



Dead Serious Halloween Special (Crawshanks Guide to the Recently Departed #6)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: It's Halloween and Chan's hosting a party at Harrison's newly inherited occult bookshop. Tristan is looking forward to a night of music, food and fun costumes with his husband and their friends.

What they actually get is chaos on the streets of Whitechapel when they accidentally open the Gospodar, the master copy of all fairy tales and let all of the creatures loose.

It's not the first time they've escaped but this time, they're determined not to go back.

They've only got until midnight. Tick tock goes the clock

This Halloween special picks up after the events of book five and leads into the spin off series, The Little Shop of Curiosities.

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I jolt out of sleep at the sound of my alarm, which has all the subtlety of the horn blare of a cruise ship coming into dock.

Reaching out, I desperately jab my finger several times against the lit screen of my phone on my bedside table, but it does nothing, just continues to blast obnoxiously at me. Unable to see anything other than a bright blur, I grab my glasses and wrestle them onto my face. Once I'm finally able to see the cancel button, I hit it with a little more force than needed and then flop onto my back, my heart hammering.

I've tried the alarms that ease a person gently out of sleep, but they never seem to work with me. Only a sound reminiscent of a host of stormtroopers making their way through my bedroom stomping along to the sound of The Imperial March can wake me up.

Fuck. I hate mornings.

I turn my head towards Danny to once again apologise for the volume level on my alarm—I don't know why; it's not like he isn't used to it at this point—but the other side of the bed is empty. The duvet is tossed back to reveal cold, rumpled sheets. Somewhat confused, I lift my head from the pillow and listen intently.

Nothing.

If Danny is up before me, I can usually hear him in the shower or pottering around in the kitchen, but the flat is silent. There's not so much as a drip of water or the hiss of the kettle.

I toss back the duvet, climb out of bed, and shiver. Any other day, I'd ignore the alarm for at least another fifteen minutes and burrow down into my warm cocoon, but for some reason I feel uneasy, like something's wrong.

Curious, and maybe a little unsettled, I grab my favourite fleece blanket from the BJ throne in the corner of the bedroom and pad softly out of the room in search of my husband.

I shiver again in the cold air and remind myself to reset the timer so the heating comes on a little earlier now we'd hit a cold snap. Wrapping my blanket around my body, I head for the living room and pause in the doorway. Danny is stood in front of the window staring out into the pitch black outside. Given that it's late October, it's still an hour or so from dawn.

I'm not sure what he's looking at, but I'm even more concerned about how still he is. Honestly, I'm not even certain he hears me or senses my presence. I cross the room and wrap my arms around him from behind. He doesn't even startle, just shifts slightly and lets out a slow breath.

"You're freezing," I mutter. Pressing against his back, I open the blanket and enfold him in a comforting hug, trying to warm him with my body heat. He's like a bloody ice cube. "Danny, what's wrong?"

He sighs again, his body relaxing slightly against me before he turns in my arms and gazes down at me. I can barely see him, his face shadowed and backlit by the pale moonlight.

"Danny?"

"Sorry," he murmurs. "I didn't mean to disturb you."

“You didn’t. My alarm went off and you weren’t in bed. How long have you been up? You’re freezing.”

He shrugs, and his voice comes out as a low, contemplative rumble. “I don’t know. A few hours, I suppose? I couldn’t sleep.”

From experience, I know there’s no point in pushing him to open up before he’s ready.

I rise up onto my toes and press my mouth to his. It’s a soft, chaste kiss, one filled with love and comfort.

He pulls back as the kiss breaks and wraps his arms around me in a tight hug. I can feel the warmth of his breath as he tucks his face into the crook of my neck, breathing me in.

“Come on,” I say, as I rub his back soothingly. “Let’s go into the kitchen. I’ll flick the heating on and make us some tea and toast.”

For a moment he doesn’t say anything, doesn’t even move, then he slowly draws back a fraction and nods. One hand still clutching the blanket to me, I slip the other in his and tow him from the room. The kitchen is even colder than the living room, and Danny is standing so close to me I feel him shudder.

“Sit.” I flip on the light and push him onto one of the kitchen chairs, then unwind the blanket from my body and fold him into it like a human burrito. He doesn’t look good. His face is pale and there are dark shadows under his eyes.

“Are you coming down with something?” I automatically raise my hand to his forehead to check for fever, but his skin is cold.

“No.” He manages a small smile and cups my other hand resting on his cheek. “I’m okay, promise. I just didn’t realise how cold it was. I should have put a hoodie on or something and definitely should have checked the heating.” His brows draw down in a frown. “It should’ve come on by now.”

“We forgot to reset the timers when the clocks went back.” I shake my head, turning towards the cupboard where the boiler is.

Quickly and efficiently, I open it up and switch the heating on, adjusting the thermostat. “There, that should warm up quickly enough.”

Filling the kettle, I switch it on and nip back to the bedroom to pull a hoodie on over my PJs. I jam my cold feet into the slippers shaped like ghosts. Our nephew, Nick, had thought they were hilarious and bought them for my birthday a couple of months ago. Before I leave, I also grab a pair of thick socks for Danny.

By the time I get back to the kitchen, Jacob Marley has sauntered in and is trying to clamber onto Danny’s lap. In reality, he’s clutching onto the blanket for dear life with his front claws while his fat, furry body dangles between Danny’s legs, his little back paws scrambling in the air for purchase.

Danny huffs out a quiet, amused laugh and scoops him up, then settles him in his lap and strokes him affectionately. My stomach unclenches a fraction at the sight of his smile as it eases the tension at the corners of his eyes.

Dropping to my knees in front of him, I yank the socks onto his feet. “Jesus, were you trying to do your best impression of Scott of the Antarctic? You’re lucky you don’t have frostbite.” I grin up at him in an attempt to lighten the mood.

“Thanks, love.” He holds onto Jacob Marley to stop him from falling and leans forward to press a kiss to my lips. “They are a bit numb.”

I snort as I stand. “That’s not a good thing.”

To keep myself busy, I bustle about the kitchen, making tea and buttering toast, while Danny chews over whatever is going on in his head. Finally, I set the plates and mugs on the table and take a seat opposite him.

“You ready to tell me what’s bothering you?” I ask and then sip my tea, watching him over the rim of the mug.

He blows out a breath and sets Jacob Marley on the floor. “Work.” He picks up a slice of toast, taking a bite and licking the raspberry jam from his lip.

I nod in sympathy. It’s not the first time we’ve had this conversation. It’s been frustrating for both of us, and I hate how he’s been treated by Scotland Yard in the months since Viv’s death, since that fucking dick of a DCI has started making Danny’s workplace absolute hell.

After the whole Detective Byrnes incident, I’d hoped Danny’s superior, DCI Butler, would get the sack, but the slimy weasel managed to wriggle his way out of trouble. And if that wasn’t bad enough, he’s tried every trick in the book to get Danny fired, even suggesting that Danny and I had something to do with Detective Byrnes’ disappearance.

While we didn’t exactly have anything to do with it per se, we did just so happen to have a front-row seat when he tried to raise a demon from a hundred-and-fifty-year-old devil’s trap in the Whitechapel bookshop. And when said demon stuffed him headfirst into the trap he’d just been ejected from, that was pretty much the end of Detective Byrnes—or should I say, Issac Crawshanks.

It had turned out that the man who’d had in it for Danny since he arrived at Scotland Yard wasn’t Byrnes at all, but rather a descendant of Cordelia Crawshanks as well as

a witch himself. A witch who, it transpired, had murdered Madame Viv and attempted to kill Harrison in order to make himself an all-powerful demon master, blah blah blah. To say the whole thing degenerated into a complete and utter mess would be a gigantic understatement.

Fake Byrnes—who goaded Danny into almost punching the crap out of him, which resulted in Danny being suspended pending an investigation—disappeared, and only we knew who he really was and what had happened to him. We figured that, with no body and no evidence, the best thing we could do was keep our mouths shut and see how it played out.

What followed was an absolute nightmare. DCI Butler managed to convince the Yard to open an investigation into Fake Byrnes' disappearance with Danny as the prime suspect.

But, like I said, no evidence. And when I say no evidence, I mean absolutely zero. Issac Crawshanks had covered his tracks well; even his address had been fake. And since Scotland Yard couldn't find where he had actually been living, they couldn't search through his personal belongings. There was nothing in his desk or locker at work.

Ironically, he was like a ghost.

For a while, it seemed the whole incident was going to get shelved as a cold case, but then the body of the real Detective Byrnes turned up in a shallow grave in Manchester, just like Issac Crawshanks had told us he'd done to the man once he'd stolen his identity and had no further use for him.

When extensive testing suggested that the real Detective Byrnes had died months before he'd even shown up in London, both the Manchester police and Scotland Yard had been unable to come up with a plausible explanation as to how a dead man had

managed to transfer to the Met and run a bloody investigation before disappearing as mysteriously as he'd arrived. Needless to say, it was all swept very quietly under the rug. Danny was reinstated, and that was supposedly that.

Yeah, not so much.

DCI Butler was livid he hadn't been able to get rid of Danny. I don't know whether it's because he's homophobic, has a personal vendetta against my husband, or is just a gigantic dick—probably a combination of all three, to be honest—but he's made it his mission to make Danny's life—and, by extension, Maddie's—hell.

It's been an absolute shitshow. Last month, DCI Butler finally managed to separate them and reassign Maddie to some other department. He's also trying his best to isolate Danny from all his other work colleagues. If anyone dares to stick up for him, they're targeted too, which is really pissing Danny off. Not so much for himself, but for the few remaining friends he has there, who have been attempting to intervene and are being punished for it.

Danny was adamant he wasn't going to let that complete wanker win, and I respected that it was his job, his career, and ultimately his decision, but this really can't go on any longer.

I can't bear to see Danny unhappy like this. It hurts. I'm about two seconds away from sending Dusty and my other dead friends in to go full-on *The Conjuring* all over that prick, but I won't. I let out a sigh of resignation. I'm pretty sure it will only end up with us all in trouble with the Upstairs Management, and paranormal trouble is something we're never short on in the first place.

Danny nibbles listlessly on his toast as I watch him in concern. He's lost weight in addition to gaining those dark circles under his eyes, and thanks to his stress cleaning, the flat has never been so spotless.

“Danny.” I draw in a breath as his tired gaze locks on me. “I’m worried about you. I’ve tried to stay out of it and let you make your own decisions when it comes to your job and your career, but I don’t think this is going to get any better. In fact, now that the tosspot has managed to separate you and Maddie, I have a feeling things are just going to get much worse. I’d never try to tell you what to do because I know how much you love your job, but...” I trail off hopelessly. I just can’t force the words, I think you should quit, past my lips.

He pushes his plate away and toys with the handle on his mug.

“I know you’re right,” he finally admits in a quiet voice. “I’ve been thinking about it a lot, and—” He breaks off and shakes his head. “This isn’t what I signed up for, but it’s more than that.”

I sit quietly sipping my tea and let him organise his thoughts. Now he’s finally talking about it, I don’t want to risk any interruption making him close down again.

“Ever since I was a kid, joining the police is all I ever wanted to do,” he continues. “What happened with the West Yorkshire Police was bad enough, but I was lucky enough to get a second chance with Scotland Yard, and I’ll always be grateful for that. It brought me to you.” He swallows tightly and I reach out to take his hand, noting how cold his fingers still are. “All I ever wanted to do was help people. I thought things were different, that times were changing, but the politics and prejudices, the power imbalances, they’re still there within the system. Everything Butler has got away with is proof of that, and I haven’t got it in me to fight it, so what’s the point?” He lifts his hand and rubs his forehead as if in pain, and I’ll bet running on almost no sleep and the stress he’s under is probably brewing a banger of a headache. “It’s not just the job.”

“What is it then?” I ask softly.

“Being a detective, working on the force, I naively thought I knew the worst that was out there. But the things we’ve seen, the things we’ve done... I mean, who the hell has Death dropping by for relationship advice? Or stops an apocalypse by stealing the bones of a dead man to rebuild a magic doorway? And don’t even get me started on naked demons climbing out of the floor!”

He breaks off and sighs loudly. “I always had a plan, a path I thought my life would take. I thought I understood the world and my place in it, but...”

“But?”

He shrugs. “Now I just feel small and insignificant, and that nothing I do matters.”

I push up out of my chair and edge round the table. Climbing into his lap, I make myself comfortable and cup his face in my hands. “Daniel Lionel Everett-Hayes, you listen to me. It does matter. Everything you do makes a difference, and if those tosspots at Scotland Yard can’t see that, then that’s their loss. Tell them where to stick their job.”

“Believe me, I want to.” Danny huffs, but the sound is devoid of humour and filled with frustration.

“So what’s stopping you?”

“I can’t just quit my job, Tris. I don’t even know what I’d do instead, or how I’d pay my share of the bills.”

“Look,” I say gently as I stroke his jaw with my thumbs. “I’ll tell you what my dad used to say to me when I was younger, before he got sick.”

“What’s that?”

“Break it down into smaller pieces. You’ve got so much going on in your head you can’t see the wood for the trees. Start with something you can change. If you truly feel like you’re done at Scotland Yard, then walk away. Your mental health and emotional well-being are more important.”

“Tris, we can’t afford for me to not work.”

“Not long-term, no.” I shake my head. “But for now, you need some breathing space to adjust to everything that’s happened. You need time to figure out what you want. Life plans change all the time, and there’s nothing wrong with choosing a new path. As for the financial side of it, between us, we’ve got enough saved to carry us for a while.”

“Those savings are for a deposit to buy a house,” he protests.

“So we’ll rent for a little longer.” I lean forward and brush my lips against his in a soft kiss. “You’re more important than a semi-detached with off-road parking.”

“That’s what I love about you, Tris.” He chuckles. “Your optimism. Our budget would barely stretch to a mid-terrace with a parking permit if we’re lucky.”

“That’s it, love, stay positive.”

He snorts and buries his face in my neck. “Ahhh,” he moans in frustration. “I really want to tell them to go fuck themselves.”

“And I would pay money to see that.” I card my fingers through his hair. “But no matter what you choose, I’ve got your back. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I do.” He turns his head so he’s leaning against my shoulder and looking up at me. “Love you.”

“Love you too.” I dip my head and kiss him again. “Quit or don’t quit, the choice is entirely yours, but at the very least, I think you need to use up some of your leave and take some time off. You need the headspace to work out what you really want.”

“What I really want is to be back in bed with you, preferably naked.”

“Me too.” I grin. “But I need to get ready soon. It may be my day off, but I’m in the mortuary for a few hours this morning as a favour to Hen since she has a doctor’s appointment, then I have to be at the shop by lunchtime to help Harrison. He’s got a shipment of books coming in, and I said I’d keep him company while he sorts through them.”

“I’d have thought he’d want peace and quiet. He doesn’t like anyone messing up his system.”

“Honestly, I think he’s just planning on using me as a human shield,” I reply in amusement.

“I’m almost afraid to ask. Just tell me it’s not demon related.”

“Nope.” I laugh. “At least, I hope not. Chan talked Harrison into letting him host his yearly Halloween party in the store—for the ‘ambience’—so Chan’s going to be there most of the day, decorating and getting everything set up.”

“I’d forgotten that was today.” Danny frowns. “I can’t believe it’s Halloween already. Feels like only yesterday we were snowed in at the Ashton-Drake.”

“Oh, that reminds me.” I shift in Danny’s lap slightly. “Ellis called, and we’ve been invited back to the hotel for New Year’s. I thought we could take Nick, see if Chan, Aidan, and the others are free. It might do us all good to get out of London for a while. We might even be able to convince Harrison to come, and if we can’t, Sam

will.”

“So you want to have a break from all the weird paranormal stuff going on in London by going to the most haunted hotel in the north of England to hang out with a bunch of badly behaved dead people.”

“To be fair, Ellis said they’ve been much better lately. I mean, there was the fiasco over the summer, but it’s probably best not to mention it.”

Danny barks out a laugh. “I honestly don’t know how Ellis manages to get himself into so much trouble with so little effort. Morgan certainly has his hands full with—what did he call him? His little blonde disaster.”

“If the shoe fits. So, shall I tell him yes?” I tilt my head to study Danny, who’s looking thoughtful again. “And see if I can round up the others to join us?”

“Sure, why not? Although I’m not going to say, ‘What could possibly go wrong?’ I learned my lesson from our wedding, and more specifically, the fallout from the wine Olivia gifted us from Dionysus.”

I laugh loudly. “Well, it certainly was a wedding reception no one will soon forget.”

“Urgh,” Danny laments, burying his face in my neck. “I don’t want to go to work. Is it wrong to hope the Wicked Witch of the West drops a house on me and I end up in Oz?”

“Actually, it was Dorothy who dropped a house on the Wicked Witch of the East, and as fabulous as I’m sure you’d look in a pair of ruby slippers, you’d be dead.”

“Still better than going to work.”

“And that should tell you something.” I climb off his lap and pull him to his feet. The pale light of dawn filters through the kitchen window. “At the very least, go to work and tell them you need some time off. If they say no, go to the doctor’s and get them to sign you off with stress.”

“Fine,” he murmurs.

“Hey.” I catch his chin in my fingertips and kiss his grumpy mouth. “We don’t have time to go back to bed, but I can offer you a hot shower and a soapy hand job in exchange.”

He chuckles and picks me up, slinging me over his shoulder as he heads out of the kitchen. I catch a glimpse of Jacob Marley scrambling up onto the table and licking the jam off Danny’s cold toast as we exit the room, and then Danny has me in the shower, stripped naked and groaning in under three minutes flat.

Totally worth being late to work.

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“What are you doing here?” Dusty declares loudly as I continue to stitch a very neat seam into Mr Brent’s torso. “I thought it was your day off?”

“It is.” I tie off the last stitch and glance up, snorting softly at my best friend. “Why are you wearing that?”

She adjusts the huge glittering beauty pageant crown and then runs her crimson-tipped nails along the white and silver satin sash which drapes across her chest and reads Spirit Guide in ostentatious letters.

“Because it’s a very special day,” she points out, as if that should be obvious. “It’s Halloween, and as much as I’m looking forward to Chan’s party later, I’m actually working.”

I pause in the act of clipping off the final sutures and stare at her blankly. “Working?”

“I do work, you know.” Dusty huffs indignantly. “It’s All Hallows’ Eve, when the veil between life and death is at its thinnest and evil lurks in the shadows. It’s my sacred calling to guide lost souls into the light and fight the forces of darkness.”

I blink. “Seriously?”

“Fuck no.” She rolls her eyes. “They told me I had to.”

“I imagine that went down well.” I chuckle and set my scissors down on the metal rolling table. “You hate being told what to do. I’d have thought they’d learned their lesson when they tried to send you on that accidental spirit possession awareness

safety course.”

“Unfortunately, there was no window for me to climb out of this time.” Dusty huffs. “They said I couldn’t just keep coming down here and hanging out with you. As a full-fledged spirit guide, spending time actually guiding spirits is mandatory, so they tell me. They gave me the choice of Halloween or Black Friday. Apparently there’s a lot of evil going on during the November sales.”

“So you chose Halloween?” I pull the sheet over Mr Brent and pick up the clipboard to scribble some notes down.

She shrugs. “At least this way I can hang out with you and the others.”

We both look up as the lights flicker and the air crackles with electricity.

“Duck!” I shout just before a brightly coloured arc of electricity shoots across the room and leaves a scorch mark on the opposite wall.

“Terry!” Dusty growls. She straightens up and glares at the man wearing a maroon Adidas tracksuit with white stripes along the seams who has just appeared in the middle of the room.

“Oops.” He winces. “Sorry. It got away from me for a moment.”

I sigh loudly and shake my head as I take in the latest addition to my merry band of ghosts hell-bent on inhabiting the mortuary instead of moving into the light.

“I didn’t mean to,” he says defensively, his mouth pursed. His wild, smoking hair still stands on end nearly a year after he accidentally electrocuted himself to death while doing a DIY home improvement project.

“I know you don’t mean to, Terry,” I reply patiently, “but you really need to try. I’m running out of excuses for why there are constantly burn marks all over the walls. At this point, we’ve had the fire department out so many times to check the wiring that we’re on first-name terms with them all.”

“You’re welcome.”

“He does have a point,” Dusty muses. “They’re gorgeous. I saw the last lot that traipsed through here. I thought it was an audition for Magic Mike .”

“HAPPY HALLOWEEN!” Two more familiar voices chorus, one American and one Scottish.

Glancing over, I see Ian and Dave standing hand in hand at the end of the table and do a double take. Usually, the pair of them appear as they did at the moment of death: Dave, soaking wet and with no shoes, having taken a nosedive off a bridge into the Thames where he drowned, and Ian, covered in blue wax and tiny shards of glass from the exploding lava lamp that finished him off. Because of their appearance, I’d always assumed they were caught in some sort of death cycle, unable to move on until they solved their unfinished business, business that so far I’d had no luck figuring out.

However, now I’m starting to suspect that’s not the case at all. Both of them show no signs of the manner of their deaths right now; in fact, they both seem to be in costume. Ian is wearing a tiny pair of gold pants... holy hell, and I mean tiny. He’s also wearing a little pair of sporty boots, the kind boxers wear, and he has a few artfully placed bandages on his thigh and upper arm. His shaggy blonde surfer hair is loose around his shoulders and for once not matted and clumped with wax and glass. A light dusting of fair hair covers his well-defined pecs, and his rippled stomach is golden and smooth, no trace of the usual cuts and grazes.

Beside him, holding onto his hand to stop himself from wobbling on the black platform heels he's clearly not used to wearing, is Dave. His black hair is wild and curly, his piercing pale blue eyes framed by heavy makeup and his lips painted a murderous red. But it's his outfit that has my attention—or rather, his lack of it. He's wearing tiny black briefs and a shiny corset, tightly laced.

“Holy Frankfurter!” Dusty cackles in delight. “You two look fabulous!”

Ian shrugs. “It's Halloween, so we thought we'd dress up. If we're going to the party at the bookshop, we figured we should make the effort.”

“You're going to Chan's party?” I blurt in surprise.

