



Nightmares and Numerology (Occult Oddities #3)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: When love burns this hot, even demons fear the flames

I thought getting through my ongoing messy divorce was hard enough.

Then, a magical accident left me sharing my body with Indigo—a witch with a dark past and even darker enemies.

Since then, my life has been anything but ordinary.

I'm currently living in Haven Hollow, running an occult bookshop, dodging my petty ex-husband, and trying desperately not to fall for Angelo, the devastatingly handsome incubus who's become my unlikely protector.

But soon, I find myself caught in a dangerous game of magical cat-and-mouse with a shadowy entity.

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Nightmares and Numerology

Lydia

“I can’t,” I whispered.

My voice escaped in a shuddering breath. I couldn’t seem to get enough air. Angelo was pressed too close, his body caging mine against the wall, trapping me before I could bolt like a startled doe. The hands that manacled mine were long-fingered and inhumanly dexterous.

“Can’t?” he murmured against the skin of my throat. “Or won’t? There’s a difference, dearest Lydia.”

His hands wound around my back, pressing me tightly against him. The scent of his starched suit collar was delicious enough to make my mouth water. I wanted to produce a snappy retort, but no words came. Proximity to the sleek, velvet-voiced incubus I shared a home with generally had that effect on me. It was a miracle I hadn’t thrown myself under him already.

“Can’t,” I managed after an embarrassingly long pause. I felt like I had to force my thoughts together with glue. “I can’t do this.”

I felt his lips curve into a small smile against my throat. “I’m quite sure you’ve got the winning argument. Once you’re through, you never have to look at the undercooked pastry you call an ex-husband ever again, Bean.”

I laughed, though it came out as more of a warbling gasp than true amusement. Angelo's nickname for me had sprung from my borderline addiction to vegan jelly beans. I'd gotten the whole household hooked on them, though it hadn't been difficult in Bluebell's case. The adolescent faerie was as hungry as any human teenager, and sugar was a must for most faeries. They adored the stuff, incorporating enough into their diet to make our local vampire dentist cringe.

But even the cutesy nickname and casual disparagement of my ex couldn't spur my traitorous legs into action. I did not want to go into yet another courtroom and argue over assets with Rodney. He'd been dragging the divorce out for years, if for no other reason than to make me miserable.

Well, to make me miserable and culpable for his many debts. He'd mismanaged our bookstore so badly I'd needed to pare back on pretty much every aspect of my life to keep myself afloat. My new lawyer, a devilishly handsome associate of Angelo's, had wrangled me a good deal. All I had to do was go in, speak with the judge, sign a few papers, and it would all be over. Years of frustration, all to get to this moment. I should have been singing the hallelujah chorus.

Except Rodney had messaged me the night before, smugly informing me that he would be attending with his new girlfriend. Some insanity had prompted me to scour his social media to see what I was up against. It had been a monumental mistake. His new girl, Andrea, was at least a decade younger than I was, with a waist so snatched it looked like she'd fold in half and be unable to stand upright again. I felt stout in comparison. I didn't have mile-long legs or smoldering good looks. I wasn't a former Filipino model turned successful businesswoman. I was just a gypsy who'd blundered into a dangerous situation and somehow, impossibly, managed to bag an incubus.

If I stepped inside that courtroom, I'd look over at her and wonder if one day Angelo would try his sexy demon schtick on someone younger and better looking. Like a former model with boobs that deserved their own spread in a naughty magazine. Her

rack seemed to defy gravity and probability both, somehow fitting her slender frame without looking top-heavy. It had to be some kind of magic keeping them aloft. You couldn't engineer a bra with enough support for Andrea's assets.

"I can't," I repeated with a touch of a whine. I sounded childish, and I knew it. You'd think my spine might have adopted a little more fortitude after all I'd been through recently, but my courage had taken a vacation right alongside my dignity.

"Hmm," Angelo hummed, trailing his fingers up my spine, leaving delicious tingles in his wake. Heat pooled in my belly, and my mouth went dry. It was just a small pulse of power, but it was enough to rouse every nerve ending I had.

A soft sound escaped my throat when he lifted a hand, pressing the pad of his thumb against the pulse straining the vein in my neck. His eyes were a hypnotic shade on a good day. Now, there was a bit of the devil in them. They'd darkened with some primeval hunger, and it took all my concentration to remember why shedding my clothes in public was a bad idea. There were cameras pointed at us, I was sure. The poor security personnel would get an eyeful. Then again, this was a Hollow. It was possible they'd seen worse.

"You can't seduce me in there," I hissed at him.

He lifted an eyebrow. "I can't?"

Angelo raked his eyes down my front, taking in the ensemble I wore. Wanda, the High Witch of our local coven, had enchanted it to attract good luck to the wearer. I was pretty sure the outcome of the trial had more to do with the expensive lawyer Angelo recommended than the garment, but I'd worn it, regardless. The black skirt suit flattered what figure I'd been able to recover in the last few years. I'd never be a taut twenty-something or a gorgeous Filipino model, but I'd managed to drop a few pounds in the last few months.

Pro tip: Running from demons is great cardio.

Before I could open my mouth to speak, the desire intensified, and I had to stifle a lusty moan before it escaped. It was the kind of sound you heard in X-rated films, definitely not appropriate for this venue. Angelo smirked when I gave him a shove.

“Shut it off! This isn’t the time or place!”

“Anytime, anyplace,” he said, his voice caressing the words like a velvet promise. “I have no problem being an exhibitionist, Lydia.”

He rolled my name over his tongue as though savoring it, and the gleam in his eyes told me he liked the flavor.

“I have a problem with you being an exhibitionist!”

He chuckled, a sound far more intriguing than it had any right to be. Everything about him was designed to tantalize: the laugh, the face, the eyes, the smile. He was nothing less than spectacular because he was a demon that fed on sexual energy. He’d been after mine from almost the day we met.

“Liar,” he said quietly. “You’d like it too. I know what you want, Lydia, and it isn’t anything vanilla.”

Heat rushed to my cheeks like a fast-moving wildfire. I knew I must have been red in the face, but I still couldn’t help my reaction to his words. Maybe my irritating mental companion had a point. Maybe I was really that cliché: the oversexed librarian who wanted to be bound and gagged in the stacks while being taken without mercy.

“I don’t think the judge would appreciate me being late,” I responded. “You only have fifteen minutes to make an impression, right?”

His breath brushed over the shell of my ear before he leaned in to whisper, “I can reduce you to a quivering mess in a handful of seconds. Maybe less. My personal best for bringing a woman to climax was fifteen seconds. I’ll make you scream, Lydia. But if you want to do power play in the dark, you have to get that monkey off your back. Wouldn’t you like to play schoolgirl and principal as a single woman?”

Boy, would I. It had been a long time since I’d... ahem... climaxed with a partner. Rodney had never been spectacular in that arena. Once in a blue moon, I could get there, but it was usually never something he worked at. I pitied Andrea her sex life. Maybe I wasn’t the one losing the competition after all. I had Angelo waiting at home, and she didn’t. That made me the winner, didn’t it?

“Principal and schoolgirl?” I asked skeptically. “Please tell me you don’t want me to wear a ridiculous skirt.”

“Only if you want to,” he answered, his lips quirking into a smirk that could evaporate a nun’s underwear at thirty paces.

I fiddled with his tie after a moment’s thought. “I think I prefer secretary and CEO, personally.”

Angelo’s eyes gleamed with challenge. “Me too. I have the keys to Hallowed Homes. It should be empty after midnight. I have a very spacious desk, and my door locks.”

Alone in his office and at his mercy. It had possibilities. Enough to face the model girlfriend? Maybe.

“Take me to dinner first,” I challenged.

“Gladly. Then you return the favor. I say we celebrate your divorce properly.”

My mouth felt dry, but I managed to force the words out, breathy with anticipation I couldn't suppress. I didn't think all of it had to do with his pheromones.

"It's a date."

His dazzling smile made my heart squeeze. The fluttery feeling in my stomach was more than pure lust. I wanted more from Angelo than he might be able to give me. I wanted... a relationship. With a non-monogamous demon who needed sex to survive. It was enough to give a girl a complex.

"Good," he said, genuine warmth in his voice. "Now, march your sexy ass into that courtroom and show that limp-dicked asshole who's boss."

I snapped off a salute, only half-mocking.

"Yes, sir."

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Lydia

“That gutless little weasel,” I hissed. “He did this on purpose!”

Vin chuckled, brushing power over my skin effortlessly. It was an occupational hazard of working alongside an incubus. Vin had only been my lawyer for a few weeks, but they’d been the most productive weeks in court I’d had in years. Rodney delighted in gumming up the works, dragging the proceedings out for as long as possible just to spite me.

I’d never understood that. It wasn’t like divorce was a pleasant experience for him, either. What was it about some men that made them willing to cut off their nose to spite their face? Why was Rodney so determined to keep me in the miserable mire with him? We’d both moved on. There was no point to this.

And yet, Rodney had managed to get one last dig at me without lifting a finger. The jerk hadn’t shown up to court, despite saying he would. He’d gotten me worked into a furious lather and then left me hanging yet again. The judge had already found him in contempt of court, but it didn’t seem nearly enough. I had to return to court again to sort out the small details before the divorce could be finalized. Rodney had done it on purpose, just to prolong the process one more time.

“Take it as a compliment, Ms. Morton,” Vin said. “It means you’re still under his skin.”

“Exactly where I don’t want to be.”

He nodded. "I've been in this business for over a century. Believe me, women are not the pettier sex. Rodney's acting like a child. If he can't get your attention the way he wants to..."

I sighed. "He'll throw a tantrum, so I have to pay attention, anyway. It's so idiotic."

"Agreed," Vin said, his voice dropping an octave as he paused a moment. "I'd... uh, I'd like to speak with you before you leave with my cousin. It shouldn't take long."

That sounded ominous, spoken in the husky timbre most incubi possessed. I still preferred the dulcet sound of Angelo's voice. In fact, it felt like Angelo had ruined me for most other men. Vin had been flirting relentlessly with me and giving my aura small, probing touches for a while, but it barely tingled. I knew it was happening, but it was more of an irritant than a turn-on. It felt oddly like a fly buzzing near my head, and I had no idea how to swat it. Indigo, my annoying witch sidekick, might have been able to tell me how to get his psychic mitts off me, but she'd been MIA for the last forty-eight hours.

After a select number of witches in town became aware of my predicament, they'd been working on solutions. The potion they concocted after a few weeks essentially put Indigo to sleep for days at a time. It didn't solve her problem, but it provided temporary relief for my side of the equation. It meant I'd been able to go on a date with Angelo without Indigo's constant commentary, and that had been glorious. I'd almost thought we'd fall into bed that night, but the timing hadn't been right. There'd been more divorce nonsense, which had soured the mood. And now the bastard was doing it again. He was... oh my God, Rodney was cockblocking me!

Well, not today, I decided.

