



Blood & Ice (Princess Procedural #3/Haven Hollow #41)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Taliyah:

The last person I expect to ask me a favor is the headmistress of Blood Rose Academy, Aurea Grimsbane.

But when she tells me her daughter, Vivian, has been brutally murdered, I can guess what's coming next...

Yep, Aurea wants me to figure out what happened to Vivian. Of course, my first answer is a resounding 'no' because I want nothing to do with that backstabbing witch.

But when she threatens the safety of my family, claiming she's stolen a bone dagger from the would-be Queen of Winter, Janara, my ears perk up.

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Blood and Ice

“Hurry up, Tally,” Maverick urged, his voice coming in heaving gasps that rattled the phone speaker.

He was running from something big and, from the sound of things, it was gaining on him. “The werewolf has an accomplice, and I think that accomplice has tentacles.”

“Stay away from schoolgirls and you should be fine,” I quipped, clipping some of the potions he’d made for me onto my duty belt. I still preferred my gun in a tight situation, but for most threats, a potion would be fine.

“You think you’re funny. Just wait until you have to share me with a tentacle monster named Greg. That’s not the threesome any man signs up for.”

I’d just bent to tie my shoelaces and pulled them tighter than I meant to. I always wore my snow boots out into the field with Maverick. Sooner or later, we’d find ourselves up to our calves in snow when I overdid it with my power. It was happening more and more these days as the mantle of ‘Winter Princess’ really settled onto my shoulders. My faerie mentor, Bea, belonged to a different court and could only theorize why it was happening. To her knowledge, no monarch had ever resisted their power, and the longer I went without fulfilling my role, the worse the outbursts were going to get. So that meant I had to remain level-headed and calm.

Which was really hard to do when your husband was implying that he wanted to have sex with someone else. Even if that someone else was a tentacle monster, he’d named ‘Greg’.

No, that wasn't exactly what he'd said, but my stupid girly feelings were smarting, anyway. Maverick was only my husband on a technicality, and that had been by my choice. At the time, the thought of being wiped clean from existence had been more terrifying than commitment. Now the lack of certainty between the two of us was killing me. Our arrangement was casual by design, but my feelings for Maverick were anything but. Because our marriage was in name only, he could technically see other people and I wasn't allowed to bitch about it. But oh boy would I.

"I don't really give a damn what kinds of threesomes you're into, Mav," I responded, trying to rein in the unreasonable flush of temper rising up in me. And failed utterly. My words were so brittle, they would have shattered into a million pieces if dropped. "Just keep them busy. I'll be there in ten minutes or less."

Then I hung up before he could say anything further. Petty? Yes. Satisfying? Also yes. With the sort of monsters around here, I rarely got to have the last word on anything. Between Maverick's freaky blood warlock powers and his street smarts, I knew he'd pull through. Not even a substance-abusing shifter would be able to keep that man down for long. I'd feel guilty about cutting him off later, but right now, it came with a sick sense of satisfaction.

A soft cough drifted from the boys' open door, shaking me out of my spiteful thoughts (which were actually pretty ridiculous) and back to my guilty reality. Sean and Charlie had brought a bug home from school. The socially conditioned part of me flinched at the thought of leaving my kids alone to suffer without me. My logical half argued that Darla and Cain were just as capable of giving them medicine and checking their temperatures as I was. The ghost flapper certainly wasn't capable of the kind of violence I was and wouldn't fare half as well against a werewolf. We all had our roles to play and on nights like this one, kicking ass was mine.

"It's a cold, Tally," I muttered under my breath, tightening the laces on the right boot mechanically. "Just a cold. You can't magic away a virus. Chill out and focus on the

job.”

Well, for all I knew, I could magic away the virus. I’d barely scratched the surface of what I was capable of. The faeries seemed eternally young, and only part of that was genetics. Magic had to be involved if you were living centuries or millennia. If I’d let the change happen, Olwen, Princess of Winter would probably know how to purge sickness from a human body. But I’d stopped Olwen from coming fully into being, which meant I had the power but was missing the instruction manual most of the time.

I strained my ears, my heart settling into a less painful rhythm when there wasn’t another string of labored coughing. I resisted the urge to peek, just to be sure the boys were doing okay. If I went inside, I’d want to snuggle with them and there were monsters out there who needed an object lesson in pain.

“Besides,” I said to myself. “It’s not like it’s a big deal. Everyone else is coming down with it, too.”

Poppy, Finn, and Andre had come down with the exact same thing a week ago, and a few witches in my social circle were fighting it off. If I had to guess, the germ had started at Haven Hollow’s only school and spiraled outward from there. Still, the suspicion lingered. The last time I’d put everything down to an ordinary phenomenon, it had royally bitten me on the ass.

And that was the trouble with being a faerie princess. It wasn’t paranoia if people really were trying to kill you. There’d been a number of attempts on my life already, and Janara’s people weren’t above coming at me through my children. The fact that others in the Hollow had the malady made me almost certain the germ was irritating but benign, but until I could confirm that for sure with the spell slingers I trusted, I wouldn’t take it for granted.

Only the charms scattered around their rooms by their babysitter Chloe made me feel better. Chloe was a changeling, which I used to believe was the name for the product between humans and faeries. Apparently, it could apply to the human children the fae stole, too. It wasn't common in this day and age, but sometimes kids were still taken by the faeries. It had made Chloe cautious as an adult. She'd taken down any faerie traps that might directly affect me, but left enough up to make us both feel safe. She was visiting friends in Washington at the moment, so I had to consult my emergency list for a babysitter.

Darla, and more importantly Cain, had already agreed to watch the boys. So why did anxiety have my stomach stuck on the spin cycle? A sourceless fear had settled on the back of my neck like an itch I couldn't scratch for days now. It wasn't the job. I had that handled. So what was freaking me out so badly?

Oh, yeah, it was the big 'L' word. I'd nearly let it slip out the other day with Maverick, and it had weighed on my mind ever since. The word had been there on the tip of my tongue as though it had any right to be spoken. And it didn't have a right. The last time I'd said that word to anyone in a romantic context and meant it, well, that had been a recipe for heartbreak. So, yeah, I wasn't saying it until he did. And I was pretty sure Maverick never would.

"Very mature," I mumbled. "At this rate, you'll get to third base before you hit the century mark."

And I would hit the century mark sooner than I wanted to think about. Now that I'd transitioned fully into my high Sidhe self, my lifespan was potentially limitless. I'd die if someone stuck a saber through my heart, but anything shy of a kill shot would heal. That meant I only had a handful of decades left with most of the people I cared about. Charlie and Sean had their whole lives ahead of them. Sixty or seventy more years, if everything went right. And then they'd be gone and... I'd still be here. Alone.

No, not alone. I'd still have Maverick. If he wasn't too busy banging it out with someone else, of course. That had been the problem in my last marriage, too.

"Existential crisis later," I chided myself, standing when the front door shook under someone's fist. The blows were heavy, so I was guessing Cain had the reins tonight. I wasn't sure what schedule he'd worked out with the ex-ghost turned medium. But when I turned the knob and let my door swing inward, it wasn't a forty-something brunette with a stylish updo. The woman beyond was a brunette, but that was where the similarities ended.

Darla was on the shorter side and utterly dwarfed by my new Sidhe height. This woman could probably have stood nose-to-nose with me if she put on a low heel. She'd made a token attempt to appear presentable by wearing an eggshell white blouse, slacks, and pumps. She'd even put her hair up, unlike the last time I'd seen her when she'd been letting it hang free around her face. Her features were austere, her eyes as cold and hard as agates.

I was tempted to slam the door in her face. The last time I'd been face-to-face with this woman, she'd been threatening my sister-in-law Astrid with expulsion. Where she summoned the audacity to show up in this Hollow after what she'd done, and more importantly failed to do at her school, I'd never know. I wanted to tell her where she could shove whatever favor she'd come to ask of me.

Instead, what I said was, "What can I do for you this evening, Headmistress Grimsbane?"

The headmistress didn't dignify my question with a response. She surged forward, all elbows and knees, pushing her way past the threshold with what strength she possessed. I was sure I was stronger. Hell, I'd probably been physically stronger than Aurea Grimsbane even before my transformation into a faerie princess. She didn't strike me as the type to stoop to physical confrontation often, which meant she'd

hesitate when it came time to throw punches.

Her flurry of limbs did accomplish one thing. She threw me off guard enough to open a gap she could use to worm her way into my house. I was tempted to send her spinning on a sheet of sparkling ice before planting her face-first in a snow drift. It would be oh-so-satisfying to give the headmistress some very literal frosted tips before sending her on her way. And I absolutely would make sure the door hit her on the ass on the way out.

For a moment that felt longer, sending her flying was the only thing I could think about. I knew, somewhere deep in my bones, that I could keep her aloft on a gust of winter wind, tossing her this way and that until she lost her supper or worse. I'd seen winter faeries use that trick before in battle, using the unseasonably cold wind to slam their opponents into the nearest solid object, breaking bones or, in the more gruesome cases, splitting their skulls like overripe fruit.

All I could hear was the howling winter wind in my ears. I'd been having more moments like these of late, especially if I got upset. I had a bad feeling that Olwen was going to have her way with me, whether I liked it or not. I'd made sure she couldn't erase me, but that didn't mean she was gone. If I didn't find a way to reconcile with that part of me, I was going to tear myself apart one of these days.

I sucked in a breath and tried to calm the whipping winds inside me. There were a lot of good reasons not to assault the pushy witch. The Headmistress was queen of all she surveyed at Blood Rose. She was used to going where she wanted because she owned a freaking castle in Europe somewhere and filled it with toadies and lickspittles. The last time someone talked back to her, she'd looked like she was choking on a lemon. It wasn't an excuse, but it was at least an explanation.

The biggest reason not to hogtie the headmistress and deliver her to Maverick for target practice was the consequences that would ensue. I knew witches well enough

to know that they always retaliated. Even if it took a few decades, a witch would always settle the score. The problem was: not all of them were above using a catspaw to hurt you. That meant Astrid would pay the price for my ‘rudeness’ not me. The headmistress’ influence over her wasn’t as strong, now that Astrid was bound for the night class, but it was still her castle. Astrid would be unfairly targeted, and I couldn’t do that to her.

“You know, in polite society, we knock before we enter someone’s house. This is technically trespassing, since I didn’t invite you in. I could arrest you for it.”

Aurea’s gaze swept over what she could see of my home, unperturbed by the threat. She knew as well as I did that it was as empty as the candy wrappers papering the bottom of my car. If I decided to throw down, I could probably win, even against a witch of her age and power, but it wasn’t worth the hassle. I’d wipe out all my reserves over this petty squabble and wouldn’t be able to help Maverick against the (possibly) amorous advances of a tentacle monster. I’d humor her for five minutes, tops, and then I’d kick her ass out. It was more than fair.

“You live in this hovel?” she asked after a moment.

And there went all my goodwill. Not that I’d had a lot in the first place. ‘Quiet and tactful’ were descriptors rarely applied to me. I was proud to be a ball-busting bitch. Any sense of curiosity I’d harbored since Aurea arrived evaporated like morning dew, leaving me grumpier than I’d been before. She could say whatever she liked about me, but she didn’t get to knock my house. It wasn’t impressive by any stretch of the imagination, but it was comfortable, and more importantly, it was mine.

“I make sixty thousand a year,” I said flatly. “In this economy, that barely covers the necessities. Excuse the hell out of me for not hiring an interior designer to spruce up the place.”

Aurea aimed a look of utter scorn down her nose at me. Which was a feat, considering I was taller in my natural faerie form. I'd never been a short woman, and the full transformation had added at least half a foot to my less-than-modest height. Witches just had a talent for swiping all your hard-won confidence and leaving you floundering. Maverick did it too, but he'd never aimed his contempt at me, and I doubted he ever would.

"You are a winter princess."

"So what?"

"So, you have untold riches at your fingertips. You could summon what you require if you accepted the role predestined for you."

"I don't believe in fate, and you're dancing around the subject. You know what I'm going to ask."

Her lips curved into a bitter little smile. "Ah yes, that."

"Uh-huh, that. Mind telling me what the hell that is?"

Aurea cast another glance around the house, eyes narrowing. A moment later her aura breezed past me, her magic questing for any enchantments that could be used to spy on our conversation. Maverick did it enough that I was familiar with the spell, even if this one had a sour flavor to it. She seemed satisfied when she found no active listening spells.

"I suppose your home's protections are... adequate," she said at last. "The warlock put them up for you, I suppose?"

"Some of them," I answered, closing the door behind her. She wasn't leaving, and I'd

only be inviting more guests if I left the door open. If this was my first visitor of the night, I hated to think what might come after.

“Do you always let a man fight your battles for you?” she asked, ambling with no particular urgency toward my kitchen. “Because from what I can tell, he did most of the heavy lifting during the debacle with the vampires.”

My first knee-jerk reaction was to follow up on my original urge and sweep her out of my house with a gust of wind. If I was lucky, she’d ruin her nice clothing in the snow. I’d been through this rigmarole so many times with the cops back in Portland. Most of my team had been good men, but there were always a few sour apples in the bunch. The men whose inflated egos couldn’t stand to see a woman in charge, no matter how capable she might be. They liked to harass me and then call me emotional if I reacted in any way. I’d gotten used to letting things like stupid comments roll off my back.

The insight did tell me something interesting about Aurea, though. Despite what she might project to the public, she was off-footed, unable to maintain her usual careful composure. Antagonizing me wasn’t just about what I’d done at her school. It had roots in something deeper.

“Are you always a bitch when you’re desperate?” I asked, pulling out a chair at the kitchen table. It creaked and wobbled when I sat down. I fought not to frown. What had the boys gotten up to with Uncle Marty this time? And was I going to have to buy an entirely new dining room set because of it? God, I hoped not.

Aurea took her own wobbly seat, scowling at me. She pulled a face and pressed a hand to her chest. “I beg your pardon?”

I rolled my eyes. The fake outrage was going to get old fast. “Just cut the bullshit, Aurea. I don’t have time for it. I’m supposed to be chasing down a werewolf high on

meth and his accomplice, who may or may not have tentacles. The point is: it has the potential to get very messy, very quickly, so I'm going to need you to say your piece and then get the hell out of my house so I can get going."

"You're not very ladylike."

"No one ever accused me of being a lady."

She frowned. "Behaving with decorum is the best way to earn respect. Swearing like a sailor isn't becoming."

"And I don't give a damn," I answered, crossing my arms over my chest. "As I said, get to the point. The preamble really leaves something to be desired."

Aurea's gaze was fixed on a point above my head, unwilling to look me in the eye. I wasn't sure what she expected me to do. There were spells I could theoretically do that would ensnare her mind, but simple eye contact alone wouldn't do the job.

"Very well, if you want me to say it simply, I will... Vivian is dead."

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The admission that her daughter was dead seemed to cost Aurea what little energy had been animating her.

She slumped in her seat, head bowed and hands clenched into bone-white claws on the tabletop. That was why she hadn't looked at me. Not because she was afraid of my power. She was afraid of my judgment. Aurea Grimsbane, headmistress and an allegedly badass head witch was struggling not to cry.

I sat awkwardly in my chair, unsure of how to respond. General human empathy dictated I should do something to comfort her, but I had no idea how it would be received. Aurea was one of the prickliest examples of witchkind I'd ever met. She wouldn't respond well to being pitied. With that in mind, I steepled my fingers on the table and kept my voice neutral when I said, "I'm sorry for your loss."

Her head whipped up, eyes wet and fever-bright. Her mouth twisted into a bestial snarl. "I don't want you to be sorry. I want you to find answers. You and that warlock uncovered a murder plot once, you can do it again."

"I'm not a private investigator for hire," I said. "And I sincerely doubt the case is in my jurisdiction. Even if I could take it, I wouldn't. I have good reasons not to trust you. For all I know, you're making me the fall guy for one of your schemes against the vampires."

Aurea's face didn't fall. If anything, her expression became more resolute, her striking eyes growing colder by the moment. "I thought you might say something like that. That's why I brought a contingency plan."

Aurea reached into her coat and drew out a knife. It was maybe a half second later that I acted on instinct, pushing away from the table in one fluid movement, drawing my gun out of its holster. Drawing on magic would probably have been faster and more effective, but underneath it all I was still a cop at heart. The training was hard to kick, new title, and responsibilities aside. There was a weapon in play, and an expert could get in my guard and really fuck up my night before I could fire a single shot. I'd seen too many men mutilated by knives to be comfortable having one in my vicinity.

Aurea glanced at my service weapon, then up to my face and back with a sneer playing on her lips. "Put that away, girl."

"You first," I said. "Drop yours and I'll holster mine."

Aurea laid the knife on the table without any backtalk. Upon closer inspection, I realized it wasn't the steel blade I'd feared and expected. This one looked to be carved out of bone and had yellowed with age. Someone had done scrimshaw on the surface, etching it with written spellwork. I'd never actively tried to interpret faerie language, and it made my head twinge to interpret the text. The part of me that was Olwen tried to assert itself with a vengeance. I ground the foreign thoughts heartlessly beneath one heel. I was the one in charge here, not some faerie bitch I didn't know and didn't like.

You know, the more reasonable half of me thought. Olwen is you. You are her.

I know, I thought back. And I just so happen to also be a bitch. So shut it.

Flawless logic laid out, I could finally find enough wherewithal to find my voice again. "What is that?"

"Rhursa," Aurea answered, eyes scanning my face expectantly.

The word's meaning materialized in my head without conscious thought. It was the name of a species of wolf hybrid, well-known for the carnage they left in their wake. It roughly translated to 'ravager.'

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?"

Aurea's brow quirked. "You don't know? I would have assumed one of your chums in the Hollow would have informed you already. Perhaps you're not as well-liked as you seem to think."

I ignored the jibe. A year ago, a comment like that might have hurt. I'd never made friends easily and kept most of the ladies from the cocktail club at a distance. A certain amount of dispassion had to be used on the job, and I couldn't afford to grow too attached to any of them. It would cloud my judgment, and in the heat of the moment that could be deadly. There was one person I'd allowed in, and he was waiting for me to get my ass in gear and stop a methed-up wolfman from going on a rampage. If the tentacle monster with it managed to hide out in a nearby lake, I'd have a hell of a time trying to get it back out again.

"This knife was made from the bones of your mother's skull."

"Excuse me... what?" There are comments that are shockers and then those that are real shockers.

Aurea continued like I hadn't stopped her. "Rumor has it Janara removed... or her toady, Wren, removed your mother's head shortly after the palace coup and set beetles on it to eat the flesh. Your mother's blood was fresh at the time Janara anointed the tip of the blade. It's a dangerous magic few dare to perform."

The desire to throw up started somewhere around my toes and rolled up my body in a nauseating wave. I didn't have any fond memories of my birth mother. I didn't have

many memories at all, except the ones passed onto me by Autumn Sidhe sorcerers but still—when someone delivers such information about your mother, even if you never knew her, it still hits.

As to what memories I did have of my fae roots, I liked to call it ‘the archive’. It was all the accumulated knowledge Olwen would need to ascend to the throne and bring peace to the courts. Blood magic was shelved in the furthest bookshelf in the restricted section. The grotesque mental image of Janara decapitating and then desecrating my mother’s corpse was so horrific that I bent double and actually was violently sick.

It didn’t matter that I hadn’t known my biological mother. What Wren had done was disgusting. She’d performed the spell on Janara’s orders. And here I thought my aunt couldn’t stoop any lower. It just went to show that you should never underestimate people or faeries.

Aurea waited patiently for me to recover. She didn’t flinch when I turned my streaming glower on her. There was a split second where I thought I saw pity in her gaze. Then I blinked and it was gone.

“I don’t do this out of malice,” Aurea said.

“Bullshit,” I said, straightening up, using the sleeve of my coat to wipe the sick off my face. It would wash off the leather, and it was a small price to pay to retain a modicum of dignity. Hard to be menacing when you had a chunk of half-digested pizza on your chin. As to the rest of the mess on the floor, I’d let it sit there and hopefully it would make Aurea uncomfortable—she deserved as much for hitting me over the head with this information like she just had.

“This is business,” she insisted. “If I thought Vivian’s murder had happened in-house, I would solve this without involving you. But she was murdered and it wasn’t in-

house, Chief Morgan.”

“Do you have any ideas who did it?”

“I have a suspect in Portland... whom I cannot approach without conflict.”

“And?”

“And you were once an officer of the law there. So, I need you to follow a paper trail for me. And I need you to visit or stakeout the address I was able to scry.”

“Considering this is completely out of my jurisdiction, why in the world would I take this case on?” I demanded, narrowing my eyes at her. “As I said before—I’m not a detective for hire.”

Aurea looked at me and quirked an already arched brow even higher. “I need you on the case.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Maybe this will—if you succeed in solving the murder, I hand this dagger over and you can destroy it before Janara realizes I had it stolen from her vault.”

I stared at her. Did she have a death wish? Or was she confident that I would defend her against my Aunt Janara on principle? Normally, I would do exactly that, no matter how much I personally disliked Aurea. But that had been before she invaded my house and threatened me with a knife made from bits of my mother’s corpse.

“When she finds out what you did, she’ll kill you,” I said.

“I know. I don’t care.”

“Why me?” I demanded, gripping the table’s edge so hard it cracked.

“Because I believe Blood Rose is in danger.”

“You have a way of avoiding direct questions.”

She swallowed hard. “Your interference in my affairs saved lives and I recognize that your... skills are exactly what I need.” It seemed to pain her to say as much. “I need your help, and I’m willing to force your hand to get it.”

“Who says I give a shit about that knife? If anything, it’s disgusting and I don’t want it anywhere near me.”

She shook her head. “This dagger is designed to kill you. Not just that, but it curses those you call your family for the rest of their natural lives. It won’t kill them, but it will certainly make them miserable. I’m sure you’d want to avoid that fate for your children.”

My vision went white with rage. The bitch wasn’t content with threatening my life. She was ready to damn my kids for her vendetta, too. When I could see again, I found the table coated in a thick frost. Aurea glittered like fresh snow, coated in a thin layer of the stuff as well. When I spoke again, I realized I was only a few inches from her nose, spitting my rage right into her face.

“I’ll kill you,” I hissed. “I swear to fucking God that if you hurt my kids, you will not have long to regret it.”

Aurea stood, reducing the frost to tepid rain with a muttered spell. She wrung herself out calmly before pocketing the knife. Then she turned on one heel and marched for the door. “I’ll have a courier deliver the relevant case files,” she said mildly before she turned back to face me once more. “I want this kept between us. Bring in the

warlock if you have to, but no one else. This can't get out... for obvious reasons."

She turned the corner and made a beeline for my bathroom. By the time I caught up with her, the only evidence she'd been inside my house was a slight ripple in the full-length mirror.

I didn't give a damn about bad luck. I ripped the mirror from the wall and smashed the glass into a million glittering shards with an incoherent sound of rage. By the time I was through, the floor was a mess of silver shards and sluices of blood.

Aurea Grimsbane was going to pay for this. I didn't know when or how, but she'd get what was due her. She'd crossed a line and there was no going back.

But for now, I had a werewolf to catch.

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Maverick

“And there’s a dent in my fucking car,” Taliyah muttered under her breath. “That’s just perfect. As if there isn’t already enough to deal with.”

We’d been fighting a werewolf and an amphibious water monster for the better part of the night, speeding down highways with the lights and sirens blaring, sometimes taking the cruiser off-roading to follow one or both through fields if the terrain allowed. Even after the pair had been successfully apprehended, there was still the problem of loading them up and transporting them to the precinct. The tentacle monster was a lost cause and had to be transported across the country to Jinx Junction, where he could be properly processed and booked.

The werewolf, however, was fair game, and Tally had slammed him into the hood with enough force to leave an impression of his head in the metal. Technically, the dent was her fault, but no force on the planet would compel me to say as much within earshot of her. The next person to piss her off was going to be freeze-dried, packaged, and put in the ground without question.

I sank a little lower into my seat, running over our last conversation, trying to figure out what I’d done to earn this amount of ire. Something was clearly bothering her, and when it came to women, I was usually the common denominator in that equation. We’d been ribbing each other, as usual, when she’d suddenly turned cold and hung up without warning. I couldn’t puzzle out which part of the conversation had set her off.

I opened my mouth to ask and shut it just as quickly. No. Down that path lay disaster.

If I confronted her about it now, she'd get defensive or hostile, and I didn't want that. Tally was only the second good thing in my life to last, and I didn't want to add her name to my depressingly long list of failed relationships. Time was the key. If I gave her time, she'd have to calm down eventually and then I could apologize for whatever boneheaded stunt I'd pulled.

Taliyah pulled to an abrupt halt in front of the Haven Hollow police department. From the outside, it just looked like a small, bland office building. Unbeknownst to anyone but the pair of us, it had several cells built into a new addition, all equipped to handle monsters. I'd magicked the entrance to that particular part of the building so those not in the know wouldn't take any notice of it.

Taliyah didn't even glance my way before she stepped out of the car and stalked to the back, a permafrost hex arcing like lightning between her fingers. Touching the wolf with that lightning would be a hell of a lot more painful than being tased, and he knew it. The wolf stayed still as she booked him and even whimpered in fright when she frog-marched him toward the cells. I didn't follow her. Crowding her elbows while she tried to do her job was going to earn me a scathing lecture at best and a soul-crushing diatribe at worst. Taliyah was a big girl who didn't need my supervision, no matter how much I wanted to offer it.

I was debating on whether to bid her farewell, step out, and slink to my car to overthink things when it happened. It wasn't loud, but I was so attuned to the cadence of her breath and the inflection of her voice that I caught the hiss of discomfort. I'd almost completed the full circuit back to the holding cells before my body checked in with my brain. On this, though, we were in agreement: I wasn't leaving if she was hurt. Proud as Tally was, she'd probably been banged up in the fight and refused to let it show.

I rounded the corner, expecting to find her bent over with bruised ribs or cradling a compound fracture. The running leap she'd taken off an oak branch had been awe-

inspiring to watch. The fall she'd taken after a tentacle whipped into her mid-air, much less so. I thought I'd been able to cushion her fall enough to avoid catastrophic injury, but I might have misjudged the amount of power necessary to provide adequate protection. If she'd been hurt because of me...

But no. Her face wasn't scrunched up in a rictus of pain. She was staring at a shallow cut on her forearm, probably sustained when she'd been manhandling the wolf. She'd used a little more force than was strictly necessary with him, but I was willing to give her the benefit of the doubt. Even if the duration of the high was short due to werewolf metabolism, meth was still meth. I wasn't eager to pit my strength against something that strong with no inhibitions and a limited perception of pain.

Blood oozed out of her wound, slowly staining her uniform a shade of purple.

"I'm bleeding," she said, and her voice sounded distant and echoing, as though she was shouting to me from the end of a long tunnel.

It made the hair at the back of my neck prickle. Tally wasn't acting like herself. She was many things, but vacant and distracted weren't on the list of her attributes. Had she hit her head? A brain bleed might explain this odd behavior.

"I can see that," I said slowly. "Will you let me take a look at it?"

"I'm bleeding," she repeated, and her lips quirked into a truly unsettling smile. It was nestled firmly in the uncanny valley, an expression that in no way belonged to the woman I knew.

A hysterical giggle burst out of her then, sending a current of pure panic running through me like a live wire. This wasn't Taliyah. If I hadn't been with her most of the night, I would have accused the woman in front of me of being a shapeshifter. The bond between us said otherwise, still active enough to allow me to confirm it was

indeed Tally standing here.

But what the hell could make her act this way? I'd seen her walk away from a pitched, life-or-death battle less shocky than this. There was no way that one werewolf had shaken her this badly. And neither had the tentacle monster, for that matter.

"I'm bleeding, Mav," she said, her hysterical giggle rising in pitch.

"Do I need to hex the guy in cell two?" I asked.

It was a calculated and largely empty threat. I hated that she was hurt and would have reacted violently to her injury if it had happened in any other circumstance. Work was an unspoken exception for the both of us. Injury, trauma, and death were risks that came with the job when you were a first responder. She'd never forgive me if I treated her like she was incapable of doing her job.

She'd also never forgive me if I killed someone outside of a life-or-death scenario. My past was littered with every shade of gray imaginable, which both intrigued and disturbed her. If my Tally was in there somewhere, she'd react exactly the way she was raised to by the Morgan family.

A little animation flickered far back in her eyes. The giggle cut off abruptly, as though someone had clicked a mute button. Her lips moved, but no sound came out. Then, as though someone had flicked a switch, she was suddenly in there, her bleak, winter sky eyes filling with the tenacious strength that had suckered me in from the first day we met. Her familiar scowl was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen.

Tally gave my arm a swat, but there wasn't much life to the gesture. "You can't hex him!"

I grinned, brushing a thumb over her jutting lower lip. This close, I could see the thrum of her pulse just under the skin. Her blush was subtle, just a dusting of pink over her cheekbones, barely visible if you weren't looking for it.

"There's my girl," I said quietly. "I knew she was in there somewhere. Do you mind telling me what you were giggling about?"

