dialling of a phone. It beeps once, twice, three times.

“Celeste?” Mel’s voice is agitated.

“Did you find Deni?” Celeste’s voice is muffled by the phone speaker.

“Yes. Where—”

“Good. Don’t call again.” Click.

“Ugh!” Mel kicks one of the toolcarts. “How is anyone supposed to help that woman?”

“He won’t let her talk on the phone,” I mumble.

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Mel throws her hands up looking lost. Before she can say anything, Ibrahim raises his hand in a calming gesture. “We’ll find her, Mel. Let’s just get Deni home.”

He offers me his wrist, his pulse almost visible under his skin, saying, “As soon as it’s dark outside, we’re getting out of here, alright?”

Djinn blood is not the same as witch blood. Rather than sweet, warm, and empowering, it’s overwhelmingly powerful. It feels like electricity is running through my veins. I get the sense I could crush stone with my fists, if only I wasn’t so jittery and uncoordinated. Like the worlds most powerful drug has been handed to a toddler.

It does help me heal, though. Only my regrowing skin makes itself known with pain shooting through my limbs, the occasional fried nerve-ending firing aimlessly to let me know that something is, in fact, wrong. As if the weeping tissue and puss weren’t indicators.

Though her house is full of memories it proves to be a better option for healing from severe burns than Pavel’s apartment, even if it takes some pleading to get Mel to check on Mav twice a day. He, at least, really seems to be improving.

Celeste tidied while I was gone, returning her scattered belongings to their origins as if her outburst never happened. The guest bedroom – my bedroom – has fresh sheets and clean towels sitting folded on the corner of the bed. The sidetable is covered in a small collection of flasks and jars – tinctures, creams, and pain relief for my burns. There’s even some of my favorite tea.

The other thing that has changed is that the house is no longer quiet. Everyone I've been fending off while Celeste was in withdrawal has come crashing back in like a tidal wave. The news of her disappearance has spread like wildfire.

Every day countless of them, many witches, snow in the door because they haven't been paid, they want to work out the details of some delivery or sale – or because they haven't heard from Celeste and are worried. It shouldn't surprise me just how many people care about her.

Everyone has one question: where is she?

Of course, I only try to help with finding her because it's the right thing to do. Not because I've forgiven her.

I try, with vigilance, to hang onto my anger. She betrayed me. She knew there was nothing I hated more than feeling powerless and took my agency away anyway. Still, it becomes harder with every passing hour. Her clothes smell like her perfume and I bury my face in them when nobody is watching.

I find small details of her life in every room. It feels invasive to look at her things but I can't help myself, even if I couldn't say what it is I'm looking for. Maybe it's the flowers pressed in between the pages of the thickest and heaviest volumes on her bookshelf or the defunct collection of cassettes she keeps on a shelf in the living room. Maybe it's the storage box that I remember having been upturned in her search for Ghostshade which holds a collection of photographs, all of them dated and annotated with immaculate handwriting. One shows a group of old-timey witches playing with a red-haired little girl in the snow, another Mel and Celeste on the beach with wide-brimmed hats and round sunglasses, drinking mimosas and laughing. Most of the others are of her and people I don't recognize. At the very bottom is the photo she took of me in the sunlight, hiding my face in my hands, annotated only with the date and the word 'Kitten', followed by a heart. I sit on the floor of the library and

read her annotation over and over again, reminding myself that it doesn't matter.

On the third day, lying awake in bed in the filtered evening sunlight of her enchanted window, staring at the ceiling while hugging one of her cashmere jumpers to my chest, I think of a stupid joke about Pumpkin the cat that I know would get at least a chuckle out of her. But she's not here.

She's not here and I miss her. Worse, missing her makes me want to be held, and she's the only person I allow to hug me. Even with Mel and Ibrahim here, I feel so alone. And guilty – why did I go with Dante? Maybe if I'd tried to run away sooner, she wouldn't have had to do the thing that frightens her most just to save me.

It's in that moment that I realize I'm in love with her. It comes like a tidal wave, all at once. I love her even if she doesn't love me back. I love her even if all she wanted to do was use me. I love her even though I'm furious with her. Maybe the only reason I'm so angry is because I love her. Really, it's so stupidly obvious that I'm not sure how I could have kept this from myself for so long.

I bury my face in her jumper. Stupid. Why are you so stupid, Deni?

And the thought that Dante could hurt her is the most shattering, painful thing I've ever thought about. It consumes me. It makes the vampire part of me want to run amok, kill everyone in my path until I find her – and for once, it seems I'm in harmony with it.