“Dusty invited us.” Ian nods in the direction of my dead bestie.

“What?” She blinks innocently. “It's not like they can't leave the mortuary, they do it all the time. I caught them sitting at the apex of St Paul's Cathedral the other week.”

“What were you doing up there?” I ask in confusion.

“Smoking,” Ian says easily. “You said you didn't like the smell of weed in the mortuary.”

“Yeah, but I dunno, doesn't it seem a bit sacrilegious to do it on top of a cathedral?”

Ian shrugs. “It's a great view though.”

“Wait a minute!” Terry interrupts indignantly. “Why do they get invited to a party and not me?”

“Because you weren't here,” Dusty answers in a bored tone.

“Oh,” Terry replies. “Well, can I go? To the party,” he clarifies.

“It depends.” Dusty’s eyes narrow.

“On what?”

“On whether you can go one evening without accidentally defibrillating anyone.”

“I’ll do my best,” he promises.

“And you have to wear a costume. Even though Chan can’t see you, he’s a stickler for the rules,” Dusty adds.

“But I don’t know how to,” Terry frowns.

“Hang on a minute,” I interrupt, looking at Ian and Dave. “How did you two manage to change your appearance?”

“We finally figured it out. Not sure why it took us so long,” Dave says shyly.

“Did you notice anything else?” Ian grins and stares down at Dave proudly.

Now that he mentions it, there is something different, calmer about the Scotsman. For a second I stare contemplatively, then it comes to me.

“Your tic is gone!” I exclaim. “And your speech... the Tourette’s?”

“Mostly gone.” Dave grins. “A couple of words and phrases sneak in there if I’m stressed or not concentrating, but this is the longest I’ve gone without twitching or blurting things out.”

“I’m so happy for you.” I smile. “You seem so much more, I don’t know... at peace?” I muse. “So you’re really not caught in a death cycle, either of you. Which means you don’t have any unfinished business.” I watch as they both shake their heads. “Why are you still here? Why didn’t you move on? Even if you didn’t see the light or missed it, Bruce can still help you to cross over.”

Ian and Dave look at each other as if having a private conversation, then turn their attention back to me.

“After everything that went on last year, with that chaos business and then the demon, we were worried about you. We decided to stick around and make sure you were okay.”

“You did?” I smile at them, and a warmth spreads through my ribs. “Thank you.”

Dave shrugs. “It’s nothin’.” He shoots a grin at Ian. “Besides, we kinda like it around here. It’s never dull. Who needs heaven anyway? Just a load of stairways and chunky angels playing harps, I bet.”

“I’m sure that’s not entirely accurate.” I chuckle.

“They’re not far off.” Dusty huffs. “It’s really boring, trust me. Here’s where it’s all at. Never a dull moment with you, Tris, honey.”

“Thanks,” I reply dryly. “That’s not exactly by choice, you know.”

“That’s what makes it so exciting.” Dusty winks. “Never know what insanity is coming next.”

I look across the room as the door bangs open and Ted, our orderly, strides in. “Morning, Tristan.” He inclines his head in greeting. “The undertaker’s here from

Stovell's. He's collecting Mrs Finchley."

"Okay."

"You done?" He points to the body on the table in front of me. "Want me to put that one back in cold storage?"

"Yes, please, if you wouldn't mind." I peel my gloves off and toss them in the bin before washing my hands thoroughly. "Mr Brent, number four, please."

"No problem. You done for the day?" Ted asks conversationally as he sets about moving the body back to the bank of refrigerators.

"Yes, just covering for Hen for a few hours." I hang my white coat on the peg and pick up my notes. "Anyway, see you tomorrow."

"See you tomorrow. Have a good Halloween!"

"You too." I smile as I head out of the room.

Dropping the notes in my office to type up tomorrow, I grab my coat and start to head out, but I pause at the sound of a loud crash, which came from the staff room. Back tracking a few paces I grasp the handle and open the door, then poke my head around the edge.

"Is everything okay in here?" My question is met with silence and an empty room.

Huh. Maybe I imagined it. I'm about to withdraw and close the door when something sparkly catches my eye. Curious, I push the door open wider and step into the room.

"What the?—"

There are small, child-sized footprints leading across the staff room. But these aren't shoe imprints—I can see the impressions of an instep and one, two, three... four toes? That's weird, and that's not the only thing. The footprints are made up of glitter.

“The fuck?” I mutter under my breath.

My gaze follows the trail to the small staff refrigerator. The door is wide open and a milk carton is on its side on the floor, spilling out the last of its contents in a little pool.

Crossing the room, I reach down and pick up the carton, which is now empty, but what catches my eye is the bite marks in the top of it, as if someone tore into it with their teeth rather than just open the top neatly.

“Tris, are you ready to go? The ghost squad is waiting,” Dusty's voice blares out next to me. I jolt in shock.

“Jesus, Dusty.” I suck in a sharp breath and press my empty hand to my chest. “What have I told you about sneaking up on me?”

“What? Do you want a ten-piece band playing the opening verses to Adele's Hello?”

Ignoring my question, she looks down at the puddle of milk on the floor, then to the mauled carton in my hand. Her gaze stops on the teeth marks.

“Thirsty?” She quirks a brow. “Jesus, Tris, you're an animal. You could've just got a glass.”

“This wasn't me, I found it like this.” I frown down at the carton.

“My money's on Ted.”

“Well, it’s not going to be Judy, is it?” I reply.

Dusty scoffs. “No way. That woman is as prim as Dame Maggie Smith.” She pauses a moment thoughtfully. “God rest her soul,” she adds for good measure.

“Is she...”

“Oh, yeah.” Dusty nods. “She’s having a whale of a time with Alan Rickman. They were setting up a theatre group and putting on a production of King Lear when I last looked in.”

“Okaay...” I look down at the glittery footprints, about to point them out to Dusty, and blink. They’re gone.

Did I imagine them? Shaking my head in confusion, I decide it’s probably best not to think too hard about it. Weird shit has a tendency to happen around me all the time. It’s probably one of the other mortuary ghosts playing a Halloween prank.

Tossing the carton in the bin, I grab a handful of paper towels and mop up the milk from the floor. I throw that into the bin too, and close the door to the fridge. Tugging my beanie from my coat pocket, I pull it down over my wildly curling hair and nod to Dusty.

“Let’s get going, then, before Chan and Harrison start fighting over Halloween decorations.”

“Fine,” Dusty mutters. “But my money’s on Chan. You’ve never seen him at a boxing day sale. He’s feisty as fuck.”

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I ignoring the closed sign on the shop door, I open it up and step inside, followed by my ghostly entourage. I've given up even thinking about how weird my life is and just go with the flow.

"Tris," Chan calls across the room.

"Hey, Chan." I pull off my glasses, which have steamed up from being out in the cold, and wipe them clean with the cuff of my hoodie before sliding them back onto my face. Now I'm able to see better I notice he's standing halfway up a ladder, hanging bats made of crepe paper from the ceiling, which has already been festooned with garlands of orange and black punctuated by hundreds of fairy lights. "Looking good." I unbutton my coat.

Chan laughs in delight and gives his arse a little shimmy in his skintight jeans. He bounces down the steps of the ladder, agile as a cat, and flips his long silky hair over one shoulder.

"Where's Aidan?" I ask, expecting to see him with Chan. It's half term and I know he's not at college this week.

"Where do you think?" Chan snorts.

"Off with Nick, by any chance?"

"There you go." Chan turns his attention to Dusty and blows her a kiss. "Hey, sweetie. Well, don't you look ready to party."

“She looks like she’s about to audition for a place in Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band.” I eye her brightly coloured sequinned military jacket with huge shoulder pads and epaulets and the thigh-high boots. “You’re seriously not going to have any trouble guiding spirits wearing that. They’ll be able to see you coming a mile off.”

Dusty snorts. “Excellent. Just the look I was going for.”

“Where have the others gone?” I ask her, glancing around.

“They’ve gone to see Bruce,” she replies nonchalantly.

“Who’ve gone to see Bruce?” Harrison steps through the doorway at the other side of the cavernous room, carrying a large box which he sets down beside a few more of a similar size.

“Ian, Dave, and Terry,” I reply.

“Really, Tristan.” Harrison sighs. “You trail dead people behind you like someone wandering out of a public bathroom with toilet paper stuck to their shoe.”

“Prickles still full of sunshine, I see,” Dusty says dryly.

Harrison just rolls his eyes. “As if it wasn’t bad enough that I have put up with a building full of drunk revellers completely ruining a sacred sabbat. Now I have to put up with the dead ones too.”

“It’s not like this place doesn’t already have a spirit infestation.” Dusty shrugs. “What’s a few more? You’re going to be uptight about it either way.”

“Don’t listen to her, Harrison.” Chan moves to stand beside him, grasping his arm fondly. “You know I really appreciate you letting me host the party here. The

Rainbow Room was simply too big. I wanted something smaller, more intimate this year.”

Harrison huffs quietly, but I don’t miss the way his eyes soften slightly at Chan. As prickly as his personality often is, I know deep down he cares for all of us. He just doesn’t like to show it—or doesn’t know how to. I’m not sure which.

“Still not really decided what you’re doing with this place?” I ask, glancing around at the bookshop’s main floor.

When the place had belonged to Madame Viv, it had been so cluttered that the space had seemed much smaller. Viv had filled it with rows of bookcases and occult detritus, not to mention an old sagging sofa. However, most of it had been irreparably damaged when Issac Crawshanks had literally ripped up the floor to open a devil’s trap and release an ancient demon.

I glance down at the clean and repaired floor. At a glance, no one would ever suspect the dark secret that lay beneath the newly polished and gleaming hardwood, but it’s a sight I can never unsee. The burning symbols, Harrison’s blood... I look up and see him watching me. His gaze flicks to the floor and his hand unconsciously twitches as if trying to stop himself from reaching for the wound that has long since healed but left more than a scar.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with the place yet.” Harrison’s spine stiffens and his tone slides back into the haughty inflection I’ve learned he uses when he feels uncomfortable. “It was an absolute pigsty, a hoarder’s paradise. It’ll take me years to sort through it at this rate.”

“He’s letting me sort through and have all the vintage clothes he finds though,” Chan squeals excitedly. “I found a Mary Quant original miniskirt. Mary Quant! ”

“I’m sure you’ll be very happy together.” I grin at him before turning my attention back to Harrison. “No plans to re-open it as a bookshop then?”

“That was the plan, but now I don’t know.” He shakes his head. “I’m not in any kind of rush. I closed my shop in Islington, but I’m still fulfilling orders online for my regular customers. I also have the money I inherited along with this mess, so I have a bit of time before I need to make any definitive decisions.”

“What’s the stock you wanted help unpacking today, then?” I nod towards the stack of books piled at the corner of the room.

“It’s not stock. They’re on loan,” he explains. I glance at him questioningly and he elaborates. “Olivia sent some of them, and the others are from her friend, Veronica Gilbert.”

“Olivia?” Chan picks up a paper ghost and once again climbs the ladder to affix it to the ceiling. “Isn’t she that American? The one who sent that wine for Tristan and Danny’s wedding.”

“Trust you to remember the wine and not the fact that she was the one who saved our collective arses by shoving that demon straight back to where it originally came from,” I say dryly, and Dusty snorts beside me.

“That wine was no joke. You’ve got to stop getting completely twat-faced on supernatural booze, Tris, honey. Because of our weird E.T. slash Elliott thing, I was hungover for about a week afterwards.”

“How do you think I feel?” I grumble. “Nearly four months later and I still have complete strangers on the streets of Whitechapel telling me I throw a hell of a wedding. I honestly didn’t think anything could top Viv’s magically spiked gin, but honestly, I’m not sure how we didn’t all end up arrested.”

“Actually, I think we did. D broke us out.” Chan steps back from the ladder and critically studies his paper ghost placement. “You’re just lucky my boyfriend is an eons-old supernatural creature with kick-ass powers.”

“Anyway.” I shake my head and focus on Harrison. “Why’s Olivia sending you books? Don’t you have enough here already?”

“Apparently not.” Harrison rolls his eyes. “Olivia seems to think there are some pretty big gaps in my education. She says she doesn’t know what the hell they’re teaching witches over here, but if I’m going to be responsible for a property that is not only home to a dormant devils trap but also an inter-dimensional portal, then I should be prepared for anything. And I have to say, Tristan, being friends with you? I think she might have a point.”

“Hey,” I say defensively. “It’s not like I asked for that potential apocalypse, and the demon was not my fault. Technically, that was your family.”

“I’ll give you that one.” Harrison’s mouth twitches and for a moment, I think he’s going to smile. One of these days, he’s actually going to laugh and the whole of time and space will come to a standstill.

“So who’s the other woman, and why’s she sending you stuff?” I ask, following Harrison over to the boxes as Dusty chats to Chan while he continues to decorate.

“Veronica Gilbert is apparently a very close friend of Olivia’s. She also happens to be the curator of the Mercy Museum of Witchcraft.”

“Mercy?” I blink.

“It’s the town in New England where they live.” Harrison hauls one of the boxes off the top of the pile and sets it on the floor, scooting it over to me and handing me a

box cutter. Before I can grasp it, he pulls his hand back, his fist curving around the knife. “You will be careful opening the box, won’t you? Some of these books are very old and irreplaceable.”

“Harrison, I cut bodies open for a living.” I lift my brows and stare at him pointedly. “If I can slice through skin and tissue without damaging the organs beneath, I’m pretty certain I can open a cardboard box without damaging a book cover.”

“Sorry, no offence.” He shakes his head and hands me the box cutter. “I suppose I’m a little nervous since these don’t belong to me.”

“None taken.” I take my coat off and drape it over a nearby chair before settling onto the floor beside the box and deftly opening it.

“Anyway, where was I?” Harrison continues as he opens his own box. “Oh, Mercy. It’s a small town, not too far from Salem in Massachusetts. From what I understand, it was founded over three hundred years ago by two of Olivia’s ancestors, twin sisters by the name of Hester and Bridget West. After surviving the witch trials, they created Mercy as a sanctuary for people of magical descent. Olivia is from one of the oldest and most powerful families, but she says there are others. People with supernatural gifts seem to be drawn to the town.”

“You seem to know a lot about her.” I open the flaps of the box and start carefully removing old leatherbound volumes, the scent of dry parchment and dusty pages filling the air.

“Yeah, well,” Harrison murmurs. He gives a little shrug as he sets about unpacking his own box. “After what happened... well, you know.” His eyes flick once again to the floor where the devils trap lies hidden deep beneath the ground. “We’ve been keeping in touch.” He pauses and draws in a slow breath. “Both of my fathers are witches, second and seventh generation. I was raised that way, grew up observing the

sabbats, honouring the traditions and rituals. I respected the craft and never doubted that it was all real. Although my parents have always been solitary practitioners—mostly, I think, to protect me—I did go along to a few coven meetings in Devon and also when I arrived in London, and do you know what I found?” I shake my head, and he continues. “Neophytes, wannabes, people who believed and respected but did not have the gift. They wanted to be a part of something bigger, but those who did have magic, it was very weak and diluted. In all that time, I never found anyone who could do what I could... what I can.”

He lifts his arm and opens his hand. His fingertips erupt into deep pink flames, and I suck in a sharp breath, my eyes wide.

“Wow,” I whisper. I’ve caught little crackles of electricity sparking from his hands a couple of times, but I’ve never actually seen anything like this. I’m almost disappointed when he closes his palm and the flames disappear.

“Olivia is the only other person I’ve ever met who has the same kind of power. I mean I’m obviously nowhere near her league, but for the first time, I don’t feel so?—”

“Alone?” I guess.

Harrison shrugs and turns his attention back to the box he’s unpacking. I know he’s not usually so inclined to share, being an intensely private person. Sensing that he’s feeling a little uncomfortable, I pick up another book from the box and flip it open to reveal pages yellowed with age and covered with faded handwritten text.

“What are these?” I ask.

“Books on magic and the history and application of the ancient arts, or so I’m told. Olivia says I should be learning the Old Ways. I guess I’ll have a better idea once I’ve

had a chance to look through them all.”

“Danny would probably love these, but no offence, they look like they’d put me to sleep.”

“Danny is wasted on the police force. He may be an exceptionally talented investigator, but he has the soul of a historian.”

“I know.” I get a lovely warm feeling thinking about my husband.

“Urgh, you’re doing it again.” Harrison wrinkles his nose.

“What?”

“That dazed, punch-drunk look you get when you’re thinking about him.” He grimaces.

I laugh loudly. “And I’m not even ashamed.”

He rolls his eyes in resignation and continues to sort through his box. “I think most of these can go upstairs. I don’t want them laying around for just anyone to find,” Harrison muses.

“What’s this?” I mutter. My fingers brush a hard but surprisingly warm surface. Kneeling up, I lean further over the box and put both my hands inside. My fingertips curl around the edges of a thick, hard volume. I struggle to pull it out of the box; although the cover seems to be leather, it’s so heavy it feels like it’s made of stone.

Finally, I manage to haul it out of the box, and as I fall back onto the floor once more, I settle it in my lap.

“Oh my god.” I frown. There are layers of silver duct tape wound around the book, almost as if it was meant to originally keep it closed, but the tape is now torn open. In fact, not just torn. It looks like it’s been gnawed at, and for a moment, I’m reminded of the strange teeth marks in the milk carton back at the mortuary. “Who would do this to such an old book?”

“Can you peel the tape off without damaging it?” Harrison asks, setting down the book he’s holding and leaning over to get a better look.

“I think so,” I murmur as I carefully peel away the layers of tape. Once it’s free, I discard the sticky tape and run my fingers carefully over the ancient leatherbound cover. If anything ever looked like a book of spells, this would be it. It’s huge and heavy, with large metal hinges at the spine and a massive lock at the sides as if protecting the pages from prying eyes. The cover itself has the most gorgeous illustrations carved deeply into the leather. Toadstools and fairies and other magical creatures. There are also letters, but I don’t recognise the language—maybe some kind of eastern European, if I had to guess? Although I could be wrong; languages never were my strong suit.

I lift it up and press my ear to the cover. Just for a second, I could swear I hear dozens of disgruntled voices.

Suddenly, an arc of electricity shoots across the room and the lights cut out, plunging us into darkness.

“Oops, sorry. My fault,” Terry’s disembodied voice rings out somewhere in the blackness.

I sigh loudly. “Terry shorted out the electrics again.”

“That man’s a bloody menace,” Dusty snaps. “Are you sure I can’t send him to the

other side?”

“Free will, remember, Dusty?” I remind her. “Have you still not read all of the Spirit Guides Handbook?”

“It’s boring,” she whines.

“Don’t worry,” Chan says calmly. “All the fairy lights are battery powered. If I can just find which pocket I put the remote control in. Ah, there we go.”

The room fills with the romantic glow of tiny twinkling lights, and I have to admit it looks really pretty. I absently trace my fingers over the book that’s still sitting in my lap. Curiously, the metal lock feels warm beneath my fingers. I find myself absently wondering what sort of key would open it when there’s a soft, almost inaudible click, and the lock flicks open.

Harrison stares down at the book in my lap. “Did you do that, Tristan?”

“I don’t think so.” I frown.

Suddenly the book flies open, the pages fanning widely. A strong breeze pushes my hair back, knocking off the beanie I’d forgotten I was still wearing. A neon green mist rises from the pages and fills the room.

“What the hell?” Dusty gasps. “Turn it off.”

“I don’t know how!” I say, panicked.

“Tristan, close it!” Harrison dives forward and slams the book shut. The strange coloured mist has gone, but the book feels ominously lighter in my hands.

“Ohhhh.” I wince slowly. “That can’t be good.”

“What just happened?” Chan asks with wide eyes.

I glance over Harrison’s shoulder and do a double take. “Can you see that?” I point.

Three pairs of eyes follow my finger to the trail of glittery footprints leading across the room.

“What the?—?”

I scramble to my feet, still clutching the now quiet book to my chest, and follow the childlike footprints towards the back of the shop. They’re exactly the same as the ones I saw earlier in the mortuary.

Harrison is beside me as we creep along the passageway. I can hear the click of Dusty’s heels and Chan’s breaths as they follow closely behind us. Although it’s early afternoon and there’s still daylight outside, the whole shop is dark thanks to the narrow Victorian corridors and the fact that Chan has covered all the windows in the place with Halloween-themed posters to create a kind of house of horror effect.

We follow the sparkly footprints out into the narrow back corridor which leads past the stairs to the kitchen. The dim glow of the fairy lights falls away, leaving us in darkness. As we edge closer to the kitchen, I can hear a glugging sound, followed by a loud belch.

“I’ve got this,” Chan whispers. He pulls his phone from his pocket and flicks the flashlight on, then holds it up to light the way. I probably should have thought of that, but I’m too busy clutching the huge old book as a potential weapon. Failing all else, I’m pretty sure I could knock an intruder out with this thing, but something deep in my gut tells me this isn’t your average burglar, not unless one of those has four toes

and glittery footprints.

The four of us tiptoe into the kitchen and pause in the doorway as Chan lifts the phone higher. He needn't have bothered. The fridge door stands open, the light spilling out into the dark kitchen and highlighting one of the strangest sights I've ever seen—and trust me, I've seen Death in a pair of Speedos and cowboys boots, which is a long story from which I don't think I'll ever fully recover .

But this time my eyes must surely be playing tricks on me because highlighted in the glow of the fridge is a small, fat, hairy creature with a protruding belly. He's maybe three feet tall and dark wiry tufts of hair sprout all over his body... his very naked body.

His head is tipped back and he's holding a large carton of milk to his mouth, the creamy white liquid spilling down his hairy chest and belly, matting the sparse fur.

Chan fumbles in shock and loses his grip on his phone, which clatters loudly to the floor. The creature startles. Dropping the carton to the floor, he blinks at us with small, black, beady eyes. His droopy jowls jiggle with a squeak of surprise and then he turns and launches himself at the wall, his jiggly naked buttocks disappearing in a splat of green glitter.

For a long moment, we all stand in stunned silence until Dusty breaks the detente with a loud exclamation.