The color fled as quickly as it came, and she swayed. I caught her before she could topple over and helped her to sit behind her desk. If she passed out here, she'd only have a bruise in the shape of her stapler to worry about, instead of a skull fracture from hitting the cement at speed.

"I don't even know where to start," she said on a sigh.

"Why don't I get you a coffee and you can tell me all about it?" I offered.

"That sounds really good. Thank you, Mav."

I gave her a knowing smile. "Hey, what are husbands for?"

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Taliyah

The over-brewed coffee with its cheap powdered creamer and copious amount of sugar tasted like ambrosia after the night I'd been through.

Maverick watched me sip it, knees braced against the side of my desk as he watched over me. My hands were shaking too badly to make the coffee myself, so he'd whipped up this monstrosity for me. Something about my new faerie form craved all forms of sugar, the way my human self used to crave steak. It was a deep, in-the-gut need for something your body lacked. I suspected that if a human scientist ever got their hands on a faerie corpse, the autopsy would show a metabolism similar to a hummingbird's. Incredibly high output required equal input, or faeries would burn themselves out in a spectacular magical explosion. At least, that's what I told myself whenever I caught myself visiting Sweeter Haunts for fudge three times in the same day.

Maverick waited until the shaking had subsided to touch me. I wasn't as averse to comfort as Maverick, who'd distrusted everything and everyone on principle. But our families had something in common when you got right down to it. Intentional or not, growing up around first responders had shaped who I was, including some of the more toxic lies I told myself. That any sign of weakness would draw everyone down on you like starved piranhas. That people would think less of you if you let your mask slip. That they couldn't possibly want the wildly insecure mess hiding just behind the facade. People couldn't want the real you. Ever.

Or maybe, I thought with a sigh. It's just you who can't stand you.

Self-loathing much, Taliyah? I thought back. Get a grip.

Maverick pulled one hand free of my mug and grasped my arm gingerly by my wrist. The touch was so achingly gentle, my stupid heart gave a painful little squeeze in reply. Maverick might have been on the slender side, but he made up for it with his height and broad shoulders. He cut an imposing figure, no matter what angle you observed him from. It was hard to make a woman like me feel tiny.

But I did. I felt tiny and petite and so utterly feminine around him at times that it made me want to spit. I'd never been that woman. The one who hung the moon and the stars on a man before he deserved that trust. But I did trust Maverick, and that was equal parts thrilling and scary as hell. It made him one of the few people I'd kill for, no questions asked. It also meant there was one more person in my life who could destroy it utterly by leaving.

Maverick traced the map of delicate blue veins under the nearly translucent skin of my wrist. When I had my winter on, they looked more like spiderwebbing cracks in ice than veins. My pulse jumped when he pressed the pad of his thumb against my pulse and gave me very serious eye contact.

My breath caught in my throat. It was almost impossible to ignore the pull of those storm-gray eyes. The air between us zinged with the potential for magic. His grip tightened just a fraction before he forced a smile.

"I'm sorry if I was pushy back there," he said. "On the phone, I mean. It was a stressful situation."

That threw me. What the hell was he apologizing for? He was being chased by a mass of writhing tentacles and a werewolf on amphetamines. I'd chalked my bad mood up to things a hell of a lot less stressful than that. He hadn't said anything pushy, in my opinion. I was about to open my mouth and tell him so when he continued, ignoring

the baffled look on my face.

“I know I run my mouth sometimes,” he continued, glancing away, finally releasing me from the magnetic pull of his eyes. “And that’s bound to be annoying. It’s okay if you get pissed at me sometimes, Tally. I get it, really.”

It took an embarrassingly long time for my brain to catch up with his words. The meaning dawned on me almost a full minute later, puzzle pieces slotting into place to form an infuriatingly adorable picture. The big lug was trying to apologize. He thought I was acting like a basket case because of our last conversation.

I mean, what else could he assume? I’d hung up the phone abruptly and showed up thirty minutes later with more gusto for ass-kicking than usual. He’d been too busy running for his life to sense my distress through our bond. He had no idea what Aurea had said—what she’d forced me into. But instead of thinking that I was a huge bitch looking for a fight, he’d decided he was somehow at fault. The man was so attuned to my mood that he knew something was wrong, but so socially dense he assumed he was at fault instead of considering other factors.

I set my coffee aside and pushed out of my chair and, like I was on autopilot, I walked right up to him. Maverick had to put a hand out to steady himself when I looped my arms around his neck. Truth be told, I was as shocked as he was. But there was something within me that was urging me forward, and I allowed my logical side to be silenced for once. What was more, I muffled whatever well-meaning thing Maverick was about to say next, molding my mouth to his. There was one stunned second before his body responded, hands falling to my waist so he could pull me even closer. And in my own head was only shock. It was like my body had needed this closeness—like it hadn’t alerted my brain yet to what it was going to do and had, instead, just done it. And my brain was still struggling to get with the program.

My heart thundered when Maverick suddenly lifted me onto the desk, nudging my

legs apart so that he could step between them.

What in the hell had I just started?

He deepened the kiss, his tongue suddenly seeking refuge in my mouth. And my tongue eagerly met his, like it had been waiting for this moment all my life.

Dear sweet lord the man was going to be the death of me...

But no matter how much I might want to, I absolutely could not rip Maverick's clothes off in the precinct. It didn't matter if I knew the camera's blind spot. If I did something that unprofessional, I'd never be able to step foot in the building again. I wouldn't allow myself.

I tore my mouth free of his and shoved at his chest. "I'm at work, Mav."

Maverick's tongue flicked out to touch his bottom lip, as though he could still taste me there. A flicker of heat woke in my belly, and it was hard work meeting his gaze again.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"I kissed you."

He chuckled. "I'm not sorry for that."

I looked at him and breathed in deeply. "Neither am I." I had to hold my hand out when he moved in closer. "But we can't continue... whatever that was."

"Right." He nodded and back away again and then we both were silent for a few seconds as we sought to catch our breath. "Going back to the conversation we were in

the middle of having,” he started. “Whatever I did—”

“—you didn’t do anything, you dolt,” I answered with a wispy chuckle.

He looked confused. “Then?”

“I was snippy over a stupid comment you made over the phone. And it was stupid to be upset about it. I mean—it’s so completely minor, in the grand scheme of things. I’m the one who should be apologizing to you for making your night miserable.”

His dark brows scrunched together. “I don’t understand.”

I shook my head, fighting back fresh gales of embarrassed laughter. I wasn’t letting myself go to pieces, but the rage was finding expression in other ways. Overreacting to trivial shit, apparently.

“Talking about threesomes bothered me,” I said.

“Threesomes?” Mav repeated, still clearly lost.

“You mentioned a threesome with the wolf and the tentacle creature.”

He looked at me. “Tally, that was a joke.”

I nodded. “I know, but... well, Jonathan asked to open our relationship for years, and I...” I felt my face flush and I ducked my chin. I never wanted to say the words aloud, let alone to Maverick, but he had to understand why this subject was so sensitive for me. “I thought about it. A lot. I knew that if we did have an open marriage, he would stay. So... well, that was what he did. With or without my agreement, actually. And I felt pathetic for years because of it—that I was so needy that I couldn’t just ask him for a divorce, even though I was miserable.”

“He was a mind-bending sex demon, Tally. You couldn’t have controlled your behavior if you wanted to. The only reason he couldn’t completely enslave your mind was your latent magic.”

I snorted, horrified when a tear fell. I had bigger things to cry about than this personal humiliation and yet, here I was—crying. God, it was just so... embarrassing.

“I know that now. But back then, I thought I was human, remember? And the feelings of self-hatred didn’t just go away... even when I realized I really had no choice in the matter.” I sighed, long and hard. Jonathan hadn’t just fed off me without my consent for years, he’d taken part of who I was. He’d taken a powerful woman and he’d broken her down because it amused him. That bastard had given me so many complexes, I should have opened a housing association. He’d ruined me for people who were actually worth my time. “Do you know how much baggage I’m carrying around?” I asked, sighing as I shook my head. “Who would want to sign on for dealing with this shit for one lifetime, let alone how fucking long eternity turns out to be, since I’m now immortal.” I wasn’t even aware that I’d voiced the thought until it was out and then I felt my cheeks burn.

“I would.”

I looked up at him. “You would what?”

“I would sign on,” he answered, kissing one of my fingertips gently. “I already did, in fact.”

“To save my life.”

“You say that like it’s a small thing,” he said with a laugh. “I happen to care about your life a great deal.”

Fresh tears stung my eyes, completely against my will. “Stop doing that!”

“What?”

“Making me cry! It’s pissing me off!”

Maverick laughed and leaned in to clear away the tears with the pad of his thumb. “I’ll help you get rid of the evidence.”

“Not something you want to say out loud in a police station,” I said dryly, pointedly ignoring the pleased smile on his face.

“Ah, true. Want me to assume the position? So you can frisk me?”

I flicked him behind the ear and grinned at his small yelp. I wasn’t sure how he’d managed to completely upend my bad mood in a matter of minutes, but I was grateful for the fact that he was here. That he was allowed in on my secret. I couldn’t have done this without him.

“I’ll stop talking about threesomes,” Maverick said. “I’d never be able to share you with anyone else anyway, so it’s a moot point.”

“Thanks.”

He paused. “So, if I’m not the cause of your bad mood, what gives?”

This was the tricky part. I got up, retrieved some paper towels to dry the rest of the tears that had wet my cheeks, and then ordered him to sit opposite me.

“Something happened and I need your help to solve the problem. Just promise me you won’t lose it when I tell you what happened.”

“No promises,” he said, face darkening. “What’s happened?”

So, I told him. All of it. “In short, I think the headmistress has been watching a little too much Criminal Minds,” I finished.

It was a weak joke, and probably not worth a pity laugh. But Maverick didn’t visibly react. His face remained as stoic as ever, his eyes fixed in the middle-distance, contemplating something I couldn’t begin to guess. It was better than the anger I’d been expecting, but something about the calm, almost detached way he was reacting spooked me. It just wasn’t Maverick. Something was wrong.

Okay, everything was wrong with this scenario, but this was just a fresh drizzle of anxiety on my panic sundae. I wanted to ask what he was thinking about, but wasn’t sure if I’d like the answer.

“Everyone watches those shows and thinks they know how police work is done,” I continued when he said nothing. “It’s usually an oversimplification, if not an outright fabrication. DNA tests aren’t done in the blink of an eye. A lot of the job is paperwork, and plenty of cops go their entire lives without having to draw their weapons.”

Still nothing. Maverick’s mouth was moving, but no sound came out. There was no subtle stirring of energies around him, so I knew it wasn’t the words to a spell.

“I guess what I’m saying is that Aurea’s painted me into a tight corner here. She’ll expect results quickly, and she’ll want me to prioritize this case over my work. How the hell do I explain to my deputies that I’m going to be on another case that’s completely out of my jurisdiction? I can’t even mention it’s a murder case, or they’d insist on joining the investigation. It means I have to do this off the books, and you know I hate that.”

“Aurea,” he said.

The word came out a strangled whisper, a sound so raw that it hurt to listen to. His hands clenched into fists around the edge of my desk. The wood groaned under the strain, and I watched cracks form in the cheap wood. Police departments in small towns could rarely afford good office equipment. It would be easy for him to take chunks away from the desk if he was trying.

“Mav?” I asked tentatively.

“Au-re-a,” he repeated, lips peeling back from his teeth in a snarl as he enunciated each syllable. “Threatened to kill you and your kids.”

“Yes, but that’s no excuse for you to manhandle my desk. Mind taking your hands off it? I don’t want to have to replace this one for at least a few years.”

Maverick didn’t reply. He didn’t move. Hell, he was barely breathing. The intensity of his gray eyes was blistering.

No... no, it really was warm in here. Sweat popped along my brow and the nape of my neck, and it wasn’t because someone had bumped against the thermostat. There was a subtle charge in the air, power vibrating the molecules around us so quickly that vapor actually curled into being. More alarmingly, shadows loomed from beneath my desk, smoky fingers forming, grasping desperately at the air, before rejoining the rest of the black oozing across the walls and ceiling.

I stepped into him, turning his head so he’d be forced to look at me. But it wasn’t Maverick glaring black at me. Instead of his dark, penetrating gaze, I saw only crimson. Blood had burst in his eyes, blotting out his pupils and irises before spreading rapidly to cover his sclera. There was someone in those eyes, but it wasn’t Maverick.

“Shit,” I hissed. “Damn it, no, Mav! Fight it!”

His face didn’t twitch. I wasn’t sure if he’d heard me, or if he was too far gone to the blood madness to pay attention. I had to do something fast. But what? My usual tactic was to hit the enemy with wind and snow or encase them in ice. But what was I supposed to do if the danger was coming from a friend? I couldn’t hurt him. I couldn’t shake him out of it. What the hell could I do to reach him?

A thought occurred to me a moment later. It was so absurd that I would have laughed at myself if the situation had been less dire. I’d never applied fairy tale logic to my magical problems before, but there was a first time for everything, I figured.

So, I pushed up on tiptoe, seized his chin, and dragged Maverick’s lips down to mine for the second time in the last ten minutes.

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Maverick

Red.

Red earth, tumbling onto a redwood coffin lined with red silk. The magic was threatening to bury me alive. When I tried to open my mouth to scream, no sound came out. The bitter grains of dirt scraped over my tongue, and I spat, flailing to escape the oversized box that held me captive.

How in the hell had I gotten here?

By the time the wood buckled, my knuckles had been scraped raw, oozing scarlet.

I gasped in a breath when my head breached the surface of my grave. The only consolation I found was that I hadn't been buried deep, so the earth on top was loose and fell away like sand when I sat up, whipping my head this way and that to get my bearings. I couldn't remember when I'd been hit, let alone when someone had buried me in a shallow grave. Did that make this my afterlife? A rusty red hellscape? There was only flat earth and distant hills for as far as the eye could see. Was this where those corrupted by vampire blood went when they died?

"Not quite," a man said. The languorous southern drawl he'd affected might have been soothing if it hadn't been whispered into my ear without warning.

I tried to spin, but with one foot still in the grave, I only managed to flop weakly to the ground. The dirt felt like sandpaper under my cheek, rubbing my skin raw with just one brush against the ground. Eventually, I managed to prop myself up on one

elbow and craned my neck to see the speaker.

He didn't look like much at first glance. He was a stretched, matte black shadow that looked almost cartoonish against the crimson backdrop. But when I tilted my head and squinted, more details came into focus. The haughty slant of his features lent his face a somewhat sinister look. The swirling ruby of his irises didn't help either. His skin was as pale and bloodless as a corpse. As I watched, he pulled a cigarette from his lips and blew a perfect smoke ring in my direction.

I scrambled out of the grave, coming up on my knees. It wasn't a good fighting posture, but it was better than remaining flat on my back and flailing like a turtle. I still had no idea where I was or how I'd gotten here.

The man flicked ash at me disdainfully when I raised my hands, drawing upon the energy around us to fuel my spell. Except... there was nothing to access. The land stubbornly refused to budge, leaving me with very little to work with.

"Now, now, none of that," the man drawled. "Attacking me before I've said my piece is just rude. I don't like disrespectful people. Understand, son?"

"I'm not your son," I muttered, pushing off from the ground so I could tower over the creep. "Where the hell is this? The afterlife? Am I dead?"

Last I remembered, I was in Tally's office with her... standing so close to her...

The man rolled his eyes and began ticking down his fingers. "To answer the questions in order, this is my dimension. No, you are not in the afterlife. And your physical body is still alive and well in Haven Hollow." I just shook my head because I had no idea what in the hell he was talking about. Or who he was.

"I thought I'd take the opportunity to introduce myself," he continued. "We've been

together long enough, and yet we've never truly spoken."

A chill traced its way up my spine, and an instinctive fear made my guts clench into a hard knot. I wasn't sure what he was talking about, but my instincts were screaming at me to run.

"Who are you?" I asked when I found my voice.

The man smiled, lips peeling back to reveal sharp fangs. I recoiled from him on instinct, trying to fling magic unsuccessfully into his face. He took another drag on his cigarette, watching me flounder with an amused smile.

"You wouldn't be able to pronounce my name. For now, call me Knox."

"So... what—you're a vampire ghost or something like it?" I asked, shaking my head as I tried to understand what in the fuck had just happened to bring me here. "I've never seen a vampire do the incorporeality thing before. It's a myth that vampires can turn into mist."

"Most can't," Knox said, smoke curling from his lips. "But I can. So can any of the ones given my sacrament. None of you have developed that capacity yet, though. Your cousin had potential to master that level of skill, but alas, she slipped through my fingers." He must have been talking about Wanda? "You, however," he continued, tipping the cigarette toward me with a smile. "Are perfect. Better than I could have ever hoped for. And male. That's always a plus."

"You're the first one to ever think so," I said dryly. "And would it kill you to speak plain English? I'm not following one word of your ramble."

Knox studied the crimson sky with an amused smile. "This bloody world isn't a large enough clue? I tried to make it as obvious as possible."

I thought about it, linking what he'd said about vampires with the implication that he'd designed this place. A picture came together all at once and was so hideous that I wanted to shout.

“You're some kind of... what... vampire god?”

Knox waved his hand in a 'so-so' gesture. “For the purposes of this conversation, we'll go with that. I was the first—let's leave it at that. And you're only beginning to learn what I can teach you about blood magic.”

I shook my head slowly. This didn't make any sense. He was either delusional or insane. And yet, how had he even brought me here? Maybe I was just hallucinating the whole thing. Maybe I was the delusional, insane one.

“Vampires don't have magic.”

“Not in your lifetime, no. The bloodline was diluted with humanity. Now they can only resurrect their improved bodies. I rose from the grave with the power she gave me.”

“She?”

Knox swung his legs over the lip of my grave, lounging in the monochromatic light from above. He flicked the cigarette away with a laugh.

“I'm not surprised you don't know. Your goddess always was a prideful sort. She wouldn't tell the story of her biggest failure. No, that might tarnish her sterling reputation.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Your goddess made me, you fool.”

I chuckled at that because it was completely absurd. “Now that is for sure bullshit. The goddess hates vampires. Everyone knows that.”

Knox shook his head. “She subverted her own laws to reanimate her fallen lover. Now she has to pay for what she’s done.”

My legs shook as I absorbed that. If Knox was telling the truth, everything I’d ever known about the religion I’d grown up with was wrong. If the goddess had truly created vampires, that would be hypocrisy on such a grand scale, I could hardly fathom it.

“What the spell do you want from me?” I asked quietly.

“Temporary use of your body.”

“What?” I nearly barked.

“Nighttime only. You could live out your days in peace with your woman.” He tapped his chin thoughtfully. “You know, I may be able to help you with that, too. I’m capable of much when I’m in full possession of a human host, and it’s been so long since I had someone worth the name.”

“I’ll pass,” I said, dusting dirt from my front. “Possession has never been my kink.”

Knox chuckled. “I assumed you’d say that... at first, anyway. But at some point, you’ll realize you need the help I can offer. I can be patient.”

“I’m still not convinced my brain didn’t just invent you. That all of this,” I looked around myself. “Isn’t just some trick of my addled mind.”

He shook his head. “When you’re ready, Charmin,” he continued, calling me by my born name. “Just think my name and we can make a deal. I’ll be listening.”

Not fucking likely. I was no one’s ventriloquist dummy. And the fact that he’d called me Charmin? Yeah, that ticked me off even more.

Knox turned to go, then paused, craning his neck so he could meet my eyes. “Oh, and Charmin?”

“It’s Maverick.”

“Names are inconsequential.” He paused. “You might want to hold off on the spell you’re building up to.”

“Why?”

“Because it will blow a hole in your psyche that I can slip through.”

“Why tell me that if that’s exactly what you want?”

He shrugged. “I’m trying to play by the rules. Good luck.”

Then Knox’s foot lashed out, connecting squarely with my knee. I crumpled back into the hole, and the casket beyond. The lid snapped shut inches in front of my face, and wouldn’t budge, no matter how hard I hammered the wood.

“Shit,” a distant female voice said. “Damn it, no, Mav! Fight it!”

I hung in limbo, neither here nor there, the shadows clawing at every inch of my exposed skin, awakening my nerves with a ticklish sensation. I found my body at last and felt someone soft and inviting curled in my arms.

Taliyah. Tally had brought me back home. With a kiss. Yes, she'd kissed me.

I love you, I wanted to say. But I couldn't force the words past my lips.

"Stay with me," Tally said when my eyes finally focused on her.

Always, I thought back.

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Taliyah

I wasn't sure what I expected when I lunged at Maverick, mashing our mouths together in an attempt to distract him.

For him to stutter to a stop and pull away, staring at me in doe-eyed shock? The ominous charge of Maverick's magic didn't dissipate. If anything, it thickened until I could practically feel it trying to seep into my pores. The air around us boiled with undulating shadows. Voices whispered from just beyond the veil, and a horrible curiosity seized me. What would happen if I fished around in the shadows? Could I pull someone through? Would they be useful enough to end Aurea?

I pulled myself free of the kiss with a gasp. Those hadn't been my thoughts. They were Maverick's macabre musings and the desire for vengeance that consumed him. But it had felt like they were my thoughts. His fury still burned the back of my throat, choking off my voice. I tasted copper on my tongue, and that meant Maverick had bitten his tongue or the inside of his cheek.

I pulled back just enough to suck in air. My grip on his face tightened until my nails dimpled the skin of his face. His eyes were still crimson, his body veiled by the shadows that accompanied some of the more violent things he could do with his power. It was still a localized thunderstorm, seeking a target. If he managed to zero in on Aurea Grimsbane, I was going to have a corpse on my hands. Hers or his, I wasn't sure. If she'd returned to Europe through one of my mirrors, she'd be out of spell-slinging distance. That wouldn't stop him from trying, though. He'd tear his own soul out of his body to fling it at her if he could, so long as he could be sure it would detonate on impact. If she was nearby, that left me with a whole other problem to deal

with. Neither outcome was acceptable. I had to get Maverick to stop.

But how?

Desperate times call for desperate measures, I thought wildly as the static in the room began to glow red, drenching the room in bloody light.

I let one hand drop away from his face, undoing the buttons of my uniform with shaking fingers. Excitement and nerves warred for control of my thoughts. I knew what I was inviting if I went through with this and part of me was terrified. Terrified that if we crossed a line, we could never come back. Or, I could never come back. I was suddenly terrified he would grow distant and cold when he got what he wanted, like so many other men before him. That if I let him in, literally or figuratively, I'd end up with my heart carved out again when I found him with someone else.

Still, I didn't stop.

I seized Maverick's hand and lined it up with the curve of my waist, holding my breath as I waited for his reaction. At first, nothing happened. The power continued to build until I felt like I was being flattened into the wall. Then his fingers twitched, uncurling from the furious claws they'd been fixed in. He tentatively touched the skin of my waist with the tips of his fingers, a cautious exploration that made my heart pound harder than if he'd seized me and hurled me against the wall in a fit of desperate passion.

Jonathan used to do that a lot. Come home, sweep me off my feet, and then take me against the door or on top of the nearest available surface. I didn't want to draw comparisons between the pair of them, but it was difficult. I hadn't been the most approachable woman most of the time, and I was kryptonite to the ego of any man who thought they could tame the 'little lady'. I'd had only a couple serious boyfriends and sexual partners before Jonathan had plucked me up and made me his

plaything. Our relationship had been textbook perfect in the beginning, but some part of me always knew it was lacking an infuriatingly vague something that mattered. Now I could finally put my finger on what that something was.

Care.

Oh sure, Jonathan would put on a pretense, say all the right words, and even ape exactly the right emotions, but underneath all of that, he was a malignant narcissist with a grudge against me specifically. Maverick liked to pretend he was unfeeling, but it was just a mask, a way to keep himself safe after a lifetime of punches thrown at his face. But the truth was that he gave a shit. And I was fairly sure he gave a lot of shits where I was concerned. Enough to take his time, and treat me like something to be handled gently, even though he knew I wouldn't break.

"Tally," he panted, nuzzling my throat after a moment. The feeling of his lips ghosting over my skin raised goosebumps on every inch of me. His voice was so hoarse it barely sounded like his.

"Shh," I soothed. "It's okay."

"Not okay," he said through clenched teeth. "She hurt you. Hurt your kids. I will kill her."

It wasn't exactly what I'd been hoping for, but simplistic verbal communication was better than nothing.

"You can't kill her, Mav. I can't let you."

"She hurt you," he insisted. "Can't let her..."

"I won't let her hurt me, and you know that. Anyone who comes after my kids gets

what they deserve. But I can't let you do this to yourself, Mav. Do you have any idea what that much blood magic will do to you if you try to use it against her? Let it go, please."

I certainly couldn't guess what would happen if he did use his magic against Aurea. I knew the more someone used his blood power, the more tempting it was to do it again. Wanda had implied it could result in violence bordering on madness if you were angry enough. She'd nearly hexed her foul feline into oblivion after one spectacularly messy fight, and only Hellcat's catlike reflexes had saved his whiskers.

"Can't," Maverick said, real strain showing on his face now. His hands had tightened around my waist, holding me close as though I was the last buoy in a storm-tossed sea.

"Can't what? Stop?"

"Yes," he gritted out. "It's too much."

The magic was too much. It had to ground out harmlessly somewhere or we'd be standing on top of a crater. There were only a few people in the Hollow capable of taking that kind of damage, and I was one of them. Snow fell on bloody battlefields and hollowed-out craters alike. I could bury it in winter and it wouldn't hurt... much.

"Take it out on me," I said. "Give me the energy. I can take it."

"I'll hurt you," he said, quietly this time while shaking his head.

"Then give me pleasure to go with it," I answered, voice coming out on a shaky exhale.

I reached down to fumble with my duty belt next, letting it fall to the floor with a

heavy thump when I was through. On any other day, I would have rather eaten my badge than leave a loaded gun lying around. Every gun safety course and familial lecture I'd ever sat through was chanting in the back of my mind. I had to remind myself that having Maverick's freaky blood warlock powers go out of control was a hell of a lot more likely than someone coming in and using my gun against us. More than likely, one of my deputies would come in, see it lying there, and hang it up. I compromised by toeing it under my desk until it disappeared from sight.

That accomplished, I reached for my power, opening a small gateway into winter. I'd learned the theory by eavesdropping on Astrid's lessons with Fox. The only problem with remaining Taliyah instead of Olwen was that I had power with no practice and information without context. Fox had made it very clear that I'd owe him if I wanted any professional instruction, so I'd created my own workaround. I was married to Maverick, so I didn't need an excuse to visit while Fox and Astrid practiced. The lectures I couldn't attend had been meticulously detailed by Maverick, who essentially copied his sister's homework for me. I couldn't keep the gateway open for long without risking the Hollow's safety, but this I could do.

Maverick didn't miss a beat as the wind coming through the doorway whipped our hair into tangles. A joy so fierce it was nearly pain suffused my entire body as I stepped into winter. I smelled the arctic howling off the mountains, carrying the smell of cold and the bite of frost. Little crystals were forming anywhere I touched Maverick as my power seeped out, but he didn't seem to mind. I was almost disappointed when the doorway snapped shut behind us and we found ourselves standing in a totally different room. I wanted him to take me on the ice of a frozen lake, the stars reflecting like gemstones on the glittering surface. I wanted this powerful force of nature to bowl me over and bury me alive. I wanted him to fill me with his magic until I couldn't breathe.

But staying in Winter was a recipe for disaster. If I fought Janara, I wanted to go in with forethought instead of literally getting caught with my pants down. So, I'd used

the portal to guide us to Maverick's room instead. I'd briefly contemplated taking this to my place, but the evidence of Aurea's recent visit might set him off again. Besides, my boys were there along with Darla and Cain. So, no, that wouldn't work.

I'd only been in Maverick's room two times. Once to tuck him in after he got plastered and needed a ride home. The other time was to help pack his bags for the trip to Blood Rose. He wasn't a scrupulously neat person, and his potions station was particularly messy, but it wasn't a dump. Maverick cared enough about his coven's opinions that he tidied up regularly. It was a lot more than I could say for some of the grown men I knew. His bed was unmade. That was the only detail I really absorbed before I was on it, bouncing a little from the force of my landing.

Maverick's mouth came down hard on mine, swallowing my yelp of surprise. His magic ran like static electricity over my skin, biting at every nerve. Even my clothes seemed to buzz with the force of his anger and need. No... scratch that. They were buzzing. As I watched, I saw every stitch that held my shirt, undershirt, pants, and underwear unravel, starting a cascade of destruction. I had no idea where he was getting the finesse to do it, but I could only watch in wonder as my clothes simply fell off, reduced to a pile of thread to either side of me. I was grateful that I hadn't worn anything I particularly liked today, because that little trick would have reduced a favorite top or pair of pants to ribbons.

Only then did it sink in that I was naked. Well and truly bare in front of my husband. That word hadn't seemed quite as serious before when there'd been no strings attached. No matter what either of us said to the contrary, sex would change things between us. I'd been planning to wait until we could talk things through, but now realized that had just been a stall tactic. You didn't climb into bed with someone like Maverick after a calm and reasoned discussion. Most people looked at him and saw a naughty boy, a bad decision that would feel good at the moment but sting later. They didn't see him. None of them really knew him. He buried it deep down, but he was a good man, even if I was one of the only people he regularly showed up for.