I get up from the bed and wander through the house, again, unsure what it is I'm looking for. Without much direction, I comb through the papers in her office, as if I could find some hint about where she might be. The sheer volume of paperwork is startling – I suppose even a criminal enterprise needs thorough organisation but Celeste's bookkeeping is nothing short of neurotic.

Really, I know that I should leave the sleuthing to Mel and Ibrahim, though it took some convincing to stop Mel from simply marching into the Myrrh & Adder and gunning people down until she got her answer. Ibrahim keeps talking about informants and mutual connections but has come up empty so far. And all of us have interrogated Mav, whose confusion seems to be fading, but his answer never changes: Dante is a voice on a phone, nothing more. They've never met. He knows nothing about him.

Nobody can trace her, not with magic and not with technology. The witches think she's consumed bindweed, somehow cutting herself off from her powers.

I've never felt more useless in my life. I trail through the hall and into the basement, checking out all the eyes floating in jars and mummified hands as if they hold answers. I stare at them until eventually I need to admit to myself that my epiphany changes very little. Celeste is gone, whether I love her or not.

When I come back up the stairs, Mel and Ibrahim are standing in the kitchen arguing with someone. For everything that Celeste has been through, it surprises me that she keeps her door open to all these people.

I pop my head through the door. "Any news?"

Mel shakes her head. "This is unbelievable," she says. "Imagine if one of us just abducted one of Charon's Veil's disgusting mafia boss assholes. They'd be here in a heartbeat, it would be an outright war!"

There are two other women in the kitchen, one of which I recognize as the dark-haired witch from that very first night I stayed over. The other is older and very stern, cloaked in crystals and talismans, bangles clinking as she moves. The dark-haired one crosses her arms. "Because they're organised around violence. That has never been our business. And we don't even know how involved Dante was with Charon's Veil."

“It sounds to me like they simply do the legwork for him,” Ibrahim says. He pats Mel’s shoulder. “She’s right Mel, we don’t have the means to fight them. We need to be smart about this.”

I sigh. “So the answer is that we still know nothing?”

The stern witch shrugs. “We’ve tried every locator spell we’re capable of. But it’s as though she doesn’t exist.”

“Celeste and I have been working for months to figure out if there’s a way around the effects of bindweed but we haven’t had any concrete results. We thought there might be a way around it on the new moon because the plant’s power is potentiated then,” explains the other one. “But we just missed it, so it won’t be for another month.”

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Disappointed, I turn away as they continue their discussion. Without me, Celeste would never be in this situation. It feels like I should have a solution.

Not wanting to return to bed, I grab my jacket from the coat rack and make my way through the living room to the sliding door. Then I pause, turn around, take my jacket off and grab Celeste's fur coat. I can almost hear her voice: you do look much cuter in this than me.

Outside, the sun has disappeared enough that I don't have to be afraid of smouldering. A thin sliver of a waxing moon hangs in the dark-blue sky, the stars hidden by clouds and light pollution. I grab one of the chairs – not the one I angrily kicked halfway across the terrace – and sit down. For approximately the hundredth time I take out my phone and call Celeste. It goes to voicemail.

Frustrated, I slip the phone into the coat pocket – and find myself cursing. I'd forgotten about the hole at the bottom of the pocket, letting my phone slide in between the fur and the lining. When I reach into it to fish my phone out, my fingers brush smooth paper. Did I leave something in this coat the last time I wore it? I don't remember.

I pull on it and produce a smooth envelope of cream-coloured paper. My name is written on it in Celeste's handwriting. I stare for a moment before I open it with shaking fingers.

“Deni,

I love you.

There. I'm too much of a coward to say it out loud. I've only ever told one other person, and he did everything to break me.

I wish I I'd told you when I still had the chance. Now, I'm not even sure you'll ever even know. If I've hidden this letter well enough, you might never discover it. But if I haven't, I know Dante will find and destroy it. He could never love. I never thought I could love again, either.

But I do now. I understand if you don't believe me. You probably think I wouldn't have done what I did if I really loved you, when actually, it's the only reason I lied. Because the last time I loved someone, it made me powerless to him and he hurt me.

So when I realised that I was falling for you – so fast and so hard! – I needed to give myself an out, a way to protect myself in case you, too, wanted to hurt me. I was too terrified not to.

I'm so sorry, Deni. I think my worst fear has come true – I've become like him: cold, selfish, and obsessed with power. I had no right to deceive you and I knew that very well. Just like I knew that this was your biggest fear. But I did it anyway because I couldn't live with my own fear – and I was too selfish not to have you.

But I'm not writing this to make excuses.