Rodney didn't get to ruin my mood or the fun I had planned for tonight. Sure, Angelo wasn't trailing rose petals up to a king-size bed with silk sheets. He was planning to

give me something better—something I'd craved for years, but Rodney had never been willing to provide. You can joke all you want about the naughty librarian stereotype; but sometimes it's true. Sometimes all a girl wants is to be bound and gagged after reading a good book. And Angelo wanted to make me feel good, and I desperately needed the distraction. No more overthinking. I was going to ride that train right into nirvana, and my ex's shitty intentions couldn't stop me.

The judge, a balding, middle-aged man I was half-convinced had some troll DNA in him, nodded wearily at me as he descended from his seat and disappeared into the office. It was a clear dismissal, and I had to resist the urge to kick the table on my way out of the courtroom. I still wanted to throw things, but I compromised by stewing about it for the next half hour. After that, I wasn't going to let this spoil the day. That would play right into Rodney's hands, and I didn't want to give him the satisfaction.

Vin brushed my shoulder, pretending to pick lint from my blazer. I knew he had to be pretending because Wanda wouldn't have sold it in anything less than pristine condition. The woman was far too proud to let something like fuzzies collect on her clothing. I was pretty sure she'd blast any stray threads to smithereens upon catching them in the act, which meant he was being handsy.

I took a step back and gave him a dirty look. "That's not very professional of you, Mr. Christiansen."

Vin's lazy smile probably would have reduced most women to a puddle. But I'd seen better. Angelo's pheromones beat this guy's hands down. Vin very intentionally took my wrist, weighing it in his hands. A shock of pure desire roiled through me for a second before dimming like a spark. It didn't remain as a stubborn ember, the way Angelo's power did.

"Call me Vin."

“I’m guessing that’s not short for Vincent,” I said in an undertone, yanking my hand free as we entered the lobby. Angelo wasn’t waiting outside as I’d expected; he’d stepped out to use the restroom and hadn’t returned. I was beginning to wonder if he regretted propositioning me here.

“You wouldn’t be able to pronounce my real name,” Vin said pleasantly, keeping pace with me easily, though I was trying to walk ahead. I had to slow a little when he beckoned me toward a small conference room off the main hall. “It’s in my native tongue. ‘Angelo’ isn’t his true demon name either; it just translates better to English.”

I prepared a cup of coffee to occupy my hands. Something was off about Vin’s tone, and he didn’t seem as upset by today’s turn of events as he should have been. I was grateful for the cheap coffee and creamer as I sat down. Clutching the cup kept him from noticing the tremor in my hands.

I was overreacting; I was sure. Vin was Angelo’s family. But there was something about his energy: anger, lust, the anticipation of violence. It reminded me of bars where a drunk, sexually frustrated man followed a woman around who’d rejected him. But that didn’t make sense here. Vin didn’t look hammered, and I hadn’t really rejected him; he’d have to ask in order to get a no.

My head screamed at me to run, the pitch rising higher when the door clicked shut behind us, leaving me alone with my legal counsel in an out-of-the-way room. I couldn’t help but meet Vin’s eyes as the lock slid home. They were a drowning dark, and his voice emerged laced with demonic power when he turned fully toward me.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Getting some answers,” he responded.

And then he was on me.

He trapped me against the wall, one hand manacled my wrists, the other crashing down onto my mouth before I could draw breath to scream. My spine let out a silent moan of protest when he leaned into me, crushing me against the wall. He wasn't even trying to hide his strength now, making it clear with the force around my wrists and the weight against my chest that he could crush me if he wanted to.

My heart raced as his scent and power engulfed me. It felt and smelled like acrid smoke, nothing like the gentle waft of desire that Angelo would send my way during the night. I wasn't even sure Angelo was aware he was doing it; it wasn't like he could control his dreams. Living close to an incubus had led to a dizzying array of erotic dreams, all centered around Angelo. I could admit, if only to myself, that I was very taken with the disturbingly charming demon.

His cousin, not so much.

I threw my weight against him in a futile attempt to escape. It forced him to hold me with bone-bruising strength to keep me still. I'd gained more than just Indigo when she'd exploded into fleshy streamers in my former bookshop. She also came with a neat array of other monstrous magical abilities that she'd stolen from slain creatures. I never thought I'd find myself in a situation where I'd have to tap into that greasy, unpleasant well of magic at my center. But if I didn't, there was no telling what Vin could do to me.

Angelo, where are you? I thought desperately.

I assumed he'd slipped away to the bathroom toward the end of the trial. Demon or not, some calls of nature couldn't be refused. But if he'd been in the bathroom, shouldn't he have returned by now? Angelo wouldn't have let his cousin do this to me, and not just because he wanted to be the one pinning me. His feelings for me

went deeper than possessiveness, though that was definitely there. He was a good person underneath it all. He'd gone to hell and back for me. I knew he wouldn't abandon me now. So where was he?

"Stop moving, damn it!" Vin snarled into my face.

I half-wished he smelled worse. I hated that his power felt perfect against my skin, as if he had every right to touch me. It was so thick and cloying that I could barely draw a breath. It felt like drowning in a vat of perfume, the magic so saturated that it burned my nose and throat.

I gave him a succinct answer when I tried to knee him in the balls. But he caught my leg and swept it aside, pressing in closer. The only reason I didn't scream was that he didn't seem to be enjoying himself. What he was doing was usually a prelude to violence, and I prayed it would just be his fists he intended to use.

"Stop it, now. "

There was enough hellish magic in that one word to freeze me solid for a second. Something in me resonated with the call of the infernal power all around me. Recently unleashed, Indigo's demonic power rose to the challenge, and I snarled right back, the sound raw and inhuman. It hurt my throat to do it, but the sound rocked Vin's head back like he'd been slapped. He didn't let me go, but his grip loosened just enough, letting my blood circulate in painful little spurts. I'd been afraid he would crush the bones in my wrists.

"Koloath," Vin said, his voice calmer now. "You're part Koloath. That explains things."

Koloath demon.

I vaguely remembered Indigo mentioning as much when she'd listed her purloined powers. Koloths could control fire. Maybe that meant I could melt Vin's smug face off if I got angry enough. I then had the unpleasant image of flesh running in thick lines down his face and pooling on the floor like wax.

This was why I hated having a mental roomie. When your bunkmate is a spotter for an illegal magic-harvesting ring, you experience all kinds of fun visuals. I'd seen horrors from her past that made me want to run gibbering to the nearest asylum.

Even so, I found myself wishing Indigo was here with me at the moment, not snoozing away for another day or two. It was annoying to have a witch riding shotgun in your brain, making an obnoxious commentary about your every thought and impulse—until said witch pulls out a bit of enchantment that can save your ass.

Regardless, she wasn't here, which meant I had to do this the old-fashioned way.

I wedged as much of Vin's palm into mine as I could and then bit down on it with as much force as I could muster. When he staggered away from me, shock in his expression, I expected to see a perfect bloody imprint of my teeth on his skin. It was worse. So much worse. A chunk of flesh about the size of a silver dollar was simply missing. And, I realized after a moment of nauseated confusion, I still had the flesh between my teeth.

I collapsed, bending over the nearest trash can and spat the lump of his hand out of my mouth at the same time that I vomited the breakfast smoothie Angelo had made for me that morning. It was less delicious coming back up. I ended up dry heaving at the sight of that bloody chunk bobbing in the trash can like a fleshy cork.

My head felt like a struck bell, vibrating with unpleasant emotion. Vin had been angry when he'd locked the door, trapping me in here with him. Now he was furious that I'd maimed him. He'd heal the damage eventually, but he'd need to drain the life

force from some poor person to hasten the process. I could almost see the calculation in his eyes. He was an incubus. I was a woman. He could take what he needed, and I would be too drunk on pheromones to know it was happening.

“Don’t even think about it,” I said, my voice hoarse. My throat burned, and the feeling of blood running down my chin made me want to bend over the trash can again. “I’m not sleeping with you.”

“As if I’d let you get into my head that way,” he said with a bitter laugh, clutching his injured hand to his chest. “I suspected you used your witchy magic to snare him. I didn’t realize you were using a Koloth’s pheromones to double your control over Angelo. If you think I’ll let you make him your bitch, think again.”

I stared at him, uncomprehending. Make Angelo my bitch? Where did he get the idea that was my goal? If anything, I was Angelo’s, not the other way around. I mean, I planned to let him do unspeakably sexual things to me later that night. I didn’t want to fight Angelo’s control. It felt too good to be pressed against him.

I wiped the blood from my chin with a grimace. “I mean this as literally as possible: what the hell are you talking about?”

Vin’s lip curled in disgust. “Don’t deny it. I know you witches think you’re superior to the rest of us. You think it’s funny to lead Angelo on and force him to crave you, just to keep denying him.” I started to shake my head but he glared at me. “I’d smell him on you if he was bedding you. Clearly, he’s not.” He took a deep breath. “It stops now. Whatever spell you’ve put on him to keep him in your bed, lift it. And if you plan to put a mate mark on him, I will kill you. You don’t get to—”

I’d never be completely sure what I wasn’t allowed to do. The door burst open hard enough to crash against the wall. Angelo stood in the doorway, his face flushed scarlet, not with embarrassment, but with rage. The heat of his anger was blistering.

Vin was so focused on me that he didn't see the strike coming until Angelo slammed his hands into Vin's chest, sending him sailing over the conference table and through the opposite wall. The drywall folded like a thin paper cup beneath Vin's weight.

But Angelo wasn't done.

He strode past me, horns curling into being at the crown of his head. It should have made him look scary, but paired with the sculpted beauty of his face, it only made him look exotic. He seized a folding chair from around the table and brought it down with a grunt of effort, right onto Vin's groin. Vin wheezed, his face blanching with pain. He scrambled awkwardly backward, barely dodging Angelo's next shot for his family jewels.

"Stop!" Vin pleaded, but this time, his voice was weak and threaded with fear. Nothing like a nut shot to humble even the most sex-crazed demons. "Ang, stop it! I'm trying to protect you, you moron!"

Angelo paused, holding the chair aloft. "Protect me against what?" he demanded, voice coming out in a growl.

"The witch has you under a spell," Vin explained. "She's made herself immune to me. Probably to any incubus."

"What's your point?" Angelo growled again.

"She's using you, man."

Angelo's snarl made my teeth rattle, filling the room like localized thunder. The heat of his power was less oppressive than Vin's, feeling like a feverishly hot wing draped over my shoulder. I couldn't see it, but I could feel it like a phantom limb. I curled closer to it, using it to siphon off my terror.

“She doesn’t have me under a spell, dipshit,” Angelo ground out.

“Then how—” Vin started.

“—there was a magical accident. Only my pheromones affect her now.”

Angelo reached for me by demonstration, power twining around my limbs. I knew I could resist his call, but I didn’t want to. It felt good to press against his chest. I shivered when he lifted my chin and slanted his mouth over mine. He poured power down my throat, and I went up on tiptoe, my back arching. I let out a soft whimper when he pulled back, leaving me dangling on the precipice.