I waited for the remarks that would send me running for the treadmill and the diet soda. Jonathan had been the king of subtle, snide comments that undermined my confidence. He had a talent for tearing people down. He'd still find something to complain about, even if I was in this new, immortal fae form.

But when Maverick pulled back enough to take me in, there was only wonder on his face. He pressed a gentle finger to the pounding pulse in my neck and dragged it south, tracing my clavicle, then down to the swell of my breasts. They'd gotten a little larger than they'd been pre-change, but my rack wasn't nearly as formidable as most of the witches he knew. I shivered when his finger dipped lower, circling a nipple with his fingernail until it hardened into a taut peak.

"Beautiful," he breathed.

Blood boiled beneath my skin, flushing my body a light pink. I wasn't prone to blotchy red blushing anymore, and for once I was grateful for that. My face turning red as a tomato from even the smallest compliment utterly undercut the dignity of the heir apparent to the winter throne. And it definitely undercut the Chief of Police.

Maverick responded with enthusiasm, descending on me with an almost feral sound of need. The edge of teeth when he latched onto my nipple shouldn't have surprised me, but it did. My hips jerked in surprise, rubbing my very naked body against the roughness of his jeans. The friction was almost enough to put me over the edge, and he'd barely even touched me.

He groaned when I hooked a leg around his waist and tried to pull myself closer. Oh, dear God. I was going to explode before he even got to the main event. I wasn't exactly a kinky person, but the thought of being at Maverick's mercy in the bedroom made my skin heat and my belly clench with want. Maverick smiled gently then, running his thumb along my bottom lip.

“Tell me you’re mine.”

It wasn’t a demand. He wasn’t asking to own me or trying to talk over me in a work setting. He was asking for a simple assurance. That we were in this together. That I wanted him enough to risk the heartbreak that came with a relationship. Because we were in a relationship, whether we liked it or not.

“I’m yours,” I whispered.

“Good.”

Maverick skimmed his nose along my stomach, pressing sweet, sticky kisses on my stomach. My heart leaped and I almost protested when he delved even lower, kissing across my thighs. But before I could open my mouth, he was on me, using his clever, sardonic tongue in new and exciting ways. No one had done this for me. Ever. Jonathan was sure to ask for oral, but never gave in return. For an incubus who loved spending every moment in bed, he was remarkably stingy, selfish, and misogynistic.

I was convinced Maverick was using magic to hold my hips in place, because I couldn’t shake him, no matter how hard I writhed. The climax that hit me a few seconds later was explosive, and snow burst in soft flurries, whipped around by the wind of my excitement. By the time he was finished with me, I was shaking with aftershocks and tears were beading on my lashes. He caught one before it could fall and turn to ice.

“I didn’t mean to make you cry. Did I hurt you?”

“No,” I said, surprised when my voice came out on a sob. What was wrong with me?

“That was... I never...”

“Had an orgasm?” he asked.

“No,” I said with a watery snort. “I was married to an incubus. I had plenty of those... I just never had anyone who cared enough to...”

“Oh,” he said, realization dawning. A bit of pink dusted his cheeks. It was oddly endearing. He could give me a bone-cracking orgasm, but he blushed when I mentioned just how he’d done it. “Really? Never?”

“Never. For someone who eats by having sex, Jonathan didn’t have a... ah... a very adventurous palate.”

Maverick grinned. “Well, mine is exceedingly adventurous...”

Gulp. That sounded ominous. And exciting.

“We don’t have to continue if you don’t want to, Tally,” he continued. “I think I have the power under control now.”

“You do?” I asked skeptically.

He nodded. “I used a lot of it to unmake your clothes. Deconstruction takes a lot more energy than you’d think.”

“I don’t care,” I said, undoing the buttons on his jeans with sure fingers. For the first time since fully transforming into my true faerie self, I felt completely sure about something. Maverick hissed when I reached past his waistband to seize his length.

“Tally-”

“Shh,” I said, pushing at his waistband. “It’s my turn.”

Maverick groaned, head lolling back against his pillows. His hands gripped my hips,

holding me off his lap. His eyes were wild, desperate, and a little bloodshot, but they were gray once more.

“Believe me, I’d love to do this, Tally, but I don’t have protection and you’re not on birth control.”

“I’m menopausal, Mav.”

“ Human you appeared to be menopausal, but faeries have a longer fertile window than most other species. You were meant to have an heir with Fox. That means he was confident you could get pregnant.”

Oh, dear God. I hadn’t even considered that. Did my new faerie body react to hormonal birth control? Was there some spell or potion that could do the job for me? Did my people have a weird opposition to the idea? I didn’t know. I was glad at least one of us was thinking straight, because there was no way I wanted to get pregnant. What was more, a baby with an autumn royal, even a changeling warlock, would put me squarely in Janara’s sights once more. I worried for Sean and Charlie any time snowstorms descended on the Hollow. The anxiety would be unbearable if I had a baby at home to fret over.

“I hate that you’re responsible,” I said, and couldn’t help the petulant note in my voice. “It really ruins the mood.”

“So does unintended pregnancy.”

I sighed. “You’re right. Thank you.”

Maverick lifted my hand to his lips and kissed every fingertip. “Rain check?”

“Definitely. Are you good?”

His expression darkened. “No, I don’t think I am.”

“Is it the magic?”

He shook his head. “No... it’s that Aurea isn’t our only problem.”

“She’s not?”

He continued shaking his head. “There’s something else. Something I need to consult with the others about.”

I stood and stretched, enjoying the weight of his stare on me. He actually groaned when I leaned down and began to rummage through the laundry on the floor. The black button-up shirt he’d worn yesterday was too big on me, hitting at mid-thigh when I put it on.

“You’re just teasing me now,” he said, longing in his voice as I shimmied into a pair of his slacks, cinching his belt as tightly as it would go. I felt like a little girl again, donning my father’s police uniform after finding it in the laundry.

“You think this is sexy?” I asked, gesturing at myself. “I look like I’m gearing up for a department store big and tall sale.”

“You’re wearing my clothes. I may never wash that outfit again, just so it’ll smell like you when I put it on.”

“I’m not sure if I should be enchanted or disturbed.”

He flashed me a quick smile. “I get that a lot, actually.”

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Taliyah

The coven house was mostly empty by the time we descended the stairs to the ground floor.

It was a small mercy not to have to do a walk of shame out the door with half a dozen witches watching. None of them would heckle us. It would be infinitely worse. Best case scenario, they'd congratulate us, and at worst, they might offer tips to improve our performance.

Color flushed into my cheeks when I saw a trio of young faces huddled together on the couch. Astrid's flame-bright hair was a striking contrast to her brother's inky dark locks. She reminded me of a spider lily, full of bright colors and odd angles. Maverick, in comparison, was like a Rorschach test more often than not. Done up in black and white, and impossible to interpret unless you squinted to find the meaning. If not for the distinctive Depraysie eyes, I wouldn't have believed they were related, let alone siblings.

The girl sitting beside Astrid was one of the few witches I'd met who didn't have black hair. Meredith Boline was a brunette and a little on the lean side. She was curled up in the corner of a sofa as if afraid to take up too much space. It was a defense mechanism. According to Astrid, Meredith's mother was a real piece of work. It would probably take the girl years to uncurl from the defensive posture.

Wedged in on Astrid's other side was a pale young man with auburn hair. It was impossible to tell if he was attractive or not. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find someone under thirty compelling in a romantic sense. He only looked a decade

or so older than my boys. Though Rook Thorne was old enough to be my grandfather several times removed, I could only see him as the twenty-something he appeared to be.

All three glanced up, taking us in as we passed. I felt the insistent urge to step through Winter and materialize in my own home, where I could die from embarrassment in peace. Instead, my besotted ass let Maverick wrap an arm around my waist and tuck me into his side protectively, forcing the others to stare him down first. Another day, his posturing might have pissed me off, but at the moment, I was too mortified to speak, let alone lecture him. There were vampires in this house, which meant at least two of the three had heard us.

Maverick jabbed a finger at Astrid. Her face was split into a wide, knowing grin, and she opened her mouth to issue the dreaded happy sentiment.

“Don’t,” he said, cutting across her before she could speak.

Astrid’s copper brows shot up, and she leaned into Rook’s side. She was sitting half on his lap, legs draped over his. Their joined hands rested on her knees, and she shivered when he stroked the outer curve of her calf with a fingernail. Her pout was a little too practiced to seem genuine.

“Don’t what?” she asked, faux innocence dripping from the words.

“Tease her. She was raised like a mundane, which means she’s practically a Puritan.”

“Hey,” I said, bumping his hip hard with mine. “I’m not a prude”

Maverick rolled his eyes. “Fine, you’re a Victorian. Hopelessly sexually repressed, overly critical of yourself, into the occult, and may or may not have piercings in intimate places.”

Astrid frowned and turned to Rook. “The Victorians had piercings?”

Rook nodded. “It was a fad for a while. Doctors discouraged it in young women, but it was fashionable to have your unmentionables pierced for a while.”

Meredith and Astrid devolved into laughter at almost the same instant, and Astrid managed a choked, ‘unmentionables’ before trailing off into further giggles. I wasn’t sure what had set them off. The fact that Victorian women had nipple piercings or that I might be sporting one.

“I don’t have anything pierced,” I said weakly.

“I know,” Maverick said. The tone was so matter of fact, it brought the blush roaring back, heat sweeping from the crown of my head down to my toes.

“Can we change the subject?” I muttered, eyeing the door longingly. Just one spell and I could get away from this humiliating conversation. I already wanted to squirm all the way out of existence, and Maverick had barely started. The familial comfort was obscenely high in this house.

“We actually have something important we need to talk to you about,” Maverick continued.

Astrid grinned at me, resting her head in the cradle of Rook’s throat. The vampire wasn’t wilting under Maverick’s stern disapproval, which was a point in his favor. I’d seen lesser men cowed by Maverick’s scowl alone.

“Fine. What did you want to talk about?” Astrid asked Maverick.

He cleared his throat. “A few things, actually.” Then he cleared it again, like what he was about to say wasn’t comfortable. “First, I need you to contact Fox Aspen for

me.”

Astrid sat up a little straighter, shrugging off Rook’s arm. He adjusted his position, draping the arm over the back of the damask sofa instead. Meredith watched with interest, saying nothing. She had an oversized rat clutched gently in her hands. The rat looked like a tiny, adorable lapdog surrounded by the ruffles of Meredith’s skirt. I thought she was leaning a little hard into the Old West aesthetic, but it wasn’t my wardrobe.

“You actually want to talk to Uncle Fox?” Astrid asked. “I thought you said you’d rather choke on a cactus than have another conversation with him.”

“Astrid...” Maverick sighed.

“You said you’d rather dive into an empty swimming pool headfirst rather than listen to him lecture Tally or me again.”

“Astrid,” Maverick repeated more forcefully, pinching the bridge of his nose, rather than glare at her.

He did that a lot lately. Whenever she was pleased or amused, Maverick would find a safe point on the opposite wall and wouldn’t look directly at her for the rest of the evening. He wasn’t being obvious about it, and I didn’t think Astrid had caught onto the reason why. But I knew. He didn’t want to see her fangs. I knew he’d always wonder if he could have saved her if he’d set out sooner. The fangs were a reminder of one of his biggest failures.

“You said you’d rather lick an ogre’s sweaty back—”

“—I did not!” Maverick burst out. “Damn it, Astrid, this is serious. Are you going to give me the number or not?”

Astrid's smile shrank, and the bewildered expression on her face made her look younger than her now eternal nineteen years. It was almost painful to watch the whiplash hit, and for all her good cheer to drain away. I wanted to push her lips back into that easy grin. No kid deserved to wear a look that anxious. She should have been worried about college finals and boyfriends, not magic and death threats.

"Mav, you're scaring me. What's this about?"

"It's a faerie thing," he answered noncommittally. "Tally needs the number. We need to fact check something."

Astrid pursed her lips. "I'll give you the number, but I doubt it will do you any good."

"Why's that?"

"Because Fox is staying in the newest hollow in Louisiana, and they don't have any cell towers near the swamp. Hell, they don't even have electricity all the time. It's still early in the construction process."

"What the hell is he doing there?" I burst out, unable to help myself. After all the times Fox had lectured me about duty, here he was pissing off and settling wherever he pleased. What a hypocrite.

Astrid shrugged. "I don't understand it completely. Apparently, it's a Sidhe protocol thing. Autumn is allied with Spring, and Fox wasn't able to stop the attack on a spring royal. That means he has to tend to her duties to the Hollow until she's well enough to resume them."

"So, it's like taking over someone else's contract," Maverick said.

"Yes," Rook answered. "And he's locked in for another year, at least."

Maverick swore under his breath. “Of course he is. Any chance Dickhead Reynard introduced you to one of his counselors? I could use the advice of a faerie noble right about now.”

Lines appeared between Astrid’s brows. “I only know a handful of Autumn faeries, and none of them have great attention spans, so I doubt they can give you the answers you’re looking for.” She rubbed her chin thoughtfully before adding. “I guess you could ask me. I’ve been getting a lot of court politics shoved involuntarily into my brain right alongside the magic lessons. Which I’m still not good at, by the way. All this power and I have no clue how to use it...” Astrid trailed off, muttering darkly. I empathized with her. I’d been the one learning harsh truths against my will only a year ago. At least Astrid had chosen her title and royal duties of her own free will. I’d been put on the spot, menaced with the threat of becoming someone else overnight, and then punished for reacting poorly. I still wasn’t completely in control of my abilities, though I was getting better.

Maverick took in a steadying breath and let it out slowly before he could speak. “I heard a rumor recently and it’s been bothering me. I need you to confirm whether what I heard is even possible.”

Astrid pulled her knees under her, sitting lotus-style as she faced her brother. I recognized the meditative posture with some chagrin. Bea had started me on a yoga program when my powers resisted all other calming techniques. Maverick’s insistence on joining me had done a lot more for me than the stretches and breathing exercises had. Just being in his presence was like draping a blanket over my shoulders, warmth that held the cold at bay.

“Okay,” she said slowly. “What’s the rumor?”

“That winter faeries can perform a type of blood magic, even without being blooded by vampires. Is that true?”

Astrid grimaced. “Yeah, it’s true.”

“Really?” Maverick seemed surprised.

Astrid nodded. “It’s dark as hell, but it does happen. Without that spark of death in you, performing blood magic involves taking a life. Using blood magic is illegal for a reason.”

“But in theory Janara could use your blood or Tally’s in a spell and hurt either one of you?”

Astrid nodded gravely. “Uncle Fox told me about a weapon that can curse his family—it’s like this dagger made out of bone. Janara keeps it on her at all times, just in case. He told me to avoid getting stabbed with it if at all possible.”

I could practically hear Fox saying the words and fought not to roll my eyes. The man was still a pretentious bastard, always smirking and acting superior. But my irritation gave way quickly to fear. If one family-cursing bone dagger existed, it was likely that the one Aurea possessed was the real deal. I realized, with a pang of loss, that I’d been praying that Aurea’s threat had been empty, because now she really did have me over a barrel.

Maverick and I exchanged a solemn glance. His irises flickered briefly to that hellish color, but the rage dimmed quickly. He knew the score too, and didn’t want to make a bad situation worse. I could have kissed him for that.

“What’s going on?” Astrid pressed. “Are you two in some kind of trouble?”

“Always,” Maverick responded, plastering over the awkward moment with one of his trademark smirks. “You should know that about me by now, sister mine.”

“Is there something else I can help with or did that answer your question?” she frowned.

“One more thing,” Maverick said. “Have any of you ever heard of some kind of vampire god? Is that a thing?”

He directed the question at Rook this time, who stared back, unsmiling. The kid looked paler than usual, owing to the hex placed on him centuries ago. The binding that kept him inside the castle was wearing off slowly, but he still couldn’t stay away from the castle for more than a day or two. Fox estimated it would take around six months for the curse to go away completely. He’d be heading home tomorrow evening and he’d be trapped in Blood Rose for the next few days to balance the magical drain on his body.

Rook shook his head slowly. “Not that I know of. At least, we don’t have a deity like your goddess. My line was supposedly descended from the first vampires, which is why we’re considered the public face of vampire kind.”

“These first vampires, were they just like modern ones? Could they do anything extra?”

Rook’s eyes narrowed. “Why are you asking?”

“I had a nightmare,” Maverick lied. “Just trying to assure myself I’m watching too many horror flicks late at night. Was it ever possible for vampires to...” He paused floundering, unable to find the words. I finished for him.

“Does Dracula compare in any way to vampires that are thousands of years old?”

Rook chewed his lip, thinking. “I’m not sure. There are rumors that some vampire powers had a basis in fact, but it would have been so long ago that there aren’t any

written records I could point to. It's mostly rumor and conjecture."

Astrid cleared her throat, shrinking under the suspicious stare that Maverick turned her way. She raised her hands in surrender.

"Don't hex the messenger."

"What more do you know, Astrid?" he asked.

"I think you should call Aunt Celestine. She's mentioned the sort of thing you're talking about."

Maverick stared at her in unflattering shock for a moment before he burst out, "You've been talking with Celestine? When? How?"

Astrid winced at his tone and volume. "Ouch. Could you tone it down, Mav? That hurt."

Maverick mouthed at her soundlessly for a moment before grimacing and amending his tone. When he spoke, his voice came out slowly and quietly, enunciating each word.

"Why and how are you talking with Celestine?"

"By phone. She's entitled to a little contact with the outside world, or she'd go insane within a few weeks. I wrote to her not long after I turned, asking her for more details about her vision she'd seen that caused her to... well, do what she'd done to the others and tried to do to you. I just wanted to understand why she did it."

"And?" Maverick continued, his eyes angry again. As far as I understood, Celestine Depraysie was like Public Enemy Number One.

“And what I got back sounded insane,” Astrid continued.

“What did she say?” Maverick asked.

Astrid shook her head. “I think you really need to hear it from her own lips. I can call someone and get you a meeting with her.”

“Not yet,” Maverick said. “At the moment, we have bigger fish to fry. We’re going out. Don’t wait up for us.”

Before I could protest, Maverick seized me by the hand and dragged me bodily from the coven house and out into the cool evening air.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Someplace safe. We need to talk.”

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Maverick

“I can’t believe this,” I muttered, tapping the manilla folder spread out on Tally’s kitchen table. “How the spell did Aurea get it in my car? Her aura should have set off every ward in the coven house. The warning shots alone would leave her extra crispy.”

Taliyah pursed her lips in distaste but didn’t comment. I knew she personally disapproved of some of the nastier traps I’d set on the property, but she couldn’t complain. Her job had net us both a lot of enemies, and I’d rather turn a rampaging werewolf into a grease stain than risk harm to any of the people I cared about.

“Could we refrain from talking about justifiable homicide?” she asked with a wince. “As much as I’d like Aurea to get what’s coming to her, I can’t condone revenge. We have to do this the right way. And besides, the boys should be home soon. They don’t need graphic details about what your magic is capable of.”

That was fair enough, I supposed. Her kids seemed to accept what we both were at face value, but that wasn’t the same as understanding it. There were aspects to Tally’s position that they couldn’t begin to grasp. Parts of her job were so frightening it would give them nightmares for years to come. She stood as a stalwart shield against it, keeping the worst details of our world away from sensitive eyes and ears.

Taliyah bent to check the casserole in the oven. The French toast casserole smelled amazing. I had a hunch Poppy had baked it. She’d been horrified to learn Tally rarely had time to eat a cold-cut sandwich, let alone make something filling and nutritious. As I understood it, Poppy had been prepping meals for Tally ever since, taking the

worry off Taliyah's shoulders.

Okay, I could grudgingly admit Poppy was a decent person. I'd never eat crow in front of my cousin, but I could finally see what Wanda liked about her. She was a kindly little barnacle, latching onto the people she cared about and refusing to let go.

It was admirable, even if it wasn't smart. Loving people made you vulnerable. In our business, that could be deadly.

"Be that as it may, Aurea's trespassing should have been noted. How did she weasel around our wards?"

"Mirrors," Taliyah answered, leaning one hip against the counter. She had oven mitts ready when the casserole was through baking. "We got to Blood Rose through a mirror. She's got a talent for that kind of magic, right?"

"Right. So?"

"So, the rearview mirror is still a mirror. It's big enough to slip the folder through if she got creative. It's about the size of a mail slot."

It wasn't often that I wished my beautiful wife was wrong. If she was correct, it meant I had even more work to do this week than I'd initially thought. On top of stitching spellwork for Wanda, catching bad guys for Tally, and tutoring Astrid on potions, I now had to set up wards on every car that the coven owned. If Aurea could toss a folder into my car through the mirror, she could toss in a grenade just as easily. I didn't want to become red mist in the front seat of the car, leaving a twisted hunk of metal for someone to deal with.

I cursed under my breath. "Perfect. Just perfect. More warding."

“Don’t be so hasty,” Tally responded. “I’d rather send word through the Council that people need to monitor their mirrors with cameras, if possible. If we can catch her in the act, there’s a chance this entire farce could end without bloodshed.”

Not likely. Even if the headmistress was arrogant enough to stroll into the Hollow, she wouldn’t leave it in one piece. No one threatened my family without consequences, and I had the receipts to prove it. Anyone who’d ever hurt someone I loved was dead.

“I’m warding your place. That’s non-negotiable.”

Taliyah rolled her eyes, but couldn’t quite hide her smile. “Worry wart.”

“As your husband, I take threats to your life seriously. If that knife is the genuine article, it would kill you instantly.”

“And you,” she said quietly, fiddling with one of the oven mitts. She wouldn’t meet my eyes directly. “The bond could drag you down with me. Maybe you should—”

I pushed away from the table, crossing the room in two long strides. Taliyah’s breath caught when I caged her in against the counter. I captured her pointed chin and tugged her face up, forcing her to look at me.

“Don’t finish that sentence. I don’t care what the bond costs me. Keeping you safe is worth whatever price I have to pay.”

Taliyah blinked rapidly, tugging her chin out of my grasp so she could turn away from me. I let her. She’d never forgive me if I watched her go to pieces. “I don’t understand that.”

It’s because I love you, woman, I wanted to scream at her. Was she blind? Could she

really not see what was only inches in front of her face? But the words got lost somewhere between my brain and my lips. What came out was an underwhelming, “I know.”

Tally risked a glance up at me, her expression almost shy beneath all the bluster. I’d never wanted to kiss her more than I did at that moment. Any vulnerability she showed was a gift. She cleared her throat awkwardly and pretended to tuck a lock of loose white hair behind one ear to disguise the single tear track she wiped away.

“Okay, this has officially gotten uncomfortable. How about we get back to that folder.” She breathed in deeply and then nodded, like she’d gotten ahold of herself. “What’s inside? You didn’t say.”

“Because I haven’t looked. It’s a large Manilla folder sealed closed with witch wax. I recognized Blood Rose’s crest on the seal.”

The spell was loosely knit, and I only needed a fraction of my power to unravel the working. The scarlet wax peeled away with unnatural ease, leaving an ordinary manilla folder behind. I flipped the folder open and almost immediately wished I hadn’t. I wasn’t even sure what I was looking at. The shape in the photo was mottled dull red and purple, and so hunched in on itself that it looked misshapen. I raised the glossy photo for her inspection.

“Any idea what’s going on here?”

Taliyah peered at the picture intently. There was a slight flinching around her eyes.

“It’s got to be Vivian,” she said at last. “I’d say they didn’t locate the body until it had gone through active decay. The positioning is odd too. It looks like she might have been bound with rope or a cord of some kind to keep her still.”

I flipped through the folder, skimming the contents. There were more photos, each more grisly than the last, and finally, a preliminary findings report.

“She was sedated,” I read aloud. “So, whatever did her in didn’t make her suffer long. That points to remorse. Maybe she knew the killer.”

Taliyah tapped her foot, starting up a fast, tense beat as she thought. She wanted to pace but refrained because her pacing usually worried me. Anything she angsted about enough to elicit that response was sure to be unpleasant.

“Or maybe the killer knew he was dealing with a witch and decided to keep her too groggy to cast. Did she die of an overdose? That’s pretty common with a kidnapping gone wrong.”

I skimmed the report, quickly locating the autopsy file. “Preliminary results indicate that she died from massive blood loss. Most of her blood volume was gone, judging from the lividity marks.”

What little she’d had left had pooled beneath her, darkening her skin from ivory to burgundy in places in only a matter of days. The longer I stared at the photos on the table, the sicker I felt. Vivian Grimsbane had been an annoying pain in my ass, a bully, an obstructionist piece of garbage, but she wasn’t a villain. She hadn’t deserved to die like she had.

If the description disturbed Tally, she didn’t show it. She tossed her snowy white braid over one shoulder as her timer went off. She bent to retrieve the casserole. Her voice was muffled when she said, “Exsanguination points to a vampire as our culprit.”

“Or someone trying to make it look that way.”

Taliyah waved a dismissive hand. “Occom’s Razor, Mav. The simplest explanation is usually the correct one.”

I hated it when she was right. A vampire was the most likely culprit, but I was desperately hoping for some other explanation. Because this revelation made Aurea’s choice to blackmail Tally make a hell of a lot more sense. If one of Valserek’s loyalists somehow survived the purge, we had a bigger problem than one dead witch.

The targeting of Vivian hadn’t been random. It was a message. And that message was: we’re still here. We still want to kill you. No one is safe. Put in that context, Aurea’s actions were more understandable. She had a disaster of Biblical proportions brewing in that hell pit she called a school. If Vivian’s death became a public spectacle, tensions between the vampires and witches would reach a fever pitch. Blood would run in the halls, and a lot of people would die. Maybe strong-arming Tally into the job had been the least messy way Aurea had found to deal with the mess. I didn’t want to have to pity Aurea. I didn’t want to consider what harebrained logic had led her to this juncture. But now that the idea had latched onto me, it wouldn’t let go.

“Okay, let’s say you’re right and it was one of the sick freaks who took Astrid,” I started.

“I don’t understand why Aurea came to me,” Tally almost interrupted.

I shrugged. “You’re a kickass detective.”

“But there had to be others closer to the school who could look into this. You know, someone on the same continent. Coming here seems a bit... extreme.”

Tally set the casserole carefully aside and began taking plates and cups down for breakfast. Her kids would be up soon, and she was making damn sure breakfast was

done right. It was one constant. Come rivers of blood or rains of toads, Tally would always prioritize her kids. It was one of the reasons I loved her.

I hid a grimace by swigging the glass of water she'd set in front of me. There was that word again. Love. It was an incredibly small word to mean so much. Just four honest letters that could destroy my world. She had to feel the same about me, right? I'd seen the way she looked at me. But I also knew she'd never confess before I did—if she even felt the same as I did. Yet, when I tried to say the word aloud, it stuck in my throat. If I was misreading the signs, I wasn't sure I could handle the fallout. No, it was better we stay as we were.

“That doesn't change the fact that you're the best at what you do,” I answered.

Tally turned and flashed me a brief smile that made my heart squeeze tight. “I'm glad you think so, but I'm no Columbo. There are people who have been in the crime-solving game a lot longer than I have.”

“But none of those detectives have your experience with the supernatural.”

“Fox does.”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, because that dickhead is always so helpful when he arrives in the Hollow. Come on, Tally, you're better than he is.”

Taliyah just smiled and began dishing up plates of casserole. She set a steaming piece in front of me and ordered, “Eat.”

“We have a case to solve.”

“We can think while we work. Food will get your blood sugar up and help you feel less groggy. You've been up all night. Eat, call into work, and then get some sleep.”

I didn't want to close my eyes. If something happened to her while I caught eight hours of sleep, I'd never forgive myself, if I lived to tell about it.

"I don't want to leave you," I admitted, hating how small my voice sounded.

"Then don't. I have a bed."

"Would we be sleeping together?"

A fetching shade of pink dusted her cheeks at that. She pursed her lips. "I think that's tempting fate. I have a sofa. I'll use that."

"No. I'll take the sofa. You take the bed."

"I don't mind the couch."

"I do." I nodded. "I want you to get a good rest in your own bed. I can ward the door. No one will disturb you."

"Not even you?"

"Well, I'm always disturbing, but you knew that when you married me. Now you're stuck."

She leaned her head onto my shoulder, playing with the food on her plate wistfully.

"Somehow, I'll learn to live with that."

Taliyah

As far as my officers were concerned, I'd come down with a case of food poisoning.

It was the best explanation I could think up—one that would get the department off my back long enough to solve Haven Hollow's latest disaster. I deserved a larger paycheck than I was getting, considering the scale and breadth of problems that went on in this town.

After breakfast was eaten, and my absence explained away, I passed out on the couch with Maverick. I hadn't intended to end up sprawled in a loose tangle of limbs on top of him. The light slanting through the curtains was the buttery yellow of mid-afternoon. When Maverick finally hauled himself off the couch an hour after I had, he looked mussed and utterly kissable.

Maverick propped himself on the doorway, watching me piece together the folder's contents like a jigsaw. I'd never been able to get a complete picture of a crime scene without spreading out the evidence to get an overhead view.