I'm so sorry I hurt you, Deni. I went with Dante because I couldn't bear the thought of your suffering. Please, at least let my sacrifice be worthwhile. Let me help you, even if you hate me. My rates are paid – stay at my house for as long as you want. I won't need it for quite some time. Let your friend stay, too. There's blood and money behind the floorboards in my bedroom. Don't be too proud to take it.

I really hope you can move on from this and live the life you deserve.

I love you.

Forever yours,

Celeste”

I read the first line over and over again. I love you. I love you. I try to imagine what those words would sound like in Celeste’s voice. I love you, kitten. It should feel good to read those words but instead, it feels like a punch in the gut. Because it’s too late. The words blur in my vision as sobs begin to shake me.

The cat appears at my feet, sniffing me curiously.

“Where is she, Pumpkin?” I ask desperately.

He rubs his head on my shin and marches past me into the house. I follow him with a heavy heart.

It’s not much but I take the letter inside to show it to the others, after first pausing at the door to try to stifle my sobs. I love you.

The letter tilts everyone’s mood further toward pessimism. Somehow, the suspicion that she went with Dante was easier to bear when there was still hope that we were all wrong. Now we know. After confirming that this, in fact, brings us no closer to finding her, I take the letter back and go back to bed, still wearing the stupid coat, so I can cry in peace.

21. NOT HALLEY’S COMET BUT CLOSE ENOUGH

I wake a few hours later, the letter bunched in my fist and my eyes swollen from crying. I read it again. What the hell am I supposed to do with your stupid money? I

think. I want you. Or maybe I don't. But I do.

Ugh. I get up from the sheets and march into her bedroom, cold and untouched without her presence. Angry, I roll up the end of the rug and feel over the floorboards until I find a loose pair. I pry them back and stare at an amount of cash that makes me queasy. An amount of cash that I'm sure someone would kill me for without blinking an eye.

Beside it sits a metal box. I pick it up and nearly drop it again – it's cold as ice. When I lift the lid, the inside of which is marked with runes I can't identify, vials of gold-swirled blood greet me. Scowling, I take one out and turn it in my hand. This should be great – with bindweed in her system, for the first time, I can drink this without having to worry about giving her power over me. Yet somehow, I only feel like crying.

Dante doesn't care about the dried flowers she keeps in her books, or the cassettes, the photos, the way she pretends she's not laughing when I say something stupid, or the way she smiles when Mel yells in delight as she speeds off. I watch the gold undulate through the red. To him, this is all she is.

To me, she's everything.

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I nearly drop the vial when I realise what that means. I don't bother putting the floorboards back or unrolling the carpet. Instead, I fly down the stairs barefoot, the letter in one hand and the box of blood in the other. Ibrahim isn't there but Mel and one of the witches are sitting in the dining room over a map of the city, parts of which are marked with red sharpie.

"I know how to find her!"

Mel, who is balancing her chair on its back legs, nearly drops to the floor. The other woman gently places her sharpie down and gives me an expectant look.

I plop the box down on the table and pop out each vial one by one. "Are you ready to go right now?"

Mel raises an eyebrow. "Uh... yeah. Let me text Ibrahim."

When I pop the stopper off the first vial, the witch raises her eyebrows. "You're going to drink that?"

"Yeah." I try to take a deep breath to slow down my heart.

"It won't work, dear. Bindweed affects blood magic the same it does all others."

"Ok but there are exceptions, right?"

She tilts her head from side to side, "I suppose. Are you planning to summon Halley's Comet?"

Mel looks back and forth between the two of us. “So, do we have a way to find her or not?”

“Just trust me,” I say. Perhaps believing this will work is just hubris. But I know how I feel, even if it’s taken me this long to realize. All that matters now is that she feels the same way.

Mel shrugs and the witch looks doubtful.

I turn away from them as I drink the vials one by one, hesitating at first but then knocking each one back faster than the one before it. If this really works, I’m handing her the keys to my body again but voluntarily this time. She said she would never make me do anything I didn’t want to – I need to trust her now. Because I’m not really an expert on magic, I drink the whole lot just in case.

My senses sharpen as they usually do, the rush of power pulsing through my veins with vigor. I wait for a few seconds, trying to sense if I can feel anything different. But I feel just how I usually feel after drinking her blood – awake, energized, powerful. I pull back one of the chairs and sit down on it, resting my head on my arms.

“What happens now?”