“What in the hairy ball sack was that?”

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My phone rings once again in my pocket. Sliding it out, I check the screen and feel a scowl settle over my face. One spiteful stab of my finger silences the incessant noise, then I shove it back into my pocket, where it continues to vibrate against my thigh.

Fucking work, fucking Butler.

It's well into the afternoon and he's had me chasing my tail all day, sending me all over the place on pointless tasks. I couldn't even call what I was doing police work anymore, and I'm not sure I even have it in me to fight back.

As much as the thought of letting that prick and all the other homophobes win galls me, what would I really be fighting for? I know for a fact that DCI Butler hates me because I married a man. It's as simple and as complicated as that. My work record stands for itself—I'm highly decorated and well respected, with several high-profile cases under my belt. Solved cases, I might add. I have a reputation for being fair and personable. But none of that counts. Butler's old school, and he doesn't like 'my kind.' I know because I overheard a conversation not meant for my ears.

Usually, I'd be the first one standing up for queer rights, the way I did with Sam when we were both still up north, but things have changed.

I've changed.

Don't get me wrong, it's still just as important to stand up for LGBTQ+ rights in the workplace and to fight discrimination, but I find my mind wandering to a different place more and more recently.

All the things I've experienced in the past couple of years have taught me that the world is not as black and white as I once thought it was. There's no divide down the middle, with one side about upholding the law and the other about breaking it.

Justice exists in many shades of grey.

I have no doubt in my mind that Issac Crawshanks got everything he deserved for what he did to the real Detective Byrnes and especially for what he did to Viv. I keep circling back around to her. To what her life had been like. Carrying the weight of a centuries-old burden, feeling she had no choice but to give up her child and hide him, thinking she was saving him only for him to end up being almost killed anyway.

I'm starting to think there's no escaping fate.

Viv spent nearly her whole life isolated and afraid, with no one to turn to, no one that would understand or even be able to help. It started me thinking: How many others like her are out there? Scared and alone.

Not that I can do anything about it. I don't have any special gifts. I can't see dead people, and from some of the things Tristan has told me, I'm actually quite glad about that. I guess I just feel... lost, like I told Tris. I've come to a crossroads in my life and I'm not sure where any of the roads lead. Right now, he's the one thing keeping me grounded.

I'm so lost in my thoughts that I almost walk past the address I'm supposed to be visiting. I pull the scrap of paper from my pocket and check the name and address.

Ms G Locks.

I look up at the small house tucked along a side street in Whitechapel. It's only down the road from the bookshop where I know Tris will be by now, and I have an

overwhelming urge to just say fuck it and go find him. This job is so pointless.

I'm supposed to double-check a witness statement for a crime that's already been solved and prosecuted. Random fact checking, Butler had called it.

What a wanker.

Still. I blow out a slow breath and reach for the latch on the small metal gate. It swings open with a groan of protesting hinges, and I stroll up the path to the cheerful yellow front door. Knocking on the door, I take a step back and wait patiently, but no one answers. After a few moments, I lean in and knock a bit louder.

Still nothing.

A brief movement catches the corner of my eye, and I turn to see the net curtain in the bay window twitch. Leaving the doorstep, I press my face to the window, and I could swear I see a shadow move somewhere inside.

I shift back to the door and knock again very loudly.

"Ms G Locks?" I call out. "Golda?"

Dropping to one knee on the doorstep, I stick my fingers into the letterbox and open the little metal flap to call through the gap.

"I'm Detective Inspector Hayes with Scotland Yard. There's no need to be alarmed, you're not in any trouble. I've just been asked to clarify a few details on the witness statement you made late last year... Hello?"

I climb to my feet with a sigh of frustration and dust off the knees of my trousers. Pulling my phone out of my pocket, I check the time. I'm about to call it a day and

head over to the bookshop when the door opens, creaking slowly inwards.

I freeze with my phone gripped in my hand. “Hello?” I say tentatively into the dim hallway. “Ms Locks?”

A sudden gust of wind comes up behind me, almost knocking me off my feet. I stumble forward into the hallway and the door slams behind me. I’m about to reach for the handle when a wave of dizziness washes over me. It feels like the floor is undulating under my feet, and my knees are wobbly.

Something’s not right , I think to myself as my eyes roll and everything around me goes dark.

Slowly I open my eyes, my head filled with confusion. I blink a few times but everything around me remains blurred.

I inhale a deep breath and take stock. I think I’m still in the hallway where I fell. The air is cool, and I feel the tiny hairs on my legs rise. That’s weird. My legs feel like they’re bare, but I’m definitely not naked. Slowly, the place comes into focus.

I am still in the hallway, I ascertain once my vision stops wavering and my surroundings solidify. What the hell knocked me out? I roll onto my front and shakily push myself onto my hands and knees. After another breath to calm my nauseous stomach, I stumble to my feet and sway slightly.

Glancing around, I notice I’m alone. I stagger forward, further into the house, but as I pass a full-length mirror, I freeze, then turn to face my reflection in wide-eyed horror.

“What. The. Actual. Fuck?” I breathe into the stillness.

I’m no longer wearing my suit, that’s for goddamn sure; no wonder my legs felt bare.

I don't know whose idea of a joke this is, but when I get back to the station, someone's head is going to roll for this setup.

I'm wearing a yellow and white gingham dress with a white collar, frilly sleeves, and a full, puffy skirt which sits just above my knees. White, neatly folded ankle socks cover my feet, along with shiny patent Mary Janes, and if all of that isn't bad enough, my hair is no longer the short, neat style I usually wear. Instead, my head is covered with long, golden-blond ringlets topped with a big yellow bow.

With a growl, I reach up to pull off what is obviously a wig, only to find, to my dismay, that it won't budge. Oh yeah, someone is definitely going to pay for this. What the fuck did they use? Glue? If I have to shave my head after this, I'm going to be majorly pissed.

I stalk further into the house, fully expecting to see some of DCI Butler's cronies with their cameras out, but as I enter what is obviously a dining room, I pause. The house is immaculate, with swept floors and vases of flowers. In front of me is a polished table and three seats of varying sizes.

Those seats do look comfortable .

The errant thought pops into my head and I wonder where it came from. My feet are moving before I know it, and I'm dropping down into the first chair with a wince.

Fuck .

I leap up, rubbing my bum cheek, and look down at it. It looks normal, but it had felt really hard and sharp. Eyeing the chair next to it, I shuffle across. It's slightly smaller but, hopefully, not as painful. I sit down and flounder, letting out a yelp when I start sinking. Grasping onto the edge of the table, I haul myself up. Gross . It was like sitting in gooey pudding. My gaze wanders to the third and final chair, which is much

smaller than the other two. Unable to help myself, I sink down onto it and let out a surprised and pleased hum.

Just right.

At that precise moment, my stomach lets out a loud grumble of protest punctuated by a sharp pang of hunger. The most delicious scent hits my nostrils, and my mouth waters. Three bowls filled with porridge have appeared in front of me. My stomach growls again and I'm hit with such a wave of longing that my hand moves without thought.

I don't even like porridge, but I pull the largest bowl towards me and grab a spoon, then lift a huge glob of it to my mouth. The second it hits my tongue, I gag and spit it back into the bowl. Urgh, it's disgusting, all salty and cold.

I shove it away and reach for the next bowl, which is slightly smaller. Picking up the spoon next to it, I shovel in a mouthful and then spit that out too. It's so sweet it hurts my teeth. Pushing that bowl away, I reach for the third and take a bite. Just right, the perfect temperature and consistency and the exact amount of sweetness.

I gobble it up, barely stopping for breath. It's insane. I've never been this hungry for something I usually can't stand. I'm about halfway through the bowl when I hear a loud splintering sound. I pause, loaded spoon in one hand and bowl in the other, and then feel myself drop. The way-too-small-for-me chair gives way. I tumble backwards and hit the ground, losing my grip on the bowl, which is catapulted through the air by my momentum. I watch from my prone position as it hits the wall, where it smashes loudly and leaves an ugly beige smear dripping down the once pristine surface.

Whoops.

I yawn as a wave of tiredness washes over me. Then I climb to my feet and brush the splintered wood from my legs. Without really stopping to think about how incredibly inappropriate it is, I head back out into the hallway and climb the staircase. The first room I come across is a large communal bedroom which seems to stretch the length of the house, and in it are three neatly made beds.

The first one, unsurprisingly, is as hard as a rock, the second is like lying on a waterbed and has me fighting a wave of seasickness, but the third one is just perfection! A wave of exhaustion passes over me and my eyes close the moment I'm horizontal.

I wake with a start and sit bolt upright. It's already dark outside, I realise as I glance across at the window. I'm trying to figure out what woke me when I hear a loud and terrifying growl from downstairs.

What the fuck was that?

Thundering footsteps sound on the stairs, and I scramble out of the bed, wild-eyed. Fuck. There is only one exit from this room, and I don't have time to head towards it because suddenly three bears fill the doorway.

Yes, you heard that correctly. Three. Fucking. Bears.

Huge, black, furry bears with sharp claws and wicked-looking teeth, and one is wearing... a tie? I blink and sure enough, even as the largest one roars so loudly the windowpanes rattle, I can see that he—she, it... they?—is naked except for a white collar and a pinstriped tie. Seriously, it's like something you'd see in a cartoon. The middle bear is wearing a paisley dress and the youngest has on a pair of blue shorts.

I must be hallucinating; this surely can't be real. But real or not, the largest one, snarling and baring his teeth, lunges for me. With a frightened yelp, I leap onto the

nearest bed and bounce from one to the next and then the next like I'm trying out for Ninja Warrior . I aim for the window ledge as the huge bear behind me hurls the heavy wooden beds out of the way. Fumbling with the latch on the window, I press my weight against it too hard in my panic, and when the latch lifts and the window flies open, I tumble out.

Fortunately for me, the porch is directly beneath the window. Unfortunately, I hit the pitched roof with a jolt and roll down the sharp angle off the end, then drop straight into a bush before flopping ungraciously onto the ground.

"Oww," I croak, my face smooshed into the front lawn.

I hear rather than witness the bear lean out of the window and bellow furiously. Still somewhat winded, I scramble to my feet and hotfoot it down the path, out the gate, and onto the street.

"Danny?" a familiar voice gasps. I lean over, bracing my hands on my knees and trying to catch my breath, then look up to see Sam standing in front of me, his eyes wide as his gaze slowly trails over the gingham dress and the ringlets. His eyes narrow suspiciously. "Did you let Chan choose your costume?"

"B-bears!" I wheeze.

"I'm more of a snarky ginger twink man myself, but thanks for the heads-up. Everyone gets a little wild on Halloween."

"No... bears!" I point as the three creatures appear in the doorway to the house and bellow in unison.

"Huh, not the kind of bears I thought then." He blinks and I grasp his arm. "Wait a minute. Is that bear holding a handbag?"

I don't answer. Instead, I set off at a run, dragging him with me down the twisting back alleys and streets until we reach the main high street, determined not to stop until I'm certain we're not being pursued.

Sam sucks in a ragged breath. "What the hell?"

What had been a wide main road, with a bus lane and lined with tall commercial buildings and pubs, is now covered with trees and moss and giant toadstools. The road itself looks like a goopy mess of beige, and from the scent in the air, I'd say it's more fucking porridge. Tons of the icky stuff, oozing down the road.

A voice rings through the air, and I look up. My mouth falls open.

"Run, run, as fast as you can, you can't catch me, I'm?—"

I look over at Sam, whose mouth gapes as wide as mine. "Is that—" I whisper.

Sam blinks twice. "A ten-foot-tall gingerbread man running down the street? I think it might be."

Small, delicate fairies flit through the air, glowing like fireflies. Flying high above on their brooms, witches with hooked noses and pointy hats cackle loudly as they circle the gingerbread man's head.

Sam and I are suddenly shoved out of the way. We stumble to the side and glance over to see several young women in ballgowns pirouette down the street.

"One, two, three, four... twelve dancing princesses?"

I breathe heavily. "What the hell is going on?"

“I don’t know.” Sam sighs. “I hate to say it, but this has got Tristan and Harrison written all over it.”

“Bookshop?” I say.

He nods. “Bookshop.”

We both take off running.

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:16 pm

“What is it, boo?” Dusty asks.

“I don’t know,” I murmur as I frown. “I just can’t help thinking this is a bad idea.” I nurse my cup of fruit punch and watch Chan’s party in full swing. “I’ve got a bad feeling.”

“You only feel that way because a bunch of creepy green smoke leaked out of an ancient book of magic right before a strange little hairy naked guy exploded into a Jackson Pollack-esque style wall mural of glitter.”

“Isn’t that enough?”

“We’ve seen worse, or did you forget the tentacles?” She wiggles her long-taloned fingers, as if I had indeed forgotten the chaos tentacle monster who tried to escape through the magic portal in this very building.

Rolling my eyes, I reach into the pocket of my pirate costume and retrieve my phone to check for missed calls and messages. My stomach churns uneasily when there are none.

“What?” Dusty asks as she studies my face.

“It’s just Danny’s not here yet. He should have finished work by now. To be honest, I kinda expected him to quit his job and pitch up hours ago.”

“I’m sure he’s fine, but if you want, I can go check in with him?”

Slipping my phone back into my pocket, I glance up at her and sigh. “Thanks, Dusty, but I’m sure you’re right.”

“I usually am.” She waves her hand airily.

“He’s probably fine.” I shake my head and try to ignore the worry gnawing away in the pit of my belly. Instead, I turn my attention more fully to Dusty, my gaze running over her skintight black leather cat costume and corset, down to the platform stiletto boots she’s wearing that are so high I honestly get vertigo just looking at them. “Aren’t you supposed to be out guiding spirits or something?”

She shrugs. “What are they going to do? Fire me? Please.” She rolls her eyes. “Besides, something tells me that tonight, this is the place to be.”

“Well, that just fills me with confidence,” I mutter.

“Tristan!” a voice with a sweet Irish lilt calls out, and as the crowd shifts, I see Aidan weave his way through the revellers, narrowly avoiding several very enthusiastic dance moves courtesy of some of the guests.

“Aidan.” I smile as he stops in front of us, his cheeks flushed and his eyes bright. “You look good. I like your costume.” I eye the elaborate and film-accurate pirate costume, complete with tricorne and a beard made up of tentacles.

“Chan helped me make it.” He beams. “It’s Davy Jones from *Pirates of The Caribbean*. Nick and I are going to get tickets to London Comic Con next year, so I’ve been experimenting with cosplay. You should see Nick’s costume!”

“Is he here?” I ask, glancing around, but all I can see is a formation of gyrating bodies doing the Time Warp on the makeshift dance floor.

“He’s running late,” Aidan replies. “He should be here soon.”

I snort. “I think we’re going to have to have words with these Hayes men about their timekeeping.”

“Is Danny not here either?” Aidan frowns.

“He seems to be AWOL.” I try to keep my tone lighthearted, but I still can’t seem to shake the sense of unease. “But I’m sure he won’t be much longer,” I add.

“Who won’t be much longer?” Harrison asks as he steps up beside us.

“Danny,” Aidan and I both say.

“Sam’s not here either.” Harrison’s brow wrinkles. “Not that I care,” he says quickly.

“Sure you don’t, Prickles.” Dusty snorts. Harrison glares at her, but she simply blows him a kiss and smirks.

“Is it just me, or do you get a weird feeling?” I ask Harrison.

“I’ve had to readjust my definition of weird since meeting you lot,” Harrison replies dryly.

“I mean with the you know. ” I widen my eyes at him, as if that should be sufficient to indicate that I mean the naked, chubby, hairy, person from earlier.

“With what?” Aidan says, pulling his tentacle beard down enough to raise his cup to his lips and sip before setting it back in place. “Are you talking about the naked, hairy dude who exploded into glitter?”

We all stare at him.

“Does Chan even know how to keep a secret?” Harrison sighs.

“No,” Dusty replies with aplomb.

Aidan shrugs. “We pretty much tell each other everything. Besides, with all the weird shit that goes on around here, he wants to make sure I’m safe.”

I huff. “I feel like we’re getting a bit of a reputation.”

“To be fair, honey, he has a point. There is a lot of weird shit.” Dusty nods.

“Actually, Tristan,” Harrison interjects, “I think you’re right. I have a feeling our night is about to get a lot more dramatic.”

“What makes you say that?” I ask worriedly.

“Because we have an unexpected visitor.” He lifts his hand and points one slender finger.

I follow his direction and see Olivia, the American witch Harrison befriended, making her way towards us through the crowd, a rather determined look in her whiskey-coloured eyes.

“Oh, this can’t be good,” I mutter. “Last time she had an expression like that there was a naked demon climbing out of the floor.”

“Are all the creatures you encounter naked?” Aidan asks curiously.

“Not always,” I murmur as Olivia stops in front of us.

“Olivia,” Harrison greets her with a polite nod. “You remember Tristan and Dusty.”

“Dusty’s here?” Aidan pipes up. “I wish I could see dead people,” he adds with a sullen pout.

“No, you don’t. Trust me, kid, it’s more trouble than it’s worth half the time,” Olivia tells him.

“This is Aidan,” Harrison introduces him.

“Love the costume.” She nods, then turns her attention back to me and Harrison. “I’m sorry, this isn’t a social call.”

“I gathered that,” Harrison replies, his brow drawing down again. I swear he’s going to have more wrinkles than Ian McKellen by the time he’s forty if he’s not careful. “What can we do for you?”

She cuts straight to the chase. “Did you get the shipment of books Roni sent over?” He nods. “Uh-huh. And you didn’t happen to come across a really heavy, old leatherbound book with metal hinges and a giant-ass lock, all wrapped in duct tape, did you?”

“The one that creepy green smoke escapes from when opened?” I say.

She sighs. “Oh, please tell me you didn’t open it.”

“To be fair, the tape was already ripped,” Harrison adds. “It looked like something had chewed through it.”

“Urgh,” she growls in frustration. “Okay, next question. You didn’t happen to see a little guy around here, did you? About yay high?” She holds out her hand around the

height of her thigh. “Hairy. Naked. Drinks a lot of milk.”

“Explodes into glitter?” I reply.

“God damn it, Puck.” She pinches the bridge of her nose as if searching for her patience. “I swear, when I get my hands on you, I’m going to skin you and make a rug out of you for Cerberus to take a nap on,” she mutters.

“Okay, that’s very specific,” I say slowly. “But what’s a puck?”

“His name is Puck, and he’s technically a hobgoblin.” She frowns. “He’s originally from the fairy realms. He hid out in Mercy for decades, living with an old Croatian woman by the name of Marta Varga. She had in her possession a very old and powerful book, which, when opened, causes complete chaos.”

“How do you know all this?” I ask curiously.

“Because we were dumb enough to open it last time.” She sighs.

“Just what is this book?” Harrison asks.

“It’s the Gospodar. The master copy of all fairy tales,” she explains. “When it’s opened, the fairy-tale creatures have a habit of escaping.”

“Fairy-tale creatures?” Aidan gasps. “What, like real characters from real fairy tales, like... I don’t know, Little Red Riding Hood?”

Olivia nods. “And trust me, they’re nothing like they are in the stories. I had to deal with a narcoleptic Sleeping Beauty, an alcoholic Cinderella, and an Ali Baba, complete with forty thieves, who pretty much trashed my friend Jackson’s pub when they got into a fight with Sinbad and his sailors.” She shakes her head. “And don’t

even get me started on the giant beanstalk.”

“Well, how did the book end up here?” Harrison scowls. “I thought you were sending me some books on the history and practical application of magic, not a ticking magical time bomb.”

“I am sorry, Harrison, you weren’t meant to have it at all.” Olivia winces apologetically. “We locked it, sealed it, and then hid it away in a secure place.”

Dusty snorts. “Obviously, not that secure.”

“Trust me, it was secure.” Olivia scowls. “It could only be retrieved by magic, which means Puck must have stolen it and tucked it into the shipping crate.”

“But why?” Harrison asks in confusion.

“Because he’s a pain in my ass.” She huffs. “And he gets bored easily. Where is the book now?”

“Upstairs with all the other books we unpacked earlier.”

“Okay, let’s go. The quicker we get them all back in the book, the better.” She takes hold of Harrison’s arm and gives him a little shove to get him moving. Harrison nods and leads her towards the stairs at the back of the shop, which have been sectioned off to stop party guests from venturing to the upper levels. “Oh, and watch out for Pinocchio,” she calls out to us over her shoulder. “He likes to flash people.”

Chan wiggles over. “What’s going on? Where’s Harrison going, and who’s that woman?” Dressed as Elvira, he’s wearing a revealing black gown so tight that it looks like it was painted on.

“Olivia,” I inform him, still trying to process everything.

“What’s going on, Tris? Are you okay, honey?” Chan rubs my shoulder. “You’re wearing your stress frown again.”

“The short, short version”—Dusty draws his attention—“is that the book that opened earlier is apparently a magic book of fairy tales and can end up letting loose a whole menagerie of fairy-tale characters.” She frowns thoughtfully. “I’m just going to check in quickly with Bruce and let him know we may have a situation on our hands... again.”

Chan blinks slowly as Dusty disappears. “Excuse me? Did I just hear that right?”

“Fairy-tale creatures on the loose,” Aidan summarises. “Like in Shrek . Whoa, do you think Shrek and Fiona are actually in there?”

“Um, they’re not exactly classic fairy-tale characters.” I wrinkle my nose. “Plus, I’m pretty sure DreamWorks owns the rights to them.”

“Shame. It’d be cool to meet Donkey and Dragon.”

Chan’s eyes widen. “Christ, please tell me there are no actual dragons on the loose in Whitechapel?”

“God, I hope not,” I whisper, and reach into my pocket to pull out my phone, hoping that fairy-tale creatures supposedly on the loose aren’t responsible for the fact that my husband is suddenly MIA.

Before I have a chance to unlock the screen, the door to the bookshop crashes open and everyone turns to look. Even the music suddenly screeches to a halt. Dozens of burly men dressed as pirates flood the room, swords raised aloft.

And that's when the screaming starts.