"Need some red string?" he offered with a wry grin. "I think Wanda might have some. Though she's probably ready to crucify me for skipping out on work."

"Sorry," I muttered under my breath. "This should still be here later if you want to clock in. I don't want to cause trouble with your family."

Maverick waved a hand, as if batting the very notion out of the air. "I've already paid back the debt I owed Wanda. Anything I do now is voluntary. I'm just an employee,

and I have paid time off. She can complain, but it doesn't change the facts. I'm staying here to help. If she doesn't like it, she can fire me and hire someone else. But if she does, there goes half the revenue stream."

"Because you're an enormous flirt and you flatter all the customers, so they keep coming back to see you," I said sourly.

He laughed. "Don't tell me that makes you jealous. Flattery is easy. Feelings are hard."

Boy did I know it. There'd been a moment when I woke where I felt absolutely no tension. My head had been pillowed on Mav's chest, my body was only half-covered in a blanket, and there was a crick in my neck, but none of it had mattered. Because he was here. Because he'd cared enough to stay. I knew anything coming for me or my boys would have to go through him first.

I chewed my lip, guilt churning in my stomach. Maverick wanted to come off as aloof, but I'd seen the seedy underbelly of his life. He craved approval the way a plant craved water. He'd been starved of affection his entire life, and now he had a family. He wouldn't do anything to jeopardize that intentionally. The only person who mattered more to him was... me.

"Are you sure?"

Maverick pulled out a chair and sat, giving me a hard look.

I sighed. "Okay, you're sure, but I'm still not convinced that this is a good idea."

"We're tracking down a murderer with enough balls to murder the daughter and heir apparent of one of the most powerful high witches in Europe. Of course it isn't a good idea. If we were smart, we'd find a nice hole to cozy up in and pull it in with

us.”

“Touche,” I said with a sigh. “Okay, let’s look through this. I think Aurea mentioned an address at some point. That would be a good place to start.”

It took around five minutes of shuffling papers to find where Aurea had scrawled an address. I checked it against the maps on my phone and, to my surprise, it came up with ease. The street view was of a three-story McMansion on a tree-lined avenue. It punctuated the looping cul-de-sac like an exclamation point. The exterior had been remodeled, but if you looked closely, you could still see the fire damage on the far side. I exited out of the search quickly, turning the screen off.

Maverick noted the hasty backtrack and raised an eyebrow. “Find something?”

“Maybe,” I hedged. “It might be nothing. We shouldn’t get too excited about it.”

His eyes narrowed on my face, and he scooted closer to me, leaning in to get in my space. The kiss came without warning and was so sweet and intoxicating that he was able to pluck the phone from my fumbling fingers.

“Mav, don’t,” I protested weakly. “I don’t want to upset you. Besides, you don’t know the code.”

“It’s Cain’s birthday,” he said without looking up. “December 16, 1973.”

I opened my mouth, closed it, and then contented myself with a scowl. “You were spying on me.”

“No, I watch you sometimes. There’s a difference.”

“Oh yeah?” I asked. “What’s the difference?”

“I observe you in order to find ways to make your life easier. Spying implies I’m poking my nose into things you don’t want me to know. But you’ve unlocked your phone dozens of times in front of me, so I don’t think this one counts.”

A fluttery feeling went through my belly at his casual admission. He was taking this husband thing a hell of a lot more seriously than Jonathan ever had. I’d never had someone who wanted to take trouble off my plate, instead of shoveling it on.

Maverick went very still when my phone opened to the search. His face blanched, and his hand tightened around my phone until the case creaked in protest. He managed to let it fall from his fingers with a visible effort and closed his eyes, sucking in deep lungfuls of air.

“Rupert’s mansion,” he hissed. “Fuck...”

“It’s not Rupert’s mansion anymore. You killed him,” I corrected. “Someone else is in charge and I need to get in contact with them. I want to feel out the room. It’s possible that this has been done without the new leader’s knowledge.”

“Unlikely,” Maverick muttered.

“I’ll try to be the optimist in the room. We’ll give them a call and see if we can schedule a meeting. I’ll update Aurea somehow, and that might appease her itchy trigger finger.”

It wasn’t a guarantee of safety, but it was a better plan than I’d had twenty-four hours ago. I just had to talk down a group of murderous vampires who’d already attempted to kill two people I was sworn to protect and indirectly caused my brother’s death.

Happy thoughts, Tally, I thought.

But the only one I could come up with was the whole place burning down to the ground with the bloodthirsty psychos trapped inside. I could roast marshmallows around the bonfire with my kids when the screams died down. There was a happy thought. Homicidal, but still happy.

Maverick switched to the keypad and began to dial a number, signaling me to wait when I asked who he was calling. When the phone began to ring, he turned on the speakerphone and set it down between us. A few moments later, an annoyed woman's voice answered.

"You have some nerve calling me at this hour," Wanda said, trying to growl the words. They came out thick with sleep, ending up closer to a throaty purr. Wanda had been forced to pretend she was a full vampire for a while now. "Taliyah, you're a friend, but I swear to the goddess..."

"Tally didn't call you, cousin mine. I did. I need to speak to Lorcan."

That succeeded in shutting her up. If she'd been present, she probably would have stared. I know I was. Maverick requesting Lorcan's presence was unheard of. Wanda's beau tolerated Maverick's presence in the coven. Maverick only refrained from hexing Lorcan because he was teaching Astrid the finer points of being a vampire.

"I'm sorry, I think I might be having a fever dream," Wanda said eventually. "Did you ask for Lorcan?"

"Yes, kick him awake. I need to talk to him."

Wanda paused, then said, "Okay. I'll be right back. He's in the basement and there's not a lot of signal down there. I don't want to drop the call. This is one that I just have to hear."

“Fine,” I said, cutting across Maverick before he could lob a sharp retort at Wanda. “We’ll wait.”

There was a stretch of empty air. I almost hung up after five minutes of air whooshing past the receiver. Then, at last, the phone on the other end rattled and Lorcan’s Irish brogue came through the speakers.

“You need me, hmm?” Lorcan said, with an edge of amusement in his tone. “I’m sorry to have to disappoint you, but I am a one-woman vampire, warlock. You’ll have to keep your pining to yourself.”

Maverick let out the rough approximation of a growl. “Don’t flatter yourself, Lorcan. Even if I were so inclined, I’d do better than you.”

Lorcan laughed, a sound so infectious that it made me smile in spite of our current predicament. “Alas, I have been rebuffed by a Depraysie yet again. What seems to be the problem? And is it really so urgent you had to wake me from a death sleep to have this conversation?”

“You bet your ass it’s urgent.”

“Explain.”

“Tally has a case of a murdered young woman on her desk. Jane Doe was killed by a vampire, and all signs point to someone in your former clan as the responsible party. You still have contacts there, so I need you to get Tally a meeting.”

Everything he’d said was technically true, if you squinted. Vivian had been killed by a vampire and Aurea’s spells pointed toward the Portland vampire clan. Maverick had left a lot of the story open to interpretation, which would put anyone we interviewed off the scent of what we were trying to solve. I didn’t like playing with

my cards so close to my chest, but for my kids' sake, I'd do it.

Lorcan sucked in air through his teeth. "My, that is a predicament. I regret to inform you that I've burned most of my bridges with my former clan, but I might be able to find someone who would take pity on me. I will call when I wake for the night. Is that acceptable?"

Maverick looked unhappy, but he eventually nodded. "That's fine. Text this number with the date, time, and location of whatever meeting you can get us."

"Taliyah's number and not yours?" Lorcan asked.

"I doubt they want someone like me in their stronghold after magic nearly burned the whole thing down."

"Indeed not," Lorcan said with a chuckle. "I'll keep you informed as things progress. For now, I am going back to bed."

"Fine," Maverick said, and punched the 'end call' button before I could thank Lorcan for his help.

Maverick didn't say anything for a moment. I took his hand, feeling fine tremors running through his fingers. He was keeping it off his face, but I knew he was scared.

"You're not coming with me," I said gently.

He looked over at me then. "Like hell I'm not."

"Mav, you've taken care of me during this debacle. It's my turn. Stay here and protect my kids. I'll be able to rest easy if I know you're here."

“Tally.”

“Please,” I stopped the argument that was ready on his tongue. “I’m asking you to do this one favor for me.”

He breathed in deeply. “I...” he trailed off, expression hopelessly lost. His eyes bored into mine, trying to communicate the sentiment without words.

“I know,” I said, a small, sad smile touching my mouth. “Me too.”

We didn’t say the words. We didn’t have to.

We already knew.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Taliyah

“William is the clan leader, so I understand why you invited him but...” I started, tapping my foot impatiently on the brake, inching my cruiser toward the intersection with excruciating slowness. The light had only been red for a few moments, but it felt like a relative eternity, given what was at stake if I failed.

I shot the man in the passenger’s seat the best glower I could manage while also observing traffic laws. The wattage must have been pitiful, because he didn’t even flinch. He seemed more concerned with sweeping his golden hair out of his face, securing it in a tail at the base of his neck. Or maybe Lorcan had just been inured to a woman’s wrath by dating Wanda. Six of one, half a dozen of the other, really.

“But why the hell did you bring,” I jerked my thumb over my shoulder, indicating the seat behind me. I kept silently willing the light to turn green. “Him, with you?”

The vampire in question gave me a dirty look from the backseat. With only streetlights for illumination, his eyes appeared as black as a night sea. His auburn hair was a striking contrast to the ivory of his skin. And I had to constantly remind myself that he was old enough to have been the root of my family tree. Rook Thorne was a four-hundred-year-old man trapped in a co-ed’s body. He looked like a disgruntled college student, not a perturbed immortal. He was older than Lorcan, who was physically twenty-something years his senior.

“I have a name.”

“Rook is an alias, not your legal name,” I pointed out. “Would you like me to call you

Chesley?”

His scowl deepened, and his brows pushed together as he considered me. I wasn't sure what he could read of my expression from the rearview mirror, but he must have caught something. He straightened, the petulance easing out of his posture as he came to a conclusion. He looked concerned, rather than annoyed. Which was exactly why I hadn't wanted to bring him along. You didn't survive for four centuries without being perceptive, and I'd dropped too many hints about my mission already. Aurea would take it out on my family if she found out I'd shared with anyone but Maverick.

“Chess is fine,” he said in as neutral a tone as he could manage.

William observed the exchange with interest, and I could practically see him filing it away for later. Wanda's brothers were all as intelligent and willful as their sister, but with the added benefit of age. William and his twin, Amos, were over a century older than Wanda, who was already ‘middle-aged’ as a witch in her one hundred and forties. There were times when I was grateful to have smart cohorts. But this wasn't one of them.

Lorcan, thankfully, seemed oblivious to the tension and answered the original question honestly. “Astrid wants to help. She was quite insistent, in fact. Since she is currently occupied with lessons with Bea, she sent her beau in her place. She believes his family name might hold some sway with the new leader of the Portland clan.”

Which was entirely possible. The Thorne Clan of vampires had been one of the oldest and most violent in Europe's history. Most vampires in the western world could trace their bloodlines back to the Thornes at some point. They'd also been the ones to incite their bloody conflict with witches when Robertus Thorne tore Alixia Grimsbane's throat out. Now an eerie echo was playing out beneath the flagstones of Blood Rose. A vampire had attacked Vivian, possibly on the Thorne's behalf.

“Let me guess,” I drawled. “Astrid used big puppy dog eyes to get her way?”

“And a pout, yes,” Lorcan said with an indulgent smile. For a moment, his face practically glowed with affection. As irritating as Lorcan could be sometimes, I’d never call him anything less than a doting father figure.

“Of course she did,” I sighed, flicking on my turn signal.

The sentiment would have been sweet in any other circumstance. Astrid had been trying to settle into the role of a sister-in-law in a spectacularly awkward fashion that was nonetheless cute. But by helping me, she was putting one of the last people Aurea wanted in on the secret in the middle of the investigation. I wasn’t sure how to forbid Rook from coming without giving more away, so here we were, nearly to the newly refurbished Portland vampire headquarters.

“So, who took Rupert’s place?” William began conversationally, thankfully moving on from the fraught moment. “I’ve been busy settling everyone into the Hollow. I haven’t had much time to do politicking. Not that I wanted much to do with that lot to begin with.”

“Cecelia Pleasant,” I answered. “Better known as Cici. A lot of paperwork had to be signed to get her in charge of the clan’s assets. A man named Joseph was the leader in the interim, according to the sources I still have in Portland.”

“You have sources who can tell you when vampire leadership changes in a different county?” William asked, raising a skeptical brow at the back of my head.

“No, but I have friends in Portland PD and at City Hall. All I had to do was ask an old friend about a tip off involving corporate crime and I got an overview of their public records.”

Lorcan winced. “Getting the human police involved could get messy, Chief Morgan. Are you certain that was wise?”

No, it wasn’t. I hated that I might have put an old friend in danger by involving him in this monster madness. But my only other option was to put my children in jeopardy, and that was an unacceptable risk. Detective James Birch could take care of himself. Sean and Charlie couldn’t.

“I don’t see that I have much choice. Walking in blind is too dangerous. If our culprit is in there and this Pleasant woman goes to bat for him, we could be stonewalled for a while. Blackmail isn’t my preferred method for dealing with criminals, but it’ll do in a pinch. Hand over the murderous bastard and I won’t hand over evidence of embezzlement.”

Lorcan looked like he wanted to argue with me, but shut his mouth quickly when we rounded a corner into the lazily curving cul-de-sac. He let out an audible swallow, eyes scanning the McMansion with apprehension. Apparently, Maverick wasn’t the only person afraid to return to this house.

I undid my belt and was out my door before any of them had a chance to pull me back and talk some sense into me. By the time they caught up with me, I was already halfway up the drive, ignoring the crosshairs I could feel on my back. There were a few good places a gunman could set up around the yard, and Miss Pleasant would have been foolish not to have a few stationed in anticipation of our arrival. You didn’t greet a royal Sidhe and the leaders of opposing vampire clans unarmed. If everyone played nice, we would leave here untouched. If not...

“It looks like they went for a more gothic aesthetic,” Lorcan commented as we mounted the stairs to the patio. There was a lot of gorgeous architecture going on, but I couldn’t pay it much mind.

“I think the gargoyles are a bit much,” Rook said dryly. “It looks like a tacky haunted castle attraction.”

“You would know a thing or two about that, wouldn’t you, Mr. Thorne?” a woman’s silken voice said from the open doorway. Her voice preceded her like an eerie echo, and didn’t seem to match the person it belonged to.

I recognized Cecilia Pleasant from the handful of photos James was able to acquire of her on short notice. She was a little thing. I might have mistaken her for a gangly teen if I didn’t know better. She was slim and nearly androgynous. The slacks and man’s dress shirt she wore didn’t help with the confusion. Her eyes were almost abnormally large, fixed like blue marbles in her face. A mop of blonde Shirley Temple curls barely brushed the tops of her ears. Her freckles were so picture perfect someone could have dotted them onto her cheekbones with a paintbrush. Her petal mouth was stretched in an unpleasant and incongruous smile as she stared at Rook.

Rook smiled back, though it visibly cost him. The reminder of his imprisonment at Blood Rose was still a sore spot.

“Yes, I know a thing or two about castles,” he said. “If you’re going to commit to the bit, you might try a little harder. Or at least make it fun. Think of all the families you’d attract if you installed a moat.”

Cici’s smile twisted into a tiny smirk. “Cute. But I don’t recall inviting you here, Mr. Thorne. I was assured by my personal assistant that I would be meeting with representatives of the Winter Court of the Sidhe and the Haven Hollow clan. I’m afraid you’ll have to wait in the hall.”

“But—”

Something hate-filled and slightly mad flashed through Cecelia’s eyes for just a

second. I was reminded forcibly of every Childsplay movie I'd ever seen and took a half-step in front of Rook, putting my body between his and hers. She craned her neck to keep him in sight, paying no attention to me whatsoever.

"I don't care who your father is, Chesley Thorne," she hissed. "You are not welcome here. Wait in the hall or I will have you forcibly removed."

Rook tensed, as though debating whether to disregard the order or not. I gave a slight shake of my head, and said aloud, "That's fine. He's mostly here for my sister-in-law's peace of mind. He'll let her know when we leave here safely won't you?"

Rook frowned, but nodded. "I'll wait."

"Lovely," Cici said, beckoning us forward. She wore leather riding gloves, which looked out of place with the rest of her ensemble. Though I wasn't sure why I was expecting cohesion, from the leader of a murderous vampire mob. "Follow me."

We did. Cici led us down endless white tiled hallways and past well-appointed bedrooms and office spaces. The trademark red that the clan favored was everywhere. The draperies and hall runners were like eye-catching smears of scarlet. It felt like a very ritzy crime scene, complete with dead people. Dozens of them poked their heads out of rooms to stare at us as we passed. None of the looks were friendly. A few even muttered threats at Lorcan under their breath, not caring if we heard.

"It seems like I've lost most of my luster," Lorcan said cheerfully, as a vampire woman named Adrian flipped him the bird. "Wanda will be thrilled. She hated how many female admirers I had with my previous clan."

"Now you only have one beautiful woman hanging off you," William drawled. "However will you cope?"

“I’m certain your sister will help me assuage the heartache,” Lorcan said, winking at William. He nimbly dodged the elbow William aimed at his rib and laughed.

“Hush,” I said.

On any other day, the banter would have been reassuring. I’d used gallows humor as a coping mechanism for most of my career, so I couldn’t bitch when someone else did so as well. It was a little reassuring when the men at your back could bark out a defiant laugh while staring humanity’s worst tendencies and appetites in the face. Right now, it was just a distraction. Any little detail could be useful in unraveling the mystery surrounding Vivian’s death.

We ascended the staircase to the second floor, turned, and then followed Cici Pleasant into a corner office that overlooked part of the grounds. The wisteria trees outside swayed in the wind, a splash of pale color against the star-spangled night. The office itself wasn’t anything to write home about. Unlike the distinguished and pretentious Rupert, Cici seemed to opt for utility. You could have plucked the grey carpet, oak desk, and floor-to-ceiling windows out of any CFOs office.

Cici directed the three of us to sit in the padded chairs opposite the desk before taking a seat herself. The shine of her leather riding gloves under the office lights was almost distracting as she drummed her fingers against the wood.

“So,” she said slowly. “How may I assist you, your highness?”

Taliyah

I opened my mouth, fishing around for any of the very reasonable opening statements I'd been prepared to make.

There was something about Cici Pleasant that threw me off, and it wasn't the entirely inappropriate name she'd chosen for herself. I had a feeling it had been pulled straight from a soap opera and plastered onto fake documents. Forged papers were a necessity in the monster world, no matter how uncomfortable that made the law officer in me. There were some things humans just couldn't be allowed to know, and the existence of vampirism was one of them.

Cici raised an elegant finger and wagged it at me, forestalling any conversation starter I might have whipped out. "Now, before you start talking, I wanted to make a few things clear. The only reason I allowed you into my home is due to your title, Princess Olwen. Haven Hollow and its community are no friends of or to my clan. Since you invoked your royal lineage, I expect this matter has something to do with Winter."

My jaw snapped shut and my tongue tried to glue itself to the roof of my mouth. I was realizing, far too late, that I might have made a miscalculation in coming here. Invoking Olwen's name always made me want to spit, but in matters of politics, it usually cut through all the red tape and got me closer to the damn point. People were usually intimidated by me enough to let me get away with it.

But not Cici Pleasant. With just a handful of sentences, she'd utterly neutered my plan of attack, leaving me floundering. Cici watched the indecision play out over my

face with a smirk before prompting, “Well?”

“It... may have something to do with the Winter court,” I hedged.

“May?” Cici repeated, narrowing her eyes. “You decided to contact me on a suspicion that one of my vampires may have wronged someone in your court?”

I felt heat rising up the back of my neck, shame and impotent fury battling for dominance in my head. Cici had me, and she knew it. I was in a corner, and anything other than a fabrication would conceal my true reasons for being here. I’d been caught with my metaphorical pants down and in that moment, I hated her for it.

William rescued me, clearing his throat to draw Cici’s attention. She turned toward him, her neck swiveling like a malfunctioning marionette. It looked utterly inhuman, and I fought back a shudder. I’d gotten used to a lot of weirdness from the Hollow, but I was beginning to realize there was always going to be stuff out there that shocked or disturbed me. This vampire was among them.

“Princess Olwen has appointed herself a guardian of the Hollow, so any crime that goes on in this region is under her purview, Miss Pleasant. Additionally, my clan is closely allied with Winter. We have pledged our service in her defense if she is ever attacked and in return, we enjoy her protection. I’d say that makes anything we’re forced to deal with a Winter problem.”

I could have kissed William. He’d said what he had with a smile and so much blithe confidence that even I believed it.

Cici raised a brow. “Is that so?”

“It is,” I answered.

What he'd said was technically true. I had a duty as their police chief to protect them, which meant the Winter court was involved. My enemies had attacked the Hollow more than once, and every vampire available had taken to the streets to slay my enemies. There had been no formal bargain struck between us, but if I survived Aurea, I would be sure to remedy the situation. I owed everyone on the Council my life more than once over. They deserved whatever help I could give them now and in the future.

Cici pursed her lips but accepted the explanation. She reached inside her desk, those large, disconcerting eyes fixed on us as she pulled out a short, ivory-handled blade, polish, and a cloth. A sharp scent wafted over to us, and I wrinkled my nose. She started cleaning the shining steel of the blade while we watched.

"And what is your grievance with me and mine, Mr. Depraysie?" Cici asked, poorly concealing the distaste she had for the name. Wanda had caused them no end of trouble, so it wasn't shocking the name left a sour taste in everyone's mouth.

"There's been a murder," Lorcan supplied. "A Jane Doe was found dead of exsanguination, and with clear signs she was fed on before death. When a vampire begins killing like that, it's because they've developed a taste for it. I don't have to tell you how disastrous it would be if the humans discovered our existence."

Which, again, was true. They were working with an incomplete picture, but they were selling the hell out of it.

Cici scowled. "And what does that have to do with my clan? If the body had been found in Portland, I would have been alerted. I have a vampire mortician on the payroll."

Now that was interesting. I knew most of the medical examiners that worked for the city. Had one of them been among the undead and I'd been too human to realize it at

the time? Or was this vampire employed at any of the myriad funeral homes in Portland?

“Scrying attempts have led us here,” I said.

William shot me a puzzled look. While he was technically a vampire now, he’d been a warlock once upon a time. He was a regular visitor in the Scapegrace sanctum house and had routine conversations with Wanda’s familiar, Hellcat. He would have heard if anyone in Scapegrace had done a spell for me. Except, perhaps, from Maverick.

Cici’s lip curled. “Accusations from witches. Very credible.”

“I trust my source,” I said quietly.

I might not credit Aurea with much, but I knew she wouldn’t lie about her daughter’s murder. She’d given me every scrap of evidence and resource she could find, and dumped it on my lap along with her ultimatum. She wouldn’t accuse the Portland clan when there were so many other scapegoats she could pursue closer to home.

“I need to know if any of your vampires have had trouble with control,” I said. “Or perhaps criminal records further back than my searches can find.”

Cici’s eyes went cold. “I haven’t signed any agreements with Haven Hollow, Princess Olwen, nor do I answer to the throne of Winter. I brought you here as a courtesy, and now I’m being accused of fostering a murderer.”

“Unless the bite radius matches your fangs, I’m not accusing you of anything,” I said on a shrug. “The reports actually lean toward a male. The bite radius was rather large. I’m just asking for your cooperation. Sheltering a killer will only come back to bite you. Literally.” She arched her brow at me and I continued. “The victim was sedated

before being fed on and was left to rot somewhere out of the way when the deed was done. That's premeditated murder. Anyone with a conscience would want justice to be served."

Cici laid the blade flat on the desk, fixing each of us with a hard stare. Her fingers curled around the ivory handle as though she were contemplating which of us she should lunge toward. Eventually the tension in her shoulders eased and she slapped on a patently false smile.

"Of course I want that, Princess. I'll have my personal assistant look into this. If you would be so kind as to leave your contact information with her, I'd be much obliged."

"I was thinking I could take a look around—" I began.

"—I'm sorry, but that will be impossible," she interrupted. "I have to think of my people's privacy. You may search the premises when you come back with a warrant." Then Cici stood up in another jerky motion and rounded the desk, offering me a hand and that infuriatingly fake smile. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Princess Olwen. I hope next time we meet under happier circumstances."

She seized my hand when I didn't move toward her, clasp my fingers hard enough that the tips of my fingers purpled. The oily polish she'd used on the blade clung to my hand when I pulled it back. I tried to rub it discreetly on my coat, but only managed to get a static shock for my trouble.

"I hope so too," I said, distracted by the subtle pulse of a stitched rune on my coat. Mav had tooled the leather for maximum protection, but maybe it was on the fritz. I'd never had a sigil just appear in response to my touch.

"Goodbye," Cici said brightly. "Be seeing you soon."

“I really hope not,” I muttered under my breath.

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Taliyah

I just stared.

And stared some more.

God, this couldn't be happening. Not today. Not after everything I'd gone through to get to this point.

Any yet, there she was, hunched over the table at the coven house, scanning the photos in the folder with horrified fascination. How the hell had she gotten to it? I'd left it in the warded fire safe Maverick had bought me for Christmas. Or Yule, as he called it. Nothing short of a rhino should have been able to crack it. But the pictures were still fanned out over the maple wood surface of the dining room table in all their grisly glory, out in public for anyone to see.

My first thought was that Maverick must have undone the wards and decided to consult her without my knowledge or approval. I banished that idea almost as soon as it formed. Maverick was many things, but disloyal to me wasn't one of them. I'd seen him face down high witches and winter queens alike to see that the people he loved came home safe and whole.

He wouldn't have shown the pictures to Astrid for two reasons: one, he hadn't okayed a consult with me, the lead investigator on the case. And two, he was absurdly protective of his little sister, though she'd proven she could handle herself. Mav wouldn't have subjected her to bloody reminders of what could have happened to her if Valserak hadn't decided to blood her, instead of leaving her corpse to rot. Which

meant she had to have taken it through some kind of faerie sorcery I had yet to encounter.

Astrid's already bloodless face blanched bone white when she spied me lurking in the kitchen doorway. She tried to shove the papers and photos back into the manila folder without success. All she managed to do was fold the toxicology and autopsy reports into failed origami. She quivered with tension, her copper hair starting to glow like fiber optics as her magic rose with her stress.

"I... uh... this isn't what it looks like, I swear."

"No?" I began coolly. "Because it looks like you took advantage of my absence to rifle through my personal files. Unless you're cleverly concealing a belated birthday card underneath that mess, I think it's exactly what it looks like."

Astrid chewed her bottom lip, careful of her fangs. It made her look younger than the eternally nineteen-year-old girl she appeared to be. A hint of panic flashed across her face when she heard Rook and William entering the house after me. Ah, to be young and in love again. I hadn't hung my hopes and dreams on a man for years, too jaded by Jonathan's numerous betrayals to trust that someone would stick around. Rook did seem to love Astrid back, so maybe they'd turn out alright.

If I didn't give in to my urge to turn Mav's sister into a popsicle, that is. I could feel the winter inside me, an arctic gale longing to rip free of my body and tear through the house, ripping appliances from the wall before plunging the entire house into a sub-zero wasteland of snow and ice. Normally, when I felt like this, I went to Poppy's. There was a lake miles from her property where I could let loose. But leaving meant giving Astrid more time with the files, and she'd already seen enough.

"Give that to me," I said, and could hear the howling wind in my voice. Astrid shrank back as though it had been a shout.

“I...”

“Now,” I snapped, a burst of winter escaping with the command.

Frost coated the floor and crept up the legs of her chair, coating her Converse sneakers in a layer of rime. She stared down at them, alarmed, before returning her apprehensive gaze to my face. Whatever she saw there seemed to frighten her because she closed the folder carefully before extending it in a shaking hand.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I could tell something was up. I felt Mav’s rage before you guys, uh...”

Oh, God. I’d forgotten in my haste to get Maverick out of the police station that we were entering a home where half a dozen skilled women could read auras. If Astrid had been paying close attention to us, had she felt...

Nope. I was not going down that line of thought. It could only end badly.

Astrid continued babbling justifications as I fought back the urge to blush. “And you got your winter on recently. Reading other nobles’ auras has been Fox’s recent homework for me. I knew something was wrong with you too... Then you both started asking about faerie weapons that can kill us, and I thought maybe there was something I needed to know. If Haven Hollow or my family is in danger I want to know. I can help.”

If it were any other case, I might have let her. The sentiment was sweet but badly timed. Astrid was smarter than most people realized. She was quieter than some of her witchy compatriots, with a keen sense of observation, and a strong sense of justice. Maybe, if she’d grown old enough, she could have become a good detective. Now she’d look utterly out of place in most stakeouts.

The urge to flash freeze the entire kitchen flickered like a tiny ember in my chest and died a quiet death. I was the adult in the room, and I thought I knew what was going on here.