“Shut up, Mel.” I close my eyes and cycle through my senses again. It’s cold inside Celeste’s house because nobody can get the fire going but her. Outside, I can hear the occasional car driving by in the distance. I’ve shamelessly changed into one of Celeste’s jumpers which smells sweet and powdery and like home. Come on, I think. Come on. Where are you? Remembering how she found me after Alastor’s attack, I conjure her in my mind. Except this time, I also let myself feel – how much I love her stupid nickname for me, how I should be annoyed when she orders me around but I’m not, how good it feels to give myself to her fully. I love you, I think. I

love you, I love you, I love you. Let me find you.

Suddenly, I can feel a sense of cold trickle through the back of my head, like someone is pouring icewater into my skull. Goosebumps cascade down my back. There's a tug on my mind, as though I'm being pulled backwards into my head, the cold creeping through my limbs. Not my limbs, I think with a sudden fright. Slowly, from my fingertips backward, it feels as though my body is a stranger's. I no longer recognize it. I fight back instinctively as it begins to move, holding a stranger's breath, taking on a stranger's posture. Suddenly I feel that I'm not ready but can't stop it. Panic rises in my stomach. I can't move. Why can't I move?

My body convulses and I can see Mel trying to steady me, though I can't hear what she's saying. I want to scream. This is what dying felt like. This is what being pressed into the mattress at the Myrrh & Adder felt like. I can kick and scream and fight and plead and it makes no difference. I'm no longer in control. In my panic, I forget where I am or what is happening. I want my body back, please, I want it back!

And then, my body just sits there, a little more upright than usual perhaps. Waiting. The cold spreads, undulates, prickles against my skin. It's the familiarity of it that seeps through my sense of panic. It doesn't seize me and tear control away, it just lingers, soothing and gentle. I recognize her in the way she sits so very upright, the way she tilts my head, the slow and thoughtful way she narrows my eyes. Celeste.

Slowly, I move my hand, balling it into a fist and letting go. This is still my body, I try to tell myself. I'm not in danger.

There's another tug on my mind, like the pull of sleep. Soft and gentle. I try to calm myself. It's her. That's why I'm doing this. And, most importantly, it worked. My heart flutters as I realize what that means. With a sort-of mental sigh, I give in to the tug, letting my body slip away. I trust you.

The next moment, I'm no longer sitting on one of the chairs but standing beside the table, holding a sharpie in my hand, which is hovering somewhere over Hel. I feel strangely dazed, like I've been asleep. When I look up, Mel is staring, mouth agape. The witch, too, is looking rather surprised.

I blink, trying to clear my head. "Did... did it work?"

Mel seizes my shoulders, forgetting about the burns for a moment. I flinch.

"Yes! You channeled her or something!" She looks at the witch. "How about that, can someone be a witch and a vampire?"

The woman shakes her head, a smile on her lips. "No, that's not what happened. This was Celeste's blood magic."

The siren narrows her eyes. "I thought that wouldn't work because of the bindweed?"

With a smile, the witch taps the table in front of me. "We've never had an opportunity to test them but I suppose there is proof now that at least one of the exceptions works."

I look down at the table. A long trailing hand has written straight on the wood with red sharpie.

I love you – C

Mel looks over my shoulder to read the words. “Which exception?”

“True love,” I say, smiling to myself despite knowing I look like a fool.

“What?” Mel makes a face. “Ew!”

I roll my eyes but can’t help laughing. Despite everything that’s happened, I don’t think I’ve ever seen Mel be completely serious.

She leans over the map, pointing at the newly added circle in Hel. “So this is where she is?”

“I guess if that’s what she said.”

Mel claps her hands. “Alright then! Let’s blow some shit up.” She pulls out her phone. “Let me just make a few phonecalls.”

Still dazed, I try to settle back into my body. “Ok.”

She steps out into the hallway, opens the wardrobe and grabs handfuls of Celeste’s expensive coats, pulling them out and throwing them aside thoughtlessly, all the while whistling a familiar melody. She tears out the back wall of the wardrobe, revealing a collection of firearms behind it.

She takes two of the guns out, singing, “Deni and Celeste, sitting in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-

N-G,” into her phone, which is pinned between her shoulder and ear.

Pausing, she takes her phone in her hand. “Ibrahim! How fast can you be in Hel?”

We’re less than two hours away from sunrise when we leave but despite Mel’s repeated insistence, I refuse to stay at home. My heart feels like it’s beating out of my chest. I need to make sure that Celeste is alright – though judging from Mel’s mood, we’re saving Celeste only to then die in a road-rage-induced car crash immediately after.

I hang onto the doorhandle while holding my breath as Mel turns through an intersection at neck-breaking speed, ignoring the red light.