It's absolute chaos. The party guests run shrieking in every direction, chased by the pirates. I grab Aidan and pull him protectively behind me, and Chan also moves in close to shield him.

Something catches the corner of my eye and draws my gaze to the doorway. My mouth falls open as an impossibly tall, impossibly broad man strides through.

He's got to be over seven feet tall, with long, dark, wavy hair and a long, thick black beard. He's wearing a velvet frock coat and waistcoat over a white shirt, black pantaloons, and leather boots, and a curved sword is sheathed at his waist.

Beside him is a similarly dressed man, slightly shorter but still over six feet tall, thickly muscled arms exposed thanks to the sleeves of his coat and shirt having been ripped away. In his hand he holds, with ease, a small, cylindrical cage and in it is?—

“Is that the Puck guy you were all talking about?” Aidan mutters.

Sure enough, looking very annoyed and quite cramped, is the little naked hobgoblin who'd been guzzling milk in Harrison's kitchen earlier on in the day.

“Give me the goblin,” the black-bearded man commands, holding out his hand.

“Aye, Cap'n Blackbeard,” says the man, holding the cage up to Blackbeard's face.

“Which one is it?” He shakes the cage. “Speak, vermin.” He gives the cage another bone-rattling shake.

The one Olivia called Puck glares at him before finally pointing—directly at me.

“Him,” Puck says grudgingly. “He’s the one who opened the Gospodar.”

“Seize him,” Blackbeard bellows.

Before I know what’s happening, one of his men grabs me. I lose my grip on my phone and it clatters to the floor, getting kicked away and lost in the melee as screaming guests run out into the street, pursued by a whole load of thirsty-looking pirates. I’m picked up as if I weigh nothing and slung over the man’s shoulder. I kick and wriggle and beat my hands against his rock-hard back, but it’s no good. I can’t loosen his grip on me.

“Get off him,” Aidan shouts angrily and steps forward.

“And what do we have here?” Blackbeard’s shrewd gaze falls on Aidan standing beside Chan. “Davy? Is that you, my old friend?”

“Uh.” Aidan glances at Chan, who nods slightly. “Yes.” Aidan stiffens his back. “It is I, Davy Jones. Unhand that man lest ye be cast down to a watery grave in the depths of Davy Jones’ locker! Um... arghhh.” He finishes off with a little growl and a flourish of his clenched fist.

The room is now almost empty. All the party guests have fled into the night. The remaining few of Blackbeard’s men, those who aren’t out chasing people through the streets, have taken up positions around the room, surrounding Aidan and Chan while I dangle helplessly from a buff pirate’s shoulder.

Blackbeard stares for a long moment before crossing the room, the heels of his boots clicking ominously against the wooden floor, until he comes to a stop in front of Aidan, who is trying his hardest to channel his inner Bill Nighy.

Blackbeard’s eyes narrow and he reaches up, ripping the fake tentacle beard from

Aidan's face and tossing it to the floor. There's a collective sharp intake of breath from the assembled pirates, as if someone impersonating their beloved Davy Jones is truly sacrilegious.

"Lies!" He roars. "Seize the impostor!"

Aidan is grabbed much the same way I was and thrown over the shoulder of another one of Blackbeard's men.

And oh my days, that's a mistake.

Chan goes fucking feral.

I actually stop struggling against my captor, mesmerised as Chan bites and claws and tears out clumps of pirate hair. It's not every day you get to see several salty-looking sea dogs cowering at the five-foot pint of pure rage in a tight black dress currently clubbing one of their colleagues with a stiletto and shrieking like a harpy to get their fucking hands off his kid.

"Enough!" Blackbeard growls. He raises his fist and, unfurling his fingers, blows against his palm when Hurricane Chan turns in his direction. A cloud of sparkly dust hits Chan full in the face and he stumbles back, shaking his head. He gives a loud sneeze and sways, then his eyes roll back in his head and he crumples to the ground.

"WHAT DID YOU DO TO CHAN!" Aidan screams, and fuck me, he's as feisty as Chan.

He goes wild. He claws and scratches at the man holding him until he has to have one of his friends help subdue the raging teenager.

"What did you do to him?" I demand, my concerned gaze fixed on the still form of

my friend slumped on the floor.

Blackbeard laughs loudly. “Enchanted fairy dust. He”—he frowns—“she?”—he shakes his head as if it’s of no consequence—“will sleep for a hundred years.”

“A hundred years?” I yell. “Listen here, you massive bellend. You’d better wake him up pronto, or you’re not going to like the consequences when Chan’s boyfriend catches up with you.”

“Yeah! What he said,” Aidan snaps belligerently, glaring at Blackbeard.

“Oh, he’ll wake up.” Blackbeard chuckles. “All he needs is true love’s kiss.”

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” I hiss.

“Come!” Blackbeard announces. “To the Queen Anne’s Revenge!”

I’m jostled about as the pirate carries me from the room, and I can see Aidan being carried out just behind us.

“Dusty!” I call out, hoping she can hear me. “Find Death!”

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“D anny, watch out!”

Sam grabs me and yanks me out of the way as several knights on horseback gallop past, colourful pennons snapping from the tips of their raised lances.

“Christ, that was close.” I breathe heavily and look at the chaos in the street. The bookshop can’t be far, but we keep getting turned around. I don’t know how it’s possible, but Whitechapel seems to be filled to the brim with fairy-tale creatures and characters. At least, that’s what Sam and I think they are; that seems to be the only theme they have in common.

“Oh my god,” Sam whispers.

I turn to look and have to blink several times, sure my eyes are playing tricks. It’s Thor looking buff in his Asgardian armour, Mj?lnir in hand. His shoulder-length hair is blown back by the wind.

“Is he... running in slow motion, or is that me?”

“I don’t think it’s you.” I frown in confusion. “There’s something oddly familiar about him.”

“Of course he’s familiar,” Sam replies. “It’s Thor.”

He really does look as if he’s running in slow motion as he tosses his hair.

“Uncle Danny!” Thor calls out.

“It’s Nick.” I blink as he stops in front of us.

“Uncle Danny,” he repeats, then pauses and looks me up and down, from my golden ringlets to the yellow gingham dress. “Did Chan pick your costume?”

“Don’t ask.” I sigh. I’m really never going to be allowed to forget this, I just know it.

Nick watches, a little wild-eyed, as a wolf wearing a grandmother-type nightgown and cap strolls past, hand in hand with a woman in a red cloak. “What the hell is going on?”

“We don’t know. We’re trying to get the bookshop, but we seem to be going in circles.”

“Where’s Uncle Tris?”

“At the bookshop,” I reply worriedly. “Why aren’t you there? I thought you were going to Chan’s party with Aidan?”

“I was running late from my work placement at the hospital,” he says. “What do you mean, you keep going in circles? We’ve been to the bookshop dozens of times.”

“I know, but every time we head in that direction, we find ourselves somewhere else.” I growl in frustration. “I can only assume it has something to do with magic, given that these are all fairy-tale creatures.”

“Fairy tales?” Nick says sharply.

“Yes, why?”

He chews his lip, his brow furrowed in thought. “If it is magic... wow, that sounds

really fucking weird to say... if it is magic stopping us from reaching the bookshop, maybe we need magic to take us there.”

“Oh, sure,” Sam says. “I’ll just pop home and grab my magic carpet. It’s a nippy little three-seater and gets great mileage.”

“As fun as that would be”—Nick grins—“I was actually thinking about the wishing tree I passed just back there.”

“A wishing tree?” I repeat.

“Yep. I thought I recognised it when I ran past, but I couldn’t place it until you mentioned fairy tales. It was in a story Mum used to read me when I was little. If magic is real tonight, then wouldn’t it stand to reason that the wishing tree would actually grant wishes? So all we’d have to do is wish for it to take us to the bookshop.”

“Clever kid,” Sam murmurs.

“Take us to the wishing tree.” I pause. “Wow, that’s a sentence I never thought I’d say with a straight face.”

Nick chuckles and sets off at a fast pace, Sam and I keeping up right behind him. After a few minutes, we round a corner, and sure enough, there, in the middle of the bus lane and surrounded by a river of moss, is the most stunning tree I’ve ever seen. Its trunk and elegantly twisted branches are pure gold, and its lush canopy of leaves is a deep magenta.

“Wow,” Sam whispers beside me.

“Come on.” Nick marches up to the tree and we follow, our feet sinking into the soft

cushion of moss. “I’ll do the wishing so the wires don’t get crossed. Each of you put a hand on one of my shoulders and don’t let go.”

“Okay, Nick. This is your show.” I take a deep breath and lay my palm on his right shoulder while Sam lays a hand on his left.

“I wish for us to be taken to the bookshop,” he says loud and clear.

It happens so fast; everything dissolves around us and it feels like I’ve been yanked off my feet. There’s a brief sensation of falling before I hit a hard surface with a pained groan, then two more bodies fall on top of me.

For a second, I lie still, trying to catch my breath after taking an elbow to my ribs and a knee to my groin. Eventually, we all roll away, disentangling ourselves from each other. I look up and recognise the occult bookshop. Even though it’s Harrison’s place and has been for months, I still think of it as Viv’s, and it always makes me feel a little sad.

“Well, we made it, I guess.” Nick pushes himself up.

“Take us to the bookshop,” Sam mutters. “Lucky we didn’t end up in Waterstones.”

“It worked, didn’t it?” Nick glances around the deserted shop. “Where is everyone?” he wonders aloud, and I haul my aching body off the floor.

I glance around and my worry ratchets up into the stratosphere. The party seems to be over. Decorations have been torn apart, some of the fairy lights have been ripped down and dangle aimlessly, and the long table which had held finger foods has been overturned.

“Oh my god,” Sam gasps. He rushes across the room. It’s only then I see a lone

black-clad figure lying unconscious on the floor.

“It’s Chan!” Nick shouts as he joins Sam and drops to his knees, reaching for Chan’s throat to find a pulse. “He’s alive.”

I hurry closer, watching anxiously as my nephew peels back Chan’s eyelids to check... I don’t know what they’re teaching him at nursing school. To check his pupils, I think?

“He doesn’t seem to be injured.” Nick frowns. “Chan?” He taps Chan’s face gently, and when that doesn’t work, he pushes his knuckles into Chan’s breastbone. “Chan? Open your eyes.”

Nothing.

“Pick up that table,” Nick says, easily lifting Chan’s petite form into his arms.

Sam and I both set the snacks table back on its feet, and Nick gently lays Chan down.

“What happened?” a voice interrupts, and I look up to see Harrison hurry into the room, clutching an old leatherbound book to his chest. A woman follows behind him, and when he shifts, I get a better look. With a jolt, I recognise Olivia, the witch who’d helped with the whole demon crisis.

“Prickles,” Sam breathes in relief when he sees Harrison. “You’re okay?”

“What happened?” he repeats, looking confused. “Where is everyone and what happened to Chan?”

“We were about to ask you the same thing,” I say.

“What’s going on?” A deep, authoritative voice cuts through our conversation, and I shift my gaze to where Death has appeared. He immediately moves to Chan’s side, his eyes scanning Chan’s unresponsive form. Touching his face tenderly, Death leans in and inhales slowly.

“Fae magic,” he growls. “A sleeping curse.”

“What can we do?” I ask, worried as hell. Chan’s so still, and his skin looks almost grey.

“You? Nothing. But I can,” Death murmurs, sliding a hand under Chan’s head. He cradles the nape of Chan’s neck and lowers his head to press his lips to Chan’s.

“Seriously?” Sam mutters.

I watch as the colour seeps back into Chan’s cheeks, turning his skin a pale pink. Suddenly, his arm comes up and wraps around Death’s neck to yank him in closer. Death stumbles, caught off-balance, as Chan flings his other arm around Death’s neck and deepens the kiss. One or possibly both of them moan, and Death lifts his leg onto the table so he’s almost mounting Chan.

“Oh, okay, then.” Nick flushes and averts his eyes, suddenly finding the ruined decorations on the ceiling fascinating.

Sam just grins and watches. Rolling my eyes, I turn to Harrison and Olivia, only to find Harrison staring at me contemplatively.

“Did Chan choose your costume?” he finally says, and I remember what I’m wearing.

“Gingerbread house in the woods?” Olivia asks.

“House with three bears.”

“Yeah, that can happen.” She nods as her amused gaze dances over the frilly dress.

“What can happen?” Sam tears his attention away from Death and Chan, who appear to be in their own little lust bubble.

“Besides the fairy-tale creatures being let loose, they can also draw you inside their stories. Last time this happened, a witch kidnapped my friends Mac and Jake because she thought they were Hansel and Gretel and wanted to eat them. Usually, you have to play the fairy tale out to escape. In the end, they had to cook her in her own oven.”

Sam stares. “I don’t even know what to say to that.”

We turn as Chan gasps and pushes Death away, sitting up abruptly. “Oh my god. Aidan,” he says, looking around the room.

“What about Aidan?” Nick’s brows drawn down in concern.

“I’m guessing nothing good,” Olivia murmurs, “given the current situation. Okay, Harrison, time to get everyone back in the book.”

“Back in what book?” I growl in frustration. “What the hell is going on and where’s Tristan?”

“This”—Olivia points at the book Harrison is still clutching—“is The Gospodar, the master copy of all fairy tales. When it’s opened, the fairy-tale creatures escape and cause havoc. Only the person who opened it can put them all back inside. Which is what Harrison is about to do.”

“I can’t.” He shakes his head.

“Of course you can, it’s easy,” Olivia replies.

“No, you don’t understand.” He frowns. “I’m not the one who opened the book. Tristan is.”

“Well, where’s Tristan?” Olivia is starting to look a little exasperated.

“That’s exactly what I want to know,” I snap. “Will someone please tell me where my husband is?”

“He’s been kidnapped by pirates,” Chan says. “And so has Aidan.”

“What?” Nick and I shout.

“Okay, at ease, Hayes squared,” Sam says calmly. “Chan, why don’t you tell us exactly what happened.”

“Blackbeard showed up, and he had Puck in a cage.”

“He had a puck in a cage?” Sam repeats in confusion. “Like a hockey puck?”

“No, like a naked, hairy hobgoblin named Puck,” Chan clarifies.

“Wait a minute,” Olivia interrupts. “He had captured Puck? Why?”

“He wanted Puck to tell him who’d opened the book. When Puck pointed out Tristan, they grabbed him. Aidan tried to stop them, but they took offence to the fact that he wasn’t a real pirate but instead his costume was Davy Jones from Pirates of the Caribbean , so they grabbed him too. I tried to stop them, but Blackbeard blew his black sparkly dust in my face and it was lights out. I don’t even remember hitting the floor.”

“It was a sleeping draught. Fae magic. You would have slept for a hundred years, and there is only one cure,” Death says matter-of-factly.

“What?” Chan asks.

“True love’s kiss,” he replies, as if it should be obvious.

Chan melts.

“Oh, please.” Sam rolls his eyes. “Will you two knock it off? I can practically see little hearts shooting out of your eyes, and it’s making me nauseous. Some of us are still single, you know.”

I open my mouth to say something when we’re interrupted.

“The Gospodar? Again, Olivia?” a cool and slightly exasperated voice says.

“Actually, this time it wasn’t me.” Olivia turns to face the intruder. “What are you doing here, Hades?”

He shrugs. “I thought I’d take a little constitutional topside.”

Olivia’s eyes narrow as she purses her lips. “You’re hiding from your wife again, aren’t you?”

Hades sighs. “The souls always get a little rambunctious around this time of the year when the veil of life and death is at its thinnest. It makes her a bit cranky. So I’m giving her some space. I’ll return to the Underworld with a little something special for her. You know how she loves those sweet treats from that little patisserie in Brooklyn.”

“That’s sweet.” Olivia smiles at him affectionately.

“When you’ve been married for several millennia, it’s the little things that count.”

I can’t believe Olivia is just standing there in the middle of yet another supernatural crisis, during which my husband appears to have been kidnapped by a fictional pirate, and having a calm conversation with an ancient god about New York pastries.

I’m freaking out about Tristan, but I don’t dare interrupt. I mean, after all, it’s the Hades...

The man is gorgeous. For several long seconds, I’m stunned into immobility and can do nothing but stare at his handsome face. His jet-black hair has a bluish hue to it, and he’s wearing an expertly tailored suit. Come to think of it, he looks familiar.

Why does he look familiar?

My gaze shoots across to Death, who also has jet-black hair bordering on blue and is also wearing an immaculately tailored suit, and his face... well, there’s enough of a difference, yes, but they could pass for brothers. A similarity that I’m not the only one who has noticed.

Chan looks back and forth between Hades and Death. It’s Death, however, who has snagged my attention. He’s... he’s blushing. His cheeks are pink! And I don’t think I’ve ever seen that expression on his face before.

“D, honey,” Chan says, not as quietly as he perhaps should. “Why do you look like Hades?”

“Do I?” he replies nonchalantly. “I hadn’t noticed.”

“Did you... did you model your human look on the God of the Underworld?” Chan is trying and failing to hold back a wide smile.

“What?” Death says as his blush deepens. “I happen to be an admirer of his work. He has the lowest rate of complaints of any of the hell dimensions. I hear there’s a waiting list! Souls are actively choosing Hades over the Christian version of hell, which is so poorly managed, don’t even get me started. But the system for soul management Hades has instituted in the Underworld is very efficient, not to mention incredibly elegant. ”

“Oh my god!” Chan grins. “Are you fanboying over him?”

“Why, thank you,” Hades says, having clearly heard Death’s words. “It is nice to be appreciated. I do sometimes feel somewhat misunderstood. My brother is so much worse than me. Zeus is a spoiled, whiny man-child who’ll nail anything with a pulse, be it man, woman, or beast. Honestly, I’ve lost count of how many half-godling nieces and nephews I have, yet I’m the one with the bad reputation, simply because I deal in souls and live in an underworld.”

“I know what you mean.” Death nods. “I have the same problem. Not the underworld part, but I do have a brother who is a bit of nightmare. He just recently tried to escape into this world to cause utter chaos and carnage. Plus, mortals seem to think I’m inherently evil because I reap souls and my true countenance is a formless death shroud. I mean, it’s just rude to make assumptions based on someone’s job and appearance.”

“Right?” Hades agrees. “It’s so nice to meet someone who gets it, and I must say I am a huge fan of your work. The Black Death? I really must commend you, that was just beautiful attention to detail. True craftsmanship.”

“That’s very kind.” Death flushes with pleasure. “But it really pales in comparison to

the river of souls. I mean, wow. And as for Tartarus?—”

“Thank you.” Hades gives a small, self-deprecating smile. “Persephone and I do try.”

“How do you keep the souls in line?”

“Torture,” Hades replies brightly. “Sometimes just the threat is enough. The trick is to wield it correctly. Torture is a precision tool to be used with a delicate hand, not a club. I only had to flay a few souls, and the rest just fell right in line like dominoes.”

“Not really my area of expertise.”

“You know, you should come for supper,” Hades says. “Persephone does an excellent heart and liver dish in a really delicate black bean sauce. I don’t know how she gets the balance just right, but you can really taste the damnation. In fact, you should bring your partner.” Hades gaze trails over to Chan, who has climbed off the table and is now standing next to Death, pressed against his side.

“He’s human,” Death replies.

“Not a problem.” Hades waves a hand. “It wouldn’t be the first time we’ve had a living soul visit Hades. Is it, Olivia?” he throws over his shoulder. She shakes her head.

I turn my attention back to Chan, who is staring at Hades and then glances up at Death with a small frown. “Can’t we just go to a Toby Carvery?”

“I hate to break up this mutual lovefest you two have going on,” Olivia interrupts, “but we really are running out of time.”

“What do you mean, running out of time?” I ask, the sense of renewed panic now

threatening to bubble over.

“I mean, you have until midnight to get all the creatures back in the book unless you want them permanently running amok along the streets of Whitechapel.” She frowns. “What concerns me is that they went to all the trouble of capturing Puck so they could find Tristan specifically. If they know he’s the one who opened the book and therefore the only one who can force them back inside, it doesn’t bode well for your husband.” She winces in sympathy. “We need to find him before they decide a more permanent solution is required to stop him from banishing them.”

“Fuck,” I hiss. “What do we do?”

“We need to find them first,” Harrison chimes in.

“Good idea.” Olivia nods. “You should do that.”

“Me?” Harrison exclaims, clutching the Gospodar tighter. “How am I supposed to find them? Just wander around the streets of Whitechapel looking for a really big boat?”

“Ship,” Sam corrects helpfully. “I believe they’re called ships, Prickles.”

Harrison sends him a glare.

“Have you still not learned to travel by witchsmoke?” Olivia sighs in exasperation before pointing at him with intent. “You and I are going to have words after this is over.”

She huffs out an annoyed breath and then disappears in a violent swirl of purple smoke.

“She does that,” Hades observes. “She’s a lot like Persephone, actually. She can get quite cranky when she’s under pressure.”

Before anyone can say anything in response, Olivia reappears. “Okay, they’re a few blocks that way.” She points to the left. When I stare at her, she rolls her eyes. “Fine, streets, whatever. They’re in that direction, but they’ve dropped anchor. Doesn’t look as if they’re moving.”

“Okay, let’s go.” Chan pulls off his one remaining stiletto and tosses it over his shoulder, leaving him standing in fishnets.

“Uh, Chan,” I say carefully, not wanting to put him in any more danger. “Maybe you should stay here and rest. You did just get smacked in the face with a whole load of fairy mojo.”

“That sounded really smutty.” Sam smirks, causing Harrison to glare even harder. “Just sayin’.”

“Fuck that,” Chan says fiercely. “That sea-shanty-singing, seven-seas-rampaging, rum-swilling cocksickle has my kid. I’m going to rip that black beard off his fucking face one hair follicle at a time.”

“Bloodthirsty little thing, isn’t he?” Hades remarks mildly.

Death beams. “Isn’t he perfect?”

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:16 pm

We're hauled up onto a massive wooden ship parked outside The Crown and Feathers. It's impressive, and reminds me of the Swedish warship Vasa. We're dumped unceremoniously onto the deck. Aidan is curled up alongside me and, like me, has his hands and feet bound together tightly.