When I could blink back to reality, I found Vin staring at me in shock. Had he really been so upset that I didn’t respond to his demon that he’d concocted this ridiculous story in his own head? Convinced himself he was protecting Angelo by figuring out my secret?

“She’s part Koloth,” Vin said quietly, sitting up and shielding himself with his knees. “We don’t bother with them for a reason, Ang. You know how serious they are about the commitment thing.”

“I’ll date who I want,” Angelo countered. “And Lydia’s heritage is her business, not mine.”

“Angelo,” Vin started, his tone of voice a warning.

Angelo turned to look at me. “I’ll take the chance. She’s worth it.”

The comment made my insides glow. I was sure Indigo would have popped my happy bubble, reminding me that Angelo was an incubus who wanted inside my pants and that was the extent of his interest in me. Thankfully, the potion that kept her quiet

also meant this entire confusing affair was my secret. I didn't have to tell her it had happened. Phew.

"Idiot," Vin said, but there was less contempt in his tone now. "You're being a damn fool, Angelo. She'll get her hooks into you, and you'll end up like your sister—trapped in suburban hell."

Angelo lifted the chair he was still holding in one hand. "Call my sister a freak again, Vin. See what happens."

Vin's gaze darted to the door. He looked shaky and was bleeding from a few cuts on his face, as well as the chunk I'd taken from his hand.

"I was trying to help."

"I didn't ask for your help or anyone else's for that matter," Angelo said tightly. "Get the fuck out. I'll contact another lawyer. You're done here."

Vin's eyes slid back to me. "She's technically the client. Only she can let me go."

"Get lost," I said firmly.

Vin stood, his gait unsteady and clearly pained. I couldn't summon much pity for him, though. He'd assaulted me for petty reasons. He edged past Angelo as if expecting to be hit again. Angelo looked like he was considering it but ultimately kept his arm around me instead of swinging at Vin's back. There was a beat of silence after Vin had gone, as if we both expected him to return.

"Are you alright?" Angelo finally asked me. He hesitated before reaching up to touch my chin. "No, of course you aren't. You're bleeding. Did he hit you? Because it isn't too late for me to kill him."

I should have scolded him for the death threat, but I was too shaken to do anything but scrub my chin with the sleeve of my blazer. Wanda would probably shriek if she knew I was smearing blood onto one of her stunning creations.

“It’s not my blood. I... uh... I bit part of his hand off. I didn’t mean to. I think it was something about the demon energy that Indigo absorbed. But... it was bad. I mean, it looked like he was mauled by a dog.”

“Koloths are intensely magical. You wanted to hurt him, so the power made it happen.”

“I didn’t want to,” I mumbled. “I had to. He had a hand over my mouth. I couldn’t even scream.”

Angelo’s expression darkened. “Did he...?”

I shook my head. “No, he didn’t even kiss me. I think he was pissed, not horny. He didn’t give me that look until he was hurt and looking to heal.”

Angelo relaxed a little. “Good... because it would upset Aunt Melarue if I gutted him.”

The words were said in a light, teasing tone, but I could feel the fury still bubbling beneath the surface. He meant them. If Vin had done more than he attempted, Angelo would have gone through with it, my protest be damned.

“Don’t,” I said weakly.

He smiled then, his bad mood evaporating as he cupped my chin, pressing a chaste kiss to my mouth before chuckling.

“My little pacifist. You’re the worst possible person to get caught in a clandestine war.”

I sighed. “Don’t I know it?”

Angelo took my hand. “Come on. I’ll make some calls, and we’ll find Vin’s replacement over ice cream.”

I leaned up on tiptoe and pecked his cheek. “How do you always know what to say?”

He smirked. “I’m just that good.”

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Lydia

“So,” I said, pausing long enough to spoon a mouthful of pistachio ice cream into my mouth. It wasn’t my favorite flavor, but it was the only brand of vegan ice cream Stanley produced regularly, so I had to make do. “When were you going to tell me about this pheromones thing?”

Angelo shrugged, lifting the plastic spoon to his lips with exaggerated slowness. With any other man, I might have found the suggestive lick eye-roll-worthy. But Angelo’s little display actually made me jealous of the utensil. Many things had gone unseen, untouched, and definitely unlicked in my life for years. It was embarrassing to realize that I was watching him eat a strawberry sundae with sprinkles with the same enthusiasm men had when ogling topless women in magazines.

“Soon. I only noticed it myself a week ago when I saw you two at a client meeting for the first time. I trust Vin about as far as I can kick him, but he’s not generally one to mix business with feeding. He’s more professional than that. I was pretty sure he wouldn’t come onto you until you were officially single.”

I scowled down at the small plastic cup. My ice cream was quickly turning into a green soupy mess. The poor jelly beans were sinking like stones, lost from sight the moment they tumbled in.

“Yeah, because that assessment worked out so well for me in the courthouse.” I looked up at him then. “If you hadn’t come in when you did, I think he would have done worse.”

Angelo's eyes changed. It wasn't much or for long, but I caught the promise of a second beating within their depths. For just an instant, I could see and feel him for what he was. Beneath the mask, he wasn't human. He might think like me on occasion, but he'd never been what I was. And he never would be. We were from two separate worlds, and his was a hell of a lot harsher than mine.

"I think I left a few inches of him unbruised. I could remedy that if you like."

I bit the inside of my cheek to contain a smile. Angelo would probably take it as an invitation to exact a little retribution on Vin. While I certainly thought the incubus deserved the beating he'd gotten, setting Angelo on him twice seemed excessive. I mean, Vin had been trying to look out for Angelo in his own twisted way. But if I ever heard of him trying it again on anybody else, I would deliver the next beating personally. I had the powers of a demon, a faerie, and a night hag fused to my soul, thanks to Indigo. Next time, I'd know how to use at least one of their skill sets.

"I think he got the message."

Angelo scowled at his spoon, clearly disappointed that there wasn't more sugary goodness clinging to its contours. He stabbed it back into his bowl, digging out a whole strawberry. He then popped it into his mouth and chewed slowly.

"He still touched you. I don't like that."

"Because I'm yours?" I asked.

"No, because he scared you. Uncertainty can be fun; terror, not so much. I never want you to be scared of me." He paused, considered it, then amended, "Well, any more than is appropriate." I laughed at that, but he continued. "I plan to use a whip on you at some point. If you aren't scared of some of the things I like, I might be concerned about your mental health. I am a demon, after all."

Another laugh slipped past my careful control. I couldn't help it. I wasn't sure if I should have been scared or anticipatory. What was more, I couldn't believe I was sitting here calmly discussing my sexual fantasies with a literal handsome devil like Angelo. Rodney would have tapped out of this conversation in seconds. He'd never said it aloud, but I sensed he thought I shouldn't like or care about sex as much as he did. My libido seemed to confuse and disgust him on the rare occasion we discussed our sex life.

"I don't have a lot of experience in that area," I admitted. "Rodney wasn't into it."

"Rodney is a moron," Angelo said, flicking a bug off the table before it could reach his sundae. "I suppose I should be glad for that. If he were worth anything, you'd be here with him, not me."

I ducked my chin and scooped up a runny spoonful of pistachio ice cream to conceal my grin. It was petty, but I was really enjoying the casual disparagement of my ex after this morning's court debacle.

"Circling back to the original topic," I said, jabbing my spoon at him. "What's this about the pheromones? What happened?"

Angelo's shoulders lifted in another helpless shrug. "I went to the coven after I noticed Vin wasn't having an effect on you."

"The coven?"

He nodded. "Those old biddies are usually the best to consult in cases like this."

"And?"

"And as best as they can figure, it's a fluke. You've siphoned my magic, which

means you're keyed into my pheromones specifically. It made you less susceptible to the pheromones of others, including Vin."

"Why didn't you tell me this before?"

He shrugged. "I didn't think telling you would be an issue. As far as I knew, you didn't plan to hook up with other demons." He paused and studied me. "Was I wrong?"

The tone was teasing, but the mocking smile didn't reach his eyes. The answer mattered to him, no matter what he said to the contrary.

"I'm a one-demon kind of girl," I answered with a smirk. "But if you happen to find a handsome devil who wants to sign on for a long-term situationship, tell him to call me."

Angelo's reply was succinct.

In a movement graceful enough to defy probability, he moved my ice cream out of his way, seized my chin, and pulled my face up for a searing kiss. The sweet burst of strawberry on my tongue drew a moan from my throat. I was breathing hard when Angelo pulled away, a satisfied gleam in his eyes. My heart raced, like he'd already put me through my paces. The man could reduce me to a puddle with just a kiss. I wasn't sure I could survive a roll in the hay.

"Let me rephrase," he said in a husky undertone. "Am I the only one you want?"

It was a deceptively simple question with a needlessly complicated answer, mainly because it was sometimes hard to tell where I ended and Indigo began. My desires and memories had blended with hers in my subconscious. And that meant I couldn't deny that a part of me longed for Indigo's lost love, Anthony. It was especially

difficult these days, with the man himself strutting around Haven Hollow looking mournful and disturbingly attractive, though we'd never so much as kissed.

"I think the more pertinent question is if you want to be exclusive," I managed. "You're the sex demon with a reputation to uphold, after all."

"My reputation can go to hell," he answered almost too quickly. Then those searing eyes were on mine again. "I want you. I've wanted you from the moment I saw you. The question is: do you want me?"

I stared at him, unsure of how to respond. The answer was an unequivocal yes, but I'd expected it to take a lot more ribbing to get the truth from him. It took a second to unknot my tongue and answer him.

"Y-yes?"

Angelo's lips tilted up in an utterly sinful fashion. It was the look he gave me before he said something he knew would make me squeal in mock outrage.

"You don't sound sure."

"No, I'm—"

"—Stanley isn't the only one here who gives free samples, Bean. I'd gladly give you a taste."

I smacked his bicep, which only elicited a deep, husky laugh in reply. Even with my increased strength, it didn't hurt him. He was way bigger than I was, and he was an actual demon, not a human woman with add-ons.

"Stop it!"

“Stop grinning at me, and I’ll feel less inclined to scandalize you.”

But it was impossible not to smile when I was looking at him. He was... well, in some ways, he’d become my very best friend. He’d rescued me from almost certain death at the auction, helped me sort through the trauma of that, put up with the weirdness surrounding Indigo, and made me feel... desirable. That last part was probably the strangest part of all. My bedroom had died long before the marriage with Rodney had.

“I like it when you scandalize me,” I confessed in a small voice.

It came out soft, almost sad, and I saw the impact on Angelo’s face immediately. Sometimes he reacted to emotional problems in a relationship like a baffled anthropologist, unsure of why I’d done what I’d done. The words didn’t match the tone, and he knew it.

“Lydia—”

I raised a hand. “It’s not about you. It’s... I was thinking about Rodney.”