“So you really love her, huh?”

I peer over at Mel, trying to read her expression. Somehow, I’m not sure if the sentence is meant to sound like a threat. “Yeah,” I confess, squirming in my seat. It’s one thing to admit it to myself and another to say it out loud.

“Hmm.” Mel tenses her jaw as she overtakes someone through a solid yellow line. “You know she’s been through a lot, right?”

Not sure where this is going, I cross my arms in front of my chest. “Of course, I know that.”

“I say this as her best friend... she’s going to struggle after this.” She raises her middle finger to the passenger window as we pass the other car. “Even if she’s very good at pretending she’s not. Trauma like this takes a long time to heal from. You need to give her time.”

Nervous, I rub my sweaty palms on my jeans. “I can do that.”

“And give yourself time, too.”

I slide down in my seat. “So when did you get board certified?”

She glances over at me suspiciously. “What?”

“As a therapist?”

“Oh, fuck you!” She laughs. “I’m just trying to be a good friend.”

“No, no, I thought it was good. Very professional.”

“I know right?” She accelerates so fast, I have to push my feet into the floor in front of my seat. “I give great advice.”

After getting this out of the way, there’s not much more to talk about and we both sit in tense anticipation for the rest of the drive. I can see in Mel’s face that she’s just as scared about what we might find as me. By the time we pull up one block away from the ugly, brutalist apartment complex we’re looking for, I feel like my nerves might make me throw up.

Just after we get out of the car, Ibrahim appears from a sidestreet, walking with brisk steps. His face is grave. “She’s inside?”

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Mel hands him one of the weapons but he holds up his hand, shaking his head. “This is the building Celeste circled on the map,” she explains.

“Are we sure we can do this with just the three of us?” I ask. “What if there’s a whole vampire army in there?”

Mel shakes her head. “There are guards outside but she said it’s just the two of them in the building.”

I narrow my eyes as we walk up the street toward the building, trying to work out why Dante would be hiding out here. “After everything he’s done to get to her, wouldn’t he keep her somewhere more... protected?”

Ibrahim slows to a stop. “Something’s wrong.”

Mel raises an eyebrow. “Something other than the fact he’s a coward and a piece of—”

“Yes,” Ibrahim interrupts. “Can’t you feel it? It’s like the air is buzzing with power.”

Mel waves her hand and urges us onward. “I’m a hard facts person, not so much into the witchy vibes.”

Sighing, Ibrahim says, “Just be careful.”

The building itself is abandoned, its bottom floor fenced in with tall wire fencing, the bottom windows and doors boarded shut. Graffiti has been sprayed across most of the concrete. It looks like the windows on the above floors have been smashed. There is

no sign of any guards when we push through a hole in the fence.

Nervous, I throw a glance at the sky, which is beginning to veer from black into purple. We split up and investigate the parking lot, then check all the entrances. Nobody meets us.

The entrance is simply open. It's a trap, it has to be. My heart stumbles. Were we wrong? Maybe he forced her to trick us. But how could he?

Before we can talk about what we should do in the face of this, I hear an angry shout dulled by concrete and... something else? It does not echo the way you would expect in an abandoned building. Signalling to the others that I hear something, I move towards the voice, slowly making my way through the rubble until I find the stairs. From the bottles and trash lying around it looks like someone might have set up camp in here but they're long gone by now.

We make it up one floor, then another. The voice still occasionally sounds out, clearer now. I recognize it. My stomach lurches. Why is Dante shouting?

Two more floors and the others can hear him, too. We exchange glances.

"Same plan?" I mouth in my most quiet whisper.

Mel nods.

Slowly, we climb up and up further. Up here, one side of the building seems to remain unfinished, the eastern wall having been replaced with scaffolding and thick plastic tarps. A cool breeze shifts them, revealing parts of the ever lightening sky. We need to hurry. I nearly trip, I'm so focussed on listening for the voice. Looking down, I notice my foot has caught a snakelike piece of rubble across my path. Surprised, I bend to inspect it. A root.

Ibrahim signals towards it and touches his chest.

The source of the power he felt?

“Goddammit Celeste!” I hear Dante. His voice sounds hoarse and viciously angry.

Ibrahim holds Mel back, who has unintentionally shot forward. They must be right above us.

Someone speaks quietly and I don’t catch what he’s saying.

“I don’t care if you have to set the building on fire!” Dante shouts back. “Just get heroutof there!”

I look up the last set of stairs and notice more roots cracking through the drywall in places, their thick wood snaking along the ground and winding around the scaffolding outside.