“It’s not the knife meant for Fox,” I said quietly, pulling out a chair so I could sit next to her at the table. “You’re safe, Astrid. I’m not trying to keep something from you that could get you killed.”

Because that was exactly what Aurea had done to Astrid. Swept vital information under the rug because of the political optics, just the way she was doing with me. Vivian’s death had more political impact than the disappearance of a minor fae in the grand scheme of things, but it wasn’t an excuse. If Blood Rose hadn’t been allowed to become a festering pot of resentment and barely repressed bloodlust, Astrid would still be a witch. If the establishment had done its job, hell if it had even warned people, maybe she would still have a pulse. No wonder she’d gone looking for evidence. Everything she’d been through thus far told her she had to work on her own if she wanted to see any justice in the world.

Astrid relaxed into her chair... for a second. Then her mind supplied the obvious conclusion to my thought and her gray eyes went round.

“It’s the blade meant for you.”

“Yes,” I answered.

Astrid waved her hand over the bulging folder, dusting it with autumn leaves as her emotions rose once more. I grimaced. I hated cleaning that stuff up. Fox always blew debris everywhere, leaving a room messier than when he arrived.

“Was this Janara’s doing? Was this one of her prisoners? It looks like a cell.”

It was an easy lie. Something I could tell her to get her off my back. Janara wanted me dead, and she'd never shied away from killing extraneous personnel. But lying to Astrid was wrong. She'd been through enough. And if something happened to me, people deserved to know the truth.

"No, it's not Janara's blade."

Astrid frowned. "Then?"

"The knife is currently in Aurea Grimsbane's possession. She stole it from Janara."

A snarl ripped through the air just behind me and I turned in time to see Rook stalk into the room. He would have cut a more impressive figure if he'd been taller and covered in muscle. He was still damn scary as he was, dark eyes practically flaming with hatred at the mention of Aurea's name. Astrid wasn't the only one who had beef with the headmistress. The years of abuse Rook had suffered at the establishment's hands made Astrid's conflict look like a minor tiff.

"She did what? "

I winced. I hadn't meant to drag either of them into this. And it was now rapidly getting out of hand. This situation had to be handled now before it spiraled out of control.

"Aurea Grimsbane approached me to solve a murder at Blood Rose," I said in as calm a tone as I could manage. It was difficult with all the ears in the house. Maybe the witches wouldn't catch what I'd just said, but the vampires would. And the more people in on the secret, the greater the chance someone would leak the news. Then there'd be no stopping the frenzy.

"Blackmailed, you mean," Rook spat. "I know how that witch operates. She took the

knife to force your hand. This is punishment for interfering at her school, isn't it? Of all the selfish, egotistical..."

He trailed off into muttered obscenities. A petty part of me wanted to wave pom poms and cheer the slander. Aurea Grimsbane deserved that and more. But if I let him build up a head of steam, he might do something stupid, like call his father. That would spell disaster for my family.

"I'm not happy with her, but I understand why she did it," I began, but Rook didn't let me finish.

"If she didn't give a damn about the faeries, she shouldn't start pretending to give a shit now. Let me guess. It's a witch who was killed? That's why she cares. Only the precious witches merit any time or attention," he sneered.

"It is a witch," I confirmed. "And she was killed by a vampire. I think you know what that means."

That succeeded in shutting him up. He swayed a little and had to be steadied by Astrid's arm around his waist. Rook had been a hostage for years, roped in to keep the families from tearing each other apart. If witch blood was ever spilled, Rook's life was forfeit, even if he had nothing to do with the killing. He'd been released from that obligation recently, but the fear still had to be there.

"A blood war," he said quietly. "It will kick off another blood war."

Astrid worried her lip with her fangs, wincing when she wasn't careful enough. Her tongue swept out to catch a few ruby droplets before the cut sealed itself.

"I'm not rooting for a war but..." She glanced between us. "Why hasn't one kicked off? Isn't this the sort of thing that would do it?"

I'd been wondering that myself. Why hadn't Aurea Grimsbane gone on the warpath when she had every right under the law to do so? Someone had struck a blow not only to her heart but to her power as well by destroying her heir.

"Because I think she knows something we don't," I answered. "Perhaps with the faerie courts already in turmoil, she can't count on allies that could help her win the war. Or perhaps it looks like a less defensible position now that she knows faeries can be turned. Magic alone wouldn't be enough to gain the upper hand anymore."

Or maybe she's too tired and defeated and doesn't want the fight, a small voice in my head supplied. What would you do if it were Sean and Charlie?

That thought was so hideous that I refused to even entertain it. Anyone who even thought about hurting my kids would find themselves buried under an avalanche. And that was only if I was feeling merciful that day. There were a few creative uses of icicles I could find if I was really feeling vengeful.

"You might as well tell us the whole truth," Rook continued. "You know we'll investigate regardless."

I bit back a groan. They would, too. Their merry little foursome hadn't been able to keep their noses in their textbooks where they belonged. When presented with a dangerous mystery, they'd eschew all reason and charge in with all the confidence of youth. Or the arrogance of age, in Rook's case. The point was that they'd get themselves hurt or killed. And I couldn't put Astrid in that kind of danger again.

"The victim was Vivian," I said with a sigh.

"Oh, shit," Astrid said.

I nodded. "Vivian is Jane Doe. She appears to have been drugged and drained of

blood. The tests for sexual assault were negative, thankfully, but she was beaten before she died. The bite radius suggests a male perpetrator, but that's not a guarantee. Aurea wants this dealt with quickly and quietly. If I don't play her game, she's going to use the knife and damn the consequences. I don't think she's operating on all cylinders at the moment."

Rook took a step back, face going blank for a moment. I didn't think that the statement computed for him. Vivian Grimsbane of the unstoppable sharp tongue was gone, killed by one of his kind. Not one of his classmates, thank God, but still a vampire.

"I don't want you running to your dad," I said, aiming the warning at him this time. "That's exactly the sort of thing Aurea wanted to avoid when she brought the case to me."

"He deserves to know," Rook argued.

"He does," I answered with a nod. "But my kids are on the line, so don't test me on this. I will freeze you in a block of ice and shove you into Roy's industrial freezer if that's what I have to do to keep them safe. You don't have to breathe, so I doubt it would kill you, but I'm not gonna cry over any frostbite you get."

It was an empty threat. I wouldn't turn him into an ice cube. Though I might seal them into a house together with a layer of impenetrable ice and wards to keep Astrid from escaping. Let them be snowed in together for a weekend and see what happened.

Rook's jaw worked a few times. I doubted anyone but Astrid ordered him around. A hostage he might have been, but he was still the son of one of the most powerful vampires in Europe. He cast a surreptitious glance at Astrid. She looked pale, probably realizing that my death would also drag Maverick down with me. That

seemed to clinch it for him.

“I’ll stay quiet,” he said. “But only as long as you’re on the case, Taliyah. If something happens to you, I’m looking into it.”

I took a deep breath, desperately wishing it would settle my stomach. Fear had knotted my guts like balloon animals, and I was afraid one wrong move would break me.

“If something happens to me, I’d want you to look into it.”

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Taliyah

The variety of conflicting scents inside the plant nursery was giving me a headache.

Yes, I understood the theory behind the move from the Half Moon, but I still didn't like it. The nursery was open to the public, and would be easily breached by a hapless mundane who made the mistake of breaking and entering during a Council meeting. The Hollow had been lucky thus far, with most mundanes who'd been let in on the secret happily keeping their mouths shut. Our luck couldn't hold out forever, though. Someday, if we weren't careful, a bad egg would learn the secret and all hell would break loose. The dryads who ran the business could hide in plain sight, giving us ample warning if a mundane approached. Even a minute's notice would allow us to get our stories straight.

The smell was just so... strong in here. I probably wouldn't have noticed it only a year ago. I was becoming more fae by the day, and that scared the hell out of me. I could smell the flowers that bloomed in autumn and winter most strongly. Crocus. Winter's Heath. Witch Hazel. Snowdrops. It felt like someone had pried my mouth open and poured floral perfumes down my throat one after the other. The pounding beat in my temples echoed like a war drum in my ears. Could faerie queens develop migraines? I hoped not. It was one of the perks of my new, less human body. I had a lot less to fear from human maladies.

"Tally?"

Maverick's voice jerked me from my irritable haze, and I glanced up at him guiltily. He wasn't giving me a reproachful glare back, the way Jonathan had. He'd always

hurt me when I let my guard down, even for a second. A comment here. A sigh or snort there. It was impossible to make him happy. I'd thought it was some failing of mine that made him stray. He'd made me believe as much, using sex like a weapon to make his point. I couldn't get his voice out of my head. I was convinced there was still a demonic whisper hiding somewhere in my brain, carved into my skull from sheer repetition. It had been impossible to think of it as abuse when I couldn't even fully articulate the thoughts, let alone toss them back at my incubus ex. The mental screw Jonathan gave me was a hell of a lot harder to deal with than the physical acts he'd coaxed me into.

Maverick raised a hand hesitantly, offering his cupped palm. I leaned my face into his hand immediately, eyes fluttering closed. My stomach settled and I could breathe a little easier.

"Thanks," I whispered.

"Are you going to be okay?" Maverick asked, raising his voice to be heard over Wanda's shouting.

It took everything I had not to burst into a fit of hysterical giggles. No, I was not okay. My family was in more peril than ever, and no one could seem to come to a consensus about it. Half the Council was pitching a 'wait and see' plan, while others (Lorcan and Wanda especially) were advocating swift and harsh action. I was a fan of kicking down Aurea's door, shaking her until the truth spilled out, and then kicking her somewhere north of Siberia for daring to threaten my family.

Maverick sighed. "Okay, that was a stupid question. You're clearly at your wit's end. Is there anything I can do about it?"

Ah, Mav. Blunt and pragmatic when I needed him to be. He knew I didn't have the emotional bandwidth to explain what I was going through. He'd zeroed in on the

situation and offered what he could. It was all I could ask of him. Of anyone.

“What would you say if I asked you to hold me for a little while?” I whispered, my voice pitched so only he could hear. It was like spilling a winter wind directly into his ear. It was apparently an ability some winter Sidhe possessed and used to send messages. We had to be in close proximity for the sound to translate properly.

Maverick shivered, reaching up to grab his ear. He disguised the motion by pushing his hair back in a practiced fashion. The womanizing warlock had perfected the role of brooding bad boy over the years. It had worked on most women he’d seduced. There was a nagging fear he’d ghost me now that we’d slept together—or we almost had. His favorite parts hadn’t been involved though, so that might make him stick around for a while.

His hand cupped my cheek again, using the other to brace my waist and draw me in close. It should have been mortifying to cuddle him like a teen at a horror flick in a room full of irate monsters. I must have finally crossed my threshold for stress because my emotions had gone distant, the way they did when I was trying to cope. I had too few fucks to give to waste it on what Wanda might think of me snuggling with her cousin.

I felt our magic meet and touch briefly, an after-effect of what we’d done in his room. There was rarely a connection so intense as those caused by a sex act. The power built and grew, making my heart pound. I wasn’t sure what was happening between us. I felt like I should pull back and retreat to safe ground, but I couldn’t move. I didn’t want to move when he kissed me, soft and heartbreakingly chaste.

I wanted more. God help me, but I wanted more of Maverick. I’d sworn I wouldn’t let myself go there when we’d started this. I still wasn’t sure it was a good idea now. There was so much potential for heartbreak. I didn’t want to lose him. Didn’t want him to exit my life the way Jonathan had, moving on to someone else the moment my

back was turned.

His magic skimmed along mine like a fencer testing his opponent's blade. It felt faintly ticklish, just a quick burst of energy, but it still left me breathless. I was glad to see the deep, almost possessive heat in his eyes when he went in for another kiss. I normally didn't go for the caveman thing, but it worked for Maverick. I could see the desire to throw me over one shoulder and drag me back to the cave. At this point, I'd let him. It would feel so freaking good to forget everything for an hour or two.

"Better?" he asked.

"Sort of."

Did I tell him that being hot and bothered was preferable to the screaming panic that was currently trying to drown me? That I wanted to sprint out of here with him on my heels and not look back?

His eyes softened. "It's an improvement from a few minutes ago. I'll take that as a win."

So would I. Celebrating the little things could keep you from going stark raving nuts in our line of work. The job could be so bleak and demanding at times. Maverick's arms made me feel safe and warm in a way Jonathan's never had.

I let myself lean into Maverick and soak in the conversations going on around me without letting the fear deafen me to everything else.

"We can end this tonight if we go now!" Wanda raged at Roy. "I say we aim a volley of hexes at that miserable old bat!"

"And then what?" Roy fired back, looming over the comparatively diminutive

Wanda. He had considerable bulk to put behind his threat. I'd sooner fight a troll than a sasquatch. At least trolls were less intelligent, and you could get the drop on them. Yeti were a different breed entirely.

Fifi's hands flew to her hips in the clearest signal of 'backing my man' that I'd ever seen. Her eyes were hard when she stared Wanda down. The situation was going off the rails if the two were close to blows. I could see the signs of an impending brawl and wanted to stop it in its tracks.

"Roy's right," Fifi said. "What exactly is your plan if Aurea strikes back? Even assuming you succeed, she's not going to take an attack lightly. She'll attack Haven Hollow. Out you as a blood witch yet again, which will only bury this place in deeper and deeper political shit! You can't just barge in there and assault one of the most powerful head witches in Europe, Wanda!"

Wanda stepped out of the circle of Lorcan's arms. She'd gotten more comfortable showing affection with him of late, though they ribbed each other mercilessly afterward. I swore it was foreplay by now. They bickered and pretended they couldn't stand one another, only to rip each other's clothes off the second they had a private moment to do so. The gesture went a long way to how seriously Wanda was taking this whole thing. I suspected most of her ire was for Astrid, not me, but I appreciated the anger, nonetheless.

Tension crackled through the assembled council members. We all knew, without verbally acknowledging it, that this situation was going to be a catastrophe, no matter how it played out. If I succeeded, there was still the political fallout that came from going against a witch like Aurea Grimsbane. I wasn't convinced she'd out Wanda since she despised the vampires and wouldn't want to inflict them on another witch. But anything past that? Yes, I could imagine she'd be a huge pain in my ass from now on, no matter how this played out. And if this played out badly... if I died, well, that left them with an even larger problem. Even removing personal feelings from the

equation lost the Hollow two powerful pillars of the community. They couldn't make up for that loss easily.

I thought I'd have to put myself between Wanda and Fifi, who were posturing like pissy cats across the circle from one another. I wasn't sure what had gotten into them tonight, but I couldn't let the two women start slinging lust and/or magic at each other with so many bystanders nearby. In the end, I didn't have to step away from Maverick. It was Astrid who stepped in between the two women, hands out to stop them in their tracks. I could feel autumn magic swirling off her in waves, a nippy breeze that tickled your nose and sank lightly into your skin. A pleasant amount of cold to herald the Winter season before it arrived. Our courts should have been allies. Maybe, if I defeated Janara someday, we could be.

"Wanda, chill," Astrid said, fixing her cousin with a serious look. It was one she'd borrowed from her Uncle Fox. A mix of authority and irritation that had always raised my hackles.

"I will not chill, Astrid," Wanda shot back, using finger quotes around the word 'chill' for emphasis. "That old hag is threatening Taliyah, and by proxy, a member of my coven. I reserve the right to kill Maverick if he pisses me off. I'm not letting someone else take the first crack at it."

"I feel so loved," Maverick said, deadpan. I didn't have to look up to know he'd wear a neutral mask. He always did that when dealing with the other witches. There'd be a twinkle in his eye, though. He enjoyed being able to verbally spar with the others. It was one of the ways he showed love. He teased because he cared.

"Tell me you wouldn't be pissed if someone tried to kill me, Mav," Wanda continued. "If anyone is going to off me for being annoying, it will be you."

"True," Maverick said without a hint of shame. "I take your point, cousin mine."

“Fifi has a point too, though,” Astrid said. “You can’t go in there, Wanda. I’m not sure if Aurea will out you or not, but it’s still not smart. I’ve seen her warding. It’s impressive. She’d know we were coming a long time before we got to her front door. Not to mention what the rest of the school might do if they think the castle is under attack. We narrowly avoided a war because Uncle Fox sent people in to battle the turned faeries. That’s still fresh in everyone’s mind. You might be able to handle Aurea, but can you beat the vampires, demons, faeries, and angels that might join the fight? There should be at least a hundred students still in residence. Not everyone goes home on break. Some don’t have homes to go back to. Can you fight all of them for the chance to one-up Aurea?”

Wanda had the decency to retreat, hiding her sullen frown as she stepped backward into Lorcan’s embrace. She didn’t usually lean on him the way she did now. This whole affair must have struck a nerve for her. One named ‘Astrid.’ She’d never forgive Aurea for not finding the culprits sooner. If she had, Astrid might still be among the living. She and Maverick both blamed themselves for not stopping her murder.

“What do you suggest?”

Astrid chewed her bottom lip nervously. “I was thinking I’d go back to Blood Rose with Rook. He’s my adoptive sire, so he’s responsible for me. It won’t look weird if I go back with him. I might be able to find and destroy the knife.”

I wasn’t the only one who said no. Maverick practically shouted it, making Astrid wince. The sound rumbled through his chest and into me. He was pissed.

“Mav,” she started.

He shook his head. “No fucking way,” Maverick raged. “There is no way I am letting you go near that bitch, Astrid. You almost died last time because she couldn’t be

assed to do her damn job. If she finds out and decides you need to be dealt with, she's not going to strike to wound. She'll do it to kill."

Astrid looked like she wanted to argue with him. Her lips mashed into a stubborn line when I stepped away from Maverick, hands raised in a pacifying gesture. "We'll keep the idea in reserve. I'd be more comfortable sending Olga in since she knows the lay of the land. You're a night class student now. That means there are places you can't go."

Some of the hostility in Astrid seeped away, leaving her looking more sullen than angry. I was right, and she knew it. My objections were similar to Mav's but paired with the fact that I knew how she thought. The mindset of a teenager, paired with the fact that she was powerful, might make her arrogant. She'd be convinced she could handle this on her own and it might get her killed. But teen ego would make her charge blindly forward. Only by bringing logic in did I have a chance to change her mind.

"Aurea will know that Olga knows the truth," Astrid muttered. "It's hard to keep something like this under wraps. I still think my idea is the best one we've come up with so far."

And wasn't that just a kick in the teeth? Astrid wasn't wrong. So far, infiltrating the castle to find and destroy the relic Aurea had stolen from Janara was the least bloody option on the table.

I sighed. "I think we should all sleep on it. I'll keep my ringtone on, just in case someone comes up with some other idea overnight. I need to get back to my boys. Cain and Darla are babysitting for me while Chloe is out. I don't want to make them stay longer than they have to."

I owed the ex-ghost a favor. She'd shown up for me like clockwork in the past week,

despite the crazy hours I'd been keeping. Secretly, I thought it was because she wanted a few of her own children, but wisely kept that speculation to myself.

The meeting dispersed after that, but I felt Astrid's gaze on my back as I walked away, Maverick's arm slung around one shoulder. Maverick waited until we reached the car before speaking quietly.

"I want to keep an eye on Astrid. She's going to try something. She's got an insufferable do-gooder streak."

I laughed, climbing into the driver's side. Maverick took the passenger's seat without complaint, buckling himself in. Isis hooted at us both from the backseat, pleased by our return. Maverick's expression was soft when he reached through the bars of her cage and stroked her feathers.

"Yeah," I drawled. "No idea who she learned that from."

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Taliyah

Darla met us at the door with a wide smile on her face.

Cain's class ring looked huge on her comparatively bony fingers. She had to wear it on her thumb to keep it from slipping off and rolling into a gutter somewhere, never to be found again. It made me nervous that the vessel holding my brother's spirit could be snatched or smashed easily. Still, I shouldn't have been ungrateful because I'd never expected to talk to my brother ever again. As a medium, Darla could give me even more time with Cain. The day was coming when he'd have to return to the afterlife, so I'd squeeze every ounce of time I could while it was still available.

"Darla," Maverick acknowledged with a nod of greeting.

Darla let her hand slide up the doorjamb, striking what was supposed to be a provocative pose in the doorway. The sweatpants and t-shirt combo she wore robbed it of most of its effectiveness, though. I knew the clothing choice had been Cain's. He hated wearing skirts, even vicariously. Darla teased him about it relentlessly. My brother wasn't the most sexist cop I'd ever met, but I'd be lying if I said there wasn't a little schadenfreude going on. Now he got to see how life was when the shoe was on the other foot. It was a learning experience for any man.

Darla wiggled her hips at us. It was so outrageous that I almost laughed. Exhaustion and worry quickly doused the urge. I wasn't going to find much funny until my family was safe.

"How'd you know it was me, handsome? It could have been Mr. Grundy in the ring."

“The smile,” Maverick answered. “Cain is never cheerful.”

“Ah, true. Come in then.”

She kept her voice pitched low so that the kids wouldn’t hear. It was a wasted effort. I could hear the boys snoring on the couch from here. They always snored like chainsaws when they got sick. It answered the only pressing question I had for Darla. They sounded about the same as when I’d left. Not worse, but not better yet. I asked the question anyway. I had to be sure.

“How are the boys?”

“Asleep,” she replied, the teasing expression slipping as we followed her through the front hall and into the living room.

Charlie was sleeping on his back, sprawled like a starfish under his favorite blanket. Sean had curled on his side, head propped by one of the throw pillows Wanda had made for me. She claimed my house didn’t ‘pop’ the way it should. I had a bad feeling that one day she and Fifi would form an evil coalition to completely remake my home in their own image.

“Did they eat supper?” I asked.

The questions sounded rote, a liturgy that fell automatically from my lips. They were inane questions really, but the answers meant a hell of a lot to me. I wanted... no... needed my kids to be okay.

“Some,” Darla said. “Not much of an appetite, though. Cain bribed them to finish their vegetables, at least. They stayed up an hour past bedtime watching cartoons. Is that okay?”

Normally, that kind of permissiveness might have earned them both a mild scolding. Routines were important in my house. It gave us all structure and that was comforting. But tonight, I'd let it slide. Cain was their uncle, and uncles were supposed to sneak your kids candy and let them stay up late. At least he hadn't given them caffeine and let them play with water guns in the living room, the way our uncle had.

My smile was sleepy but genuine. "It's fine. Don't make it a habit, though."

Darla snapped off a cheerful salute. "You got it, Mrs. Grundy."

Mrs. Grundy was Darla-speak for someone being uptight and no fun. I could tell she didn't really mean it this time around. She was trying to be a bit of sunshine during a hard time, and it was noble of her. It wasn't her fault that I was padded with so much cynicism. But her optimism bounced right off my titanium-grade bad mood.

Darla teetered backwards in shock when I threw my arms around her and drew her into a hug. Even Maverick looked a little caught off guard when I did it. As a general rule, I didn't go in for casual intimacy. It seemed silly, in retrospect. I hadn't hugged Cain enough in life. So what if Darla and I weren't as close as family? Cain was here and I could hug them both, thanks to her gift.

"Thank you both," I whispered.

Darla's hand patted my back awkwardly. It didn't surprise me to see a little of Cain in her eyes when she pulled back. It was her voice when she spoke, but his inflection. I could see the minute differences in posture and expression.

"Are you okay?"

"No," I answered, giving them a final squeeze before I let go. "But I will be."

I had to believe that. I had to move forward with the assumption that I'd solve this. The alternative was too horrible to bear. It wasn't just that I didn't want to die. It was what my death would mean for the boys. They'd already lost their biological family. I wouldn't rob them of a home a second time. Not if I could help it. Sean stirred fitfully when I ran a hand over his hair. He was damp with sweat and clammy to the touch.

My poor baby.

Mine. This was my family. I wasn't giving them up without a fight. If that meant sending Astrid to Blood Rose, I'd do it. I hated myself for thinking it, but I would let her go back to save them—to save my children. I wouldn't let her go in blind, of course. She'd have every protection and lifeline I could conceivably give her, but I was willing to die, to kill for these boys. I hated such a dark spot existed in my soul, but it did.

Then again, if I hadn't had the darkness within me, Mav and I wouldn't have been friends, and possibly more. The truth was: his soul was more stained than mine. He was capable of things I wasn't.

Darla took her leave, and Maverick helped me move the boys back to their beds. Charlie woke just long enough to go to the bathroom, then shuffled back to his room like a zombie. No, scratch that. I knew zombies, and all of them moved faster than Charlie.

I hadn't realized I'd been staring until Maverick cleared his throat. I turned halfway on the sofa, angling my body toward him. We'd been talking, but I'd cut off abruptly, watching my kiddo like a hawk until he was safely back where he should be.

"Sorry," I mumbled.

"Don't be," he said. "I like how dedicated you are to your kids. I never knew the

feeling. It's nice to see, even if it wasn't aimed my way."

It was frank statements like those that gave me an insight into how bleak his childhood had been. I'd been informed he was a jerk when he first came to the Hollow. After learning about his home life, I was surprised he hadn't turned into a comic book villain. General douchebaggery was a far cry from evil. Neglect carved an empty place inside you, and nothing could fill it. Maverick was healing, but his mom had dealt him a permanent wound when she turned him out at eighteen. Her good reasons didn't matter. He'd been hurt.

Maverick flinched when I touched his cheek with a whispered, "Mav..."

"Sorry," he said, voice strained. "I didn't mean to say it like that."

"No. I'm glad kids are your priority, too. So many people perpetuate a cycle of abuse. It takes a lot of work to break a generational pattern. You protect kids. You love your family. You fight for them. I l..." My tongue stuttered over the word, altering it at the last second. "I like that. I like it a lot."

Maverick kissed me.

No, that didn't quite do the action justice. He lunged at me, capturing my face in his broad hands. He was surprisingly gentle, despite his haste. His lips crashed into mine, effectively silencing me before I could stagger into that dreaded L word again. If I thought too hard about what was going on, I'd cry. I didn't want to cry. I wanted this. Wanted his skin on mine, sponging all thoughts away.

I cursed my need to breathe. We both seemed set to see how close we could get to the edge before we sucked in ragged breaths. It wasn't just that, though. There was a driving need for this. His hands on me. I'd been craving it longer than I was willing to admit.

Had been afraid of it for longer than I wanted to admit.

Jonathan had ruined more than just our marriage. He'd neutered my already limited ability to trust people. If you trusted someone, the betrayal just hurt that much worse. Maverick was far from perfect. He could screw up epically. Break my heart all over again.

A small voice in my head muttered the words that I'd been unwilling to say to myself until now.

So what? So what if he screws up? He's human and thanks to him, so are you. He's earned a little grace.

I leaned my head back, unwilling to let him see the tears gathering in my eyes. He'd take them the wrong way. Assume he was the one who'd given me a complex. He really was a softie when you got past his defenses.

Maverick's lips roved across my jaw before trailing more searing kisses down my throat. I was ready to melt into the cushions. He paused when I spread my legs, just a little, angling our bodies closer. He was excited already, and we'd barely done anything. It was heady to know that just kissing me had this effect on him. It made me feel strong. Powerful. Beautiful.

"Tally..."

"I have protection in my purse," I whispered. I couldn't quite look him in the eye. I felt like a pot about to boil over. I wanted to do it with him inside me, making love to me, not keening in fear and grief on the floor.

To his credit, he didn't argue with me. His weight vanished for a moment. I felt the absence like a toothache, dull and unpleasant. My heart beat a little faster when he

didn't return in seconds. He was back before my self-doubt could do more than nibble on me. I only caught a glimpse of something dark in his hands before he pressed something over my eyes.

The sudden plunge into blackness made me jerk in shock, and I couldn't argue as he knotted something behind my head, fashioning a makeshift blindfold. The nimbleness of the maneuver spoke of experience. I wondered if I should be jealous of the prior women in his life but decided against it. He'd married me, not them.

"Mav," I said when I could catch my breath. "What are you—"

"Shh," he interrupted, lips grazing my throat again. Without the visual, the sensation was more intense. He had a five o'clock shadow that scraped deliciously against my skin when he talked. "Stay right there, Tally. Don't move."

It was mortifying how quickly the words heated my skin. I felt like a pulse point, hammering with excitement as he hovered just above me, tantalizingly close and yet so far away.

The image of pushing him to the ground, climbing astride him, and taking what I wanted was so visceral that I almost climaxed then and there. He must have read the expression on my face, because his chuckle tickled my skin.

He pinned me easily, and I let him, luxuriating in the feeling of his lean body caging mine against the cushions. I wiggled impatiently beneath him, trying not to whine as he peeled articles of my clothing off one by one. I'd never thought I'd be wishing for the clothes unraveling spell again, and yet here we were. No matter how much skin he bared, it never felt like enough. I cried out when he pressed his fingers into me, effortlessly finding the spot that made me scream. Which meant the bastard had gagged me, too.

It was sweet relief when he finally plunged himself into me, working himself in and out, riding my bucking body like a wave. He didn't seem to mind when I raked my nails down his back, trying to find purchase. He shuddered above me, groaning my name like a prayer.

“God, Tally. You're so beautiful.”

Under his hands, I felt beautiful.

I was glad he'd gagged me. Otherwise, I might have said the words aloud.