I look up as Captain Blackbeard strides onto the deck, followed by a short, neatly dressed man in a white shirt and cravat, a rich brocade doublet, and black pantaloons. His brown hair is tied at the nape of his neck with a black ribbon, and he carries a roll of parchment and a quill.

Blackbeard's fearsome gaze falls on me and Aidan. "Tie 'em to the yardarm!" he thunders as he approaches.

"Um, sir!" The small man scurries along in his wake, almost colliding with Blackbeard's broad back when he stops abruptly and spins around to face him.

"What is it?"

"Sir, deepest apologies, but we no longer have a yardarm. It was accidentally broken last week while the crew were playing cannonball cricket."

Blackbeard pauses, his expression contemplative, then turns to the assembled crew. "Tie 'em to the jibboom!"

"Sir." The slim man clears his throat again, drawing Blackbeard's attention. "Once more, a thousand apologies, but we no longer have a jibboom either."

“We don’t?” He frowns.

The other man shakes his head. “It was damaged yesterday when the crew were playing fireball volleyball.”

“Bowsprit?”

The petite man shakes his head slightly.

Blackbeard scowls. “Well, what do we have?”

“Um.” The small man looks around thoughtfully. “We have a comfy sofa on the recreational deck?”

Blackbeard closes his eyes and sighs loudly, then composes himself and fixes his attention on the crew, who are twitching with anticipation while they await his orders.

“Tie ’em”—he glances back at the small man dubiously, who nods with a smile of encouragement—“to the... comfy... sofa.”

A loud cheer is followed by several hearty arghhhhs! and then there’s a flurry of activity. Several men disappear through the black wood cabin doors whose edges are gilded gold.

Aidan and I are wrenched off the floor and lifted aloft by many pairs of hands. From where I’m dangling awkwardly, I see the other crew members reappear, carrying a worn-looking but plush crimson velvet sofa between them.

“Ow,” Aidan mutters as we’re dumped on the cushioned seat with a little bounce and collide with each other.

They then proceed to tie us to the sofa with elaborate knots and lots and lots of rope.

“Prepare to get underway!” Blackbeard stalks up and down the deck, yelling at his scrambling crew. “Hoist the mainsail, raise the anchor!” He pauses, turns to the little clerk guy, and raises one brow, his tone dry. “Do we still have one of those?”

He winces, and Blackbeard growls. “Just go and deal with those two.” He points at me and Aidan, then stalks into his cabin.

Hastening to obey his orders, the clerk scurries across the deck and stops in front of us, still clutching his journal and quill.

“Good evening.” He gives us both a wide, friendly smile. “My name is Oren, and I’m Captain Blackbeard’s events coordinator. I’m in charge of ship morale, making sure the crew are happy and entertained while maintaining a strict fitness regime. After all, heart health is very important!”

He chuckles happily.

“I’d like to take this opportunity to thank you for joining us today as our hostages. The crew are very excited to have you with us. While stuck within the pages of *The Gospodar*, they just don’t get the chance to commit a kidnapping as often as they’d like, so this is really special.”

He presses his hand to his chest in a sentimental gesture.

“You’ll notice your ropes and bindings are of the finest Persian weave and are, of course, included as part of your welcome package.”

He dips his fingers into the pocket of his doublet and retrieves a small brass pocket watch, then tuts.

“Ooh, we do seem to be running a tad behind schedule. We have a poison darts tournament at ten followed by rum cocktails on the lido deck at eleven. However, we are hoping to serve supper before you walk the plank but after your trial.”

“Trial?” I blurt out.

Oren hums slightly. “Not exactly a trial, more a recounting of your crime,” he clarifies, then tucks his watch back in his pocket. “Right, then. I think that covers everything. Just holler if you need anything and thank you once again for choosing the Queen Anne’s Revenge as the destination for your ultimate demise. Please don’t be shy with any feedback as we do like to make sure we continuously improve our service.”

He steps back and gives us an enthusiastic thumbs up.

“Thank you.”

He scurries away and I turn to Aidan.

“I’m beginning to think someone might have spiked that punch with Viv’s magically laced gin.”

“You might be right,” he mutters. “They’re not actually going to make us walk the plank, are they? There may not be water down there, but it’s a long drop to the pavement below.”

“Don’t worry.” I try to force as much confidence into my voice as I can for his sake. “There’s no way Danny will let anything happen to either one of us.”

“Do you think Chan is okay?” He chews his lip and shifts uncomfortably against his bonds.

“Definitely.” I smile. “Did you forget who his boyfriend is? I’ll bet he’s awake and already stalking this way to tear Blackbeard a new one.”

“I hope so.” Aidan frowns in worry. “Not about the tearing him a new one, but I hope he’s awake and okay.”

“Look, it’s going to be all right, Aidan, I promise. They’ll all come for us. You forget we’ve also got two powerful witches. Olivia and Harrison are the real deal, plus we have the advantage that Olivia has dealt with these clowns before.”

I hear a loud, derisive scoff and crane my head around Aidan to see who made that noise. It’s only then that I see a wide barrel set close by, and on it is the small cylindrical cage containing the hobgoblin Puck.

His expression is thunderous. He has his fleshy jaw propped on one fist and he’s sitting cross-legged, giving me an unhindered view of something I could have quite happily gone my entire life without seeing.

“Got something to say?” I snap. “Considering you’re the one who got us into this mess.”

“It’s not my fault,” he says sullenly. “It’s all that Blackbeard’s doing.”

“Really? Because he wasn’t the one who stole the book from Olivia and hid it in the books for Harrison.”

“Blackbeard made me do it.” He glowered.

“What?”

“He’s powerful, that Blackbeard is. Maybe the most powerful of all the fairy-tale

creatures. He's learned to access the fae magic, but he couldn't break himself out of the book. Need a human for that, but once you opened the book, it was just a case of finding you and stopping you from stuffing them all straight back in."

"Me?" I stare at him. "How am I supposed to put them back in? I just see dead people. I'm not a witch."

"Only the one who opened the book can put them back," Puck replies.

"And so you served me up like a Christmas turkey," I hiss.

"That's your fault!" He grasps the bars of his cage. "I tried to escape. As soon as I arrived in that shop, I hitched a ride with that tall, brightly coloured woman with the ginormous yellow hair."

"Ginormous yellow hair?" I mutter. "Do you mean Dusty?"

"I followed her and saw you for the first time."

"That's why you were at the mortuary," I whisper. "Because Dusty was there. She'd been at the bookshop earlier with Bruce. So you followed her to Hackney."

"I stuck with you, thinking I'd move somewhere else and switch."

"Switch what?" Aidan asks, trying to avoid the line-of-sight view of the area between Puck's legs.

"People. Keep up, boy," he snaps peevishly. "I leapfrog from person to person. That's how I travel in the human world unless it's a powerfully magical place like Mercy; when I'm there, I can move freely on my own. That's why I stayed so long. It was only when Marta, the keeper of The Gospodar, died that things started to get a bit

hairy. I thought if I could abandon the book in one of the Old World countries like England, I could be free of it and then make my way back to Mercy. I kind of think of it as my home now.”

“I’m sure Olivia will be thrilled to hear that,” I murmur.

“Anyway, I hitched a lift with you and that Dusty person, thinking you’d take me someplace else, but instead you brought me right back to the bookshop, where Blackbeard managed to get his hands back on me.”

“What a mess.” I blow out a breath. “What can we do?”

“Do?” Puck scoffs. “You can’t do anything. Now that Blackbeard is out of the book and in the real world, there’s no stopping him. He’ll have you fed to the sharks before the clocks chime midnight.”

“Hate to break it to you, Puck, but we’re in the middle of Whitechapel. There aren’t exactly a lot of sharks around here.”

“He’s a magical creature. You think that’s going to stop him? Believe me, he can get very creative.”

“Great,” I say sourly.

“I’m sorry, human, but you’re screwed,” Puck laments. “I do feel a little bad about that.”

“Yeah, well,” Aidan pipes up. “Don’t be so sure we’re screwed. He may be a fairy-tale villain or whatever, but we have a Grim.”

“What’s a Grim?” Puck asks curiously, his little pointed ears perking up.

Feeling a shiver run down my spine, I look up into the night sky and watch as the tiny pinpricks of starlight momentarily disappear behind a large, dark shadow.

“Oh.” My mouth curves slowly. “I think you’re going to find out very soon.”

“Holy shit, they were actually serious?”

Aidan’s voice shakes from behind me.

I can’t see him as we are currently standing back to back at the end of a rather sturdy-looking plank hanging over the side of the huge pirate galleon. We both still have our hands and feet bound in ropes of the finest Persian weave.

“Oh, would you look at that?” I murmur, looking down. “Sharks.”

Thirty-something feet below us circle three ominous fins. There’s no water; instead, the grey concrete ripples and churns as if it were liquid. At this point, I’m not sure what’s worse, plunging to our deaths and hitting solid concrete or finding the concrete is not solid and being eaten by whatever is attached to those fins.

“Tristan Frankie Everett Hayes, you have been sentenced to death for the crime of using The Gospodar to trap and imprison fairy-tale persons. How do you plead?”

“Fuck off,” I call out.

“Tristan,” Aidan hisses.

“What? There’s not really any point in arguing with October’s cover model for Big Boys in Boots over there, or his peppy little holiday rep sidekick,” I reply.

“You’re starting to sound like Chan.”

“It comes from hanging out with him and Dusty for too long. I think I’ve lost my filter, plus my world perspective is somewhat skewed now.”

“I don’t want to die,” Aidan says in a quiet voice.

“Oh, sweetheart, no. I wish I could hug you, but I swear to you, nothing bad will happen to you. Granted, circumstances are not exactly optimal right now?—”

“Not exactly optimal?” Aidan blurts incredulously. “Tristan, we’re tied up and being forced to walk the plank like the end scene of *The Goonies* .”

“That’s what it reminds me of!” I let out a laugh. “It’s been bugging me.”

“Oh, I’m so glad I could put your mind at rest,” he says sarcastically.

“I don’t think I’m the only one starting to sound like Chan,” I point out.

“HEY, YOU GUYS!” a loud voice rings out.

“Wow, Aidan, that sounded just like Sloth. Very impressive,” I mutter.

“That wasn’t me.”

I look up into the rigging to see two figures grasping ropes and about to swing from the cross section of the main mast.

“Is that”—my eyes narrow as I try to focus—“Thor and… Shirley Temple?”

Clutching their ropes, the newcomers leap off the mast, and as they swing closer, I see one is actually my husband, which sets my heart pounding, and a wide smile spreads across my face.

“Danny!” I exclaim.

“I bet Chan chose his outfit,” Aidan replies.

As they reach us, Thor grabs Aidan and Danny grabs me. Their momentum lifts us off the perilous plank and swings us over the deck. They drop us onto the comfy sofa, and we land with a grunt. The boys swing out over the edge of the ship and then back in, where they both body roll onto the deck and jump up ready to fight.

“And what time do you call this?” I call out to Danny, who is grappling with a pirate. “You were supposed to finish work hours ago.”

“Sorry, love,” Danny pants as he knees the pirate in the balls. “I got held up.” As the pirate doubles over, Danny grabs a small wine cask and cracks him over the head, dropping him to the deck.

“DCI Butler?” I ask as he twists around to plant his fist in another guy’s face.

“Three bears, actually.” He wrestles another into a headlock.

Thor, it turns out, is actually our nephew, Nick. While Aidan is staring at him with stars in his eyes, Nick leans down and grabs Aidan’s bound hands, hauling him up off the sofa and throwing him over his shoulder.

Bless him, he must have been watching *The Princess Bride* again.

Nick has a cutlass in one hand and, with the other firmly holding one of Aidan’s thighs to keep him in place, Nick proceeds to fight off two pirates.

“Holy shit.” Aidan lifts his head and peers over his shoulder. “Nick, where’d you learn to do that?”

“After-school fencing club while Mum was working. It was that or crocheting, but my fingers kept getting knotted up in the yarn.”

I’m beginning to think the Hayes men just have this air of sexy competence about them, but then again, I’ve met Danny’s older brother, Derek, and he’s a complete dick, so clearly not all Hayes men are created equal.

A shrill whistle pierces the air, and when I look over, Chan has just climbed over the rigging.

And boy, does he mean business.

His long skintight black gown has been ripped so it now only reaches mid-thigh to allow for more movement. There are tiny rips and tears in his fishnet tights, and on his feet are a pair of neon pink Converse. But most noticeable is the shiny metal baseball bat he’s holding in one hand and tapping menacingly against his other palm.

Three of the pirates still, like animals sensing danger. One of them has a small bald patch over his right ear and a long scratch mark down his face, and I’m pretty sure he was one of the ones Chan went for earlier.

“So you thought it was a good idea to make my kid walk the plank, huh?” He raises one brow dangerously.

The three of them look at each other and then turn and run. I can’t help the chuckle that escapes me as I watch Chan leap gracefully over the bodies piling up on deck and chase after them.

“Get those bitches, Chan! You show them who’s boss.”

Glancing up, I see Dusty standing on top of a barrel with one arm wrapped around the

main mast, hanging half off it with a bull horn in one hand as she shouts encouragement.

She's still wearing the corset, skintight pants, and thigh-high boots, but she's switched the cat ears for a bandana and gold hoop earrings that are so big, they look as if they could be used for the obstacle course at Crufts.

I haul myself off the sofa and onto the wooden planking as another pirate is thrown in my direction. I duck out of the way just in time, and he tumbles over the back and hits the floor with a loud cry of pain.

I crawl across the floor commando-style, thankful that those idiots had tied my hands in front of my body, and head towards the body of an unconscious pirate. Grabbing the small knife tucked into his waistband, I set about sawing through my restraints with the half-blunt blade.

"Tristan!" I hear Harrison call out to me, and even though I keep frantically sawing away at the finest Persian-weave ropes, I look up. Sam has a long piece of pipe he's obviously appropriated from somewhere and is in front of Harrison to clear a path for him to get to me.

Harrison is clinging onto the book that I accidentally opened earlier.

"The Gospodar!" Puck shouts excitedly, standing up and rattling the bars of his cage. "Remember what I said, human? Only the one who opened it has the power to force them back inside."

"Tristan, catch!" Harrison goes to launch the book at me, but at the last moment, he trips over a prone body and loses his grip.

The book arcs slowly through the air, straight for me.

Oh no , I have time to think before it cracks me straight in the forehead and I see stars.

“Are you really the best the humans of the Old World have to offer?” Puck says in disappointment.

“Fuck off,” I mumble. “At least I don’t look like a buffalo’s ball sack.” Wincing, I lift my still bound hands to my forehead and feel a welt in the shape of The Gospodar’s lock.

“NO!” Blackbeard bellows, his dark eyes wide when he sees the book lying next to me. He starts to stomptowards me, literally treading on his own fallen men, the intent in his eyes unmistakable. I set the rope back on the blade and begin to saw frantically at the remaining threads.

Suddenly, Death appears directly in Blackbeard’s murderous path. “Excuse me,” Death says politely. “Are you the one who cursed my beloved into an enchanted sleep?”

“Who are you?” Blackbeard growls.

“I’m Death,” he says simply. The tone of his voice literally chills my blood as he nods in Chan’s direction. “I’mhis boyfriend.”

Death’s hand shoots out and grabs Blackbeard’s throat, then squeezes. The pirate captain’s mouth falls open as he tries to gasp in a breath. Black veins appear at the edges of his throat, and his hands scramble uselessly against Death’s grip.

Blackbeard’s eyes fill with fear as he watches Death explode into a huge, black, smoky mass undulating and crackling with microbursts of power. The black veins keep spreading across the pirate’s face, and his fingers tear at what is now a roiling

black rope of smoke tight around his throat. The sky boils and churns above us, the wind ripping at the sails and pushing everyone off their feet.

And amidst the chaos is a man calmly sipping a goblet of wine and looking like he could be Death's twin, not a hair so much as flicked out of place by the wind. He glances up into the violent maelstrom swirling above the ship, then back down at Blackbeard, who lets out one last screech of thwarted rage and explodes in a cloud of black glitter.

Death's twin sets his goblet down and applauds in delight. "Oh, yes! It's all in the showmanship," he says to Olivia, who stands beside him and is gripping the foremast to stop herself from being blown off the deck by the turbulent wind. "No one takes pride in their craft any more. It's so exquisite to see one of the masters at work. Truly inspiring."

"Tristan!" Harrison yells above the howl and shriek of the storm. "The book!"

I yank my wrists apart, the last of the ropes giving way, and grab The Gospodar. Kneeling up, my ankles still bound behind me, I open the book and lift it up.

"EVERYONE IN THE BOOK! NOW!" I yell.

Suddenly, the bodies strewn around the deck lift up, tumbling around as they head towards the book and dive into the pages. Fairies, toadstools, wolves, bears, whip through the air, shrinking as they approach the book and are sucked into its pages.

My fingers cramp from holding on so tight as I watch pumpkin carriages, ticking clocks, a huge golden tree with pink leaves, a beanstalk, and a gingerbread cottage all sail towards me.

"Ahhhhh!" I close my eyes, yelling loudly as I fight to hold up the book, which grows

heavier and heavier. Then suddenly the book slams shut, and I'm surrounded by silence. I'm sitting in the middle of the empty road, my ankles no longer bound, breathing heavily and clutching the locked book. Next to me, still in his cage, is Puck, looking grudgingly impressed.

The ship is nowhere in sight. Aidan stands next to Nick, his arms wrapped around Nick's waist, and Nick's rest on his shoulders.

Sam helps Harrison to his feet and Danny steps up beside me and gently sweeps my hair out of my eyes, wincing at the egg-sized lump I can feel growing on my forehead.

Death has now reverted to his human form and holds Chan in his arms, who's smiling smugly, his baseball bat propped on one shoulder and his arm slung around Death's neck. Dusty stands next to them looking amused.

"Nice job." Olivia rises and dusts off her jeans. "This is Hades, by the way."

I stare at the God of the Underworld for several long seconds. "Why does he look like Death?"

Chan snorts loudly, and Death looks slightly bashful.

"If you don't mind, Tristan?" Olivia holds out her hands for the book, and I hand it over with relief.

"Oi, witch." Puck rattles his cage. "Aren't you going to let me out of here?"

"No," she says irritably and picks up his cage. "You and I are taking a little detour to the fairy realms, and you're going to explain to Oberon how Blackbeard nearly escaped."

“Argh. Do I have to?” Puck whines. “He gets so shrill when he’s angry.”

“Fraid so, little man.” Olivia looks at each of us in turn. “Nice to see you all again, despite the circumstances.” Then she looks directly at Harrison. “And don’t think I’ve forgotten that we need to have a conversation,” she says, her expression serious. “There’s something going on in that bookshop of yours, something that wasn’t there last time I was here.”

“What?” Harrison frowns. “What’s there?”

“I’m not sure yet,” she murmurs.

“You should listen to her,” Hades says. “She’s right. There’s something very dark and very powerful in that place.”

“You can’t just drop that bombshell on me and leave,” Harrison snaps waspishly. “What am I supposed to do?”

Olivia stares at him. “I’m going to send someone to help set you on the right path. He has a real soft spot for London. After all, he met his wife here.” A small, enigmatic smile plays across her lips. “You coming, Hades?”

“I suppose so,” he says in a bored tone. “I do find the fae rather tedious though.” His gaze sweeps over to Death and Chan. “Don’t forget, supper next Sunday. I can have Charon bring you down the River Styx. There’s nothing like a romantic boat ride down the river of souls.”

“What?” Chan’s eyes widen. “Charon? The actual Ferryman?”

“Oh, you’ll like him,” Olivia says. “Charon’s a sweetheart. He was in love with my great-great-aunt Charlotte. My husband, Theo, and I rescued him one time when he’d

been kidnapped.”

With that parting statement, the pair of them disappear.

“Okaaay,” I drawl as Danny’s arms wrap around me and pull my back into his chest.

“Some night,” Danny says tiredly as he rests his chin on my shoulder. “Are you okay, Harrison?”

I look back to our friend to find him chewing his lip.

“Am I okay?” Harrison replies. “Am I okay when the God of the Underworld and the Guardian of all the hell dimension tell me there’s something dark and powerful in my shop, the place where I now happen to also live?”

“Yeah, sorry. That was a bit of a stupid question.” Danny sighs.

“What do you think is there?” Harrison says quietly, and there’s a hint of vulnerability in his eyes.

“Don’t worry, Prickles, you won’t be alone,” Sam says and takes his hand, and it’s a testament to how unsettled Harrison must be that he doesn’t let go.

Instead, his knuckles whiten as he grips tighter.

1

Theo's truck came to a slow stop. He peered through the windshield at the large, carved wooden sign that read Lambert's Pumpkin Patch.

"This is the place, is it?" he muttered, his expression a mixture of curiosity and reserve.

"Sure is." Olivia smiled and unclipped her seat belt. "It'll be fun, I promise." She glanced over her shoulder at their twins, currently strapped into car seats in the back seat. Logan seemed to be trying to fit his whole fist in his mouth while his sister, Theia, sucked the ear of her stuffed bunny.

Climbing out of the truck, Olivia stopped and breathed deeply. The ground beneath her boots was covered in hay, and the air was crisp. Splashes of bright orange could be seen among the bales as children dove in with wild abandon, enjoying the piles of loose hay as much as the search for the perfect pumpkin to carve.

The wind tugged at her long dark hair, and she pulled her jacket a little tighter. Her heart gave a slow thud as bittersweet memories flooded her mind. The last time she'd visited this particular pumpkin patch she'd been a child. Her parents had helped her search for the biggest pumpkin she could find, and then they'd had hot cocoa and candied apples.

Theo's arms slipped around her, drawing her back against his chest. "Are you sure you want to do this?" His deliciously low voice rumbled against her ear as he rested his chin on her shoulder and watched the hive of activity laid out in front of them.

Olivia drew in a breath and gave a small nod. Turning in his embrace, she pushed away the unwelcome thoughts of her past. She wrapped her arms around her husband's neck and lifted up on her toes to press a soft kiss to his lips before glancing at their son, who was swiping his small spit-slicked palm across the inside of the car window.