We creep up the steps noiselessly, holding our breaths. One set of stairs, then we turn a corner to the second. More roots are creeping over the floor and cascade down the stairs as we ascend.

The scene we walk in on is so bizarre, for a moment I wonder if I’m dreaming all of this up. The floor we enter is almost entirely empty save for some rubble and a group of six vampires, one of which is Dante. All of them stand facing... what? It’s difficult to comprehend what I’m seeing.

The center of the room seems to be taken up by the trunk of a giganting tree. On closer inspection, it turns out not be made of solid wood but rather hundreds or even thousands of thick, brown vines winding over and around each other. Green, arrow-shaped leaves have burst forth from them in places, partitularly towards the side of

the building that's missing its walls. White, trumpet shaped flowers dot the strange growth all around. Everyone but Dante is working away at trying to destroy it, hacking with axes or cutting with lopping shears.

"You're going to regret this when we get you out of there," Dante hisses in the direction of the plant.

I grab Ibrahim's arm. "Bindweed!"

Dante turns on his heels.

Fuck.

He lights up when he sees me, his expression turning impish. “Deni! What a delight.”

Even though I’m not looking at her, I can feel Mel’s gaze on me and I know she wants to strangle me.

Hoping that we’re all having the same thought, I raise my hands to my ears and plug them with my fingers. Despite this, Mel’s scream nearly knocks me off my feet anyway. Pain shoots through my head, my vision going dark. For a moment, it’s as if my mind shatters. I forget who I am or where or why, unable to focus on anything but the most horrendous sound I’ve ever heard, like the cries of everyone who has ever suffered all turning into one cacophony of terror.

When I come to, my ears are still ringing. Only then do I notice that I’ve fallen, crumpled up two steps from the top of the stairs. Ibrahim is already moving, his body even larger than I remember it, grabbing the first vampire by his shirt. Flames burst forth from his hands, enveloping the vampire. The others have been thrown back, not only by Mel’s scream but, as I notice now, by her machine pistol, the barrel of which is smoking lightly.

Still recovering, I look around the room. Where is he?

My question is answered the very next moment when something fast tackles me into the stairwell. The bones in my back crack as I hit the wall. I can feel the panic rising

in me as he holds me down but this time, I have no reason to hold back. My mind goes blank, my body tense like a drawn bow. The only thing left when I give myself over to the vampire is the desire to kill, because no matter how corrupt, even this part of me loves Celeste.

I tear into him with my teeth and my nails, twisting like a cat to slip out beneath him. I yank him off his feet and we fall onto the stairs. The next moment, he throws me into the wall, my back hitting the metal handrail. With an angry growl, I grab onto the railing and tear part of it free.

He yelps as I stab it through his stomach and stumbles back. It's not wood and therefore can't kill him but I wouldn't mind driving it into his heart anyway. Using the wall behind me to push off, I launch after him. We roll over the floor, growling and hissing like animals.

By now, the sun has come up and my skin hisses every time I pass through one of the lone sunrays dappling the dusty floor. The heat of the daylight is gruesome – it's too bright in here. As we fight, I can hear the occasional rattle of Mel's gun or the sound of a scream as one of the vampires is hurled out of the building and into the sunlight.

Dante manages to throw me off and kicks me hard enough to send me flying back. Turning, he sets himself a new target, his face mad with rage. He reaches Mel before I can catch up with him.

Another one of the vampires tackles me from the side, stopping me from interfering. He's the only one left beside Dante. Ibrahim stands there looking between us, unable to use his fire for fear of burning me or Mel.

Dante kicks Mel hard in the stomach and yanks the gun from her grip. I wrestle the vampire holding me down until I can slip from his grip, launching toward Dante. Behind me, the man screams as Ibrahim turns his flaming hands on him.

I skid to a halt. Dante has managed to grab on to Mel, wrapping his arm around her from behind and holding the gun to her head. He grins at me. “Fun’s over, kid.”

Ibrahim raises his hands in a show of peace. “What do you want?”

“Ah, fuck that,” Mel swears, looking at him. “Don’t negotiate with terrorists!”

Dante shoves the gun into her temple. “Shut up!”

For perhaps the first time in her life, Mel does as she’s told, though she does not spare us an eyeroll.

Dante lets go of her and steps back, still holding the gun pressed firmly to her head. “I want you to leave.” He circles around Mel, eyes trained on me. “And I want you to get the hell out of this city and never come back.”

I growl, watching his steps. “I’m not going anywhere without Celeste.”

He opens his mouth to reply but never does. One of his feet catches on a root – to my vampire eyes it almost looks like the root reached up to grab him – and as he catches his balance, for just a second, lets the gun’s barrel slip from Mel’s head.