“Oh.” He didn’t like that—I could tell.

“I like your teasing,” I continued. “Rodney never did that. He basically came home, decided when or if he was in the mood, and did the bare minimum. I gave up hope of ever feeling...” I gestured between us helplessly. “Like this. Of course, I want to be with you. You make me feel...”

I trailed off, unsure of how to finish. We were heading rapidly toward sticky feelings territory. I wasn’t sure a public place was the right locale to discuss exactly how I felt for my demonic roomie.

Angelo's hand caught mine. He wound our fingers together, and the warmth of his skin felt heavenly against my palm.

"I make you feel what?"

"Wanted," I finished. "It's nice to know you mean it. Rodney... I think he fell out of love with me early on, if he ever actually was in love with me in the first place. But I'm pretty sure that towards the end, he just wanted to keep me on as a glorified secretary he could sometimes sleep with. He only ever stepped up when it looked like I might decide to leave his sorry ass. If I'd met you back then..."

Angelo's eyes brightened. "A torrid love affair would have commenced."

I gave him a look. "Mmm hmm."

He laughed. "You know you couldn't have resisted me if I'd pursued you. And I would have pursued you. A woman as lovely as you deserves all the attention she's due."

Heat flushed into my face as I tried to picture the scene. It would have been something out of a porno—the handsome realtor seducing the lonely married woman while her husband was away.

"Now there's a roleplay. An empty house, my husband is away..."

An almost sub-audible thrum made my bones quiver just a little. It was a sympathetic vibration. I could almost feel the gut-knotting hunger Angelo was trying to suppress. My mouth went dry, and I had trouble swallowing when his hand ghosted up my arm, settling in the bend of my elbow as he leaned in towards me.

"That's my girl. Always finding the silver lining. I have to admit, I like the idea of

seducing you as a married woman more and more now that you've framed it that way. We'll start in my office first, but we're definitely keeping that one in mind."

The insides of my ribcage felt bruised from the force of my hammering heart. The anticipation was going to kill me. Suddenly, it didn't seem so crazy to nip back to my loft with the remainder of our ice cream in tow. There were more interesting places for the sugary confections to be dribbled.

A soft cough drew both our attention. I jumped as if I'd been caught in the act, letting out an undignified squeak. Angelo's reaction was more subdued. He released me from the hold of his power, easing back into his seat with an almost petulant set to his shoulders.

I glanced up and froze, a plain rabbit in the sights of a gorgeous golden eagle. The woman beside me was nothing short of stunning, and my confidence dribbled away like tissue paper in a downpour. I knew who I was looking at. I'd hoped I wouldn't see her today, given Rodney's absence, but I was learning that fate liked to screw me personally. I was pretty sure it was Indigo's bad karma coming back to bite us both. Except it was always my ass that ended up bitten.

The woman flashed us both a dazzling smile before offering her hand to me. "Hello, Ms. Morton. I'm Andrea Reyes. I wanted to talk to you about Rodney."

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:18 am

Lydia

Andrea Reyes looked like she'd been ordered from a Sports Illustrated catalog and constructed in a perverted Frankenstein's lab.

There wasn't an inch of her that didn't look categorically perfect. Skin with a permanently sun-kissed glow? Check. Huge, almond-shaped eyes with lashes that belonged in a mascara ad? Check. Lips that looked downright kissable without any extra makeup? Check, check, and check.

The red dress she wore hugged every contour of her body without ever truly looking indecent. I wouldn't have been able to pull it off without some part of me deciding to mutiny. I didn't have calves of steel from walking on heels my whole life. I sensed that every part of her was just as taut and well-trained, which only made my stomach sink lower.

Even I couldn't deny that Andrea was beautiful. Rodney had managed to score way out of his league yet again. I wondered if I should pity her for dating him but decided she'd probably have to learn the hard way. Rodney could be very superficially charming if he needed to be.

I glanced sideways, half-expecting Angelo to be staring at her with drool dripping onto the table. Instead, he was scraping the bottom of his ice cream bowl, trying to finish his sundae before it melted. He caught me staring at him, followed my gaze, and shrugged, as though he barely noticed her presence.

"So what does the bastard want?" Angelo drawled, still eating. When he licked his

spoon this time, there wasn't much flourish. How the hell didn't Andrea rate the sexy spoon routine? She was objectively perfect from her toes to her Pantene-commercial ebony hair.

Andrea half-turned toward him, her expression affronted. "What did you just say?"

Angelo set the bowl and spoon aside after finishing and leaned forward, elbows on his knees, his posture completely relaxed. He didn't seem impressed by her, which utterly baffled me. I wasn't even into women, let alone dependent on sex to live, and I thought he'd be certifiable not to want her. And yet, there was no hint of interest. At all.

"I asked what the prick wants. Today was yet another entry in a long list of ways he's dragged the divorce out longer than necessary. So forgive me for not being polite to you, Ms. Reyes. I'm disgusted by the man you've decided to hitch your wagon to. Maybe I should be giving you my condolences on your choice of partner."

Andrea mouthed at him like a landed fish. I did too, for that matter. I'd never heard such naked contempt in his tone before. Sure, he put on a show of being an aloof incubus, but he was fairly easygoing once you got to know him. The only thing he took seriously was feeding, and we were on the same page there. He rarely cared enough to become truly hostile.

Andrea straightened, brushing nonexistent wrinkles from her dress as she composed herself. She managed to put on that winning smile again, but this time I wasn't buying it. I had a customer service grin too; it came with the territory. I could sense the underlying hostility that settled like a stone in her mind. Angelo had just made himself an enemy. Great.

"I came to tell you and the judge that there was a miscommunication about this morning."

“A miscommunication?” I repeated, frowning.

She nodded as she turned to face me. “Rodney has been under the weather. He intended to show up this morning, I promise you. But at the moment, he’s being seen by a doctor. They’re saying he has severe anemia. As you can probably imagine, I was pretty surprised to learn as much and I... well, I forgot to make the necessary calls. You have my most sincere apologies, Lydia. I know it must have been difficult to have this postponed again.”

And now I felt like a heel. The concern in her eyes when she spoke about Rodney seemed genuine. It took me a minute to dig myself out of the shame and self-recrimination to whisper, “It’s fine. I’m sorry he’s not feeling well.”

I was surprised to find I meant it. To say we were on rocky ground was an understatement, but that didn’t mean I wanted Rodney seriously hurt or dead. Just... mildly miserable.

Andrea’s expression softened, and her smile became a bit more genuine. “I knew you’d understand.”

I looked at her and frowned. “You did?”

She nodded. “I’ve heard good things about you. You’re a kind person. Rodney wouldn’t have loved you if you weren’t.”

I thought about saying that Rodney had used my kindness and good nature, not loved me because of it. But that would probably have started another argument. And I didn’t have the time or patience for that. I was relieved to have a concrete reason that Rodney hadn’t shown up. Yes, I was irritated that our last court date had been postponed again, but at least he hadn’t done it out of spite.

Andrea reached into the purse hanging from one graceful hand and pulled out a business card, offering it to me. “I have his hospital room phone number here if you want to call. Ignore the top number; it’s for my campaign office.”

“Campaign office?” I repeated.

Andrea’s smile was dazzling. I actually felt my heart give a nervous flutter. Was Andrea some kind of seductress in disguise, and I just wasn’t catching it? The only woman who’d ever made me think this way was Angelo’s sister, and she was a succubus.

“I’m running for mayor. The election is next week. Can I count on your vote?”

Angelo snatched the card before I could, tucking it into his pocket. “We’ll see about the vote. I like to read the fine print before I form an opinion.”

There was an almost amused slant to Andrea’s smile, which made it more compelling, not less. “I like a deep thinker. We should get coffee sometime and discuss politics, Mr. Stedham.”

Had she just asked him out? In front of me? Was it Angelo’s misbehaving pheromones or something he’d done on purpose? I cast him a sideways glance, opening my mouth to say something, but he beat me to the punch.

He pointedly took my hand. “I have a prior arrangement, and you have a sick boyfriend. It wouldn’t work out.”

Something ugly flickered in her eyes before she could disguise it. Then the moment was gone, and she was all business again as she turned to face me once more.

“I’m sorry to dash, but I thought you deserved an explanation, Lydia. I’d want one in

your place.”

“Thanks,” I said. “Good luck with your race, I guess.”

Andrea’s smile didn’t dim. “Oh, I plan to win.”

There was something in her words that made the skin at the back of my neck prickle. I shook my head after a moment and watched her walk away, noting the sway of her hips with envy. How was it possible that someone with a waist like that could have nice hips and a nice ass?

“Seven,” Angelo said, speaking for the first time since Andrea had left. It made me jump. Indigo would have teased me for not paying attention.

“Seven?” I repeated.

“I’m going to the store to get some things. We’ll have dinner in my office tonight. I think you deserve to dine in, don’t you? I’ll come back when I have everything ready. I’m thinking around seven.”

A candlelit dinner in his office. And after...

“Okay,” I said, my voice small. I couldn’t look him in the eye. If I saw and felt everything he wanted to do to me in that instant, I’d combust right here in Stanley’s nice dining area. “It’s a date.”

Wanda’s witchery was a fashionista’s paradise and an empath’s hell.

I’d only been inside the gothic Victorian once to meekly request a cute set of

jammies. It had started as a spite-fueled reply to Angelo's insistence on going around in skimpy pajamas, trying to get me to break first. Anything to get him to end this tense, sexually frustrated stalemate we lived in. I'd been silently begging him to throw me on the queen-sized bed and ravish me. Unfortunately, I could never force the request past my lips.

But back to Wanda's clothing store, I'd quickly found myself overwhelmed by the sheer variety of styles and patterns available. It had taken me a distressingly long time to realize the headache knuckling at my temples had been from the sheer bombardment of magic from all sides. Most of it centered around sensuality, luck, and other positive feelings, but there were enough cursed items to make my teeth ache. It took real malice to make hexes and curses work, and Wanda was capable of that depth of feeling. Not everyone with magic was though. Indigo was constantly disgusted by my inability to do dangerous magic. If she'd been awake and aware, she probably would have bemoaned her luck getting stuck with me. If Indigo had latched onto someone like Wanda, she'd at least be able to defend herself without an issue.

Fortunately, I'd gone in the evening, and Wanda had taken pity on me, guiding me into her backroom while she bustled about selecting pieces that both boosted my confidence and looked great. Less fortunate for me, it was daytime now. Through a set of complicated events, Wanda was left having to pretend she wasn't a witch. Indigo and I weren't sure how long her 'vampire' tale would hold up under scrutiny. One just had to be in proximity to realize she had a healthy pulse.

And to top the whole embarrassing situation off, I wasn't here looking for underwear this time. I was looking for a slinky number to wear on a date with an incredibly sexy demon. And the moment I expressed that, the warlock was going to give me a look. That universal look that all men seemed to have when they realize you're a woman looking to get lucky. It was smug and knowing and always made me want to punch someone.