I love you, Maverick Depraysie. And that scares the shit out of me.

Maverick

I'd never thought of myself as a romantic until I met Tally.

Maybe meeting the right woman did that to you. Made you want to be better. To make more of yourself than the sorry condition you'd been in when she found you. Tally had offered me something no one else really had—she'd offered me friendship the day we met. I'd never be able to tell her just how much that had meant to me.

I stared down at her sleeping face, wishing I could paint her in soft pastels. I'd never been the artist that some of my family was. I could do passable stitchwork, enough to make up for Wanda's lack of proficiency in potions, but I wasn't a maestro in anything but magic. It wasn't arrogance to say I was one of the best. I'd proved it over and over.

I wished I could bottle this moment. Let Tally feel how much it meant to me. My stupid mouth would only ever muck things up if I tried to explain with words, so I didn't even try.

Tally cuddled closer to me, pressing her face against my chest. She'd drifted off to sleep not long after we'd finished. We'd donned our clothes and arranged ourselves in a more respectable position on the couch, just in case the boys rose early and needed something. Even having her curled like a kitten in my lap was a peace unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

"I love you," I whispered against her hair.

She didn't reply. I was too much of a coward to shake her awake and say it to her face.

It's practice for the day when you finally pluck up the nerve, I reasoned.

Sure, I'd go with that.

I sucked in a deep breath and froze when the scent of ozone and copper pennies drifted to me on a nonexistent breeze. I twisted in my seat so fast that I almost gave myself whiplash.

At first, it was hard to see where the source of the smell was coming from. It seemed to pour, sourceless, from the shadows. The darkness all around us bunched and roiled, splashing like ink where it shouldn't. It seemed to creep forward, blotting out the glow of the nightlight and infomercials. The announcer's speech had become a solid drone of sound. I could feel, but not see, time dragging around us like a rock in a stream. This moment was stuck in space, while the world around us carried on merrily.

Which should have been impossible. Time was a tricky concept, magically speaking. You mucked with it at your own peril. Only a few species could even attempt playing with time, and witches were among them. Blood witches, in particular. Or a blood warlock, as the case may have been. When I glanced down at Tally, she'd frozen as well. So, it was just me and whatever magical fuckery this was.

"Knox," I muttered under my breath. "Stop this, right fucking now."

The worthless, incorporeal son of a bitch fizzled into existence, striding through Tally's living room like he had every right to be there. He leaned his elbow on top of the TV, blowing a plume of red smoke from the end of a lit cigarette. He'd leaned into a gangster aesthetic this time. Pinstripes in red, and a bowler hat that looked old

enough to be authentic. He tipped it at me with a wink. He looked more solid here than he had been in my dream.

But how was he here right now? And why?

“Sorry, champ, but it isn’t my choice this time around.”

“What are you talking about?”

“She wants Taliyah out of the equation. I’d like to avoid that, but I’ll take any avenue back into the world.”

The words settled like a chill into my bones. It felt like I’d splinter if I made any sudden moves. He’d all but just told me that the culprit behind Vivian’s murder was a Blood Witch. That meant there was another abomination like me roaming around, and whoever that abomination was, she’d struck a deal with the devil to kill my wife.

Fat fucking chance.

“You can have an hour,” I said.

Knox grinned and took another drag of his cigarette. “Oh no, I’m going to need more time than that, dear boy. A day at least.”

“Done.”

I blurted the words before I could think. Tally would probably hate me for them, but I couldn’t let her die. If Knox was what he said he was, he could kill her. I wouldn’t let that happen.

“Excellent,” Knox continued. “Let’s perform a sleeping curse, then, not a fatal hex. I

have to make it look convincing, you know.”

I wanted to protest. Wanted to tell him to stop, but I couldn’t find my voice. The shadows loomed long, blotting out all the light in the room. I fell, silently screaming into the void, watching the gleam of Knox’s smile until it disappeared from sight.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Astrid

“I still think we should have taken them to the hospital,” I whispered, clutching one of the doilies on Olga’s end table in one fist.

I wished it was a barf bag. I wanted to puke.

When I’d seen him the first time, I thought he was gone. There was just a profound sense of death hanging around all four of their bodies. It had been most upsetting to see the kids that way, but seeing Mav so still, so blank... well, I thought Tally would forgive me if I found that worse than her death mask. Don’t get me wrong—hers was plenty upsetting, but not as much as I’d thought. She was already pale as a corpse with her winter complexion. Maverick wasn’t.

I’d been standing in the doorway to Olga’s room for a few minutes, just staring at my brother’s prone body. He was so damn tall, his feet dangled off the end of the bed. He was loose-limbed, his eyes glassy. I had a horrible insight into how it must have felt for him to see me as a vampire. It was hard not to think of them as bodies, even though they were technically alive.

Rook gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze. I wished it made me feel better.

“And tell the nice mundanes what?” Rook asked, shaking his head. “Enchanted sleep is bizarre to us, let alone to them. The four of them are going to star on some medical mystery show and make Haven Hollow famous. You know they wouldn’t want that.”

He was right. I hated that he was right. I wanted the doctors to fawn over my brother

and his little family and somehow find a cure where we couldn't. Every spellcaster in the Hollow had examined them, and we still had no freaking clue who could have done this. Olga made noises about it being evil, but we didn't know more than that. A lot of creatures could force you to sleep and not wake. Night hags were a really common example, draining their victims to death on accident (and sometimes on purpose.) Faeries put people into an enchanted sleep for a lot of reasons. Sometimes it was a prank. Other times, it was revenge. But none of them ever put off an aura of non-life so potent, it made my eyes water.

My head knew Mav wasn't dead. My heart wasn't so sure.

"I just want some sign that someone is trying to keep them alive," I whispered. "It feels like they could slip away at any second."

"If they hit our senses as dead, the mundanes that found them would have buried them, Astrid," Rook said. "We had to bring them to the coven house. It was the only safe place for them right now."

He was right about that, too. We'd been forced to scramble for an explanation for Tally and Mav's sudden absence. We'd been lucky it was Cain and Darla who stumbled on the bodies, not one of Tally's deputies, because that would have meant a quadruple homicide investigation on top of all the problems we were already facing. As it was, the four of them were hanging in a limbo between life and death that I couldn't breach.

"I'm going to Blood Rose," I said, keeping my voice low so none of the witches milling on the floor below would hear me. Lorcan was the only person present with superhuman hearing who might rat me out. Thankfully, Wanda had him getting supper while the rest of them tried to come up with a solution.

Rook's sigh ruffled the hairs at the back of my neck. Goosebumps rose on my arms,

but I smoothed them away with a guilty frown. This was not the time to get excited by my sire.

“I knew you were going to say something like that. Is there any chance I can talk you out of it?”

He sounded resigned, not angry. He’d finally begun to adapt to dating an ex-witch. He’d been old-fashioned in the beginning, trying to act like a gallant knight. It wasn’t the way to a witch’s heart. He was slowly learning I liked to fight my own battles, not rely on rescue.

“No.”

“I didn’t think so.” He sighed. “Give me a minute to step out and make a call.”

“Who are you going to call?”

He shrugged like that much should have been obvious. “Father has earned a favor from Aurea, so she’s been letting me mirror-walk back and forth from here to Blood Rose. I’ll give you an ETA when I have one.”

My throat felt tight. I wanted to cry. Wanted to shake Maverick and scream at him to wake up. This wasn’t fair. He wasn’t supposed to actually drop dead. Or a very close equivalent. The four of them were supposedly locked in, unable to move but able to think. It had to be terrifying. If traumatic shit kept happening in this town, I was going to have to nominate someone as a therapist. At this point, we all deserved some time on someone’s couch.

“Thank you.”

Rook smiled gently and leaned in to kiss my cheek. “Anything for you.”

“I’m counting on that, actually.”

Astrid

Aurea Grimsbane's office was an odd mix of macabre library and apothecary.

And not the cheerful kind, like Poppy's Potions. Poppy's shop always reminded me of springtime, regardless of the season. She was a sunny person, and that light shone through in her magic. As a white witch myself, I liked that in a person.

I winced. I'd done it again. Thought of that blasted word. Witch . I wasn't a witch anymore. I wasn't even a full vampire. I was a rare magical crossbreed with the appetites of a bloodsucker. There weren't enough of us to be given an official name. Every time I thought I'd gotten past the loneliness of the thought, it sucker-punched me again. What Valserak had done to me hadn't just felt like murder. It had felt like an assault. He'd hurt me and turned me by force, sending me sobbing to my grave. He'd stolen my dignity, my sense of safety, and my identity in just that one move, not to mention everything that came after.

I scrubbed discreetly at my mouth, trying to erase the feeling of Valserak's mouth on mine. I knew the kiss wasn't the worst thing that could have happened to me in that cellar, but it still bothered me. I'd never been kissed by someone I didn't want before that night. Even worse, some part of my vampire brain had responded to it, compelled by the power of my sire. Even now, after exchanging blood with Rook in a sort of pseudo-official ritual to make him my sire, I didn't feel like his. My sire was dead, but some part of me missed him against my own will. It was sick and twisted. If I could have performed necromancy, I would have brought him back just to stake him all over again.

At least I had someone who could commiserate on that point. A British soldier had turned Lorcan during the Wicklow Rebellion in 1789. Lorcan had never told me whether he'd hunted the guy down and killed him. He'd never wanted to reveal a dark past to his quasi-daughter, as though it would make him anything less than a badass in my eyes.

Adults were weird sometimes.

The red and green rugs just beyond Aurea's new mirror bunched a little when Rook stepped through, carrying me like a limp burden in his arms. I hadn't been entirely sure that I could look at the foul hag without giving her the evil eye. I doubted I had something that dark in me, but by the goddess, I'd give it a shot if she provoked me. And right now, even breathing wrong in our direction might provoke me. Rook seemed to know it too, because he'd convinced me to down a number of boozy blood cocktails before returning with him. It was an easier explanation: that Rook had brought his drunk girlfriend back to his room when the truth was that I wanted nothing more than to leap across the desk to claw her eyes out. She already had a low enough opinion of Rook to believe the worst of him.

Roy hadn't been happy to make the alcohol for me. Couldn't blame the guy. He had a liquor license to think about. Even supernatural customers liked to drink, and I looked underage, though I wasn't. The blood mead had been great, though.

I leaned my forehead against Rook's shoulder, mouth slightly parted as though asleep. Vampires could pass out from drink, but it took a lot more to put us on our asses than most. Rook curled me closer to his body when the headmistress spoke, voice more strident than usual. From the bunch in his shoulders, he'd anticipated the tension that was already crackling up my spine. The desire to go for her throat.

She'd hurt my family, and I wanted her blood for it.

“The next time you call at this hour, I will hex you, Thorne,” Aurea said crisply. “I expressly told your father passage to and from that silly Hollow is only to be done at dusk. I don’t have time to accommodate your late-night antics.”

“Meredith, Astrid, and I were at a club,” Rook said, managing to inject enough arrogance into the words that even I thought he was begging for a backhand. “She started acting weird, and I’m pretty sure someone slipped something in her drink when she wasn’t looking.”

“They don’t have a doctor in Haven Hollow?” Aurea asked in a would-be calm voice.

She wasn’t. I could feel her rage from here. She blamed Rook for Vivian’s death. I could practically taste the words she wasn’t saying. She blamed all vampires, but especially this one.

I couldn’t even fault her, either. The Thornes had killed many members of her family. I’d never know how many witches Rook and his dad had killed, but I knew the number wasn’t zero. If I’d been in her position, I would have looked at Rook as a suspect too. Her own magic had disproved that theory, but it didn’t mean she didn’t hold him responsible, in part. His grandfather had started the war—after all. Robertus Thorne had killed Alixia Grimsbane in cold blood and all of us that came after had suffered for it.

I dared a peek between my lashes, staring up at Rook. We’d made the ruse look good, dressing up in appropriate club wear. It had almost been worth it to see Rook’s face when I stepped out of the bathroom wearing one of Wanda’s designer cocktail dresses. The simple black dress looked elegant, flirting with the idea of being racy. Paired with the heels, I actually looked leggy. I hoped one day we could make the story a reality, dancing together to a bass beat under the pulsing lights. Rook’s hair was artfully mussed. Honestly, I thought he might have gone a little too far with the gel. There was a fine line between tousled and porcupine and he was dancing on it.

“I trust Uncle Bernhard,” Rook said quietly. “I know she’ll be safe in the infirmary.”

I could almost hear the smile in Aurea’s voice. It was a nasty, sneering smile that could barely contain the poison she wanted to spit at him. It was evident in her voice when she muttered, “That makes one of us, Thorne.”

It was a lie. Rook didn’t trust any of his uncles. Most had died sometime during the Blood Wars, but two still lived out their existence at Blood Rose. Bernhard was an old-school surgeon, coming of age when leeches were still standard treatment. Donahue was a weapons master, training elite members of the night class in medieval weaponry. I had a class with him next semester.

I was hoping to convince Rook’s dad to give me the lessons instead.

“Get out of my sight,” Aurea hissed after a protracted sight. “I don’t want to see your face anywhere near the daytime dorms for a week. Do you understand me?”

Rook gave her a sardonic smile and a wave of acknowledgment before turning for the door.

“Always a pleasure, Aurea,” he called over his shoulder. “Toodles.”

Rook barely bit back a chuckle when her hex went wide, missing him by a hair. The talisman I’d tucked into his breast pocket was doing its job, deflecting dark magic.

The laughter died almost as soon as it began, put on only for the headmistress’ benefit. Silence swallowed us a few feet into the corridor. The gothic architecture looked gloomy in my current state of mind. If my heart could have beaten, it would have been racing.

We’d done it. We’d made it to Blood Rose.

Now what?

Maverick

“Move!”

I spat the words into Knox’s face. Which was, coincidentally, my face. The vampire god, or whatever he really was under that smug grin, had used my body like a template, using it to create a physical form that was more than shadow. He seemed to appreciate it, too, because he’d been luxuriating in making my limbs move for a while now. I’d never been possessed, but this sounded eerily similar to some of the stories Wanda told on the rare occasion she deigned to talk about her experience.

It had been confusing at first, waking inside my own head, trapped in some elusive corner, alive but not able to move my body. I could feel it like a heavy weight holding me down. It was almost unbearable and reminded me of the fits of terror that night hags could produce. Had they been spawned from this son of a bitch?

Staring at Knox, I finally understood why I’d been punched in the face so often in my past. The sneering set of my mouth, especially guided by the vampire deity’s derision, made me want to haul off and break his face. I’d tried planting a blood bolt between his eyes only an hour after waking here, but to no avail. Because all of this was only existing in my mind—this opulent prison he’d forced us into was just a holding cell, but in it I could still lunge at him. Try to fight him.

And get absolutely nowhere.

Knox blew a stream of smoke into my face before offering me an ‘aww shucks’ smile as though he hadn’t intended to do that the entire time. It felt strange and somehow

incestuous to notice how full my mouth was. It was also hard to think about him as me, even though we now shared a face. My face.

He didn't feel like me, and that was the most I could pin down about his energy. He kept himself a huge, scary mystery on purpose. The fucker wasn't done manipulating me yet.

"I told you, dear boy: I already have a summoner. I can't turn on a dime and betray her."

"So you kill me instead?"

He chuckled at that. "You are far from dead. To the outside world, you might appear that way, but don't worry, though. The witches of your coven haven't buried you yet. They can tell something's off—that you aren't really dead. You just look incredibly convincing. And that's by design—I had to make it look good to her. The spell should wear off in a few days. That's all it will take, in the end. Just a few days, and then you and I can be one... at last."

It wasn't the words that disturbed me. It was the expression. The vampire was eyeing me like a particularly fine cut of beef, and he was wondering how and when to make the first cut. Paired with the longing in his voice, it felt like I'd walked in on something personal. Something inhuman and ugly that I was never meant to see. There were monsters in the descriptive sense. Classified so by humans. Then there were monsters. Demons of the lowest infernal layers. Reepers. Hags. Wendigos. Killers. Soul crushers. Knox was one of those. He wanted to crack me open like a nut and live inside my skull. Creepy didn't even begin to cover it.

"Save the Hannibal Lecter routine for someone who gives a damn," I hissed, pacing back the way I'd come.

He'd channeled Wanda's aesthetic when creating the place. The red velvet damask wallpaper was something she'd have adored. I thought it made the room feel tight and cluttered, especially with all the antique furniture shoved into the space. The chandelier would have been to Wanda's taste as well. Or perhaps Wanda had adopted his preferences. I didn't like thinking that way, but maybe there was more than one reason Wanda had been susceptible to the Reaper's influence. Maybe because there was a shard of something evil inside of us that we hadn't asked for.

I ended up sitting stiffly on a black wingback chair, glaring at Knox instead of trying to rush the door. He'd been standing vigil there for a while. I couldn't tell if hours, days, or weeks had passed while I paced my cage, waiting for the fucker to do something.

"Come, don't get sour grapes now," he said, ruining the rebuke with a toothy smile. His fangs disturbed me viscerally. They looked wrong in my face. The eyes were wrong too, red seeping in under the gray so that they resembled the color of blood in murky water. I didn't want to know what else might be hiding in their depths. "We've only just begun."

"Why are you keeping us here?" I asked. "Where's Tally? Where are the boys? If you hurt them—"

He raised a hand. "Slow down, Charmin."

"If you're going to wear my damned body, you'll call me by my right name."

"Maverick," he corrected himself with a smirk. "The boys and the fae princess are fine. In fact, when they come out of the spell, they won't remember a thing. Only you are conscious."

"Thank the goddess for small mercies," I muttered.

Knox's face scrunched into unhappy lines at the mention of the goddess. He actually spat on the ground near the door. The ebony floorboards sizzled at the heat of his displeasure. He gave me a hard, almost disgusted look.

"Why invoke her? I know you don't believe in her."

"I don't worship her," I said quietly. "Not unless a ritual calls for it. I have the same view on the goddess that I have about my mother."

"Which is?" he asked, one brow arched.

"That she exists. And that she also doesn't give a damn about me. I'm pretty sure she abandoned me the same time Tabitha did."

I had to think of my mother as Tabitha most days. Because if I thought of her as Mom, it hurt more. Her absence was like a sore tooth. I could ignore it most days until the pain became sharp and immediate. Sometimes it made me its bitch, but the self-pity had become less common of late. There were people in the Hollow who loved me. Not many, granted, but that was an improvement from five years ago.

Knox's laugh was an echo from the past. It had been my laugh once upon a time. Cynical. Hollow. Full of seething anger. I hadn't realized it had changed.

"We have that in common, dear boy."

"We have nothing in common."

He shook his head. "No, I do know something about being abandoned by your creator."

I didn't want to believe him. If he was a creation of the goddess, just like me, it meant

something. I wasn't sure what. Change, for sure. Wars, maybe. Our people had fought over less.

"Is that why you hate her?"

The smirk crept like an unabashed intruder onto his stolen face. "It's part of the reason. As to your aunt..."

"Celestine."

"Yes—I'm tempted to do away with her before my time is up."

As much as I hated my aunt and blamed her for what had happened to me, I didn't want her dead. "Don't kill her."

Knox tilted his head to the side. Past how far my neck should have been able to go. Not that logic mattered in this mindscape. The mortal mind was as malleable as clay. As fragile, too. If you messed with it too much, the structure fell apart. It was why so many humans went crazy during or after a possession. Too much strain, not enough mental defenses.

"Why should I not kill her?" Knox asked. "You hate her. She tried to have you killed. Worse, she tried to have your sister killed, which you count as a greater sin." He paused and inspected his fingernails—my fingernails. "I was happy to see Astrid join my brood. It makes things easier. Again, not the vessel I'd normally choose, but any port in a storm."

The thought of any part of this creature creeping in to smother the life from my sister was unbearable. I'd crossed the room before Knox could blink. His nose... my nose... our nose made a satisfying crunch beneath my fist. Blood fountained out, bubbling over his lips. If it bothered the bastard, he didn't let it show. He licked the blood from

his lips delicately, as though savoring the taste. It didn't seem to matter the source. He just wanted blood.

"If you touch her, I will fucking kill you!" I raged at him.

"We'll see," he said with a grin as he tilted his head again, then his expression brightened. "Ah, finally. She's let the leash go slack."

"What are you talking about?"

He shook his head like he didn't have time to explain. "Come with me, boy. You'll get the answers you're looking for."

He stepped away from the door with a flourish before offering me a hand. My skin looked pale. Bloodless. Dead. This was the closest I ever wanted to be to the reality of what I'd look like as a leech. The door swung open of its own accord, and only blackness showed beyond. For once, I didn't want to go through. I was afraid of what I might see.

But that didn't matter. I had a family to save.

I took Knox's hand, vanishing into the blackness behind him.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Maverick

I woke with my face in a pile of paperwork.

For a second that felt like longer, I swore there were bugs crawling all over me. The instant in darkness had felt foul. Profane. My... everything felt scraped raw by whatever void Knox had pulled us through. I never wanted to pass through it again but knew, in some portion of my mind, that I'd have to bear it again. I'd promised Knox a day. Making oaths to the goddess was serious business. All things being equal, I assumed promising things to the god was just as binding. There were very few lines I wouldn't cross to save the people I cared about.

Knox knew it, too. Could use it against me. Which meant I'd have to play the long game if I wanted to beat him.

I ended up beating the paperwork into submission, leaving scorch marks on the glossy wood of the desk, while starting a small fire in the center of a stack of financial reports. I snatched a glass off the table on instinct, realizing a second after I threw it that the clear liquid could very well be vodka, not water, and might make my predicament even worse.

To my relief, the flames sizzled and died. Smoke curled up from an indistinct blob of crumpled paper, invading my nostrils. I prayed no one was close enough to the office to see, smell, or hear the whole embarrassing debacle go down. Dying at the hands of a Blood Witch had some dignity. Dying because I couldn't keep my composure long enough to take a look around was quite another.

And speaking of looking around...

The office was... gray. Very gray. The oak desk I sat behind was the only spot of color in the room. The walls were a shade so light they were almost white, never quite escaping the gloomy charcoal undertones that dragged it back to monochrome. Most of the fixtures were pewter or chrome. The floor-to-ceiling windows looked out over a grove of wisteria trees. They looked like pale, lovely ghosts in the twilit yard. The sun had almost set.

It was the trees, not the office, that let me know exactly where I stood. I'd stalked past that exact grove shortly after smiting Rupert and his murderous comrades for kidnapping and hurting my daughter, Sybil. I couldn't help the quiver of fear that ran through my guts. I hated this place. Hated every damn bloodsucker who thought like Rupert. They wanted me and mine dead. I'd just been willing to slit their metaphorical throats before they went for mine in a more literal sense.

"Which is why you're my favorite, Maverick," Knox chimed in with a delighted laugh. "It's that cutthroat thinking that will get you far."

"I'll convert to Buddhism and become a monk first," I muttered under my breath.

My voice came out higher and with more breathiness than I was used to. It plastered my back to the office chair for an instant as I processed something I hadn't before. My body felt... smaller. Slimmer. When I moved, my proportions were different and a glance down confirmed...

Yes, those were modest but still there breasts. The last time I'd been in a female body, I'd done it on purpose. Well, generally when I was inside a woman, it was on purpose. It was rarely this literal though. I'd stolen Wanda's body briefly, intending to use it for my own selfish needs. Needless to say, it hadn't panned out. Looking back, I was glad she'd stopped me. It had been the kick in the ass I'd needed to have

a necessary conversation with Wanda.

A glance down revealed a smudged signature on one of the documents. I could just make out the looping signature of 'Cecelia Pleasant' before the paper curled in on itself. It pretty much confirmed my worst fears. I was in a vampire body. The Portland clan leader, who Aurea had already fingered as a person of interest.

It was automatic to raise my hands to feel the contours of the chest. Wanda couldn't even fault me. She'd been curious about the opposite anatomy, too. She'd been ready to curse my dick off for what I'd done, but she'd still looked at it. It was a body swap thing. I expected the female body I was in to feel, but these were... firm. Hard, even, like someone who'd had too much plastic surgery.

No... that wasn't right. They were harder than that. It took me a minute to figure out why the texture felt familiar. It was like... a mannequin. Like Sybil, when she 'played dead.'

"I'm not in a vampire body, am I?" I whispered.

"Indeed not."

"Then?"

"You are in a doll's body. Literally."

"What?" I couldn't help my shock.

"The poor dear had to find a way to escape her vampire captor somehow. She played house with the doddering old fool. Let him believe she was mending her ways. He brought her gifts because he felt guilty. Dolls, as though she was still the little girl he watched grow up from his high tower. I daresay he treats her better than her kin. Not

that she cares. She wants him dead.”

I stood up unsteadily. I could feel what he was talking about now. There was blood magic all over the surface, scratched into the porcelain by a sewing needle and painted in witch blood. No, a Blood Witch’s blood. Every part of the ‘Cici’ doll had been meticulously formed, shaped with care, and then sent out into the world to play decoy. The doll didn’t have vital signs, and the glamour tied to the doll made it look human enough to pass casual inspection, even from someone with power. The vampires would never know the difference. But all Tally’s complaints about how odd she’d felt in Cici’s presence suddenly made sense...well, in hindsight.

The doll hit Tally’s radar as uncanny valley. Close, but not quite human. The magic was so well done that Tally hadn’t been alerted to what Cici really was. But her human brain, her cop sense, had known there was something off.

I examined the face in the mirror, trying hard not to wince. The resemblance to an oversized doll was painful now that I understood what I was looking at. The eyes were huge and periwinkle blue and hand painted. The curls were real hair, but so old and brittle that I knew the doll had probably been an antique. The freckles had been dotted on with painstaking precision. Looking at it without the glamour, the whole thing was creepy as hell. I was shocked no one had run away from Cici screaming.

I spied Knox in my reflection, smirking at me, while still wearing my face. He looked more real now, like a phantom observing from the corner. It was all in my mind, but it didn’t feel that way. I knew I wasn’t here. That Knox wasn’t either. But I turned on him regardless, getting up in his spectral face. He didn’t seem fazed when I seized him by the lapels of his jacket and shook him.

“Who did this? Who kidnapped a witch and blooded her?”

Knox grinned. “One of my direct descendants.”

“Which descendents?”

“If you want either of their names, you’ll give me another day.”

I glowered at him, willing lightning to hit the smarmy jerk right in his smug face. Thunder rumbled dangerously outside the window, lightning forking across the sky. Knox actually tsked at me.

“Going to burn the place down twice, Maverick? The first time was exciting. Now it’s just getting cliché.”

“Stop stringing me along, you Machiavellian asshole! Give me the names!”

“Payment first. A day.”

“Half,” I countered.

“Done,” he said easily.

He told me the names. I prayed to the goddess that it was a lie. If what she said was true, it was going to hurt Astrid. Badly.

Knox held out a hand to me once more, that unfathomable smirk still on his face. “Ready to go? I think we’re going to have to move quickly. She’s already aware that Astrid is at Blood Rose.”

I stood up straighter, a jolt of fear making the porcelain body I occupied rattle like old bones. “She what?”

“Oh, did I forget to mention that part? Well, it shouldn’t come as a surprise. Red-haired witches never follow orders well, do they?”

“Knox—” I seethed.

“Two days.”

“Fine, damn you! Two days! Get me to her now!”

And he did. We fell forward into oblivion again, and I gritted my teeth against the feel of blowflies just under my skin. Which wasn’t half as bad as what I woke up to. I woke up French-kissing my sister’s boyfriend, an experience so off-putting and strange I nearly hexed him.

It wasn’t his fault, really. I could sense the love potion’s effects distantly. I was almost irrationally angry for a second, thinking he’d dosed her. Then reality hit home, and I realized it was yet another ploy. A way to take revenge on all of us who’d foiled her plans. It was a disproportional response to the accident.

So, I punched him instead.

Astrid

I hadn't meant to seduce Rook.

Honest. It just sort of... happened. Trust me. It was more embarrassing to do it on accident after months of trying and failing to do it on purpose.

The library was the logical starting point. Even if Aurea had her familiar, Daegal, watching us, the most he'd see was Rook reading in the large print section while I dozed, apparently insensible. In reality, Rook would be reading pertinent sections from the book under his breath, so only I would hear. Or that was what we should have been doing.

I sort of got distracted when we were selecting pertinent titles to read. There were archival texts about the construction of secret passageways and hiding places in the castle. There were eighteen such passages that Rook knew of, and he wasn't certain he'd mapped them all, even in the centuries he'd been alive. Er... undead. He wanted to double-check the old books and pinpoint which one would be ideal for hiding a relic as evil as the one Aurea had stolen from the Winter Queen.

Then the material of his dress shirt had rasped across my bare back, sending pleasant tingles up my spine. It was only the second time he'd touched my bare back since we'd begun dating. The first time, he'd been making out with me out of necessity, trying to scandalize a pair of witches into ignoring the questions they really should have asked us. It had worked. I'd thought he might get around to touching me again after I'd grown up a little, vamp-wise. Lorcan seemed to think the problem was on Rook's end, not mine. No matter how much time passed, there would be at least a

sliver of him that wanted to treat me like a fragile lady, even though I was harder to hurt than ever.