It wouldn’t be enough time to act for a human. But I’m no longer human. I cross the distance between us in the fraction of a second, tackling him. The gun fires and hits the ceiling. Mel ducks, and Ibrahim yells my name.

A moment later, the force of my tackle pushes us through the tarp protecting the building from the elements, launching us into the open air. Sunlight envelops us. I scream as we burst into flame.

I never hit the ground. Before I can even begin my descend, someone grabs a hold of me, someone who seems to have a hundred gentle hands. I watch the flaming Dante descend into the parking lot as I am pulled back into the building, shielded from the sun, enveloped. It takes me a moment to realize that it's the vines that have caught me. Like tendrils, they wrap themselves around me, not only pulling me back into the building but into its centre, where they form a solid column. My skin is blistered and cracked where it wasn't covered with clothing but despite the pain, the damage doesn't reach nearly as deep as last time.

Despite a strong sense of claustrophobia, I let the vines wrap themselves around me, embedding me into their structure. They brush my skin and weave through my hair as I get pulled deeper and deeper.

Eventually, my fingers brush skin. I reach out, the vines giving way to me, reaching for her body with my hands. We find each other in the mess of the vines, pulling until nothing remains between us, my arms around her neck, her arms around my waist. Through the green I can see a mess of red hair and then her face is buried against my neck.

"You came," she says quietly. "I didn't know if I deserved saving."

"Of course I came," I reply. "I love you."

“I love you.”

22. EPILOGUE

“I will actually get a real bed at some point,” Mav says as we sink down into his new-but-used foldout couch.

We touch our papercups with celebratory healthy B-negative blood together, though rather than a satisfying clink we only get a noiseless squish.

“Congratulations,” I say, probably for the fiftieth time. “I’m so proud of you!” Pointing at the sexy firemen calendar he’s hung up on one of the walls, I add, “You’ve really got your life together now.”

He laughs and shakes his head. There isn’t much other furniture in his new room besides a clothing rack and a table whose particle-board top has gotten wet at some point and begun swelling up at the corners. Despite this, the room has an air of hopeful cheer to it that Pavel’s apartment was distinctly lacking in.

“Well,” he shrugs, “It’s not quite living in a mansion with my sugar mommy but to each their own, I guess.”

I slap him on the arm. “It’s not a mansion, it’s just areallybig house!”

The mention of Celeste dampens the mood just a little.

“How are you doing on the mental health front, by the way?” I ask a little more

quietly.

“I don’t hear voices now, most of the time.”

I frown.

“Oh, I’m just kidding.” He sighs. “I don’t know how to put it. It’s really hard but I’m getting better. Like when a broken bone has grown together all crooked so it needs to be re-broken to heal properly.”

“Ew. Is that a thing?”

He rolls his eyes. “Yeah, dummy, doctors do it all the time.”

“Still, I just wish you hadn’t gotten caught up in this mess.”

He shrugs. “It’s alright. It kind of felt like...” For a moment, he looks at his hands, tilting his head. “It felt like I had something like that coming for a long time, you know? If she hadn’t pushed me over the edge, something else would have.”

Though I’m not sure I agree with his assessment, I nod along. When it comes to Mav having his psychotic episode, we figured out it had something to do with the combination of smoking Ghostshade and being controlled by blood magic. And though it makes sense – if your mind is already untethered from your body, it is that much easier to accidentally displace with magic – I still think the fault can be attributed solely to Celeste. Not that she hasn’t been suffering with the full effects of her guilt since her withdrawal.

“And you’re sure it’s ok if she comes by? I think she’ll be here soon but I can still tell her it’s a bad time.”

He grins widely and nods. “I’ve figured out that the more guilty I make her feel, the better her gifts get, and I really laid it on thick last time she was at the bar.”

I roll my eyes. Mav’s job at the [witch bar] means the two of them awkwardly cross paths at least every couple of weeks – Celeste still struggles to be around that much Ghostshade so despite Mel’s protests we spend a lot more time at home than going out – but at least when she’s there, most of the patrons don’t have the nerve to curse out Mav for being a vampire.

“You realize this is my girlfriend we’re talking about, though?” I ask.

He laughs. “Yeah, right. More like your handler. I’m surprised she doesn’t keep you on a leash, to be honest.”

Setting my teeth, I cross my arms. Not in public, at least.

When he sees my face, he puts his hand on my arm. “I’m happy for you two, really. There was a moment there when I thought the two of us were beyond redemption.”