And besides, I wasn't even sure where to begin. What exactly did one take into consideration in a situation like the one I was marching into? Romance? Durability? Contraception? God, I just didn't know. All I did know was that it was far worse to drag Angelo inside the store with me to make lewd commentary in front of the daytime manager, a grumpy warlock by the name of Maverick.

Said warlock glanced up when the bell above the door tinkled, announcing my presence to the room at large. I was tempted to cut and run before he could open his mouth and start interrogating me. Only the absence of any other customers in the store allowed me to step inside and close the shop door behind me.

The bell let out another warbling sound before dying off, leaving just the hush of the air conditioner to fill the silence. The man straightened to his full and impressive height, draping himself in a practiced motion over the cash register. It was casual and a little appealing. It might have even been flirty if I didn't have Angelo's antics to compare it to.

"Welcome to Wanda's Witchery. May I help you?"

It was the first time I'd interacted with Maverick Depraysie outside of a council or emergency setting. I mostly knew him as Police Chief Taliyah Morgan's loyal bounty hunter first and a fashion designer's assistant manager second. It made him more than a little intimidating in my book. I had to actually clear my throat before I could find my voice.

"I... um... I was looking for a dress."

Maverick gave the shop's interior a meaningful look. "We have plenty of those."

"Oh, right."

“So, you’ll have to be more specific about what type of dress you’re looking for.”

“Okay.”

“Wanda just finished a luck line in women’s business wear. Two women have already reported getting the promotions they were asking for. Though in your case, you probably want something to speed up the divorce.”

“Oh, you heard?”

He nodded. “I heard Taliyah talking about it after the last Black Cat Cocktail Club meeting.”

And yet again, I found myself red in the face and struggling to look a man in the eye. I’d only attended a few of the boozy gossip fests held by the local supernatural set, but they’d been memorable. Wanda had mixed the drinks so strong during the last one I’d ended up drunk texting Angelo on the way home. He still teased me about what I’d said that night.

“I’m...I’m not looking for luck.”

“Okay, what are you looking for?”

I cleared my throat and couldn’t hold his gaze. “Well, I was thinking less conservative and more...” I gestured vaguely at the nearest rack. The tea dress was a little too cutesy for tonight’s date, but it was a step in the right direction. There was no way I was getting Angelo out of his pants if I showed up in 80s shoulder pads.

Maverick’s eyebrows lifted. “Ah. Something formal? Or were you thinking something sexier?”

I was thinking I was going to burst into a pile of cinders. My neck and cheeks felt hot enough to fry eggs on. I gave the rack nearest his elbow a desperate glance, unable to voice the request. Thankfully, he caught it and followed my gaze.

“A cocktail dress? Are you planning on going out clubbing?”

“No,” I finally managed. “Candlelight dinner, I think.” Angelo hadn’t been overly specific.

“With Angelo, I’m assuming?” I nodded and wondered how quickly word spread in the Hollow. Apparently, pretty quickly.

“It’s supposed to be a surprise,” I continued. “And, well, I wanted to surprise him back. We live together, so he’s seen most of my nice outfits by now.”

“Ah,” Maverick said, as though that made sense.

I wasn’t sure if he actually understood or was just humoring me. At least the look was mercifully absent. Maybe I’d judged the moody warlock too harshly. He’d been raised by witches, who seemed to have a completely different relationship with sex and romance than us mere mortals. Indigo had apparently danced naked often, specifically to attract male Sidhe when she was younger. There was relatively little sexual shame in their society. I guess I hadn’t expected a man to be as on board with that as Maverick seemed to be.

Maverick gave me a once-over, starting from the crown of my head and concluding on my aching ankles in their kitten heels. The look didn’t feel sexual at all, though I was probably too desensitized to realize if it had been. Angelo’s leering made casual admiration feel tame. Besides, I’d seen the way Maverick looked at the Chief of Police. He was dead gone on his gorgeous faerie wife.

“You’re a pear shape, right?”

“Yeah,” I grumbled, not exactly happy that he was pointing it out.

Maverick reached out and casually flicked my ear. A static shock traveled from the tip of his nail into my skin. I yelped, clapping a hand over it.

“Hey!” I yelled at him.

“Don’t do that,” he answered.

“Do what?”

“That thing vanilla human women do. Where you think you’re hideous because you aren’t model-perfect.”

“Says the guy who married a svelte princess,” I countered. “Or is it queen now? I heard Taliyah’s in charge now that the war with Janara is over.”

I still wasn’t clear on everything that had happened there. Until members of Misty Hollow had poured into town through a faerie portal, I’d been the new girl on the block. I wasn’t having as hard a time adjusting to the changes since I hadn’t been here long enough for Haven Hollow to feel like home. All I knew was that there had been celebrations among the local faeries when Taliyah returned from whatever mission she’d been on. It had taken a few days for me to understand the significance of the news.

Maverick shrugged. “It’s complicated,” Maverick responded. “But my point was about your self-esteem or lack-thereof.”

“Right.” I didn’t even feel like arguing the point. “Yeah, I think I’m a pear shape.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that. You say it like it’s a bad thing.”

I swallowed hard. “You don’t think it’s a bad thing?”

He looked at me. Really looked at me. “I think women are beautiful in all their shapes and sizes.”

“Oh.”

“And I think a wrap or empire waist dress would work best for your figure,” he continued. “The empire has a more flattering silhouette, but the wrap dress comes off faster.”

The damnable blush was back again. “I think I’ll go with the wrap then.”

Maverick smirked. “Good for you. Now we have a few options available...”

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:18 am

Angelo

No way. There was no way I was this unlucky.

And yet, there Fifi's car was, in her usual spot, parked next to a Mercedes I didn't recognize. It was past our operating hours, with rare exceptions for the nocturnal clients we sometimes dealt with. Selling to vampires was always a pain in the neck, pun intended. It could be fun when the buyer was a frisky female with a Carmilla complex. But lately, the vampires settling here were all too male and too related to witches for my liking. I'd let Fifi handle the former warlocks that now made up most of the Haven Hollow vampire clan.

Had another of the bloodsucking buggers come to town? It was the only explanation I could come up with for her presence here so late in the evening. And if it was another dour bloodsucker camping out in Fifi's office trying to find a gothic mansion to hole up in, I was putting garlic extract in Fifi's diffuser. This was absolutely ridiculous. And after I'd begun planning and moving things into place, too. Lydia was due to arrive any minute.

Technically, Lydia was half an hour late, but it didn't bother me unduly. She'd texted, explaining she wanted to do her makeup. I could have told her not to bother. I was going to ruin it anyway, kissing her until her lips were swollen and her lipstick smeared across her chin. If she liked it as rough as I suspected, she might tear up when her ass was stinging. That would create black smears under her eyes. But I liked women, even when they were messy. Especially this woman. If the makeup made her feel sexy, I wanted her to go for it. I'd use the time to ensure everything was set up just right.

So, of course, Fifi had scheduled a consultation the exact night I expected to have the place all to myself. Damn it all to hell in the most literal sense.

I stalked inside, fully intending to rake Fifi over the coals, but stopped dead when I saw who was waiting in the lobby. It wasn't a vampire sitting near Libby's abandoned desk at this late hour. It was a small, doughy man with a hairline that had declared retreat years ago. What he had left was thin, leaving enough shine beneath to reflect my car's lights from outside. The newer model would turn them off automatically after a period of time, but not before glittering over the man's skin.

Rodney Rourke sat hunched over, his head leaning against the wall as though he was longing to fall asleep. I'd been half-convinced Andrea Reyes had been full of shit this morning, but he really did look ill. I'd seen a few photos of him that Lydia hadn't purged from her social media. He'd never been an Adonis, but his skin had an almost grayish cast now, more befitting a troll than a human man of his age and build. He looked like he'd been dragged from his sickbed and forced to wait in the lobby.

Speaking of... what in the hell was he doing out of the hospital when he looked like he was knocking on death's door?

He opened his eyes briefly when he heard me rounding Libby's desk, intent on Fifi's office. Our eyes met. Rodney's were a watery blue and too small for his face. I supposed he might have been considered inoffensive, but Lydia had upgraded, in my opinion. By a lot.

Rodney looked startled to see anyone strolling through the door. He gave me a bleary-eyed look before slurring, "You're one of those people on the posters."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Of course he'd know who I was. Fifi may not appreciate me, but she certainly put my face to good use on the advertising materials. You couldn't buy the kind of appeal an incubus brought to your firm. Women would

schedule appointments to see as many houses as possible just for an opportunity to look at me.

“Yard signs, but yes,” I said. “I’m Angelo Stedham. You’ve probably met my sister, Seraphina.”

Rodney blinked slowly, as though he had to work hard to understand what I’d just said. His skin looked waxy, and he’d broken out in a light sweat. He mopped at his brow with a long sleeve and slumped back against the wall, his energy spent after the one question. His eyes slid out of focus, and a moment later, he was snoring. There was even something grayish leaking from the corner of one nostril. I thought about tossing a tissue box at him, just so he’d take a hint, but decided it was beneath even my dignity. The man looked awful. If it was a curse, he was getting his comeuppance for what he’d done to Lydia. If it was illness, it wasn’t as though I could cure it. I’d urge whoever brought him here to get him back to the hospital posthaste. He looked and smelled like a man who wasn’t well.

“Who did you come here with?” I asked in a loud voice designed to wake him up. It worked.

“Andrea,” he mumbled, not opening his eyes. “She drove... needs... house... something...”

He trailed off into incoherent muttering. If his eyes had been fever-bright, I might have accused him of having a psychotic break. But he looked like a man who’d lost blood. Maybe the vampire comparison hadn’t been far off. But if Andrea was a vampire, how could she have approached us in daylight? I’d never seen a bloodsucker achieve that feat unless there was serious cloud cover. But the sky had been blue this morning, and not a cloud in sight. So if Andrea was a monster, she wasn’t a vampire. But what? I hadn’t read her as anything other than human.

I shook my head. It didn't really matter much, did it? Rodney was here, he was sick, and I wanted him gone before Lydia showed up. There was no faster way to spoil the mood of a date than to run into a nasty ex.

I needed to get him out of here while there was still time to salvage the situation, which meant having a serious conversation with Fifi.

I bypassed the now lightly snoring Rodney, torn between irritation at his presence and an uncharacteristic amount of pity. No matter my personal thoughts about the man, he shouldn't have dragged himself from the hospital bed if he wanted to recover. He looked like death warmed over. No, scratch that. I'd met Death before, in a ghost motel, and he'd seemed too refined to take this guy. I hoped I was wrong, because if Rodney croaked in the office and left a spook, I'd be even more annoyed than I was a few minutes ago. A ghost was bad enough. Lydia's dead ex would be a step too far. I'd have to find a new job to escape the insufferable man.