She chuckled and shook her head. "It's Halloween, time to make our own traditions."

"I still don't understand this predilection for celebrating Halloween." Theo frowned.

"That's because you were born in the seventeenth century, honey," she reminded him fondly as she turned and opened the door beside her.

Beau, her golden cocker spaniel, leapt out, vibrating with excitement at all the new sounds and scents. His whole body wagged as he danced around her legs and sniffed the ground.

"Good boy." She patted his head and then leaned into the car to unclip her son's seat belt. Logan gave her a toothy grin, a trail of drool running from his mouth to his tiny knuckles as he gnawed on them fiercely.

She lifted him into her arms with a sigh of resignation as he buried his spit-covered hands in her hair.

Teething was hell.

As she shut the door, she looked over to find Theo lifting Theia from the car, wincing as he was slapped in the eye with a soggy rabbit ear.

"What do you want to do first?" He shifted Theia in his arms and smiled at her when she kept offering her bunny to him for kisses—which he obliged, much to her delight.

“We’ll let the twins help pick out pumpkins first. Then, if they get tired, they can nap while we have a hot drink.”

Theo glanced around at all the other families juggling small, shrieking children and giant orange squashes. “Are you sure we need them? I don’t think the twins are old enough to notice if we have jack-o’-lanterns.”

“It’s tradition.” Olivia began to walk and Theo whistled for Beau to follow them.

“Are all these people witches?”

“No,” she answered in amusement. “It’s not just a witchy thing. Most people don’t have a clue where the tradition comes from originally, but it’s fun for the kids.”

“It has something to do with spirits, doesn’t it?” He had a vague recollection of hearing it mentioned somewhere before.

Olivia gave a nod as they walked side by side. “Historically, pumpkins weren’t always used. They could be carved from any root vegetable—rutabagas, turnips. In fact, they take their name from the strange phenomenon of flickering light above peat bogs called ‘will-o’-the-wisp’ or ‘jack-o’-lantern.’ It’s also tied to the legend of Stingy Jack, a drunkard doomed to roam the land with nothing but a hollowed-out turnip to light his way. But the tradition of carved pumpkins was brought to the States by Irish immigrants centuries ago and used to ward off evil spirits and keep harmful spirits out of their homes.”

“You do know that your magical wards do a perfectly good job of keeping anything evil out of the house, right?” Theo smiled.

“I know.” She laughed. “But this is fun, you’ll see.”

They strolled among the pumpkins, Beau dancing excitedly at their heels. The air was chilly and filled with the raucous laughter of children as, with cold hands and pink, ruddy cheeks, they darted between hay bales. The clouds sat high in the sky, huge puffs of white cotton candy, and rust-colored leaves danced and tumbled restlessly across the ground.

Olivia sighed in deep contentment. There was nowhere more beautiful this time of year than New England. Bouncing Logan on her hip, she turned toward Theo but paused when she found him staring intently. Following the line of his puzzled gaze, her eyes widened when they landed on a strange sight.

“Are they supposed to be that big?” Theo asked in surprise as he eyed a huge pumpkin that looked to be the height and size of a shopping cart.

Olivia blinked, sure the sight couldn’t be real. Edging closer to get a better look, she realized that not only was it indeed real, but it seemed to be... growing. She blinked again and the strange-looking pumpkin throbbed like a heartbeat, expanding in front of them. They both watched open-mouthed as the giant squash wobbled slightly in its nest of straw.

It was now the size of a small car.

As the assembled crowd watched in a kind of wary fascination, it pulsed noticeably and swelled to the size of a minivan.

And it was still swelling...

The crowd chattered excitedly and pointed. Mr. Lambert, the owner of the pumpkin patch, stood to the side, slack-jawed and eyes wide while he scratched his head in obvious confusion.

Olivia and Theo slowly tilted their heads back, their eyes rolling upward as the gourds surpassed the size of a small trailer. A rather alarming creaking noise filled the air, followed by Beau barking, and Theo reached out with his free hand and grasped Olivia's elbow.

"I think we should move," he said quietly, his voice filled with alarm.

"Uh, I think you're right." Olivia clutched Logan tighter as they backed up.

There was another loud, ominous creaking sound. Olivia and Theo spun around, hunching over the twins to protect them. The pumpkin exploded and chunks of orange squash were propelled into the air, filling it with an orange mist and spraying pumpkin guts and seeds that rained down on the stunned onlookers for nearly two minutes straight.

When the last few chunks plopped to the ground in a series of wet thuds, the whole field seemed to shimmer, and it was only then that Olivia realized everything was covered in a fine film of glitter.

There was a long moment of stunned silence as everyone stared at the devastation, strings of pumpkin guts clinging to their hair and hanging from their clothes. Then a loud cheer went up as the assembled crowd roared in delight, followed by a round of applause.

Theo turned slowly to Olivia, a chunk of pumpkin on his shoulder and seeds stuck in his dark hair.

"You have some very strange traditions."

"That's not meant to happen." She frowned as she glanced down at Beau, whose fur now had a coat of glitter and who was shoving his face enthusiastically into a gooey

pile of pumpkin guts. Her gaze trailed from her cute and very happy dog to a set of small, sparkly footprints no bigger than a child's on the ground beside them. The prints led away from the pumpkin patch and toward a huge red barn with white trim.

"Theo," she whispered, tugging on his sleeve and nodding toward the tracks.

"What the...?" Theo muttered, but Olivia had already started following the glittery trail.

The door to the barn swung open on obviously well-oiled hinges and as Olivia, still holding Logan, stepped cautiously inside, she heard a loud gulping. She tiptoed softly along the straw-strewn floor, ignoring the lowing of an old, caramel-colored cow as she shuffled in her stall.

Stopping sharply, her eyes widened and her mouth fell open. Theo moved up alongside her, shifting his daughter in his arms. Before he could ask what was wrong, he caught sight of what she was staring at. He blinked rapidly, sure he was hallucinating from inhaling too much pumpkin and glitter.

In front of them was what could only be described as a small, fat, hairy man, and he was very decidedly and unapologetically naked. He stood about three feet tall and had a paunchy belly and dark tufts of wiry hair covering his body. What little they could see of his skin beneath the copious amounts of hair was a dark, weather-beaten brown.

The tiny man had yet to notice either of them since his face was concealed by a rather large, dented metal pail. Olivia and Theo watched speechless as thick, creamy fresh milk spilled from his chin and down his chest, beading on the matted hair and pooling on the ground around his sausage-like toes. He gulped and drank noisily, smacking his lips and obviously enjoying himself from the sound of his satisfied grunts.

Olivia and Theo glanced at each other in disbelief. Suddenly, Beau bounded into the barn and skidded to a halt beside Olivia, his tail wagging madly and his nose covered with mashed pumpkin.

Catching a new and exciting scent, Beau's big brown eyes landed on the strange creature, and he started to bark loudly. The startled creature dropped the pail with a loud clang and a slosh of milk. His face, now fully exposed, was that of a pudgy man, with droopy jowls and puffy, beady eyes. His head was almost bald apart from a few wispy tufts poking out of his pointed ears.

His watery eyes widened in panic and he gave a loud squawk of distress, then turned sharply, baring his jiggly naked buttocks. He dove at the wall and disappeared into the seemingly solid surface leaving nothing more than a huge splat of glitter against the wood.

Olivia frowned in confusion as Beau continued to bark incessantly.

“What the hell was that?”

Roni smiled, hopping out of the way as a small group of ghouls, ghosts, and witches streaked down the sidewalk with wide grins and baskets of candy. She smoothed down her skirt and continued walking, her elegant and impractical heels clicking along the sidewalk.

She waved and smiled as she passed familiar faces and marveled at how much her life had changed—how much she'd changed—since she'd come to live in the small Massachusetts town. In fact, she barely recognized herself these days.

Of course, her fiancé had played a part in her newfound confidence, as had Olivia. They'd believed in her when she hadn't had the guts to believe in herself. Sure, they'd introduced her to a world filled with monsters, ghosts, and soul-sucking demons, but she'd also been lucky enough to experience a world filled with magic and wonder.

She wouldn't trade that for anything.

She was now part of the community; as curator of the Mercy Museum of Witchcraft, she was well known by most of the residents, but it was so much more than that. She had a family. They may not have been blood, but Olivia and Theo and their circle of friends meant more to her than anything.

"Roni!" a familiar voice called out to her.

She looked up and saw Ellen Beaumont leaning against the doorjamb of her

secondhand bookstore, wearing a warty witch's nose and a conical hat and holding a plastic cauldron filled with candy bars.

"Good afternoon, Ellen."

"You look happy," Ellen remarked, holding out the cauldron for Roni to take a peanut butter cup.

"Just feeling grateful, I guess." Roni unwrapped the candy and popped the sweet treat in her mouth, glancing at all the children running and laughing.

"There's nowhere quite like Mercy, is there?" Ellen remarked fondly.

Roni laughed. "You got that right."

"I'm glad I saw you." Ellen stepped back into the shop and beckoned for Roni to enter. "I have something for you."

"You do?" Roni followed curiously as she passed by deep, glossy midnight-blue bookcases framed with twinkling white fairy lights and holding everything from travel guides to the latest bestsellers and tarot cards to bell jars.

Ellen nodded as she placed the cauldron down on a nearby table and headed toward the back of the shop. "Did you hear Marta Varga passed away last month?"

"I did," Roni muttered.

"Bless her." Ellen sighed loudly. "No family left. She was the last one. Still, we gave her a helluva send-off."

"That's nice," Roni replied. "I can't think of anything worse than coming to the end

of your life and having no one to attend your funeral.”

“Yes, well.” Ellen disappeared into the back room and Roni could hear her rummaging about. When she spoke again, her voice was louder so Roni could still hear her. “We made sure that wasn’t the case. Anyway, her will stipulated that her belongings were to be sold and the money donated to the local children’s home.”

“That was kind of her.”

“I thought so.” Ellen reappeared with a rather dusty, battered packing box and thumped it down onto the desk.

“What’s this?” Roni peered into the box and found—perhaps unsurprisingly, considering she was in a secondhand bookstore—lots of old leatherbound books.

“It’s from Marta’s estate sale.” She began pulling out handfuls of books and stacking them on the counter. “Now, where is it...” she muttered. “Ah, here we go.”

Roni watched, her eyes rounding in interest as Ellen pulled out an old, large tome. It almost looked like a spell book, with thick leather bindings and metal hinges.

“I thought you might like this for the museum.” She handed it over to Roni with a small dramatic oomph.

It was heavy, Roni would give her that. She settled it on the counter in front of her and traced the cover with inquisitive fingertips. There were several designs deeply carved into the leather cover, intricate trees and toadstools and goblins, but she struggled to read the title as it seemed to be in another language. Romanian, perhaps Croatian.

“I thought you might like it.” Ellen nodded. “Marta’s people came over from the old

country. Croatia, I think it was,” she mused thoughtfully. “Anyway, I can’t see me being able to sell it, especially as it’s not written in English. Besides, it’s locked.”

Roni shifted the book carefully onto its spine and saw that the pages were indeed bound together with a metal lock that looked rusted shut.

“Are you sure you don’t want it?” she asked, looking up at the other woman.

Ellen watched her in amusement.

“Veronica Mason,” she laughed, “I can tell by the look on your face and the grip of your fingers that you desperately want it for the museum.”

Roni glanced down and noticed her fingers had turned white. Deliberately relaxing her grip, she chuckled lightly.

“Go on.” Ellen nodded. “You send enough business my way. Take it.”

“Thank you.” Roni picked up the heavy book.

The bell above the door tinkled merrily and a band of misfits burst through the door amidst rousing, squeaky chorus of trick or treat. Ellen cackled dramatically in delight and, pressing her wart-covered plastic nose back into place, hobbled over to the table to retrieve her cauldron.

Leaving the woman surrounded by princesses, pirates, and a Waldo, Roni slipped out of the shop and back onto the street, turning toward the museum. The temperature had dropped in the short time she’d been inside the store and the wind began to kick up, causing leaves of red and gold to swirl like little miniature dervishes.

The book felt warm against her chest and was incredibly heavy. By the time she rounded the corner and the museum came into view, her arms were beginning to ache and she was starting to wonder if the book was made of stone rather than leather and paper.

Roni trotted up the steps to the main entrance, backing into the door to push it open since she had her hands full. Taking one last glance up at the sky, she was surprised to find that what had been a clear, cloudless afternoon had suddenly turned overcast, with gray swirls streaking across the horizon.

She headed inside and gave a nod of greeting to her staff and the visitors as she headed up to her office. Closing the door behind her, she dropped the book onto her desk with a hum of relief, but for one crazy moment, she could have sworn she heard a clang like a lead weight, followed by the curious murmur of disgruntled voices.

Roni was so surprised that she turned sharply, but there was no one there. She was still alone. Kicking off her shoes, she sank into her chair and studied the book closely. Unable to decipher the language, she studied the painstakingly carved illustrations on the cover, the style of which indicated it might be a book of folklore.

Opening her desk drawer filled with all manner of curious items, she pulled out a can of oil that used to stop her office door from squeaking and a long, thin letter opener.

Roni carefully oiled the metal lock, not wanting the liquid to seep into the old pages, then took the letter opener and tried to pick the lock. She tried and tried but it wouldn't budge.

A sudden knock at her office door had her looking up and calling out in frustration, "Come in."

Mitch, her tall, dark-haired assistant, stuck his head around the door and smiled

apologetically.

“Sorry to interrupt you, Roni, but the delivery came in for the piece on loan from London, and there seems to be a problem with the insurance paperwork.”

Roni sighed and stood up. Smoothing her skirt, she slipped her feet back into her shoes.

“We had this problem last time.” She frowned in annoyance and followed him from the room. “Did they use the same courier company again?”

She flicked the light off on her way out, plunging the office into darkness and silence as the door clicked closed.

A muted, eerie glow reminiscent of phosphorescence began to pulse in the darkness. It lit the room with a sickly green cast, throwing deep shadows that seemed to dance impatiently with dozens of strangely human-like forms across the walls.

Then the silence was punctuated with a small, harmless click that reverberated through the stillness. The book, which had been sitting sedately on the desk, flipped open, its pages fanning until they came to an abrupt stop. The light began to pulse brighter as a green mist began to rise from the parchment pages.

3

Jake climbed out of the car and paused, slowly sipping his coffee. His gaze scanned his surroundings and his free hand rested lightly on his gun holster at his hip out of habit rather than any sense of danger.

Mac climbed out of the driver's side and gave a nod to the man approaching.

"Bill." Mac greeted the burly man once he stopped in front of them.

"Mac." Bill inclined his head in return, his heavy-set brow furled into a frown.
"Jake."

"What seems to be the trouble, Bill?" Jake continued to sip his coffee nonchalantly.

"Cow's missin'," Bill stated.

"A cow is missing?" Jake replied. "Uh... You sure it hasn't just wandered off?"

"Buttercup wouldn't do that." Bill shook his head. "Besides, she was locked up in her stall in the barn."

"Why don't you take it from the top?" Mac retrieved his little black notebook from his pocket and flipped it open. "Tell us what happened."

"I got up this morning at the ass crack of dawn to do the milking as usual, and when I went into Buttercup's stall, I found these."

They both leaned in close as Bill unhooked a small, plain canvas sack from his belt and opened it. He reached inside and scooped out a handful of multicolored beans that seemed to shimmer and glitter in the light.

Mac and Jake glanced at each other for a long moment before bursting into laughter.

“Oh, Bill.” Mac slapped him on the shoulder in amusement. “You had us there for a moment... magic beans in exchange for a cow...” He shook his head. “But I think you’ve got your holidays mixed up there. It’s Halloween, not April Fools’.”

“I ain’t joking.” His eyes were filled with conviction and a gravity completely at odds with the prank he was obviously trying to pull.

“Sure... sure.” Jake snorted. “And I’m sure that, if we look around, we’ll find a kid called Jack with a sack full of gold he’s stolen from a giant.”

“I told you, I ain’t joking, and I can prove it.” The farmer scowled.

“By all means.” Jake lifted his hand and indicated for Bill to lead the way to this so-called proof.

Bill threw them both a disgruntled look and stalked around the side of the barn to the field behind. Mac and Jake glanced at each other again, chuckling as they followed him around the building.

But their laughter soon died as they rounded the corner of the barn and stopped dead.

Jake opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He turned to Mac, who blinked for several long minutes.

“Is that a—” Mac began.

“—giant beanstalk?” Jake finished in disbelief.

There in front of them, as large as life, were several dark green vines, each as thick as a tree trunk. They wound round and around each other, forming a spiral that circled up to the sky and disappeared into fluffy, thick white clouds.

“Jesus,” Jake muttered as he continued to stare up into the sky.

“I don’t think this was his doing,” Mac replied.

“It just showed up an hour or so ago.” Bill glowered at the plant as if personally affronted.

“Wait a minute.” Jake shielded his eyes and squinted up at the giant vine. “Did you see something... move up there?”

“You’re right,” Mac murmured. “Is that... What is that?”

They watched as a small, dark blur carrying a sack that looked to be bursting at the seams shimmied down the beanstalk.

As the blur got closer to the ground, Jake realized it was a?—

“It’s a kid!” Mac exclaimed sharply.

A young boy of perhaps thirteen scrambled down before them. As his feet touched the ground, Jake caught him by the collar before he could bolt and swung him around.

“Let me go!” The kid yanked back hard, struggling to free himself.

The sack fell and its contents spilled out with a merry tinkle and?—

A honk?

Jake looked down at the large golden coins, that almost looked like doubloons, scattered across the ground. In the middle of the coins was a harp strumming a soothing song. There was also... a goose?

Jake blinked as the rather large bird squatted and, with a loud squeal, laid a solid gold egg.

“What the hell?” Mac muttered.

“Hey, kid.” Jake’s eyes narrowed suspiciously as he turned his attention back to the boy. “What’s the rush?”

His eyes wide as saucers, the kid glanced up into the sky.

“Th-th-that,” he stammered, and he pointed a finger upward.

They all looked up to see a gigantic pair of hairy feet appear at the top of the beanstalk, just below the cloud cover.

“What in the merry hell?” Mac gasped.

Jake turned back to the boy, whose shirt was still gripped tightly in his fist. “What did you do?” he demanded.

The boy shrugged and sent him an apologetic grin before disappearing in a puff of green glitter.

“The fuck?” Jake whispered as he shook the glitter from his hand.

“FE FI FO FUM,” a huge voice bellowed from high above them.

“You’ve got to be shitting me.” Mac blinked. “Is that an actual giant?”

“Fuck!” Jake swore again as he saw a pair of thick legs join the enormous hairy feet.

“Quick, think!” Mac grabbed Jake’s arm. “Jack and the Beanstalk, how did Jack defeat the giant?”

“Uh...” Jake blinked wildly as he tried to remember.

“Axe,” Bill muttered as he watched a massive torso appear from the clouds.

“What?” They both turned to the dairy farmer.

“An axe,” he replied as an enormous pair of arms followed. “Jack called to his mother to bring the axe, and he chopped the beanstalk down. The giant fell to his death.”

Mac withdrew his weapon from his holster and backed up slightly so he could see better, training his gun on the giant. Jack’s eyes swept over Mac’s shoulder to the barn behind him.

“Please tell me you have an axe in there?”

“Nope,” Bill murmured as he continued to watch the slow descent of the impossibly large man above them. “Got a chainsaw though.”

“That’ll do.” Jake flung the coffee he was somehow still holding and bolted for the

barn.

“GOT IT!”

Clutching the chainsaw, Jake ran out of the barn and back toward the base of the beanstalk. After firing it up, he set to work hacking through the thick trunk.

“Hey!” Bill frowned, shouting above the noise of the chainsaw. “Cutting there will?—”

Jake nodded at Bill but continued cutting. A few moments later, there was a loud lowing as dozens of cows scampered out of the wide-open doors, led by Bill.

Jesus, Jake thought to himself as he glanced up quickly. It was like watching Wreck-it-Ralph shimmy down a drainpipe. The huge guy was surprisingly agile.

“JAKE!” Mac shouted and held his gun on the giant as he continued his climb. “Hurry up!”

“DDDDDDDDDOOOOOO YYYYYOOOUU WWWANNNT TOOOO DOOO THHHHHIISSSS????” Jake replied as the chainsaw sent vibrations up his arms and across his body.

Mac stepped back a little further and began firing, but the bullets did nothing but bounce off the guy and cause him to roar in anger.

“DDDDDDON’T MMMMMAKKKE HHHHIIM MMMADDD...” Jake shouted.

There was a loud crack, followed by the alarming sound of something splintering. Suddenly, the beanstalk began to tilt and sway.

Jake dropped the chainsaw.

“RUN!” he shouted to Mac.

They leapt out of the way, diving to the ground. There was a loud shout from the giant as the beanstalk crashed down and filled the air with dust and debris.

“Jake?” Mac coughed. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Jake groaned as he pushed himself up.

The dust slowly cleared and they were treated to the sight of the mooing cows milling around the devastation.

“BILL!” Mac called out. “Bill, are you okay?”

“Yeah,” came a gravelly voice through the dusty air, “but my barn isn’t, thanks to you jackasses.”

Jake looked up and saw that the roof of the barn had completely caved in. The walls on either side had splintered and collapsed, and a pair of spread-eagled legs and two thick arms stuck out of either side.

“Ouch.” Jake winced.

“Why the hell didn’t you cut the other side so it came down in the field?” Bill grumbled.

“Sorry.” Jake frowned. “Thought you were cheering me on. First time cutting down a colossal magical beanstalk with a giant attached to it. Didn’t exactly have time to think it through.”

Jake stood slowly, dusting the straw and chunks of beanstalk from his uniform. He pushed the cows out of the way and headed toward Mac, who stood next to Bill and stared at one arm sticking out of the side of the demolished barn.

“Is it dead?” Jake asked cautiously.

A loud snore filled the air.

“Nope.” Mac sighed. “Just knocked out.”