It felt like something in my chest pulled, trying to ape a heartbeat I no longer had as he trailed his fingers delicately up my spine. The backless dress didn't plunge past my waist. Even my liberated cousin wouldn't allow me to go to a club showing too much ass. Less is more, in cases of fashion. Still, it felt like his hand was mapping a line from my waist up to the crown of my head. I let out an unnecessary breath when he grasped the back of my neck gently, pressing his body closer to mine. A moan actually escaped my lips when he tugged on my earlobe with his teeth.

"Rook..." I breathed. "Why...?"

Why now? Why in the library? We were here to solve a crime. I wasn't sure what crime we were investigating, exactly, but there had to be something in the penal code that fit what Aurea was doing. Blackmail of a public official, at least. Was that a misdemeanor or a felony?

My thoughts spun wildly when Rook ground his very evident arousal against me. If I'd been living, my heart would have been going at a full gallop. I felt dizzy, even without the blood pulsing to my head, overwhelming every rational thought.

"I've always wanted to touch you here," he whispered, tone soft and reverent. I was surprised I hadn't burst into bright, autumnal colors at the sound of those words. I'd started to adopt more fae traits while in faerie. Uncle Fox thought I might grow the family tail at some point. I hoped not.

I couldn't talk. I could barely breathe. I wanted to say his name. To babble inane questions, when it simply didn't matter. Was I scared of this? Yeah, a little. I'd built it up in my head. But I trusted Rook not to hurt me. To make me remember every touch fondly. I wasn't sure if I believed in eternal love, but I believed I could love

him for centuries. I wanted something that endured. Something like Lorcan and Wanda's seemingly unshakeable bond. It was a lot to ask of someone. It wasn't a witch mindset at all. I should have been able to do this without feeling lovey-dovey about it.

You're not a witch anymore, dummy.

For the first time in a long time, the thought wasn't depressing. I wasn't a witch. I didn't get judged like one anymore. I was just a vampire fae crossbreed. And I was in love with the man at my back.

Rook let me turn to face him. It was a mistake. One look at his handsome, sculpted face, and I was in danger of bursting into tears. There was just something incredibly tender in his dark eyes as he stared down at me.

"I love you," he whispered.

"I..."

He pressed a finger to my lips to silence me. "You don't have to say it back. I know it's a witch thing. I just want you to know. I want this. I want you. I'm not holding back because I'm not attracted to you or whatever infuriating lie you've told yourself. It's just..."

I yanked him down by the collar, sealing my mouth over his before he could breathe another word. He didn't have to explain himself. I didn't care what his reasons were. I just wanted.

My back hit the bookshelf hard enough that a few of the books above our heads wobbled dangerously. I couldn't even find it in myself to care about the book hail hazard. The library hadn't been my first choice for a sexy locale, but I could admit we

could do worse.

The space was vast and labyrinthine, with bookshelves towering high above our heads. It felt like a paper hedge maze. In the dark, there was no one to see us. Even if there was a spy lurking, Aurea wasn't learning anything she couldn't have guessed. She'd probably be shocked to learn we hadn't been sleeping together before now.

Rook's hand fisted in my hair, and he claimed my mouth in an almost bruising kiss. My trembling fingers found and undid the first button of his dress shirt. Where had my once nimble fingers gone? I felt like a clumsy, drunken oaf trying to melt into him.

I felt drunk. No... I was pretty sure I was drunk, despite the potion Poppy had brewed to help halve the effects. The bubbly feeling was back in force, overwhelming my sense. My magic, my...

Suddenly, Rook pulled away from me and gave me an expression of pure shock as something bloomed like a dark flower in the back of my head. The sensation was so eerie that I jerked away from Rook on instinct. The presence felt both alien and familiar. Acrid like cigarette smoke and metallic like rust. It took me a second to recognize the figure in my head through the fog. Even when I could make out who it was, I couldn't quite believe it.

"Maverick?"

He didn't respond. His first thought was one of confusion, which shifted to revulsion, and finally rage when he felt the state I was in. I was about to lecture him on not being a sexist prick, but what he said instead made me pause.

"Ah fuck. A love potion. Wonderful."

Love potion? Was he saying that this... this feeling wasn't real? That Rook wasn't touching me because he wanted to?

Maverick's sigh breezed through my head. "Don't do that. You're my sister, but even I can see you're beautiful. He wants you, trust me. He doesn't want this while you're under the influence, though."

"That was helpful... and creepy. Promise me you'll never give me sex advice again, big brother, or I'm hexing you."

"Gladly," he said with a bitter laugh.

"And what the hell are you doing inside my head?"

"That's a very long story."

Rook looked dazed, and a little hurt when I stepped away from him. I fumbled for the clutch purse full of potions that Maverick had brewed for me. I hadn't really seen the point of the de-lusting oils he'd packed. I didn't want to de-lust Rook. I very much wanted to lust him.

"Gah. Never think that collection of words again."

Yeah, having Maverick in my head was going to be so painfully awkward that it brought me to tears. It was a sibling's worst nightmare. There was no social code that covered what happened when your blood warlock brother's freaky magic went off the range and started doing things it shouldn't. He'd already told me he could do familial blood magic with his new powers. At this point, it shouldn't shock me he could slingshot his thoughts into mine by the same mechanism. Why not? My world wasn't already insane enough with the once-in-seventh-daughter odds I'd already faced.

And then I thought of something. “Oh, my Goddess, you aren’t dead, are you? Are you like possessing me or something? Have you died?”

“No, Astrid, I’m not dead. But I don’t have the time to explain what’s happened—not at the moment.”

Maverick uncorked the potion and emptied it into Rook’s face. He blinked down at me in shock, suddenly seeming to realize where we were and why my bodice was pushed down to my waist. I was still wearing my underthings, thank the Goddess. I’d implode from sheer mortification if he’d come in later in the process.

“Astrid, what are we...?” Rook started.

“You weren’t lying to Aurea,” I whispered. “I got roofied. So did you. There was a love potion in our drinks. That’s why you um...”

I gestured broadly at him. He looked nearly as disheveled as I felt. I hadn’t been kind to his clothes, half-ripping them in my haste to get them off. I gestured at Rook to close the shirt when I had difficulty tearing my eyes away from his chest. It was just a chest. A very nice chest, but I shouldn’t want to lick it at a time like this.

“Close your, uh, shirt please,” I said. “Maverick is singing ‘la la la’ in my head so loud I can barely think. You’re inspiring too many X-rated thoughts for my brother to tolerate.”

Rook blinked slowly. From the expression on his face, I think I’d actually stunned him silly. The fact someone had spied on us long enough to know our plan, spike our drinks, and activate their spell here said that the murderer knew that we were onto them. They knew we stood a good chance of actually uncovering the truth. They needed us to be distracted. Sex was distracting as hell. Had Aurea dosed us? But what did she gain by throwing us into bed together?

“It’s not her. She will pay for what she’s doing to Tally, but she didn’t do this.”

I almost asked the obvious follow-up question, but Rook spoke first. “Maverick? Your brother is... and... um... we?”

The dawning horror on his face was enough to make me giggle, just a bit. I could feel hysterics building as I realized that Rook and I had walked into a trap. The library didn’t feel like a safe haven at that moment. It felt like a rat maze with only one exit that led to safety. We’d been too busy to notice any scuffling in the dark. Now I could hear figures moving through the stacks, searching for us.

“What is that?” Rook asked, voice low, eyes darting nervously around. The love potion was wearing off, leaving my more rational boyfriend behind. On the one hand, I was happy to see him back so soon. On the other, I was almost sorry that Maverick had put a stop to things. Rook had just about taken off my panties...

“Do you want me to curse you, Astrid? Because I can curse you,” Maverick said.

“Hey, I don’t poke fun when you perv over Taliyah.”

“Yes, you do. You give me this look.”

“I do not give you a look.”

Maverick sighed. “We don’t have time to argue. There will be more of those dolls in place to guard the exits.”

“Dolls? What are you talking about?”

“Can’t explain at the moment. Point is: we aren’t getting out of here without a fight. I need you to follow my lead. You’re more powerful than you used to be, but you still

won't fare well against her."

"Her? Who is 'her?' When did you wake up? How the hell are you doing this?"

"All excellent questions that I will answer when you are not ass deep in alligators, sister mine. Do you want to fight with me, or do you want to live?"

Well, when he put it that way...

"Lead on, Mav."

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Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Maverick

Moving Astrid's body was even harder than moving Wanda's, due in large part to her age.

Astrid wasn't long-limbed and gawky as some teenagers could be. Poppy's son was beginning to get the look about him as he grew into the man he'd be someday. Astrid's body was a lot smaller than I was used to and unfinished for the rest of eternity. It wasn't obvious at a glance, since she'd become more serious of late, but she was technically still a teenager.

That somber responsibility was beginning to show, making her look older, even though nothing had outwardly changed. It worried me, watching her grow up so fast.

"Aww. You really are a big softie, aren't you?"

Astrid's voice was loud and unwelcome in my head. I was straining the limits of her vampire hearing to pinpoint where Morgana's dolls might be.

"Morgana?!"

Astrid's voice actually rose to an indignant screech in the shared confines of her head, and I actually jerked in place. It was like she'd poked a bruise at the base of my skull, sending waves of pain rippling through us both. Remaining in control of her body took most of my concentration, and there seemed to be a physical cost to it, too. I was going to have one spell of a headache when I woke from the death sleep I'd been placed under. I wasn't sure how to control the new power level, and juggling

Astrid's moods alongside it felt impossible.

"Sorry," she whispered, seeming to feel the pain, if only distantly. "Did you just say 'Morgana's dolls?'"

"Technically, I thought it."

"Wiseass. Seriously. What are you talking about? Morgana is dead."

Astrid's lips twisted into a bitter smile, but it was my grim mood that prompted it. I didn't like her, but I could understand the motives behind her actions. We were like slanted reflections of each other. One tilt this way or that way of the pane, and we'd have been exactly the same. The reasons we'd been rejected were different, but I understood exactly how much the chip on her shoulder weighed.

"She's not dead. She was blooded, and she's been developing her powers in secret."

At least Astrid was decently horrified by the thought. I'd been afraid she might side with the bloodsuckers on this issue. Wanda had ended up falling for the bastard that had tainted her with blood.

"It's different," Astrid said, sounding genuinely offended I'd doubted her. "Lorcan didn't understand. Once he did, he tried his damndest to undo what he'd started. He apologized and she forgave him. This was willful. The vampires knew Morgana wouldn't want to be blooded, but they did it anyway. I know how that feels, believe it or not."

She tried not to let her thoughts drift to Valserak. Tried not to let me see. But we were bound by blood, pressed mind to mind. She couldn't stop herself from reliving the pain. Valserak hadn't been as vicious as Janeth, ripping into her over and over like a rabid dog mad with its bloodlust. One keenly torturous bite and it was over in

minutes. She'd actually been relieved he'd withheld the coveted anesthetic from his bite, even as she'd thrashed, making it worse. At least he hadn't made her enjoy dying.

The desperate screaming and sobs would never leave my ears. I squeezed the sounds down into a tight knot of grief to be dealt with later. If I let myself feel the helplessness of that moment, I would freeze. We couldn't afford that with Morgana's dolls wandering around, laying in wait for us. Morgana wasn't an idiot. She had to know Astrid had figured out at least part of her plan since she'd de-lusted Rook. That meant the dolls wouldn't be trying to ambush two fornicating vampires. It had gone from a trap to a fair fight. We could make it out of here if we were strong enough.

That was a big if. Morgana had given more of herself to Knox than I had for power. She wanted to know every trick, no matter how vile or blasphemous. I'd never been convinced that anyone could be purely evil until I got a peek into her mindset. Honestly, Knox and Morgana deserved each other. It was why I had to kill Morgana, no matter how distasteful I found the thought.

Astrid shrank back from the thoughts flitting through my mind. The magic inside me was too dark for my white witch sister.

"I'm not a witch," she mumbled.

"If Poppy is considered a witch—well, enough to be in a coven, so are you. He doesn't get to steal that from you."

"I can't get that power back, Mav. It's a nice sentiment. I could hug you for it but..." She heaved a heavy sigh. "I can't go back. I have to embrace what I am, not what I lost. That means I learn what fae Astrid could have been like. If Mom had gone with Dad, we might have grown up in Autumn. You might actually like Uncle Reynard."

I snorted. “Never. I don’t care what timeline we’re on, I will never like Dickhead Reynard.”

Astrid might have replied aloud, if Rook hadn’t slapped a hand over our mouths, pulling us into the deepening shadow beneath one of the rolling ladders. His grip on our shoulder was so tight, it was almost bruising. I sucked in a sharp breath through her nose and froze, going completely still against Rook. At that moment, I didn’t care he was manhandling Astrid. If I’d been there in person, I would have been doing the same. They were coming. If they heard or saw us, we were going to die.

Our eyes darted sideways in time to see the first doll stalk past, making soft clinking sounds as its porcelain joints scrubbed against each other. If Astrid had a heartbeat, it would have been in her throat. Instead, it was my heartbeat providing a drumming beat in our head. It felt like my heartbeat for both of us at that moment. She fought the urge to gasp like a swimmer breaking the surface. For just an instant, life flooded into her body. One beat. Two.

Rook froze in place, somehow going even more rigid than before, staring down at us. The blip didn’t last long. Her heart went silent once more, but it had beat. Which meant vampirism was potentially reversible with blood magic. Goddess. That shouldn’t have been possible. I knew exactly what Knox was doing. Dangling the ultimate carrot. He could give me the impossible.

He could make Astrid a witch again.

The doll’s head turned with a whisper of sound. Its face looked much cruder than the Cici doll. The inked-on smiley face was somehow more chilling than the porcelain doll effect. This one had been a male doll, judging by the proportions. Blood had dried to a rusty color on its front. The dolls had fangs, which solved the mystery of what had beaten and killed Vivian. It was a bleak thought that she’d died like a slasher victim. Mauled by something soulless with large teeth.

The PA system crackled, and it took everything we had not to jerk in place. A single twitch might alert the doll that we were here. They were more primitive than the Cici doll. As long as a vampire stayed still, they wouldn't be distinguishable from another doll. But we couldn't stand still forever. They'd stumble on us, eventually.

"You have to give me credit," Morgana's voice crooned over the speakers. "I did try to get you laid before you died, Depraysie. It would have been a shame for you to die a virgin."

It was Astrid's embarrassment that glued our tongue to the roof of our mouth. It was just as well, in the end. I wanted to snarl obscenities at her. I'd been the one to foil her plans for world domination, not Astrid.

"I helped."

"Maybe a little."

If I'd been there in person, she would have thrown an elbow into my ribs. It worked better now that she was a vampire. More muscle behind those spaghetti arms. Her indignant squawk after I thought the words almost made me smile.

The bloodstained doll finally moved on. Rook waited a full minute in taut silence before he motioned for us to move. The moonlight from the windows above cast a gossamer spiderweb across the library. We were safe in the shadows of the stacks but had to constantly cross the light to get away from the dolls. I felt like a fly getting hopelessly tangled in a web. I couldn't see Morgana, but I could feel her.

"I was planning to come for you two last, you know? I had bigger fish to fry. But you minnows can't help but latch onto the hook, can you?"

I resisted Astrid's urge to puff up at the 'minnow' comment. Giving Morgana a

reaction would be deadly. I stayed right where I was, the edge of a clawfoot table digging into my ankles. The dolls were circling closer. We were running out of places to hide. I'd have to act soon.

“Do you like my dolls, Chesley?” Morgana simpered. “They were gifts from your daddy, you know? Or should I call him our daddy, now? Isn't that what your sire is? Your big blood daddy?”

The way her tone wrapped around the words was awful. I didn't like vampires, but even I didn't like the insinuation she was making. We couldn't reply, of course. I could only inch toward the exit, praying we made it at least a few inches closer. If we could make it into the corridor, there was a chance we could escape. I didn't like our chances if we had to fight.

“How dangerous are they?” Astrid whispered, asking the question Rook couldn't.

“Very. They're basically homunculi. Artificial bodies she can project her magic into. She's seeing through their eyes, hearing through their ears. It's a power the really old vampires used to have.”

Astrid was silent for so long I was afraid she'd keeled over from sheer fright. When I pressed at the edge of her thoughts, I found her pensive instead.

“Aunt Celestine was right, then. That our magic—blood magic—was dangerous. That we should have been burned.”

I didn't have an answer to that. On the one hand, I understood that Knox couldn't make it back into the world. On the other... well, it was hard not to want to live. There had to be an answer to the riddle that didn't end in fire. “No. She's still wrong.”

I inched forward, just a little, navigating a creaky floorboard on instinct after coming

here so often last semester. The library had been one of my best resources while looking for my missing sister. So much of history just waiting to be discovered if you bothered to look. Unfortunately, Rook didn't seem to share my adroit footwork.

He stepped on the floorboard. It let out a moan of protest that sounded like a death rattle in the confined space of the stacks. The bookshelf next to ours shuddered as something bounced into it from the other side and began to scale the shelves. They were coming for us.

“Run!” I screamed.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Astrid

Maverick was fast.

Don't ask me how the big lug did it. I knew he hadn't actually used my magic to open a doorway into autumn to escape, but you wouldn't have known it from the way he moved. I think he must have lunged forward, moving the way he expected his lean, six and half foot plus height to move in a similar situation. It took advantage of all the new vampire strength and speed my body possessed without any of my awkwardness or caution. Maverick was essentially Tally's unsanctioned bounty hunter, and he moved like it.

It was bizarre to be present in my body but not actually in control of it, as though I had a case of whole-body pins and needles. It was uncomfortable, and just to the side of pain. I had a bad feeling there wasn't enough room in my head for me and Mav. One of us would have to go at some point. I just hoped the rubber band didn't snap back to his side of the equation at the worst possible second.

Getting confirmation of Aunt Celestine's wild conspiracy theories hadn't been on my bingo card for this trip. It was turning out to be a red-letter day all around. When she'd started spouting nonsense, I'd thought she'd finally lost it and was spewing lies to justify the cruel actions she'd undertaken in the name of this centuries-old plot. It hadn't crossed my mind to talk to Maverick or Wanda about it. I knew neither one would approve of my interacting with the old witch any more than was humanly necessary. Maybe it was a fault of character, but I pitied her, just a little, despite what she'd done to me. So much hate, for so little reason.

Except, apparently, there had been a reason. There had been an existential threat to witches everywhere. It just wasn't coming from your garden-variety vampire. It was an older, more magical version trapped in his own dimension. That was if Celestine was to be believed. Which was a huge if in my book. The being considered itself male and would always chase male bodies. It was why Celestine had had so many warlocks bumped off. He couldn't work with a non-magic vessel.

It felt like I had an eternity to ponder the problem. In reality, the fight was happening much faster than I could track. Maverick seemed to feel, rather than see, the dolls move in the dark, their pale limbs coming into sight seconds after he'd guided my body down into a baseball-worthy slide. Since Rook still had a grip on me, it dragged him down with me.

The stones split my pantyhose like a cheap plastic bag and stripped layers of skin off my outer thigh. The pain came to me distantly, as though being filtered through a distortion filter. It definitely hurt, but not as much as it should.

Rook had it worse than I did. He hit at a bad angle, and something snapped. He hissed a curse, stumbling to his feet as we cleared a line of advancing dolls. They were even creepier up close. Morgana wasn't much of an artist. The doll's features looked sloppy. Or maybe she just didn't want to put effort into something intended to be smashed up and discarded once it had done what it was meant to do. I hadn't even seen her yet. And there was no guarantee she'd be in the head librarian's office operating the sound system. She had to be nearby to be piloting these constructs, but destroying them didn't actually end the threat. It only delayed it.

"How do we beat her?" I asked.

Maverick was silent, which was an answer in and of itself. He wasn't sure we could beat Morgana. She'd nearly killed us both last time, and she'd been an ordinary witch then. With tainted magic and a link to an otherworldly sponsor, she was a nightmare

stalking the night in stylish stiletto heels.

Maverick ducked low again, avoiding another swinging arm. I had a feeling getting clubbed over the head by one of those things was going to feel like having a vase dropped on my head. It probably wouldn't kill me, but it might daze me enough for them to go in with their teeth. Seriously, why had Morgana added fangs to these things?

I hoped Vivian hadn't suffered long. If she'd gone out the way I had, running and eventually being captured, beaten, and eventually killed by these things, I'd never be able to think an unkind thought about her again. No one deserved to die the way she had.

Rook finally found his footing and pulled ahead of Maverick and me, face gone ashen with fright. Good to know I wasn't the only one spooked. I might have felt like a wuss at this whole combat thing. I'd never been in a real, life-or-death battle until our last fight at Blood Rose. If this place wasn't careful, I'd end up becoming a warrior queen out of necessity, not inclination.

"What did she mean, Father's her sire?" Rook panted.

Oh, goodie. He hadn't understood the speech in the library. Sometimes men being slow was endearing. At times like these though, it was a waste of time that could be used smashing things.

"Your father—he blooded her—he blooded Morgana," I said, hoping that restating it might make Rook accept it. "I'm sure he thought he was helping her, but he shouldn't have done it. Mav says that he was apparently playing house with her for months, giving her gifts and things."

I'd liked Abraham Thorne when I first met him. He seemed like a standup vampire,

despite his past history. Now, it was hard to think the name without tasting bile at the back of my throat. He'd seemed so kind. But could a kindly man give his blood to someone he knew damn well would rather die than take it? What delusion had possessed him so thoroughly that he'd completely eschewed common sense and given more power to the unstable witch? Did he really think keeping her under wraps would make her like him more? I didn't know.

Rook shook his head, even as he ran. I didn't think he was arguing with us, exactly. More that he couldn't absorb what we were saying. I understood it. If someone had come to me and told me that Aunt Celestine was actually trying to do the right thing, I would have laughed them out of town. Rook loved his dad. Learning he'd done something this awful to someone already suffering wouldn't compute for a while.

"We don't have time to baby him," Maverick reminded me.

He flicked my fingers toward an oncoming doll, reaching for my magic. It wasn't the first time someone had put their psychic mitts on me. The last time it had been Morgana, using my power as a battery to prolong her spell's lifespan. She'd just been an ordinary witch then, and the mix of faerie magic and her natural ability had short-circuited a hallway full of wards.

This time, a blood warlock reached for a vampire-faerie hybrid in a castle full of arcane warding spells. And, well... I'd seen what that mix could do once before, when it had befallen my cousin, blowing out her front window. It had been a relatively minor ward guarding Wanda's shop. But this hallway was wired top to bottom with Grimsbane wards.

Maverick flung his hex at the first doll to leap for Rook's face. And the hallway exploded. The sound was almost deafening and stopped us in our tracks as I closed my eyes against the heat of the room blowing out in all directions.

When the smoke cleared, the teachers found us under the rubble, surrounded by shards of the porcelain dolls, broken wards, and the wreckage of priceless art.

Maverick had disappeared from my head, evaporating like mist after sunrise. I prayed to the goddess that he'd snapped back to whatever curse he'd been under. Prayed that he was still alive.

But something told me I couldn't get that lucky twice in one night.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Astrid

Lucretia Boline stalked the Headmistress' office like a predatory cat.

I could practically imagine a striped tail flicking back and forth as she navigated the room. She was clearly reaching the end of her very limited stores of patience with me. I'd earned some leeway with her when I'd helped her daughter thwart a Winter-led jailbreak in her Hollow down south. It meant I got to remain uncuffed, while both Aurea and Abraham got to stew in it while manacled in their own damn dungeon.

I had to admit, the woman had a backbone of steel. Not only had she demanded to be let on campus when I'd reported the irregularity at Blood Rose. Lucretia made Aurea transport her through the mirror and then cuffed and read the woman her rights the moment she was fully through. Tally would have saluted the move, if she'd been conscious long enough to check it.

A phone call home had revealed the spell was waning. I wasn't sure if Morgana had given up on it, or if whatever Maverick had done toward the end of the fight had somehow destroyed the link she'd been using to aim the curse. Whatever the reason, Olga and Betanya agreed that the family should be up soon, though some nightmares were likely to occur.

"I hate this place," Lucretia said, gesturing around at the dim confines of the office when I failed to answer her question for the umpteenth time. She didn't seem convinced by the plethora of "I don't know" that I had to offer. The truth was: the fight had happened almost too quickly for me to track. I hadn't been the one running or slinging spells. I had a big fat goose egg on the details she wanted most.

“You hate this place?” I asked and couldn’t keep the surprise out of my voice.
“Why?”

Lucretia crossed her arms over her chest. “This whole lineage thing has been ridiculous for years. Tradition has allowed the Grimsbanes to remain in power long past the time it was useful or appropriate. They aren’t actually preparing any of these women for the real world. If Aurea had been less interested in politics, she might have seen what she had in you before a vampire came along and mucked it all up.”

“I don’t think the answer to the Grimsbanes behaving badly is to establish a Boline dynasty instead.”

The words escaped my mouth before I could stop them. They bubbled up somewhere from my gut and poured out, heedless of my brain’s veto. The sharp look Lucretia threw me over her shoulder was enough to glue my tongue to the roof of my mouth. It wasn’t even a hex. She really did scare me that much.

Hey, you try staring into the face of a woman who, honest-to-goddess, tried to smite you for ‘hurting’ her daughter. It’s scarier than it sounds. After you survive that, try doing it again.

“Did I ever say I wanted a dynasty, Depraysie?”

Lucretia’s tone was as saccharine as a pitcher of sweetened iced tea and just as cold. The smile she forced looked sneering and awful. She was trying to make the effort to be diplomatic, now that she knew who and what I was. I almost told her to stop. The effort looked as painful as yanking a tooth. She wasn’t built for this kind of thing. Like Tally, she kicked ass first and smoothed feathers later.

“I’m not disagreeing with you,” I said, deciding that conceding ground was going to get me farther with the prickly sheriff than arguing. “All I’m saying is I don’t think

the Grimsbanes need to be in charge either, but how do you replace them? I mean, this place is an institution like Yale or Harvard. People go here because of them.”

Lucretia shrugged. “It’s up to you, in the end. Once I’ve cleared you of any wrongdoing, it will be your job as faerie council to the school to decide what happens now. I don’t think it should take long to gather evidence that backs your claims. My best deputy has already confirmed that the dolls were constructed with blood magic so that backs what you told me. Though I still find some of the other details suspect.”

Yeah, I just bet she did. I’d thought Celestine was crazy until I saw what Maverick could do when he really let loose with blood magic. It wasn’t just dangerous. It could be catastrophic. Did that mean he deserved to be burned no? No. So, I wasn’t telling Lucretia the whole story, pretending Rook and I had discovered Morgana’s affliction on our own and had come to foil her intentionally. Lucretia could smell the bullshit but wasn’t sure which bits I was lying about. All of it sounded so absurd.

“Talk to Aunt Celestine,” I said, crossing my arms over my chest. “I can’t explain it any better than she can. She’s the one who turned me onto the conspiracy in the first place. If you want more answers, you should ask her.”

Lucretia did another circuit of the room. The eyeball floating suspended in a jar tracked her progress. I hoped it wasn’t actually reporting the conversation back to anyone, but I couldn’t be sure. I wasn’t sure about anything anymore. If Mav was right, everything I thought about magic was wrong. Every story I’d been told was a lie.

There was no way I could convince Lucretia of something I barely believed myself, so I just shrugged, as though I had nothing else to offer on the subject. And then the first half of what she heard hit home, and I sat up straighter.

I stared at her, not sure I’d heard right. “And what do you mean, it’s my job?”

Lucretia did something truly terrifying then. She smirked at me and leaned her hip against the desk. She always gave off the aura of a powerful beast, coiled and ready to strike. This was Lucretia at rest, a lioness resting on a rock after a successful kill. I knew that whatever came out of her mouth next was going to be bad if she was aiming anything so pleasant as a smile in my direction.

“Weren’t you listening when Headmaster Thorne told you about the new regulations the school was under?”

Yes, he had, but I’d been half-starved at the time. One of his former fledglings had locked me in a basement after brutally ending my life. I thought I was entitled to be fuzzy on the particulars.

“Remind me.”

Lucretia scooted further onto the desk, disrupting some of Aurea’s knick-knacks. If Aurea had been here, I was sure she’d have let out a furious tut of disapproval, especially when Lucretia kicked her legs, setting her spurs jangling. It was a pleasant sound in the dim, unpleasant room.

“The representatives of the Faerie courts arbitrate disputes at Blood Rose from now on. The responsibility falls to the nearest to the castle, geographically speaking. That means that duty falls to you, Depraysie. You’re the closest royal at hand. It puts you in a unique position.”

“What unique position?”

She cocked her head to the side. “Blood Rose is essentially yours to run as you see fit, provided you have an older fae to oversee you. You haven’t reached the age of majority, even if you’d remained a witch. I won’t feel comfortable letting you run an administration on your own until you’re at least seventy.”

The picture she was painting seemed impossible. Blood Rose was mine? That couldn't be right. I wasn't a princess yet. I wasn't through with school. I hadn't even lost my virginity! I couldn't be in charge of all these people.