Fifi had made many changes to Hallowed Homes since Ophelia's departure. Well, 'death' was a better word for what had happened to Ophelia, really. And Fifi had helped Wanda salt the sour old night hag like a slug. Doing so had literally petrified the old broad. If Ophelia had somehow survived long enough to see her realty office now, she'd be completely and utterly mad inside her own head.

Yep, the old bat would have thrown a fit if she'd seen what my sister had done with the place. Ophelia would have detested the fact that there was way more light in the place now and easier lines of sight—both bad things when you were born to inspire nightmares and used shadows to cloak your sinister deeds. For a demon, Fifi had a comparatively sunny demeanor, one she aimed at Rodney's new fling if the glimpse I caught through her office door was any indication.

I poised just outside the slice of light pouring from the open door, letting my presence speak for itself. Fifi might like to play the part of a blushing virgin, but underneath it

all, she was a predator. Predators were always wary of their own kind, afraid they'd be next on the menu. It hadn't been unheard of in our far-flung past for close family members to manipulate each other that way. Our pheromones didn't work as well on each other as they did on humans, but more powerful members could still make an impression. I let just a little of my power permeate the air, a subtle but powerful statement of intent.

It didn't take long for Fifi to sit up and take notice. I saw her shift uncomfortably in my periphery, glancing sharply to where I lurked. No amount of shadow would have hidden me from her if she was determined, so I didn't even try. Instead, I crooked a finger at her in silent irritation, repeating it more forcefully when she didn't move right away. I could see her weighing the pros and cons of confronting me, almost dismissing my presence as an irritant.

Well, that wouldn't do.

I moved closer and rapped my knuckles lightly on the door. Both women swiveled to face me. Ordinarily, I would have liked Andrea Reyes; she was pretty and well-spoken. Unfortunately, she seemed to lack all sense of taste or shame. Anyone who'd decide that a prick like Rodney was worthwhile was either blind or willfully ignorant, neither of which I found attractive.

"Did you need something, Angelo?" Fifi asked, struggling to keep her tone level.

It didn't work. I could practically see her composing a diatribe to launch into when we were alone. Fine by me. I didn't mind a dressing down as long as everyone left the office like five minutes ago.

"I've got a bit of a problem. Can you help me with it?"

Fifi's eyes narrowed. She'd put on a little makeup today, though she didn't need it.

Her burgundy eyes were striking on their own. They looked even more exotic in her true form. Shame she rarely let it out to play. She was frightened of that part of herself. I'd never met a member of our species so deluded about who they were that they preferred being human for that reason. I just liked looking human to appeal to their women. From what I'd seen during the auction, Lydia didn't mind looking at my true form. It was enough to make a demon preen.

"I'm with a client."

She glanced pointedly at Andrea, who was still staring at me. There was a disturbing intensity in her gaze, and it had nothing to do with desire. For just a second, she examined my body more like a collector than a woman overcome by lust. I'd had clients throw themselves at me; Andrea looked like she was more likely to throw a paperweight instead. I'd pissed her off this morning.

Ask me if I cared.

"It should only take a second."

Fifi shot me a glare. I half-expected her to march to the door and slam it just shy of my nose. We'd always had a prickly relationship. Partly my fault; I could admit that now. I ought to have been more accommodating of my sister's strangeness. I still questioned her sanity, settling down into domestic bliss as a sasquatch's main squeeze, but to each their own, I guess. Their bizarre and borderline crazy own. Honestly, though, would it have killed her to find another demon? At least there was some dignity to that. Sasquatches were just... brutish. I shuddered to think how large her children would turn out.

Fifi finally seemed to realize that I wasn't going to back down and sighed, pushing away from her desk with a polite smile aimed at Andrea. Her eyes promised me an ass-kicking, though.

“I’m sorry about this, Andrea. I promise I won’t be long.”

Andrea’s smile was only a little more convincing than Fifi’s. She was going to have to work on that poker face if she wanted to be a politician. She should have taken lessons from our father, who was inscrutable unless he was trying to wring something from one of his victims.

“Of course. Business first,” Andrea said. “I think I’ll slip away to the ladies’ room while I wait. Nature calls.”

Fifi stalked out, holding the door open long enough for her client to sashay toward the back before closing the door behind her. She was in my face seconds later, nose inches from mine, with one knobby finger pressing like a stern ruler against my chest.

“This better be good, Ang. If you’ve just come to mock me about—”

“I’m not here to mock you,” I interrupted. “I wasn’t planning to speak with you at all tonight. I thought you’d be home having a romp with your boyfriend at this hour. Why are you still here?”

Fifi shrugged helplessly. “Do you remember that witch I told you about a year or two ago?”

I blinked slowly at her in response. Honestly, did she expect me to keep track of all her friends? She had too many platonic friendships to remember them all. It was odd for most succubi to make friends at all; other women were competition for prey, after all. But of course, my oddball sister didn’t think that way.

“You’ll have to be more specific,” I said finally. “I barely remember what you said this morning over coffee, let alone remembering any acquaintances you’ve made in the last year.”

Fifi sighed, pinching the bridge of her nose. “The one who encouraged celibacy?”

“Oh, her?”

Fifi nodded. “She contacted me again and asked for a favor.”

“And?”

“And Andrea appears to be a friend of a friend of hers.”

“Okay, what sort of creature do you think Andrea is?” I asked, figuring maybe Fifi had picked up on something I hadn’t.

“She strikes me as human, probably a grandchild of a witch, not one herself.”

A chill raced down my spine at those words. I’d worried about Fifi’s safety more than I liked to admit. Starving herself had been one of the most reckless stunts she’d pulled in recent memory. The fact she’d planned to amputate her demon from her human shape, leaving her frail and sickly, was bad enough. Knowing what I did about Indigo, I suspected (but unfortunately couldn’t prove) that the witch in question was working with the Ring Wraith wannabe I’d met at the auction. Ah yes, Murrain. That was the name.

“Why are you still in contact with that witch?” I demanded. “She was trying to mutilate you.”

Or possibly kill her, all to gain Fifi’s essence for some nefarious plot. I’d heard enough from Lydia to be horrified at the thought of something like that happening to Fifi. We might not get along well, but she was still my sister.

Fifi rolled her eyes. “She was trying to help me. That makes her well-meaning and

wrong, not dangerous.”

She’d probably think differently if she’d seen Lydia wake in a cold sweat. Whatever Indigo had been up to was worse than she wanted to admit.

But I hadn’t come here to argue with Fifi about the witch’s intentions. I had more important things to worry about, like getting Rodney and his girlfriend and my sister out of here.

“Why are you in the office so late?” I asked.

Fifi swayed, taken off guard. I think she’d been expecting more pushback. The change of topic seemed to throw her.

“It took a while for Andrea to check her fiancé out of the hospital. You know how lengthy the discharge process can be.”

I snorted. “So he’s conned another woman way out of his league into keeping him?”

Fifi’s brow furrowed. “You know Ms. Reyes’ fiancé?”

“Of course I do. He used to be Lydia’s husband. And Lydia is due to meet me here anytime. So reschedule with them or something.”

Fifi’s eyes narrowed. “And why exactly were you planning to be here after hours? At least I’m doing my job.”

I rolled my eyes. “Oh, I’m treating Lydia to a candlelit dinner in my office. What do you think I’m doing?”

Though, in all honesty, food and mood lighting were still waiting on my desk. I’d had

a few trips to make, so I'd left the setup to the last minute. It wasn't like it mattered if the plates and cutlery went flying when Lydia forgot herself in a wave of passion. Lydia was the one who wanted something traditional, so I'd try to give it to her. I planned to be very non-traditional after I broke out the handcuffs. But if I told Fifi that, she'd have something to say about doing it at work, and I wasn't in the mood to hear it.

Fifi glanced backward, wincing a little. "That's really Lydia's competition?"

"There's no competition if Lydia doesn't want him. And she doesn't have competition where I'm concerned. I'm not seeing anyone else."

It was shocking to realize I wasn't even looking for anything else or anyone else. I'd note if someone smelled appealing or had a particularly pretty face, but I didn't want the way I used to. There was less abandon in it now. I had a purpose: make Lydia scream herself hoarse with pleasure and keep doing it until she could see what I saw when I looked at her.

Fifi was staring at me like I'd sprouted a second tail. "So... you're only seeing Lydia?"

"Didn't I just say that?"

"And you wanted to have a date here," she continued, as though I hadn't spoken.

"Have you gone deaf as well as insane?" I asked pleasantly, hiding a grin when she punched my shoulder.

"Don't be an ass!"

"Too late."

Fifi's smile was softer and more understanding than I liked. "Alright, alright. I get it. You're trying to do something special for Lydia, and I'm sorry to be barging in, but this can't wait. I made promises."

I glowered at her. "You're really going to be here for the next few hours?"

"Unfortunately, I can't reschedule this without breaking a council code. You know we're supposed to give priority to things like this."

I personally thought a corrupt witch's grandchild was less important than Lydia's happiness, but I doubted anyone else would agree with me. Which meant my night had just been turned upside down.

"If you sell to Andrea, you're making a mistake," I said quietly. "I don't have a good feeling about her."

Fifi rolled her eyes. "No, you're just pissed you're not getting laid tonight."

A little, but it ran deeper than that. It wasn't about the sex. It was about what the knowledge of what was coming would do to Lydia. I jabbed a finger into Fifi's shoulder, glowering down at her. She took a step back when she spotted the look on my face.

"If Rodney moves here and hurts Lydia further, I'm holding you responsible, Fifi," I said in a low voice. "Remember that. Because I won't forget."

I turned on my heel, storming back to my office. I had evidence of a date to clean up. Fuck my life. Or rather, don't.

No. I wasn't going to let this stand. They'd have to leave eventually, and then I'd be able to follow. I'd find a way to take Lydia on our next date, avoiding Rodney

entirely. I wouldn't spoil things by mentioning him until I knew more.

I pulled out my phone and drafted a quick text to send to Lydia in a few minutes. I needed to cool off before fielding any of her curious calls. It wasn't time to tell her about this yet. After clearing my office and stuffing my things into the back of my car, I settled into the shadows to wait, windows down to catch any snippets of conversation that filtered out of Fifi's open office window.

A decision I regretted immensely when something moved in my periphery. I looked up just in time to see the bottle I'd bought earlier come swinging through my driver's side window like a laser-guided missile. It burst on contact with my skull, showering me with glass. I barely caught a glimpse of something gray whipping out of sight, clutching the broken top of the Irish whiskey bottle in a globby fist.

My eyes slid shut, and I slumped face down onto the wheel, praying whatever had bludgeoned me wouldn't come back to finish the job with their new improvised weapon.

I know. A demon praying. It was humiliating for me too.

Nightmares and numerology, I swore as something cold and slippery grasped my ankle. The sensation faded quickly as I sank into unconsciousness. This just isn't my night.

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Angelo

Whiskey was best when drunk, not worn, as law enforcement gleefully informed me while dragging my unconscious self in under the pretext that I'd gotten shitfaced in my car and harmed myself either intentionally or accidentally.