Jake scowled. “Damn it. I thought the story said it was supposed to kill him?”

Mac shrugged. “I don’t think this is an exact science, Jake.”

“You know what we need, don’t you?”

“Olivia,” they said in unison.

Mac pulled his phone from his pocket and lifted it up. “No signal.”

“Typical.” Jake shook his head. “We’re going to have to head back into town to find her.” Jake glanced down at his watch. “Theo said they were going trick-or-treating with the twins since it’s their first Halloween, so she could be anywhere.”

“Come on.” Mac started around the wreck of the barn toward where they’d parked the police cruiser. “We’ll just...” He stopped and stared at the flattened pancake that had once been their car but now had a gigantic fist pressing into its roof.

“Ah.” Mac frowned. “Guess not.”

“Dammit,” Jake replied. “We don’t have time to walk back. We don’t know how long

Gigantor here is gonna be out cold.”

“I can help with that.” Bill fished in his pocket and tossed them a set of keys. “My truck’s parked by the shed on the other side of the trees there. You can take it.”

“Thanks, Bill.” Mac fisted the keys. “We’ll be back as soon as possible.”

“Just don’t break the truck,” he told them as he glanced back at the barn.

Nodding, they headed over to where Bill had gestured and climbed the fence, but as soon as they crossed the tree line, they knew something was... off.

The inside of the wood was much darker than it should have been. They looked behind them and could no longer see the field or the wreckage of the barn.

The trees felt malevolent somehow, twisted and gnarled. Eyes glowed in the dark and the squawks and shrieks of predatory birds echoed through the branches.

“Something tells me we’re not in Kansas anymore,” Jake remarked dryly.

“Be grateful we weren’t in Kansas to start with,” Mac muttered, “or something tells me we might have had to dodge a tornado and a house falling on our heads.” Max pulled his flashlight from his belt, flicked it on, and looked around.

“What the hell is going on?” Jake shook his head. “This is weird, even by Mercy standards.”

“You’re telling me,” Mac muttered. The flashlight suddenly highlighted a winding path at their feet that seemed to lead through the threatening woods. Mac shrugged. “I guess we follow the path.”

They began walking, and after a few moments, a tantalizing smell wafted in their direction.

“What’s that?” Jake sniffed loudly as his stomach growled.

They hurried forward and the darkness receded, revealing a sweet little cottage in the middle of the path.

“Is that... a gingerbread house?” Mac asked in disbelief.

The air was filled with the mouth-watering scents of cinnamon, sugar, and warm cookie dough. The cottage in front of them had crumbly gingerbread walls and candy cane corner posts. The window frames dripped with smooth, sweet icing, the roof was thatched with thick sugar-spun clouds of cotton candy, and the pathway leading to the licorice door was paved with scattered candies.

Jake’s stomach growled once again as he caught sight of a steaming?—

“Pie ,” Jake breathed out reverently, his feet carrying him closer to the open window.

“Jake!” Mac hissed in warning.

But Jake wasn’t listening. He’d reached the window and leaned down to inhale the freshly baked pies.

“Hey, Mac,” Jake called to his friend as he turned. Then there was a loud clang, a sharp pain to the back of his head, and darkness.

4

Roni stepped into the warm pub and removed her jacket, draping it comfortably over one arm. Heading toward the bar, she smiled at Jackson—the pub’s gorgeous Irish landlord currently dressed as a zombie—who waved in greeting.

“Hey, Roni!”

“Jackson,” she replied, then nodded to Olivia and Theo who were standing beside the bar. “Hey.” She glanced down at their costumes.

Theo had on jeans and sneakers with a red hoodie. Strapped to his front was Logan in his baby carrier. The carrier had bicycle handlebars sticking out on either side and was made to look like a basket, and Logan was wrapped up in a white sheet like E.T.

Olivia wore a blue and white gingham dress, her midnight hair drawn back in pigtails. Glittery ruby shoes were on her feet and, in her arms, nestled happily with her sippy cup, was Theia, dressed up as Toto in a little furry onesie.

“You guys look adorable.”

“No costume?” Olivia sipped her wine and glanced down at Roni’s tidy pencil skirt and heels.

“I haven’t had time.” She shook her head. “I’ve only just left the museum. Work’s been insane today, and I don’t mean just busy. I mean, Halloween’s brought out all the crazies. I had a woman in, really pretty, said her name was Belle and kept

insisting I tell her where the library was. Then some weird guy by the name of Dick, who was apparently off to London to, and I quote”—she raised her fingers and curled them —““seek his fortune because the streets are paved with gold’. Then we had an outbreak of mice who kept milling around and bumping into things, like they couldn’t see.”

“Sounds like a handful,” Olivia replied thoughtfully.

“You’re telling me.” Roni shook her head. “Anyway, I thought I’d just stick my head in and see if Jake was here before I head home to change.”

“I haven’t seen him all day.” Olivia turned to her husband. “Theo?”

“I spoke to him earlier today.” He set his beer down on the counter. “He and Mac were heading out on a call, but I haven’t heard anything since.”

“That’s weird.” Roni frowned. “He’s not answering his cell, and that’s not like him.”

Olivia thought for a moment. “Speaking of weird, something strange happened earlier at the pumpkin patch.”

“Oh?” Roni replied curiously.

“There was an enormous pumpkin. Literally, Cinderella’s-carriage-size pumpkin.”

“Wow.” Roni blinked. “I didn’t think Mr. Lambert had managed to grow anything that big. I heard he lost out to Mr. Sykes at the county fair for biggest pumpkin, so I’d hate to imagine how big Mr. Sykes’ pumpkin was.”

“Except that it didn’t start out that big.”

“Huh?”

“It grew,” Theo chimed in. “Started off about the same size as the others, but it grew right before our eyes, like an inflating balloon. Then it exploded glitter and pumpkin guts everywhere.”

“And that’s when it got really weird,” Olivia murmured.

“Weirder than a giant exploding pumpkin the size of Cinderella’s carriage?”

Theo and Olivia both nodded.

“A trail of footprints appeared,” Olivia continued. “We followed them to the barn and found a bizarre naked little man.”

“Sorry?” Roni repeated. “Naked?”

“He was um... short, like only a few feet tall, but really plump and hairy, and ... naked...with pointy ears.”

“What did you do?” Roni asked in confusion.

“Nothing.” Theo shook his head. “He dove at the wall and just”—he mimed a small poof with his hands—“disappeared.”

“Disappeared?” Roni repeated. Oliviashrugged. “Any idea who he was? Or should I say, what he was?”

“None.” Olivia frowned. “I mean, I did have a quick glance through the library after we got home and cleaned up. Closest thing I could find was a hobgoblin, but they’re just fairy tales... myths.”

“What? Like Hades is a myth?”

“Did I hear my name?” a smooth, cultured voice said behind them.

Olivia turned to find the handsome and enigmatic God of the Underworld leaning against the bar, wearing, as usual, one of his impeccable Savile Row suits, his shiny black hair glowing blue in the muted light.

Her eyes widened in surprise. It wasn't like Hades to be this brazen; the pub was packed with people.

“Hades?” she said dryly. “What are you doing here?”

“It's nice to see you too, Olivia.” The corner of his mouth curved. “Theo.” He nodded in greeting. “Ms. Mason.”

“Hello, Hades,” Theo replied easily. “Would you like a drink?”

“Thank you.” Hades lifted a brow in Olivia's direction. “At least your husband has some manners. You're turning out to be as cantankerous as I am, Olivia.”

“That's probably why we get along so well,” she muttered.

“Hades.” Jackson sauntered over easily and slid a glass of fine aged whiskey across the counter. “That's the best I have, don't serve it to just anyone.” He winked.

Hades lifted the glass and took a slow sip, then nodded in approval. “I like the Irishman,” he declared.

“Hades,” Olivia replied, “I'm really not trying to be rude, but what are you doing here? It's one thing to drop by unannounced at the house, but we're in public. This

place is packed with regular people who know nothing about you and the Underworld.”

“Oh, please,” he snorted as he lifted the glass to his lips and drank deeply. “It’s Samhain. Anything out of the ordinary they’ll just assume is a costume. They wouldn’t know what’s real if it jumped up and bit them on the nose.”

He was right, of course. Olivia watched a gray ghost materialize through the wall.

He took one look at the pub filled with customers in ridiculous costumes, then shook his head in disgust and disappeared back through the wall.

Ever since Jackson’s pub had become the most haunted pub in the whole of the United States—and, well, probably the world, since there was no longer a veil between life and death within its boundaries—the place had been crawling with spirits.

Although a select few knew the absolute truth and some of the more hardcore residents of Mercy had accepted the unprecedented level of paranormal activity, the rest were convinced it was all an elaborate hoax. They seemed certain that Jackson was putting on some kind of fake light show with hidden projectors, but for the life of them they couldn’t explain how he was doing it.

Jackson thought it was hilarious.

“So, I guess you have a reason for being topside.” Olivia lifted her glass and sipped her wine.

“I just thought I’d pay a visit.” Hades clicked his fingers and a rather ornate rattle made up of a silver handle wrapped around a delicate crystal ball appeared between his fingers.

He presented it with a flourish to Theia, who smiled as she abandoned her sippy cup and reached out with chubby fingers. She took the rattle carefully and stared at it. Instead of shaking it to produce a sound, she held it up like a mirror, and the transparent crystal ball filled with a swirling dove-gray mist. For a moment, Olivia thought she saw strange images flickering in the smoke.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Olivia frowned. “Glass and babies don’t mix.”

“Don’t worry, Olivia,” Hades replied absently, a little distracted as he observed the small child with the rattle. “It won’t break, and she knows what to do with it.”

“What do you mean?”

Hades waved away her concern and straightened. “The truth is, something about Mercy feels... off, more so than usual.” He glanced around the packed pub and his eyes fell on two women seated at the bar toward the end of the bar.

He stepped closer, his eyes narrowing.

They were both blonde and incredibly beautiful, but one had her head planted on the counter as she snored loudly, her arms folded under her face. One of the fingers on her left hand was bandaged tightly and was marred with a small bloodstain at the tip.

The other woman had her hand wrapped firmly around her glass as she drained it thoroughly then gave out a loud hiccup. There were several empty wine bottles lined up in front of her. She was murmuring to herself, and in her other hand, she held on tightly to what looked like a glass shoe.

They all inched closer to hear what she was saying.

“You’re just no fun anymore.” She looked down at her companion. “Ever since you

pricked your stupid finger on that spinning wheel.”

She nudged her semi-conscious friend sharply, causing her to sit up abruptly and blink.

“Sorry.” She yawned and wiped the drool from the corner of her mouth. “Must’ve dozed off. What were you saying?”

“I was saying,” the glass slipper toting drunk slurred, waving said shoe about for emphasis, “that it’s just not fair. They’re so mean to me. I mean... Why me? Why do I have to do everything? Why can’t we just get a maid service like normal people? I don’t even like cleaning.”

“You should just tell them no.” Her friend yawned again sleepily. “I mean, your stepmother’s a total bitc—” Her head once again dropped onto her arms.

“This was not how I saw my life.” The other woman grabbed the wine bottle and refilled her glass, not noticing that her friend was snoring face-first against the bartop. “I had plans, big plans, but no one asked me what I wanted. They were just like, fix this, mend that, clean this, cook that. What a bunch of fuc?—”

“Bitch.” Her friend sat bolt upright, blinking her eyes rapidly to stay awake. “So are your stepsisters. Why do you take their crap? I mean you could just leav—” Her head dropped with a thud again and she was back to snoring, not very daintily.

“I could just leave,” the other slurred as if the thought had only just occurred to her. She lifted her glass and downed it without finesse.

“Pardon me,” Hades interrupted. “I couldn’t help but overhear your predicament. Your name wouldn’t happen to be Cinderella, by any chance?”

“Did he just say Cinderella?” Roni whispered to Olivia.

“Shush,” she hushed her friend, watching the scene unravel in front of them in fascination.

“How did you know?” The woman’s appreciative glance slid up and down Hades’ body before landing on his handsome face. “Are you here to rescue me? Are you my prince?”

“Far from it.” He snorted. “How did you get here?” he asked in curiosity. “To the mortal world?”

“The what?” She belched loudly and screwed up her face in confusion. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. I was lying on the floor in front of the fire in the kitchen, just minding my own business and trying to keep warm, and then the next thing I know, I’m here.” She waved the hand holding her shoe around the pub.

“And your friend?”

“Aurora,” she told him. “I don’t know, she sleeps a lot. It’s hard to have a conversation with her.”

“Sleeping Beauty?”

“If you like that sort of thing.” She scoffed and slid off the stool and pressed up against Hades, swaying drunkenly until he was forced to wrap his arms around her to keep her from ending up in a heap on the floor. “Don’t you think I’m prettier than her?” She attempted a coy flutter of her eyelashes, but it just made her look like an intoxicated barn owl.

“Um.” Hades tried to extricate himself from her. “I’m sure you’re very attractive.”

“Don’t you want to run away with me?” She smiled up at him. “We could live in your castle.”

“I don’t have a castle.” He pushed her back slightly, but she was like an octopus.

“We could live anywhere you want,” she crooned and rubbed up against him.

“I live in a demonic hell pit thousands of miles below the earth.” He removed her hands as they slipped under his jacket. “It would never work out.”

“I don’t mind a little heat.” Her hands snaked down and squeezed his ass.

“Madam! Do you mind!” he replied indignantly. He pushed her back down onto her bar stool.

“I’d stay where you are, sweetheart.” Olivia stopped Cinderella as she tried to reach for him again. “Trust me, you don’t want to cross his wife. Persephone is not known for her patience.”

“Arghhhhhh. Why are all the good ones married?” she howled, then folded her arms on the counter, burying her face and wailing loudly enough for several people to stop and stare.

Hades flushed as he smoothed his suit.

“What’s going on, Hades?” Olivia asked, both concerned and amused at his obvious embarrassment. “She’s not actually the real Cinderella, is she?”

“I’m afraid she might be,” Hades mused. “I’m not sure what’s going on, but there’s old magic at work here. The whole town reeks of it.”

“Here.” Theo reached for his daughter. “I’ll take Theia and Logan upstairs. Shelley should be settling Miller down about now, and she did say earlier that she didn’t mind watching them for us this evening. I have a feeling we’re going to end up with a bit of a mess on our hands.”

“You might be right.” Olivia sighed and kissed her son before handing his sister over. “Would one night off from supernatural crises really be too much to ask?”

Theo gave a sympathetic smile, then leaned in and dropped a kiss on her lips. “I won’t be long.”

“Hey, honey.” A squeaky young-sounding voice from behind Roni and Olivia had them turning around, but they couldn’t see anything. “Down here,” the voice added.

Standing in front of them was a small wooden puppet with hinged joints. He was a couple feet tall and wearing a feathered cap and a trench coat. “You want me to tell you I love you and want a commitment?” He grinned. “My nose isn’t the only thing that grows when I lie.” Then the puppet whipped his coat open and flashed them both.

Olivia’s mouth fell open in shock and Roni’s eyes widened in complete disbelief.

“Hey!” the puppet squeaked as he found himself scooped off the ground and held, legs dangling, by the scruff of his neck.

Hades glared at him dangerously as his hair burst into blue flames.

“Whoa!” The puppet held up his hands. “Ease up, big guy! Some of us are flammable.”

They all turned their gazes as the main door to the pub burst open with a loud crash.

A huge man stood in the threshold. He wore baggy harem pants and curved silken shoes. A sash of crimson was tied at his waist beneath an elaborately embroidered waistcoat that was open to expose bare, golden skin and a very hairy chest. His hair was concealed beneath a rich silken turban and his black beard and mustache covered most of his face. In one hand he held a huge, wickedly curved scimitar and when he grinned, it was to reveal teeth punctuated with gold.

“I am Ali Baba!” he proclaimed. “My men and I have come for your women and your gold! HA HA HA!”

The patrons of the pub roared with laughter and broke out into a loud round of applause.

“I don’t think they’re taking this very seriously,” Hades murmured, still clutching the puppet in his fist.

As Ali Baba threw his head back and laughed maniacally, the sound of smashing glass filled the air. Dozens of thickly muscled men dressed and armed just like Ali Baba came crashing through the pub windows, and several more swarmed through the door.

“Damn it,” Jackson swore throwing a glance at Hades. “There go my insurance premiums again.”

“Don’t look at me,” Hades replied mildly. “They’re not mine.”

Theo appeared at Olivia’s side, slightly wide-eyed as he surveyed the chaos. “I heard the commotion and ran down. What’s going on?”

“Ali Baba decided to crash the party,” Roni told him.

“Who are the others?” he asked in confusion.

“Those would be his forty thieves.” Olivia sighed.

“Forty thieves?” Theo repeated slowly.

“Forty thieves,” Roni confirmed with a sigh that matched Olivia’s. “Where the hell’s Jake when you need him?”

5

Jake blinked, and his head throbbed as the room swam into focus. The tantalizing scent of warm pie filled his nostrils and memories of the giant and the woods flooded his mind, along with a renewed sense of urgency. He tried to move but he looked down and realized he was bound tightly to a small wooden chair.

But that wasn't the most disturbing part.

He was no longer wearing his uniform, but instead was clad in Lederhosen. Jake stared down in horrified disbelief at the white peasant shirt, the heavily embroidered leather knee-length shorts with braces, and the white stockings that folded over neatly just under his knees and ended in heavy black shoes.

"What the...?" he hissed quietly and then stilled as he felt someone shift behind him. "Mac?"

"Yeah, I'm here," rumbled his partner.

"Uh, are you tied to a chair?"

"That would be an affirmative," Mac replied, and Jake felt his chair wobble as Mac obviously struggled against his ropes. "I think our chairs are tied back to back."

"You still wearing your uniform?" Jake asked.

Mac stilled and then went quiet. "No," he finally said. "I look like I passed out at

Oktoberfest?”

“You too?” Jake scowled. “What the hell is going on? And what’s with the Bavarian boy shorts?”

“Ah, you’re awake!” a new voice called out, accompanied by the sound of a door opening and closing.

Jake craned his neck to see who was speaking and caught sight of an old lady hobbling into the room. She wore a plain black smock dress and had a dirty apron tied around her thin waist. Hands that were claw-like and gnarled with age curled tightly around the handles of a wicker basket, and her hair was wild and gray. She smiled widely at them, revealing large gaps around misshapen teeth .

“Lady, I don’t know who the hell you are, but I suggest you untie us. You’re messing with the law here.”

The woman just cackled with amusement and reached for a huge copper pot.

“Tried that,” Mac mused.

Jake quickly scanned his surroundings. They were inside the cottage they’d stumbled across in the woods, there was no doubt about it. He could see the crisscrossing diamond shapes across the glass windows and the rows of freshly baked pies laid out with military-like precision along the sill.

They seemed to be in a kitchen, with a hard flagstone floor and a rough-hewn wooden table in the center that looked less like a table and more like a work bench. It was covered with pots, pans, chopping boards, bunches of herbs, and stacks of raw vegetables and fruits.

A fire burned brightly in a hearth along one wall, a cast-iron kettle hanging from a hook directly above the snapping flames. Beside it, ominously, was a huge iron oven door that was more like something that would be found in a crematorium and was worryingly just big enough to comfortably fit two police officers.

“That can’t be good,” he muttered.

“What was that?” The old woman turned and stared at him with beady eyes, a large carving knife in her hand.

“Just wondering where you’re planning on sticking that knife,” Jake murmured as his gaze landed on both his and Mac’s cell phones, plus the keys to Bill’s truck, all tucked in between a stack of turnips and a head of cabbage.

“Oh, Gretel, mein Liebchen.” She patted his cheek with her papery palm. “Don’t worry. It won’t hurt... much.”

She hobbled back to the table and began to chop the carrots roughly and toss them in a copper pot. Jake felt Mac shaking behind him and knew he was laughing.

“What?” he hissed.

Mac snorted. “She thinks you’re a girl.”

“Shut up,” he replied sourly. “You’re just jealous because I’m the pretty one.”

“Now, now, Hansel,” the old woman tutted at Mac. “No making trouble.”

Setting the knife down on the edge of the table, she lifted the huge pot and hung it on an empty metal hook suspended from a metal arm that swung out from the hearth. Picking up a poker, she pushed the pot over the flames beneath the kettle and left it to

boil.

“There.” She grabbed a large knot of dough from a nearby bowl and slapped it down on the table in a puff of flour, then began to knead and roll it out into pastry. “You, my little Hansel, will make an excellent pie. You’re a little more, how you say?” She narrowed her eyes thoughtfully. “Pudgy,” she decided.

“Who you calling pudgy?” Mac growled.

“You, my sweet little Gretel, you’re more wiry. You’ll make an excellent spit roast.”

She sucked her teeth loudly, smacking her lips as if she could already taste the glorious flavor of human meat.

Jake glared at her. “Hate to burst your bubble there, Sweeney Todd, but no one’s spit roasting anyone.”

“Oh, would you look at that.” She scanned the table. “I forgot the rosemary. I’ll be right back.” She picked up a small basket and headed toward the door. “No fighting while I’m gone,” she told them in a singsong voice as the door closed behind her.

“What do you say we get the hell out of here?” Mac said quickly.

“I say you had me at what.” Jake wriggled and yanked on the ropes holding him to the chair. His gaze slid over to the knife at the edge of the table.

“Mac, we need to shuffle to the right. She left the knife out; I think I might be able to reach it.”

“Okay,” Mac agreed. “On three.”

“Okay,” Jake replied. “Ready? One... two... three...”

They hopped and shuffled across the stone floor toward the table. Stretching to the side, Jake used his chin, then the side of his head, to scoot the knife to the very edge. With his hand beneath, he nudged the knife off the table, but it bounced off his fingers and landed on the floor with a clatter.

Jake stared down at it for a second. “Okay, plan B,” he declared. “What can you see on your side?”

“There’s a metal hook on the wall about waist height. These chairs are pretty small, like they were designed for kids, and they’re only wood. If we shuffle over to the wall and brace them over the metal hook, then put stress on the weak joints, they might snap.”