But what was the alternative? Let the Grimsbanes have it? They'd been running the place like a country club for centuries. Didn't other supernaturals deserve a chance to attend the school?

"I'll think about it," I said at last. "But that's not why you wanted to see me, was it?"

Lucretia shook her head with enough force to make her inky ponytail bob. "No. I wanted to talk to you about the knife."

Tension sang through my veins. Had they found it? Could they destroy it? Would breaking down the magic do more damage than good? I didn't know. I wasn't the one who'd grown up learning about mystical weapons. If you wanted trivia like that, you asked Meredith. She might be a white witch, but she was practically Wikipedia if you wanted to learn about evil relics.

"Did Aurea still have it?"

Lucretia shook her head again, face screwing up like the words tasted bad. "It's still out there. We believe Morgana took it as an insurance policy."

That was disappointing, but not exactly surprising. Morgana had been playing us all off one another. Killing Vivian had made Aurea irrational. All Morgana had to do was sit back and watch what the headmistress was capable of when grief stole all her decorum.

"Janara will be hunting Aurea down soon," I muttered, more to myself than Lucretia. "She's not going to give that advantage up if she can help it."

“Indeed not,” Lucretia said dryly. “But it does make the need to chase her less pressing. Aurea’s blackmail scheme has earned her at least a year or two in my custody, I believe.”

“And Headmaster Thorne?” I asked.

I couldn’t help it. Once again, the words rolled off my tongue without checking in with my brain. I didn’t want to ask after Headmaster Thorne. What he’d done was wrong. He’d known better. And yet...

Yet, he was still Rook’s father. He’d been kind to me. It was hard to squint past the genial face to see the monstrous thing he’d done. It would be doubly hard for Rook. I needed to know, if only for his sake.

“Also in custody,” she said coolly. “Your coven may find blooding without consent more permissible than mine, but it’s time it became a crime. Morgana Grimsbane would not, in any way, have willingly become what she became.” She paused a moment. “Do you have a problem with that, Depraysie?”

I wasn’t sure she was right about that. Morgana had been filled with so much blind hatred that she might have embraced the power sooner if she’d known it existed. Arguing the point would only earn me a hex, though, so I kept quiet.

“No, Sheriff. I don’t have a problem with that at all.”

Tally

The last time I'd gotten an icepick migraine, I'd been a newlywed mundane and had cried myself to sleep after learning Jonathan was cheating.

That had been the first I knew of, but definitely not the only indiscretion up to that point. As an incubus, he'd probably turned my head with magic more times than I could count.

It turned out that faeries could get migraines. It just took ridiculously dark magic to hurt or put me down for any time at all. In some ways, that was reassuring. I was harder to hurt. On the other hand, if Astrid paced the room one more time, letting the light glint off her coppery hair, I was going to snatch her by it and force her to sit still.

I rubbed the pounding pulse in my temples, wondering for the umpteenth time how my metabolism worked. It would probably absorb drugs quickly. Too quickly to do me any good? I wasn't sure. I hoped not. I doubted this was the last time I'd be cursed during my exceptionally long life span. Aspirin had been my best friend for years. I preferred over-the-counter magic to brews of unknown origin.

"What do you mean, Maverick is gone?"

That had been the most difficult thing to digest. Not that I'd been cursed into a week-long sleep alongside my boys while a Blood Witch ran amok at Blood Rose, trying to kill everyone in the establishment before they could discover she was alive. Then Meredith Boline had brought her mother in after Rook and Astrid failed to make

scheduled contact. And as I understood it, Abraham and Aurea were in jail for what they'd done and this was all before I'd even cracked an eyelid open.

No, it was the fact that Maverick was gone—that was the fact that was sticking with me. As Astrid explained it, he'd evaporated into thin air. No one had seen him for the last few days. There were no phone calls. No texts. He'd ghosted all of us in a very literal sense. It took effort not to curl into a ball, feeling hideously empty. What he'd done was supposed to be impossible, magically speaking. He'd accomplished it with what amounted to the help of a demigod. Or maybe, a demon. Astrid seemed to think this Knox character was close enough to both.

"I mean, he's gone," she said quietly. "Whatever had Morgana had him too. I could feel that before he went poof."

Astrid motioned vaguely at her head, face screwing into a pinched expression. Her features were almost vulpine. When she was unhappy, she resembled her Uncle Fox. I couldn't blame her for it, but it didn't help my mood. Or my poor aching gray matter.

"Mav was reading your thoughts?" I checked.

Astrid shrugged, making another circuit of the room. I closed my eyes, rather than let the firelight from the grate reflect off her hair and stab straight into my retinas.

"Yeah. Apparently, the really old vampires were just as magical as witches. Maybe more so, since they could break conventional rules. It's sort of... anti-magic. The goddess literally invented new magic and then tried to stomp out any trace of it. It's too dangerous. It's why witches always burn the taint from the line."

"I won't let them burn him," I said, half-rising from the plush armchair. The coven house was always a comfortable place to be. I avoided it only because I was not

sexually liberated to survive in casual conversations with these women.

Astrid gave me a 'duh' look. I wasn't sure how she managed to convey the meaning without the sound, but like many teens, she managed. "I won't either. I don't care if the big dolt has gotten himself into something stupid. We'll drag him out of it."

She said the words matter-of-factly, as though if she declared it, everything would work out. And who knew? She was a faerie monarch of Autumn. It just might.

I forced a smile. It wasn't going to feel the same around here without him, but I had to live my life. I had a family to take care of. Even if the disaster of the week had passed us by, there'd always be another day. Another problem. I'd learned that the hits never really stopped coming when I'd been a cop. Becoming the heir to the throne of a court of Faerie had only solidified the feeling. I'd get through this because I had to. The point was: Maverick wasn't dead. The coven had convinced me that I'd feel it if Maverick passed on. So, he was out there. Just... someplace none of us could scry. We'd done our very best to locate him and nothing. Whatever was in his body was going to regret snatching him from us, but it was going to take me some time to figure out how to go after him and how to defeat whatever this thing was that had him.

Astrid shook her head, setting the waves shimmering. "Can we talk about something else, please? Talking about Mav is depressing."

She had a talent for understatement. I was sure I was going to cry tonight. I'd finally allowed myself to let him in and now he was gone. Not of his own will, but gone nonetheless. My bed would feel colder, my house quieter and less homey. He wasn't dead, but he was gone.

I'm going to get him back, I vowed.

“Sure,” I said with a sigh. “What did you have in mind?”

Astrid performed a little shuffle step that instantly had my back up. I knew the guilty motion when I saw it. I’d done it myself at her age, when I’d attended a party my father had forbidden me to go to. She flinched away from my automatic glower of rebuke, raising her hands in surrender.

“It’s not bad, Tally, I swear. There’s just... a big decision to be made, that’s all. I’ll need to bring it to the Council for a vote, but ultimately, you’d get the final say.”

“What?”

The question came out from between my teeth. I already had a headache. I did not need political bullshit heaped onto my plate as I struggled to deal with the aftermath of a curse. My men were under the impression I’d taken paid leave to deal with a family emergency in Portland. I had to hand it to the coven. It was a plausible story. The boys at the station might give me a hard time for ignoring messages, but if I kissed ass with breakfast for a few weeks, we’d be square.

Astrid backed up a step. “Well, do you remember what the headmaster said when I was newly turned?”

“Remind me.”

“He said they were placing the conflict in the hands of Faerie until the families could be trusted again. Well, Lucretia Boline and I agreed that would be a lot easier if we moved the school here.”

“Move Blood Rose here?” I repeated.

She nodded. “Haven Hollow is a... well, it’s a Hollow. It’s accessible. Right now,

there isn't really a school system for monsters, but if we moved Blood Rose here, there could be."

I held up a hand, trying to stave off the torrent of words. She was clearly excited about the idea.

"Are you saying you want me to... what? Oversee the school?" I asked as I shook my head. This was just too much. "I'm not a teacher, Astrid. Besides, how would we even make that work? If we open a private school or university here, there will need to be humans involved. Otherwise, there will be lawsuits. Courts. All that unpleasantness."

"That's just it. Trusted mundanes could be added to the list to act as support staff in keeping the secret. I mean, everyone would have to be thoroughly vetted. It will be a tad too Men In Black for my taste since memory charms will have to be more common, which I know you hate, but I think... I think the Hollows have been going about it wrong. We have to stop treating all of humankind like the enemy. Like it or not, they're here and we need their support if we want to live in peace."

Astrid did another shuffle-step, glancing up at me through her lashes. It was a young woman's beseeching look to a mother figure. I hadn't realized I'd stepped in and filled that role in her life at some point, but she was looking at me like... like she thought I could make things better. Not just stop them going badly, but improve them somehow.

I realized I could. Astrid was right. There wasn't much of a system in place for kids. Education about the world we lived in, both mundane and magical, was restricted to the elite. What if we could start something here? If we did—with the school being in city limits—it was firmly in my jurisdiction. I could deputize people I thought could oversee it well.

I let out a sigh. “It’s going to be a huge undertaking, Astrid. Who would we even get to build the thing? It’s not like we can tear down Blood Rose stone by stone and import it here. I think it might raise some eyebrows when we go through customs.”

Astrid waved a dismissive hand. “That’s the easy part. Uncle Fox is living in Misty Hollow, which is currently under construction, remember?”

“Yes.”

She nodded. “I can ask him for the names of the contractors. You’ll have your pick of people. It would also make it a lot easier for the Bolines to keep an eye on what’s being taught there. The factions have tried to kick off war twice in as many months, so she wants them under supervision.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about having another supernatural cop honing in on my turf, but decided to let it go for now. There were bigger things to worry about than a potential future institution in Haven Hollow. Like Maverick’s absence. The new threat posed by contaminated magic. Like my aunt’s continued battle for the throne.

And whatever the hell was causing the racket out in the street. There was a clap of deafening thunder, even though the night had been clear when I woke. Shouts and screams rose from the street. Unbearable pressure built between my ears before the sound bubble popped and it all poured over me. Those weren’t drunken hooligans outside. Those were screams of fear.

Astrid beat me to the front door. I was right behind her, launching myself down the steps with all the speed and agility of an Olympic sprinter. I stopped dead not long after clearing the railing of the front porch.

There was a dragon in the middle of the street. A huge, scaly dragon with crimson scales and eyes like burning embers. And it wasn’t even the scariest thing waiting for

me. There were ogres. Enormous alligators, shaggy creatures I didn't have names for. Exotics , Fifi, would have called them. They didn't look even remotely human. And then there were those of us who could pass. I saw faeries and witches. Even a few vampires milled around, looking pale and nervous as they saw to the panicking children. That was where the screaming had come from.

God, kids. Some of them were bleeding. One looked so glassy-eyed with shock I was afraid she'd need to be committed. And above it all, the wind began to howl, cold winter air pouring off the hills like a landslide. The air froze in fractals when I breathed out. I whirled around, trying to find the source of the winter power pouring into my town. The last time I'd been surrounded by this much of it, a bunch of pixies had been trying to kill us all.

But it wasn't Janara, Wren, or Rime waiting at the portal at the head of the street. It was Fox Aspen, swaying like a drunk in the mouth of the open portal. He looked awful , face sheened with sweat, as though he'd recently broken a fever. His face was still flushed an unhealthy shade of red, and his eyes were frantic as he seized another vampire and tossed her through.

The woman looked a little younger than my human glamour. Her hair was a shade of gold that reminded me of harvest corn. She landed on her ass in the street, betrayal spasming across her face when she realized he'd tossed her away.

"Don't you dare!" she shouted at him, eyes sparking with fury.

"Sorry, Charlotte," he said, and I somehow managed to hear his whisper, even over the wind. Then his eyes shifted to meet mine. They were harder than I'd ever seen them and full of accusatory fire.

"Take care of them, Taliyah," he ordered.

And then the portal collapsed in on itself. The wind stopped howling, and the light coating of snow that had fallen on the street began to melt, unable to stay solid in the current climate. It left the night sodden, bloody, and utterly, utterly bereft of explanations.

There was only one thing I could say to that.

“What. The. Fuck just happened?”

The End

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

(read on for a sample)

Dark clouds rolled through the sky, casting eerie shadows over the terrain.

Even though the conductor announced it was midday, that was hard to believe, given the grayness of the sky outside. I was used to the clear, sunny skies of Iowa. Or maybe I'd deluded myself into thinking summer would last forever—and that autumn wasn't already enveloping everything in its cold, dreary grasp.

"All disembarking for Tanana Riverfront, please watch your step." The conductor's voice carried over the squeal of the train as it finally rolled to a stop.

I stood up, my heart racing as the buzz of sheer excitement coursed through my veins. I disembarked from the stuffy train and stood on the age-worn wood platform, poised to take the first step toward the fulfillment of my lifelong dream.

Fingering a few strands of loose, blond curls that had slid out from my ponytail, I glanced around the station for a familiar face.

"Nothing but a sea of strangers," I said to myself on a sigh. A handful of weary travelers disembarked from the train, hustling to places unknown to all but themselves.

Shifting my bag to my other shoulder, I set off across the platform. It was only a mile away; or at least, that's what Amelia had said in one of her many letters.

Cirque du Noir .

The name tingled on my lips, pulling them into a slight smile. The circus . The only place I'd ever felt inexplicably drawn to. It had been dreams of the circus that had helped me escape the humdrum life of a farmer's daughter growing up in the middle of Podunk, America.

It was visions of the circus that helped me settle into sleep each night—dreams of leading a life full of excitement and adventure. The most thrilling way to see the world and escape the unremarkable existence I'd been leading for the past nineteen years.

And, now, that's exactly what I was about to do...

One more deep breath and I marched toward the train station exit, the weight of my meager belongings suspended entirely on my right shoulder.

Tanana Riverfront was the sort of place you could pass through without realizing it, as it housed only a tiny handful of shops and eateries. It was no more than a steppingstone to a final destination. Occasionally, my family and I passed through small towns like this one when we had to pick up supplies or livestock. My father used to say, "Don't blink or you'll miss it!" as the yoked oxen pulled our work wagon. At the time, I thought how awful it must be to live in a town that folks passed every day—a town where no one ever stayed long enough to learn people's names or remember their faces.

Regardless, Amelia and I had agreed to meet at the Tanana Riverfront train station. But, now, there were only four people who remained at the station and none of those people were Amelia. Her train had been scheduled to arrive twenty minutes before mine. Maybe it was late... I plopped myself down on an empty bench and waited, swinging my feet back and forth as I listened to the heavy chugs of coal-fired engines rolling down the tracks.

After ten minutes, I decided to head for the circus grounds. After all, Amelia and I had agreed in our last telegram that if our trains were delayed; we'd just meet at the circus instead.

I walked around the entire train station, which wasn't very big, to make sure she wasn't waiting in another area, but she was nowhere to be found. An elderly man in a red cap and vest sat quietly humming to himself in the ticket booth. Other than him, the place was empty.

I adjusted my heavy bag on my other shoulder and headed for the front of the train depot. Luckily, the circus was within walking distance of the train station.

As I walked, the dark clouds overhead rolled across the bleak, gray sky. In the distance, the faint silhouette of a huge tent peeked over the tops of the old oak trees lining the street.

The big top.

It had to be less than a mile out, planted attractively in waving fields of yellowing prairie grass.

As I stepped onto the dirt path leading through the field and fixed my gaze on the huge tent, an icy shudder rolled down my back and gave me cause for pause.

Why in the world was I suddenly feeling nervous, scared even?

Perhaps it was just the ominous feeling of a gloomy day, when it seemed like the landscape was just waiting for a storm to strike. Whatever it was, I shook off the feeling and focused, instead, on the adventure that awaited me.

A new life.

Setting out toward the tent, golden fields waved in the autumn breeze, giving way to a distant forest so thickly strewn with trees, light barely penetrated the canopy. I hoped to see Amelia walking somewhere ahead of me, but no such luck.

Despite the short walk, the large bag I carried, which had seemed manageable at the start, became oppressively heavier as I plodded along. But the thought of seeing my best friend after so many years apart kept a spring in my step—well, that and the thought of the circus itself.

Amelia and I had met in primary school, becoming instantly inseparable and united in our dream to join the circus one day. We were forced to part when her father, the manager of our local train station, was transferred to another station in Nebraska.

Our kindred love of the circus had never waned, though, and here we were, in the autumn of 1930, finally manifesting our dream... together.

As I walked, I tried to absorb all the incredible sights I passed. A dazzling rainbow of tents and stalls were scattered in casual rows leading up to the main circus tent, which dominated the skyline.

People strolled in and out of the tents, busily tending to this or that. The more I watched them, the more I realized that no matter how hard I tried to take in all the details of my surroundings, I couldn't. Strangely, the people almost appeared faceless, their features obscured by shadows from the clouds above—they appeared as streaks of skin color, leading into a bright red shirt here or a blue one there.

Every so often, I could make out a pair of eyes, or a crooked nose on one of the passersby, but when I looked again, they were blurry. It was like I was trying to study faces through a thick fog or trying to recall them from a distant memory.

I blinked a few times and then took a deep breath as I forced myself into believing

this was simply a trick of my eyes—or that of my mind. I'd been traveling on the train for a very long time and hadn't gotten much sleep. Clearly, my mind was playing with the images referred to it by my eyes.

Much to my relief, folks began to appear more clearly the closer I came to the big top.

I could breathe a little more easily now and as I watched, I even felt a smirk take over my lips as a trio of clowns juggled balls and rings as they walked past me. Next was a fire-eater who carried lit sticks between his fingers, and as I turned a corner, a woman stood before me with a bright green snake wrapped around the length of her arm. My skin crawled when the viper slid across her shoulders. I skittered off to the side of the path, giving a wide berth to this odd-looking woman and her exotic pet.

After watching the snake lady enter the big top, I turned around and bumped right into a stranger's chest. All I saw was a long, curling orange-red beard as I pushed myself away from his chest a little too hard, trying to escape the tickle of whiskers in my nose, and lost my balance. As I started to go down, he reached out and grabbed my arm, preventing me from hitting the ground.

"I—I'm sorry," I apologized breathlessly as I looked up into his face.

But when I finally caught a glimpse of his features, I felt my mouth drop open in shock because the man who'd kept me from falling was actually a woman! A bearded woman.

"Oh, it's all right, hon!" The feminine voice took me completely by surprise. The beard wasn't any hallucination, and it was attached to the woman's face, which was round, with pink cheeks and a wide grin of lots of teeth. Her hair— all her hair—was a brilliant display of ginger curls.

“I...” Shaking my head, I tried to reorient myself. “I’m really sorry.”

The gold sequins on her exotic, purple dress shimmered in the light as the woman laughed deeply. “Aw, it’s fine. I’m a big girl, love! I can take a few whacks to the ol’ chest.” She held out her hand once more, taking mine and giving it a firm shake. “The name’s Halfrieda. I’m known ‘round here as ‘The Bearded Lady’.”

My hand was dwarfed by Halfrieda’s warm grasp. I’d never seen such large hands on a woman before. Or a beard, for that matter, but her deep chuckle and jovial smile filled me with comfort, and I found myself smiling back at her.

“Hi, Halfrieda,” I said. “Nice to meet you.”

“Whaddya call yerself, love?”

“Um, B-Bindi. My name is Bindi.”

“Bindi, Bindi...” Halfrieda played with my name for a moment before her eyes lit up. “Oh, Bindi! Laurent mentioned you’d be comin’ sometime today.”

“L-Laurent?” I wasn’t sure who this Laurent character was or how he knew I was coming. Then I guessed this had to be Amelia’s doing—she must have contacted the circus before we arrived? Or, at least, before I arrived?

“Laurent’s the ringmaster of the Cirque du Noir , Laurent Elilchelvan,” Halfrieda clarified. “He seemed awful excited ta meetcha.”

I was puzzled. “He did?”

Halfrieda nodded. “He’s always lookin’ fer new talent, ya know?” She indicated the big tent behind us and added, “You’ll find him in there, practicin’ his act fer later

tonight.”

“His act?”

She nodded again. “He’s not only our ringmaster but also an illusionist. He’ll be the only one wearin’ a top hat.” Before I could respond to that, Halfrieda broke into a heavy chuckle. “Yep, he always wears a top hat, even when he rehearses. Claims it helps him git into character.” Halfrieda snorted, the crow’s feet crinkling at the corners of her eyes. “He’s a strange one, Laurent is. But he treats us good an’ he’s fair.”

“I didn’t realize my friend told him we were coming,” I said, still slightly puzzled by that fact. “By the way, you haven’t run into a girl about my age named Amelia, have you? She’s a juggler with long, red hair, similar to yours actually.”

Halfrieda stroked her beard. “Can’t say as I have.” Then she looked me up and down, a sparkle coming to her eye. “Didja both come to try out for our little troupe of actors?”

I nodded.

“There ain’t but two things in the whole world that gits Laurent excited,” she continued. “Money and new acts.” Then she chewed on her lower lip. “An’ saltwater taffy, too, I guess. He’s got a right sweet tooth, that man does. Gits giddier than a horse on the prairie whenever we go to the piers.”

Halfrieda winked as I smiled. Strange though Halfrieda was, I immediately liked her—she was one of those people who had no trouble talking to anyone—one of those people where words never seemed to stick in their throats like they did mine. I imagined she made friends wherever she went.

“Well, if Laurent is expecting me, I don’t want to keep him waiting,” I said, thinking Amelia could already be inside the circus tent, waiting for me there. Along with Laurent.

Halfrieda’s gaze followed mine to the big tent. “Well, if ya’d like some company, I’ll be happy ta introduce you to him, love.”

“I don’t want to interrupt your routine.” Although I found her offer comforting, it was a bit embarrassing to need an escort, and I began to feel like a lost child. “I’m sure I can find my way.”

Halfrieda peered at me curiously. “Well, all right then. I’ll leave you to yer business. Nice ta meetcha, Bindi. Good luck with yer audition. As we say in the business, break a leg!”

I laughed. “Thank you, Halfrieda.”

She gave me another of those genuinely happy grins. “I hope our paths cross again real soon.”

“I hope so, too,” I said, and meant it. I waved as Halfrieda turned away, leaving me alone once more. My heart skipped a beat, and I prayed Amelia was inside the big tent, waiting for me, planning a dramatic reveal once I entered. Regardless, I was here to audition, and Bindi Bairam wasn’t one to ever run late.

With a deep breath, I started toward the open flaps of the tent, ignoring the butterflies in my stomach.

Source Creation Date: August 5, 2025, 4:27 am

Truth be told, I felt anxious because I had no clue what to expect.

The black and glittery gold stripes of the big top seemed otherworldly at first, so different from the traditional red-and-white striped circus tents I remembered from picture books. The eerie black and gold theme suggested the tent housed something almost macabre within. But as I entered, I wasn't greeted by ghoulish clowns or sinister organ music, which I'm ashamed to admit I'd actually expected. Instead, I was surprised at how normal everything looked. A semi-circular amphitheater encircled the main ring, its mostly unoccupied seats waiting for the night crowd.

A group of men sat in the stands, tuning their instruments. Two ladies juggled knives, tossing them back and forth to one another. A man balanced on a unicycle, moving fearlessly across a thin wooden beam. As I stepped forward, I became acutely aware of a tightrope spanning overhead, made visible by an unseen source of light.

I slowly walked across the floor, careful not to stare at any of the performers, although they were a marvel to behold, milling about and rehearsing. A strange sense of familiarity and tranquility washed over me as I observed my surroundings. Even though the familiarity made no sense, since I'd never stepped foot inside this particular circus before, it set my mind at ease, even though I couldn't explain why. It was like one of those magical moments of twilight, where the light is both faded and bright, poised on the cusp of transition from one juncture to the next.

If you blink, you might miss it.

Whipping around, I felt the distinct sensation of someone's gaze settling on me from behind. Toward one of the side entrances stood the performers I'd seen before—three

clowns, a fire-eater, and the reptilian woman with the green snake. Her gaze was fixed on me, her yellow eyes so similar to the snake's—narrowed and calculating. They both stared at me unapologetically, as if they knew me. Of course, they didn't, and so I had no idea why my arrival would capture their interest.

Interestingly, the hair on the back of my neck stood up, and I turned around, heart in my throat, as I suddenly found myself face to chest with a very well-dressed man. I immediately glanced up, an apology on my lips and found him beaming down at me.

“Hello,” he said as he extended his hand and I took his large one in mine automatically as I continued to stare up at him. It was almost as if I couldn't break his gaze, it was just so intense.

“Um, hello,” I answered in a mouse voice.

I couldn't explain it, but I was instantly mesmerized by his brilliant, gray eyes. Swallowing hard, my throat was suddenly dry and my heart was pounding in my chest, as if warning me a grizzly bear was charging me from behind.

And yet... yet, there was no grizzly bear.

There was only this man.

And he was quite debonair in his violet tailcoat. Its silver buttons reflected the low light of the tent's interior and the black trim accented his broad shoulders. Beneath his top hat, wisps of sandy blond hair framed his handsome face. If I had to guess, I would have put him in his mid to late twenties.

“Bindi Bairam, I presume?” he asked as he brought my hand to his mouth and kissed the top of it ever so gently. As he pulled his hand away, I caught sight of a dark spot on the inside of his wrist, a dark inked tattoo of a design of some sort.

This must be Laurent.

Although Halfrieda had told me I was expected, I was still surprised to hear him call my by my name. I tried not to show that surprise, though. “Mr. El... Elilchelvan?” I labored to pronounce his surname.

He dipped his head low toward me in a small bow. “Please call me Laurent. Mr. Elilchelvan sounds so...” He stood up straight again, pulling his hand free of mine as a small bouquet of fiery-red and ebony-black flowers suddenly appeared in my palm. “Pompous, if you know what I mean?”

I gasped, clutching the fragrant spider lilies and roses as I inhaled their subtle scent, marveling at how he’d magically produced such a rare arrangement, seemingly out of nowhere. The blooms were flawless, as exquisite as the man who’d just thrust them into my hand. “How did you...?”

Laurent grinned from ear to ear, like a child given praise. “Do you like them? I’ve been working on the timing of that trick for days now.”

“Oh, I thought... you were the ringmaster.”

“Not only am I the circus ringmaster, but I’m also an illusionist. As they say, I’m a jack-of-all-trades, and master of none!” Laurent chuckled and placed a friendly hand on my shoulder, turning me away from the snake woman and her pet. They still stared at us with those eerie, golden eyes. I couldn’t help but swallow hard as I faced Laurent with a wilted smile.

“Who... who is that woman with the snake?” I asked.

“Oh, don’t mind her. That’s Valida.”

“She looks like she ate something sour,” I managed.

Laurent chuckled. “She’s just our snake charmer and she can be rather... dour.” He glanced down at me and gave me a little wink, as if this conversation were just between the two of us. I couldn’t help but smile back at him. “She keeps tabs on whatever’s happening around here. Sometimes, she can be a bit of a busybody.”

“Ah,” I answered and faced him as he stopped walking to face me and doing so, held my gaze. There was a flash of something in his eyes that almost spoke to a sense of reunion—as if we’d met before, but that was impossible, because I’d never seen him before.

“It is... so good to see you,” he whispered and there was something in his eyes that was warm, an emotion echoed in the smile that took over his lips. And yet... the intimacy of his expression and his words—the way he said them—as if he’d known me my entire life—was off-putting because it was so strange.

“Oh, it’s... well,” I struggled to find the right words. “Nice to see you too.”

He nodded and seemed to remember himself because he gave me a hurried, yet apologetic sort of gaze as he started walking again. “Anyway, I received your recent letter mentioning you and your friend were interested in auditioning for our circus, for the Cirque du Noir.”

“Oh.” I hadn’t sent him a letter, so I assumed Amelia had.

“I’m delighted you showed up. You know, plenty of people who request an audition never follow through. Quite frustrating. Regardless, I’m most interested in viewing your talent, young lady.”

“Thank you.” I tried to hand the bouquet back to him, but Laurent only shook his head and pushed it closer to me. And I didn’t fail to notice how the touch of his fingers on mine lingered quite a bit longer than necessary.

“Those are for you to keep!”

He pulled away then and nodded, as if he were answering a question in his own mind.

“Oh, thank you,” I managed.

He nodded again. “Spider lilies are the flowers of the afterlife, according to Buddhist legend. They even grow in hell, guiding the damned through samsara , their next incarnation.” With a wave of his hand, Laurent plucked a black rose from the ensemble and stuck it behind his ear, enhancing his already dark motif. “I always pray for some guidance myself.” Then he grinned broadly and I could well understand how he’d become a showman—he seemed to have it in his blood. “And who decided to come to my little circus today? You! Seems the flowers are already hard at work!”

Laurent’s joy was infectious. There was something warm and bright about his demeanor, as if he, himself, provided all the light inside the place. It was an odd thought, to be certain, but one that strangely also felt too right not to be true.

He waved his hand toward the rear of the tent. “Now, let’s not discuss the specifics out here. Come with me, Bindi Bairam, to a world of humdrum paperwork and legal terms.”

“S-sure.” I cast one more nervous glance behind my shoulder as the ringmaster led the way from the bustling tent.