In a bigger, more human-centric town, I would have been stuck in the drunk tank all night. Thankfully, this was a Hollow, and I knew a gal.

Police Chief Taliyah Morgan leaned most of her frame against the wall across from my cell, giving me a pointed glare, as though I'd engineered this entire scenario just to ruin her night. Thankfully, there was no warlock in sight, so I was less likely to be cursed for saying something outrageous. I could recover from frostbite, but blood bolts gave even me pause. The man was touchy when it came to his wife. I'd heard he'd put a very distant cousin of mine through a wall once.

Taliyah could just as easily put my head through a wall but wouldn't. She took her oath to protect and serve seriously, though it didn't mean she didn't gripe about it along the way.

"You're bleeding," she said, her eyes dipping to my shirt.

She was right. I looked like I'd starred in a slasher film. Head wounds always gushed blood, and mine was no exception. One of her deputies had been afraid I'd shot myself when his headlights swept over the parking lot, and he found me leaning unconscious against my steering wheel. He'd been less than amused to discover that the blood was sourceless, my wounds having healed by the time he arrived. He'd

assumed I was staging some kind of drunken prank.

Taliyah knew better.

“Correction,” I said, slumping onto the single cot in the room. “I was bleeding. Now I’m healed, hungry, and pissed.”

I found myself watching her too intently. My hunger was intense—far greater than it should have been. I wasn’t keeping myself a small, starved thing the way Fifi had for years. I had resources to draw on in emergencies. Granted, I’d had a lot of emergencies since meeting Lydia and hadn’t replenished myself in longer than I could remember. It just seemed excessive for the amount of blood I’d lost. I’d lost a pint at most—not enough to cause this kind of brain fog.

“And you didn’t see who attacked you?” she checked.

A small, frustrated snarl escaped my lips. “I already told you what attacked me.”

“A gray, globby thing,” she said, folding her arms skeptically over her chest.

“Right.”

“That’s not much to go on. In fact, it probably describes a lot of monsters I’ve never met.”

“But none that live in the Hollow,” I said wearily. “That I know of, anyway.”

She nodded and then sighed. “I’ll talk with Mav when I get home. The coven will probably be able to scry something if the situation calls for it. For now, I need to be sure you’re alright. The head wound would have been serious for a human. Are you going to be okay?”

No.

I was struggling with the urge to ask for my one phone call. If Lydia strolled in, I'd take her against the bars. Her scent still clung to me from earlier in the day, so intoxicating I couldn't think straight. I needed to get out of here and get a meal or two in me. Human food, as well as a trip to see Ty again for a hunger suppressant. I was going to feed on Lydia at some point, but I wouldn't act like an animal, descending on her like a hungry beast. She deserved better than that from me. I'd take my precautions tonight, sleep, and then consult Fifi first thing in the morning. We had external cameras. With any luck, one of them had caught the thing that hit me.

"Fine," I gritted out between my teeth. "Just let me out. I don't want to accidentally seduce anyone in your department."

Taliyah frowned. "I'm the only woman on the force."

"Exactly. It's best for everyone if I go."

That earned me a wan smile. "You think you can sway my deputies?"

I returned it. "I don't think—I know." She gave me a disbelieving look. I shrugged. "I can already tell one is interested in me. It's a lust thing."

Taliyah cast a surprised glance over her shoulder. "Really?"

"Really. Are you going to let me out?"

Taliyah shrugged. "In about an hour. It'll take that long to sort out your paperwork."

I thumped my head against the bars when I checked the clock. Another hour would put my departure a half-hour before ten. I was already inexcusably late. Lydia had

probably turned in by now.

“You should call her,” Taliyah said as if reading my thoughts. “Lydia would want to know what’s going on.”

I shook my head. “It would worry her. Besides, I don’t want to break the news yet. She deserves another Rodney-free day.”

Taliyah shrugged. “It’s your funeral, Angelo.”

Yeah. That’s what I was afraid of. I hadn’t figured out what was happening, and soon it might be the end of us both. I had to find what had attacked me and shake some answers from it.

“Let’s hope not.”

“I need to call someone,” Taliyah continued, her tone softer now. “They think you’re under the influence. It won’t look plausible for you to walk out of here reeking and drive yourself home. Give me a name. Anyone who’ll take you.”

The winter queen looked formed from ice. She was cold, sleekly sculpted, with hair the color of frost. Her eyes were too bleak a blue to capture me, no matter how hungry I was. I was from an infernal realm. Nothing as chilly as a winter queen would be able to satisfy the urges I had.

“Not Lydia,” I insisted. “I don’t want...”

I didn’t want Lydia to worry. If she saw scarlet staining my skin and clothes, she’d fly into a panic. She’d already been scared once today when Vin tried to force his power onto her. I’d nearly been too late to stop him from trying to take her after the injury she’d inflicted on him. I wouldn’t do the same thing to her. She didn’t need to

fear me as well. This was my problem, not hers. Going home now was wrong. Cheating.

I'd promised not to cheat at the bargain. And despite the dark thoughts below, I was sticking to that.

Taliyah's sigh wasn't one of frustration now. She looked... sad. "Fifi then? Or Roy? You should at least get cleaned up before you go home to Lydia. You look like you tussled with Vorhees."

I felt like it too. My entire body ached, not just my head. I could feel a migraine coming on, which almost never happened to me. I was convinced that whatever had attacked me had done worse than knock me out. But the only wound that remained was a line of pink scar tissue near my navel. It looked like someone had cut me open, but the incision was too small to remove anything vital. It wasn't even a good spot to draw blood, being so far from an artery. You'd have to dig deep to find the large vessel that supplies the organs. I would have been far more hurt if someone had been after that. I figured I must have landed on a shard of glass, cutting myself deeper.

"Fifi. She can take me where I need to go. I don't want to deal with a lecture from Roy tonight."

Taliyah nodded. "I can do that. Just promise me you'll tell Lydia what's going on, eventually. Trust me. She'll want to understand."

"I promise."

I'd tell Lydia soon. After I could guarantee I wouldn't hurt her without meaning to. Tomorrow morning, at the latest. I had a showing at two, which left a few hours to make it up to her.

Taliyah turned back to me after a moment of hesitation. “Stay safe, Angelo. I don’t want to lose another person under my protection to the bullshit this town comes up with.”

“Amen, Chief,” I said wryly. “A-fucking-men.”

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:18 am

Lydia

“Just go in already,” I muttered to myself, pacing the sidewalk outside my shop like a lost puppy. It’s just up the road. You pop in, buy something, and then come back. It’ll take fifteen minutes, max. Just go.

But I couldn’t force my legs to move. My entire body felt heavy, and the reason was deceptively simple.

Angelo hadn’t taken me to bed last night. Hell, he hadn’t taken me anywhere last night. No call, no texts, nothing to explain why he’d bailed. He’d made grand promises, but in the end, he hadn’t come in until after midnight, dragging himself onto the couch with a groan. He’d smelled so much like whiskey that I assumed he’d been elbow-deep at the bar by the time last call came around. I wasn’t sure what had sent him into the arms of Jack Daniels, but I had a sneaking suspicion that I was somehow involved.

Had he finally taken off his rose-colored glasses and gotten a good look at me? I’d always been afraid he’d wise up and realize that when it came to looks, he was way out of my league. There was nothing I had to offer that he couldn’t get elsewhere from someone more attractive. No, I wasn’t a hideous monster or anything, but I was still fairly ordinary—girl-next-door pretty at best, with all the physical earmarks of being in my forties. I wasn’t an ageless faerie like Taliyah Morgan. I wasn’t full-bodied and confident like Wanda or any of the other witches I’d met. I wasn’t ridiculously attractive like the succubae he’d grown up around. Maybe he was mulling over how to let me down easily over a glass of aged whiskey. Or thirteen.

You can pout about the rejection or do something about it, I chided myself, actually missing Indigo's voice in my head. She would have told me to end the pity-party like yesterday. There's a potion shop right up the street with a few handy solutions. Just move your ass. It's not even that far.

My feet remained stubbornly unconvinced. I kept flicking Angelo's lighter restlessly as I paced tiny, depressing circles around the front door of my shop, Occult Oddities. A few people glanced my way, watching me curiously, but almost no one stopped to stare. I was just an odd duck pacing like a lunatic in front of a black arts shop. It would probably be weirder for tourists if I wasn't a bit strange.

The fire coming from the lighter was probably eye-catching in the gloom, though. An unseasonable fog was rolling in, chilling my face and hands. It was part of the reason I'd grabbed Angelo's lighter. He always kept it nearby these days. He smoked a hunger-inhibiting herb most mornings and evenings, drawing in at least a few women who had set their sights on my hunky roomie. It had been great for business, if not for my fragile ego.

He'd left the lighter behind today. Did that mean he wasn't hungry? That he was done waiting for me and had gotten food elsewhere? I couldn't blame him. He shouldn't go hungry because I was being indecisive. I just wished he'd told me as much, instead of avoiding me. He'd left before I could even ask why he'd flaked.

As if in response to my thoughts, the lighter suddenly flamed up in my hand, as if it had just exploded for no good reason. I gave a little yip, then glanced down at it, realizing the heat from the flame hadn't harmed me at all. In fact, it hadn't even hurt.

"Well, that was interesting, wasn't it?"

I yelped when I turned around and found a witch standing only a few feet away, hand on one hip, watching me pace like a caged animal. In my distracted state, it took me a

second to distinguish this brunette from the rest of the pack. Well, “coven” was more accurate. The ink-dark hair and intense gray of her eyes were dead giveaways. She could only be a witch, and one I recognized better than most.

I pressed a hand to my chest. “Wanda! You scared me!”

Wanda’s full lips curved into a smirk, clearly pleased with my reaction. Most witches seemed to thrill in being at least a little terrifying. You could always trust a witch to find mischief wherever she went.

“You should pay better attention. I wasn’t trying to sneak up on you, which means you’re dangerously distracted. You only just now realized that lighter has been flaming up in your hand the entire time you’ve been pacing out here?”

I stopped in my tracks, staring down at the lighter once more. I briefly tried to get it to light, but it only made a pathetic sputtering noise, producing only a few sparks before going out. Definitely no flame. Hmm.

Wanda sighed, looking put upon as she took in my confused expression. Then she reached for me, seizing me unceremoniously by the wrist and dragging me up the sidewalk.

“Where are we going?” I asked in a small voice.

“Poppy’s.”

“Why?”

“You two need to talk. She’s the only other gypsy who’ll be able to relate to a muddled power signature.”

“A muddled power signature?”

“That lighter didn’t make itself explode.”

“Then you’re saying I made it do that?”

She looked at me like I was dumb. “That’s exactly what I’m saying. Anyway, Poppy will have an answer for you. Maybe you’ll learn something from each other.”

I swallowed thickly. It looked like I’d be paying my cousin’s shop a visit after all.