Gesturing around the room, I say, “And look at us now!” I point at a small cactus he has on his table. “You’re going to kill your first plant and everything!”

He pouts. “I’m good at taking care of things, it might survive.”

“Not good enough to remember that plants need sunlight.”

“Oh.”

A clattering noise outside of the window gets our attention and we both stand on the lounge to look out into the street. Celeste’s car has pulled up on the curb followed by a white moving van.

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Mav grabs my arm. “I told her the foldout smells a little like old cheese!”

“Mav! You’re taking advantage!”

A few moments later, the doorbell rings.

“It’s for me!” Mav shouts as he leaps out of the room. We pass two of his housemates who are cooking something that smells a lot like instant ramen in the kitchen.

I elbow Mav out of the way to be the first to pick up the intercom. “Hello!”

Her voice still makes my stomach go all tingly every time. “Hey, kitten. I brought Mav some housewarming gifts.”

When she comes up to the second floor followed by a parade of minotaurs carrying unwieldy boxes, I can tell even Mav knows he’s overdone it this time. We settle in the shared living room, the lounge of which smells just as much like old cheese as Mav’s, while the moving crew assemble Mav’s new furniture in his room.

“I had some nicer pieces picked out,” Celeste says apologetically, “But I had to settle for things that disassemble because of how narrow the stairwell is.”

Mav bites his lip. “You really didn’t have to.”

She waves her hand dismissively. “You should be comfortable in your own home.”

The wait becomes a little awkward after as we don’t have much to talk about, and

though I'd be perfectly happy just watching Celeste be pretty for a while, I'm relieved when one of Mav's new housemates offers us all a hit of his bong – ordinary weed, not Ghostshade – and goes on a convoluted but extensive Marxist rant.

Celeste, ever the socialite, makes some highly intellectual sounding remarks that neither agree nor disagree with his argument, while Mav and I throw each other 'what the heck is going on'-glances.

Finally, the crew is finished and we manage to escape the conversation before it can get any more political. Mav gapes when we enter his room – there is a king-sized bed, a fluffy rug, a wall-to-wall closet with mirrored doors, a flatscreen TV on its own stand, and she even got a throw for the stinky old foldout.

"It's too much!" Mav says in a tone that says that he loves it and it's absolutely not too much.

Celeste reaches into a cardboard box the movers left on Mav's table. "There are a few things in here just to brighten it up but I wanted to give you this myself."

She holds out a large box so pedantically wrapped in colorful paper that I know she wrapped it herself. Now Mav really looks like he feels bad, though his expression quickly turns to delight when he opens the present.

He sets the package down carefully before leaping around Celeste's neck. "Thank you!"

She stiffens and awkwardly pats his back, though I can see in the slight curl of her lips that she's pleased with herself.

I peer at the box – a special edition Pikachu Nintendo 64 still in its original packaging.[Not bad for someone who thinks her WiFi not working means the whole

internet has shut down.]

Letting go and stifling his excitement, Mav says, “Sorry, I forgot you don’t really do hugs.”

“It’s fine.” She clears her throat. “That said, my therapist says I need to work on my guilt, so uh... this is probably the last of the remorse gifts.” I can see her struggle to stop herself from saying it but then she adds, “Unless you need anything urgently for survival?”

“Well—”

I shoot Mav a warning glance.

“No! You’ve done more than enough,” he concedes.

”

She opens her eyes, brilliantly blue. “Hmm?”

“How long did you suspect that it was Dante who was behind the witch blood?”

“I know from the moment I found out it was happening again.” She shakes her head.

“Mel thought I was crazy.”

“That must have been terrifying.”

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She shrugs. “I certainly wasn’t happy.” I can practically watch the wall around her go back up. But that’s ok – we’ve got a long way to go together.

She sighs, gesturing out over the garden. “I should get to work. There’s a lot to do.”

I narrow my eyes. From the moment I stepped outside, I’ve noticed a pile of garden tools lying ominously on her potting bench. “Tell me this wasn’t all a long preamble to revealing that I’m not only your maidservant but also your gardener now.”

She scoffs. “My maidservant? I’ve watched one of your shirts gather dust next to my bathtub for a week. You’re the least tidy person I’ve ever met.”

“That’s not why I said that.”

Realization crosses her face. “Oh, you mean because I make you bring me drinks and be my footstool when I’ve had a long day.” She inspects the hand rake she just picked up. “Maybe I could draw inspiration from the garden...”

I quickly take the rake from her hand. “Where do you want me to start?”

She smiles wryly. “The weeds in the strawberry patch.” Kissing my cheek, she adds, “Please.”