“Okay, shuffle and brace, got it...” Jake replied. “Three again.”

“Ready?” Mac asked. “One... two... three.”

Between the two of them, they managed to shuffle across the room like a Lederhosen- attired crab and hook the side of one of the chairs over the protruding metal.

“Now brace yourself,” Mac told Jake as they pulled hard against the rope.

Jake’s chair began to creak and the rope burned against their exposed forearms and thighs with the friction. Where they ended up had put Jake in front of one of the large windows, and as he glanced out, he saw the old woman place a bunch of herbs into her basket and straighten up.

“Hurry, Mac,” he panted as he pulled harder. “She’s coming back!”

“Almost there.” Mac gasped just as the chair splintered and gave way, dropping to the floor in pieces and loosening the ropes binding them. He’d just managed to disentangle himself from the rope as the door opened and launched himself at the old witch. She dropped her basket of herbs to the floor with a startled cry. Mac plowed into her, pushing her away from Jake so he could free himself from the tangle of ropes.

The witch shrieked in fury as they struggled across the room until she finally picked Mac up and threw him into the cottage door. The heavy oak cracked straight down the center, and Mac slumped to the cold, hard floor.

Jake finally managed to free himself from the tangle of knotted rope and splintered wood and scrambled to his feet.

“Look, lady.” He held his hands up as she advanced on him slowly. “I really don’t want to hurt you. I was taught not to hit girls, plus you’re old, like really old. Wouldn’t you rather just sit down with a mug of cocoa and watch Jeopardy ?”

Her wrinkled mouth broke into a slow, toothy grin before she caught him with an uppercut that literally lifted his feet off the floor and sent him flying several feet across the kitchen and into a rack of cooking pots. There was a loud crash of pots and pans as they rained down on Jake’s body.

Jake watched, slightly dazed, as the witch spun around in time for Mac to crack her across the chin with a heavy rolling pin. She stumbled back and, seeing an opportunity, Jake scrambled to his feet and opened the furnace door. With a loud battle cry, Mac powered her back into the flames, and together they slammed the door shut and latched it.

They stood breathing heavily as the old woman screamed and beat her fists against the reinforced glass window. Suddenly, she exploded, covering the soot-framed

window with purple glitter.

“You okay?” Mac panted.

“She had a helluva right hook.” Jake tested his jaw gingerly to make sure it wasn’t broken, although it definitely felt like a bruise was already beginning to bloom along his jawline.

“Let’s get the hell out of here.” Mac grabbed the truck keys and both phones, tossing Jake’s to him, and headed for the damaged front door.

A few moments later, Jake sauntered over to where Mac was scanning the forest, looking for a way out. He glanced over to Jake as he joined him and stared at him as he shook his head.

“What?” Jake mumbled around a mouthful of pie. “You want me to get another fork?”

“Never mind.” Mac sighed heavily. “Let’s go.”

Jake reached out and snapped a chunk of gingerbread from the wall of the house and dipped it into the middle of the pie he held. Taking a bite and humming happily, he followed Mac through the woods.

Hades dropped the puppet to the ground and turned to face the thieves as they swarmed into the pub. Suddenly, there was what can only be described as a huge swell of water gushing past the broken windows of the pub, and on it crested a huge wooden sailing ship.

“Now there’s something you don’t see every day,” Olivia muttered.

Moments later, the door burst open again, and a man in clothing similar to Ali Baba’s and brandishing a long, curved sword stood in the threshold, surrounded by salty-looking sailors.

“SINBAD!” Ali Baba roared, then lunged forward.

Tables overturned and customers shrieked and screamed as thieves and sailors smashed into chairs and walls amid the clash of steel. Olivia ducked as a beer bottle hurtled past her head and crashed against the wall behind the bar.

“What do we do?” Roni yelped as one of the thieves rushed her. Snatching a nearby drinks tray, she cracked him sharply on the head.

“I haven’t a clue.” Olivia yanked Roni out of the way, watching as the thief Roni had just knocked out crumpled to the floor. “Hades?”

“Don’t look at me.” He picked up his glass and leaned elegantly against the bar, then took a slow sip and surveyed the carnage. “I’m not supposed to interfere with the

mortal realms, remember? But might I suggest you find the root cause?”

“You interfere plenty when it suits you,” Olivia snapped as she watched Theo wrestle one of Sinbad’s sailors.

“The perks of being a god.” He smiled as he drank.

“Watch out!” Olivia dragged the semi-conscious Sleeping Beauty from her bar stool and hauled her out of the way right when a thief and sailor banged into the bar and rolled over the top of it in a mad tangle of limbs while trying to punch each other viciously.

Olivia looked over and saw a familiar face. “Oh, hey, Dom.” She smiled at the small man sitting at the end of the bar as she propped the sleeping woman against the wall.

“Olivia.” He grinned with a perverse delight at the fairy-tale brawl. “Always a pleasure to be back in Mercy.”

Dominik Savage was a notoriously hard-to-please travel blogger who’d visited Mercy the previous winter to debunk its claims of witchcraft and prove it was nothing but a poor man’s Salem.

However, his visit had coincided with the veil between life and death disappearing inside the pub and the subsequent spirit infestation. Needless to say, he’d had somewhat of a baptism of fire and was now not only a full-on believer but also a more or less permanent fixture in the town since he’d become best friends with Jackson.

“Friend of yours?” Dom’s brow rose as he peered down at the unconscious woman propped beside his bar stool.

“Fairy-tale creature,” Olivia replied.

“Never a dull moment.” He smirked.

“You’re telling me,” Olivia murmured, noticing the sailor behind the bar rise to his feet. Having obviously bested his opponent, his menacing gaze locked onto the four-foot-tall man sitting comfortably on a bar stool and sipping a bourbon.

“You!” he hissed, pointing his wickedly curved blade at Dom. “What are you? An evil imp?”

Dom stared at him flatly and flipped him the finger. Before the sailor could lunge at him, the man’s eyes rolled back in his head. For a second, Olivia could’ve sworn the guy had little Tweety-Pies flapping around his head before he dropped to the floor.

Jackson stepped over the unconscious sailor, a baseball bat propped comfortably on one shoulder and a bottle of Jim Beam in his hand.

“Olivia?” He lifted the bottle.

“No thanks, Jackson.”

“Refill, Dom?”

“Don’t mind if I do.” Dom held out his glass. “I like what you’ve done with the place.”

“Thanks.” Jackson lifted a bowl of snacks off the bar as one of the thieves was sent skidding along it to crash into the wall at the other end. “The seats have been re-upholstered and we’ve added some new art to the walls.” Jackson poured himself a drink.

“Theo’s work?” Dom remarked politely and ducked as another bottle smashed against the wall.

“Aye.” Jackson clinked his glass against Dom’s and they both drank deeply.

“Olivia!” Theo tossed one of the sailors out the window and into the street, then called out to his wife.

“Yeah, I’m here.” She stepped over a couple of unconscious bodies on the floor, heading toward him, and was met halfway by Roni and Hades.

“Okay, Hades.” She took the drink from his hand and slammed it on a nearby table. “How do we stop this?”

“I have no idea.” He shrugged. “But you can’t put them back until you know where they came from. Retrace your steps back throughout the day. There must have been a point when you first noticed something wasn’t right.”

“Olivia?” Theo drew her attention.

“Yeah?” She turned to find him staring at the ground between the bodies rolling around.

“Look familiar?”

Her gaze focused on where he was pointing. Suddenly she saw it: child-sized, glittery footprints, just like the ones they’d seen in the pumpkin patch.

Olivia and Theo stared at each other.

“The goblin,” they both uttered.

“You have a goblin?” Hades’ brow lifted slightly.

“You think he caused all this?” Olivia asked.

“I couldn’t say.” Hades mused. “They are known for causing mischief and chaos wherever they go, however.”

“So, how do we get rid of him?” Roni asked.

Olivia frowned. “From what I read briefly earlier, I think they can be banished by forcing them to wear clothes.”

“Weird,” Roni replied, “but okay.”

Olivia shook her head. “We need to find him first.”

“That’s simple. We just follow the footprints,” Theo answered. “It’s how we found him the first time.”

Olivia glanced up at the ceiling with worry, thinking about the private apartment above them.

“I don’t know that it’s such a good idea leaving the children here while all this is going on.”

“They’ll be fine,” Hades replied easily. “I’ll make sure no harm comes to them.”

“But you’re not supposed to interfere, remember?” She cocked one brow and he shrugged. “I swear you make the rules up as you go along.” She sighed.

“Get going.” He gave her a nudge toward the door.

“Fine.” She rose up on tiptoes and kissed Hades’ cheek. “Thank you.”

“Go,” he repeated, the corner of his mouth twitching in amusement.

“Alright.” Olivia turned toward the door. “Theo? Roni? Let’s go goblin-hunting.”

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Source Creation Date: July 18, 2025, 12:16 pm

Olivia, Theo, and Roniburst out into the cool night air, skirted around the sailing ship, and headed down the soaking wet sidewalk.

“Where do you think he’s going?” Roni asked.

“I have no idea.” Olivia stopped abruptly in front of an open doorway as a grinning young woman rushed out and skidded to a halt in front of Olivia and the others. She raked her hands through the short, blond tufts of her hair in pleasure and laughed gaily.

“Oh my God!” she exclaimed loudly. “You have NO idea how good this feels.” She scrubbed her hands all over her short pixie cut. “BEST DAY EVER!” she shouted at the top of her lungs. “WOO-HOOO!”

Olivia watched as the woman danced gleefully down the street before turning to look through the door she’d emerged from. It was the local hair salon. Inside, Lily Brody, the owner, stood, bewildered and holding yards and yards of thick, long golden hair. It was wrapped around her arms like yarn and then swept around her legs to the ground where it lay in heaps that almost filled the salon.

Shaking her head and shifting her gaze, Olivia caught Theo peering intently through the window of the clothing store next door. Leaning in to see what had snagged his attention so thoroughly, she saw dozens of tiny little men—elves, each no bigger than a Snickers bar—stitching and hammering away at the pairs of shoes in the window display.

“RUN, RUN, AS FAST AS YOU CAN!” A loud, high-pitched voice pierced the air,

followed by a maniacal laugh. “YOU CAN’T CATCH ME!!!”

Olivia looked up and blinked. “Is that...?”

“Uh-huh.” Roni nodded slowly, her eyes wide and her mouth open. “It’s a ten-foot-high gingerbread man running down the street.”

Olivia spun around at the loud clatter of metal and horses’ hooves to see an army of knights racing down the street at a gallop, their pennons snapping from the tips of their lances in the night air as they hooted and hollered battle cries.

“This is really getting out of hand,” Olivia muttered.

“You’re telling me.”

The two of them glanced up at the indigo sky as several dark shadows wearing pointy hats and cackling loudly shot across the horizon on broomsticks.

“Seriously?” Olivia shouted indignantly. “So clichéd.”

“Come on.” Theo tugged Olivia’s hand. “We need to find that goblin.” Olivia opened her mouth to warn him but wasn’t quick enough. He stepped off the sidewalk and into a gooey beige mess. “Urgh? What the hell is this?”

“Um, I think it’s porridge,” Roni supplied helpfully, and Olivia snorted.

Theo let out a resigned sigh and carried first Olivia and then Roni over the river of porridge running down the street and to the other side. Despite the gallons of hot porridge, those glittery footprints still sparkled atop it.

They bypassed a young woman in a red hooded cloak skipping happily down the sidewalk with a basket swinging in her hands and followed the trail of footprints

around the corner onto the next block.

Suddenly, a truck screeched to a halt next to them. The doors flew open and Jake and Mac climbed out.

“We’ve been looking everywhere for you!” Jake rushed to Roni’s side. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.” Roni nodded.

Olivia glanced down at Jake’s Lederhosen and then across to Mac, who was wearing the same. “Uh, bold choice of costume?”

Before they could answer, she saw Roni’s eyes narrow as she reached up with tentative fingers and touched the darkening bruise at Jake’s jaw. “What happened?” Roni demanded.

“I was punched by an old lady,” he admitted with a sullen pout.

“Huh?”

“We were kidnapped by a witch, who was trying to bake Mac into a pie and spit-roast me over a fire.”

“I don’t even know where to start unpacking that sentence.” Olivia blinked while Roni fussed over her fiancé.

“What the hell’s going on?” Mac glanced down the street at the ensuing chaos.

“Oh, you know,” Olivia replied. “Just business as usual in Mercy. Ali Baba and his forty thieves decided to pillage the pub, then Sinbad and his sailors arrived and it turned into a full-on brawl. We met a narcoleptic Sleeping Beauty and an alcoholic

Cinderella, and got propositioned by Pinocchio, who, it turns out, is a sex pest.”

“Uh-huh,” Jake said slowly. “Well, we hacked down a hundred-foot-tall beanstalk and knocked out a giant before being kidnapped by a witch who lived in a gingerbread cottage and wanted to eat us.”

“Touché.”

“Looks like we got ourselves some rogue fairy-tale creatures.” Mac scratched his chin thoughtfully. “What’s the plan?”

“The short version is we’re goblin-hunting.” Olivia glanced down at the footprints. “If you’re coming along, try to keep up. We’ll explain on the way.”

The footprints led to Bailey’s convenience store. Even though Mr. Bailey had passed away and the store now belonged to Jake’s brother-in-law, Tommy, they’d kept the name in homage to the dear shopkeeper who’d been so beloved by the town and who’d been killed by a soul-stealing demon, although most of the residents had not been privy to that information.

“So, if you force the goblin to wear clothes, it will banish him?” Jake asked quietly as they approached the doorway. “I can’t even believe that sentence just came out of my mouth.”

“That’s what the lore says,” Olivia replied as she pressed her face up against the window and looked in. All the lights were on and the store was open, but there was no one in sight. One by one, they crept inside. “Spread out,” Olivia mouthed.

They’d only been searching for a few minutes when Olivia heard her name yelled loudly, followed by swearing and the sound of shelving toppling over. She and Roni took one look at each other and ran in the direction of the commotion. They skidded to a halt with Mac behind them to see Theo and Jake rolling around on the floor in a

lake of spilled milk with a fat, naked guy.

Theo had pulled his hoodie off and was trying to wrestle the creature into it, but it wriggled and squirmed and shrieked in his face.

“Ahhhhh, get it off me!” Jake yelled as a pair of hairy naked buttocks squished against his cheek.

“No! No! No!” the little man yelped as he fought and squirmed and kicked at Theo, who kept trying to force him into the hoodie. “Not clothes! Anything but clothes!”

“Alright, stop!” Olivia ordered. The three of them stared up at her, breathing heavily. Theo’s shirt was soaked with milk and droplets of it were dripping from his hair. “No disappearing,” she warned the goblin. “If I have to come looking for you again, trust me. Next time it won’t be clothes. I will send you into the deepest, darkest pit of hell.”

“No disappearing,” he agreed sullenly as Theo and Jake released him, climbed to their feet, and hauled the little man up.

“Who are you?” Olivia demanded.

“Puck.” He eyed Jake and Theo with distrust. “My name is Puck.”

“Puck,” Olivia replied with a frown. “Like in A Midsummer Night’s Dream?”

“Arghhh,” Puck growled in annoyance. “One time! I got drunk one time with a bunch of Elizabethans, and the next thing I know, some tedious hack is writing me into his ridiculously long-winded play, and for the next five hundred years, that’s all anyone thinks of when they hear my name. Do you have any idea how pissed Oberon was with me? The fairy realms are supposed to be a secret. Instead, we get plagiarized by some tedious ball sack who called himself a playwright.”

“Bullshit!” Jake snorted. “You’re the real Puck, from the play?”

“I thought Puck was supposed to be a mischievous sprite?” Roni mused.

“Artistic license,” Puck huffed. “Apparently, I wasn’t pretty enough for Will.”

“You actually knew William Shakespeare?” Roni replied.

Puck shrugged and admitted grudgingly, “I’ll say this for him, he knew how to wear a codpiece. Takes a secure man to pull off tights and a bedazzled jockstrap.”

“We’re getting off the point here,” Olivia interjected. “Why did you let all of these fairy-tale creatures loose?”

“Me?” he spluttered indignantly. “That wasn’t me. Do I look like a complete moron?”

“Well...”

“Shut up, Jake,” Mac warned.

Olivia’s brow furrowed. “If you didn’t let them loose, then how did they get here?”

“Duh...the Gospodar, I imagine.”

“The what?” Olivia replied in confusion.

“The primary copy of all fairy tales,” he rolled his eyes. “Massive old crusty leather book with a huge-ass lock on it.”

“Um, this book.” Roni swallowed uncomfortably. “It wouldn’t have happened to be in the possession of Marta Varga, would it?”

“Marta Varga?” Olivia glanced over at her friend. “The old Croatian lady? Didn’t she pass away last month?”

“I lived with Marta for a long time.” Puck scowled. “She was a nice woman. Fed me, looked after me. The book had been in her family for generations, came over with them from the Old World. After she died, I had to fend for myself, don’t know what happened to the book.”

“Ummm....”

They all slowly turned to stare at Roni, her cheeks flushed as she looked at them sheepishly. “Whoops...” She smiled awkwardly.

“Really?” Jake replied dryly. “I’m wearing Lederhosen, I got punched in the face by an old lady, and I had a goblin’s sweaty ball sack squashed against my cheek, and all you got is... whoops?”

“Sorry.” She winced. “This is all my fault.”

Suddenly, the ground shook violently and the lights flickered. A booming voice echoed from outside. “FEE FI FO FUM.”

“Shit,” Jake swore. “Looks like Andre the Giant’s awake.”

“Roni,” Olivia asked urgently, “where is the book now?”

“In the museum, on my desk in my office.”

“I’ll get it.” Jake backed up toward the store’s front door. “Meet me back outside the pub.”

They all watched as he took off running, then the ground heaved and lurched again,

causing them to stagger.

“We’d better do as he says.” Olivia grabbed Puck’s hairy hand. “You’re sticking with me until we put all these creatures back.”

“You’d better hurry up then.” Puck blinked up at her with large dark eyes.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, if you don’t get them all back in the book by midnight, they stay... permanently .”

Olivia’s eyes grew wide. “What’s the time?” she demanded.

Roni glanced at her watch in panic. “11:45 p.m.”

“Fuck,” Olivia breathed. “RUN!”

They emptied out of the convenience store and headed toward the pub as fast as possible, only just dodging an army of flying monkeys on their way. They skidded to a halt in front of the wooden sailing ship as Jake rounded the corner with an old leatherbound book.

“Is this it?”

Puck nodded. “That’s it.”

“What do we do?” Olivia asked urgently.

“Only the one who opened it can put them back.”

Olivia grabbed the book from Jake and tossed it to Roni. She caught it with both

hands and flipped it open.

“What now?” Roni yelled.

“You have the power, you are in command of the book, you have to order them back in and be firm.”

Olivia glanced at her watch. “11:55 p.m.! Hurry up, Roni!”

Roni set the opened book on the road and stood up. Placing her fingers in her mouth, she let out the loudest, shrillest whistle any of them had ever heard.

Everything screeched to a halt. The witches hovering on their broomsticks watched curiously, the flying monkeys hanging in the sky beside them. Tiny fairies bobbed on the night air, glowing brightly. Peter Pan leaned against a streetlight, clutching onto his wayward shadow. The knights reined in their horses, and even the enormous gingerbread man stood still, watching silently.

“That’s enough!” Roni told them in a no-nonsense tone. “Everyone, back in the book. NOW!”

“I love it when she does the schoolteacher voice.” Jake murmured.

Grudgingly, the fairy-tale creatures sheepishly marched toward the book, looking thoroughly chastised.

“Apologies, milady,” said one knight as his comrades-in-arms dismounted. They all bowed and led their horses back to the book, shrinking as they stepped in.

“Sorry, ma’am.” One of Ali Baba’s thieves handed Roni a broken beer bottle before hopping back into the pages with several of his friends.

“Sorry,” they all murmured as they disappeared.

The three pigs went in next, followed by a fairy godmother and a wolf in a nightdress and sleeping cap. Next came the sailors, dragging their huge ship forward by heavy ropes. With an apology and a final heave-ho, the ship and its men shrank, and they too disappeared.

The porridge then poured back in, bringing along geese, mice, ducklings...

Finally, the book—its once-blank pages now covered with elegant lettering and elaborate illustrations—snapped shut and lay silently on the cold dark street just as the town clock struck midnight.

Olivia picked the book up and clicked the lock back into place.

“Here.” Mac held out a roll of duct tape. “I grabbed this from Bill’s truck, just in case. Just to be on the safe side.”

“Good idea.” Olivia nodded and together they taped the dangerous book tightly shut.

“Hey!”

They all glanced over to find Dom leaning up against the side of the pub. “You all look as if you could use a drink.” He nodded toward the pub. “Jackson’s just cracked open a bottle of the really really good stuff.”

“Sounds good to me.” Mac headed toward the entrance, stepping over the broken glass from the windows.

“So.” Roni’s gaze swept over Jake as he approached. “The Lederhosen, are you...?”

“No, Roni,” he replied firmly, and Olivia snorted loudly.

“But couldn’t you just...”

“No!” He turned her around and marched her toward the pub.

Still clutching the firmly taped book to her chest with one arm, Olivia turned to the naked goblin. “What about you, Puck? Coming for a drink?”

“No thanks.” He patted his milk-stained belly. “After all that excitement, I think I’ll take a little nap.”

“Where will you go?”

“Oh, don’t worry.” He grinned mischievously. “I’ll be around.” He snapped his fingers and disappeared in a poof of glitter.

“That doesn’t exactly fill me with confidence,” Olivia muttered.

Theo’s hand gripped Olivia’s free hand and squeezed gently. “Come on, let’s go check on the kids.”

Smiling tiredly, she leaned her head on his shoulder as they wandered toward the pub.

Dominik took a final drag on his cigarette and stubbed it out on the still damp ground. Taking a long, deep swig from the bottle in his hand and smiling widely, he looked up into the dark sky as it glittered with dozens of tiny pinpricks of light.

“I think I might buy myself a house in Mercy.”