And all it took was a magical mishap and a witch to kick your ass the whole way there.

I’d seen Poppy’s Potions from the outside more than once, usually on my way to and from Sweeter Haunts, the most visited tourist locale in town. It wasn’t every day you waltzed through a tiny hamlet and found a year-round Halloween candy store. It had been fueling my jelly bean addiction for months now. I was pretty sure I had the proprietor of the establishment to blame for the last few pounds I’d packed on.

Poppy’s shop looked less outrageous in comparison, though just as adorable in its own right. She’d chosen an old-school apothecary aesthetic: a large pair of frosted block windows and a heavy oak door wedged in between. Wanda didn’t bother to knock or announce her presence as she dragged me past it, still clutching my wrist like I was a child.

In the face of all the magic in the room, I almost felt like a child. The complexity of some of the enchantments in their tiny glass bottles was staggering. I’d barely begun to learn how to brew, relying heavily on Indigo and Checkers to make anything

halfway decent.

If my attempt was a child's scribbles, this place was the Mona Lisa. Poppy clearly had a talent.

The aroma struck me a second after the magic. It was almost overpowering, after the smell of old pages and roasted coffee beans I was used to. I remembered enough from my uncles to recognize bergamot, allspice, pepperwort, and vetiver. The rest blended into a somewhat muggy background noise that immediately fogged my head. Unlike Wanda's Witchery, there seemed to be nothing cursed inside.

I reached idly for a crystal, smiling to myself as a pulse of happiness radiated against my palm. It was easier to sense magic now that Indigo had kickstarted mine, but I felt like I still had a lot to learn. Wanda had been right about at least that much. I needed a teacher who understood a blend of magic and could help me make peace with what I had. According to the terse explanation I'd gotten on the way, white witches were slim pickings here. If this was the general tenor of Poppy's magic, I wouldn't mind learning from her. It beat relying on Indigo's dubious morals.

Was it sad that I was half hoping to hear Indie's indignant squawk in reply to the thought? But the potion we'd made had done its job. She was still fast asleep. I didn't have anyone else to ruminate with. If she'd been conscious, she'd probably have convinced me to curse Angelo's junk or something, so maybe it was a mixed blessing. I wasn't sure I wanted the intentional infliction of warts on my conscience. I'd regret it... eventually.

A door near the back opened, and a blonde woman bobbed into sight, summoned by the tinkling of the bell above the door. Most of her body was obscured by a swaying stack of boxes. Wanda sighed and steadied it before the top two could topple onto the front counter. Then Wanda lifted the very top box to reveal a red-faced, pretty woman. I could see a little of the family resemblance in Poppy's nose and mouth, but

otherwise, we weren't obviously related. With the witchy dye job I sported, we looked even less alike. I found myself a little envious of Poppy's softly waving hair. I missed being a blonde.

Poppy blinked in surprise, more color flushing into her face when she realized she'd been about to fumble the box.

"Thanks," she said in a small voice.

Wanda's free hand slammed down onto one hip as she fixed Poppy with one of the most chiding looks I'd seen between adults.

"I've told you not to do it in one trip. You're going to end up in an accident, and then I'll have to deal with the aftermath. If you spill the ones with potions in them, it might be even worse. I might find you lounging across the cash wrap like a sloth."

Poppy rolled her eyes. "I take the potion orders one by one for that reason. These are recently charged crystals and a few blessed candles. The worst that could happen is I drop the box on my foot, break it, and need a cast."

"Which will still fall to me, Poppy," Wanda said with a long-suffering sigh. "Someone will have to drive you to the ER. You're so lucky to have a coven watching over you; you'd be lost without us." She paused. "And I don't want you breaking anything—least of all one of your bones."

"You are worse than a helicopter parent," she said, biting her cheek, clearly holding back a smile that made her eyes sparkle. They were a different shade of blue than mine. It was odd to look at someone who shared some of my features but was otherwise so unlike me. I kept expecting her to burst into a ball of sunshine or dandelion fluff. It was a nice change after all the negativity Indigo had dragged into my life.

“Excuse the spell out of me for caring so much about you,” Wanda responded with a frown.

“Well, thanks for that, Wanda,” Poppy said as she then turned to face me. “Hi, Lydia.”

I greeted her in kind as Wanda waved away our words as if they were the buzzing of insect wings. “You need someone to stop you from doing stupid things, Poppy. Don’t carry that much again, or I’m going to hex you.”

The smile won, spreading across Poppy’s face like the break of dawn. She and Wanda were clearly very close, even if Wanda was as prickly as a cactus.

“Other than concern for my safety, what brings you in today? You’re not out of Love’s Goddess Oil again, are you? I know that underwear line has been selling a lot lately.”

Wanda set her burden aside and seized me again, dragging me forward. A second later, I was nearly nose-to-nose with a breathless Poppy. The color had begun to drain from her cheeks, and her smile was a little brittle when she turned it on me. “I’m not here for myself, actually.”

“Oh?” Poppy asked as she turned her attention to me.

But before I could say anything, Wanda was already saying it for me. “Lydia is having an unusual magical reaction that appears to be fire related.”

And that was basically the gist of it. Granted, Wanda had only witnessed this strange ability in the last ten minutes or so, but my relationship with fire had been pretty interesting lately—something I probably did need to get to the bottom of.

“Oh?”

I shrugged. “I mean, I guess that’s what you could call it.”

Wanda nodded. “I’d think if anyone can help her figure out what’s going on, it’s you. You’re the only gypsy I know with experience in dark and light magic.”

Poppy cast me a nervous glance. Her swallow was audible, but she didn’t immediately speak.

“Please,” I whispered. “I... I was going to come sometime today. I need help. If you want to help me, that is.”

Poppy’s eyes softened, making lines fan out around them, a roadmap of much happier expressions. I had a good feeling about her, and my gut rarely led me wrong.

“Alright. Step into the back. I’ll see what I can do.”

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Lydia

Once Wanda had departed, claiming she had business that was taking her elsewhere, I followed Poppy into her back room, which felt barely larger than a postage stamp compared to the spacious area I reserved for inventory.

Still, she kept it neat, with potion bottles and ingredients organized and out of the way. The place was suspiciously clean, except for a pile of colored pencils and assorted markers in one corner. She caught me looking at the mess and flushed an adorable shade of pink.

“Sorry about that. Finn and Ouire have been working on art lessons. Some of the magic lessons he’s learning might require basic sketching. He doesn’t have to be Van Gogh or anything, but apparently, art has magic in it, too.”

“Makes sense,” I said, leaning against the wall instead of taking the undersized chair in the corner. “I’ve always thought there was something magical about art.”

She looked up at me. “Oh?”

I nodded. “I tried to go to art school when I was younger, but I gave up halfway through and switched my major. Being forced to learn a certain way wasn’t for me. I wanted to keep enjoying the process of creating, you know?”

Except I hadn’t. I’d met Rodney and settled down. I’d stopped doing anything that made me happy for fear he’d mock it or otherwise steal my joy.

Poppy cast a cautious glance up at me through her lashes. She reminded me a little of a small, blonde doll. She had dimples, for Pete's sake. I'd never met someone whose insides matched their outward appearance so perfectly. She was bright, shining from the soul outward. I felt grimy in comparison, covered as I was by the evidence of Indigo's sins.

"Really?"

I nodded. "It's been years, but I might be able to help your son with the very basic stuff if you or he want me to."

"Oh," she started and seemed taken aback.

"I get it; we're related, but that doesn't make us family," I offered. "I have plenty of relatives I only see once or twice a decade when there's a reunion. That's actually how I ended up with Indigo. I mean, I met her briefly, the accident happened, and then..."

I splayed my fingers, mimicking an explosion. I was trying hard not to think about watching Indigo fall apart in front of me. I tried to keep the revulsion off my face but failed. Poppy sat down in the empty chair, considering me.

"Do you want tea or something? You look like you want to puke."

I nodded, swallowing back the urge to be sick. "Tea sounds great. Do you have peppermint?"

Poppy nodded in a businesslike manner and began rummaging through the stacks until she found a box of bagged tea stashed in a back corner. "And as far as I'm concerned," she said as she started to sort through the tea bags, "we are family." Then she looked up at me and smiled. "And I'm sure Finn would love to take you up on

your offer.” Then she bustled off and returned a few minutes later with a steaming cup. The tea hadn’t steeped long enough, but I didn’t care the moment the mix hit my lips.

She’d added something to the weak tea, I was pretty sure. It tasted like rose, which clashed oddly with the sharper taste of mint. It tingled going down, but definitely tasted good. I paused, lifting an eyebrow.

“Was that magic?” I asked.

Poppy’s smile was hesitant yet genuine. “Mine. It’s a modified form of Tranquility Oil. I’ve been experimenting with anti-anxiety brews for a while. The world just keeps getting darker and darker, you know? It’s easy to get scared. I wanted it to work like a mild form of medication, without all the nasty side effects, but it’s been too strong for most people. It’s more like a sedative when humans take it. Which, I mean, is great if we need to do magical surgery or something, but I really don’t want it to come to that, you know?”

Poppy’s smile had slipped, and worry had crept into her eyes. The happy-go-lucky persona wasn’t a mask, per se, but she was definitely being worn down by stress, I was pretty sure. It was stifling her light.

She jumped when I grabbed her hand and gave it a little squeeze. I lifted my cup to her in salute. “Well, I’m grateful, whatever the reason. I was about to have a nervous breakdown on my front stoop. You just saved me a hell of a lot of embarrassment. I like playing into the eccentric bookshop owner thing sometimes, but I don’t want it to be that authentic.”

Poppy let out a surprised laugh, stifling the sound with her hand as though surprised at herself. It made me smile. At least someone was happy to be around me.

“So, what’s going on?” she asked.

So, I told her. And then I further told her that I needed advice before I accidentally did worse than summon small tongues of flame. Stress was a part of life. Causing wildfires because of it was not. I told her as much.

“Was it Indigo’s magic that’s affecting you?” she asked after a moment. “Is that what freaked you out and made your fire come to the surface?”

That was a nice way of putting it. And oh, if only. At least then I’d have a reason to descend into an unending pit of doubt. Not being able to trust yourself not to burn down the town was a legitimate reason to freak out. Angsting over being ghosted was not.

I fiddled with the tea bag before taking another sip of the infused tea. Forget love potions. I’d pay Poppy a fortune for this stuff. The utter clarity and calm were incredible.

It was the only thing that allowed me to blurt out the truth instead of a convenient lie.

“No. I think the magic was a side effect of my mood. The stuff I inherited from Indigo is unstable. It makes casting or brewing things tricky because I don’t know what’s me, what’s her, and what’s bleeding over from the things she absorbed from other monsters. I know better than to get into a tizzy, though. It can only end badly, but I just...”

I sank lower in my chair. It was just so embarrassing to admit.

“You just?” Poppy encouraged me.

“I guess you could say I’m having a bit of an identity crisis.”

“Because of Indigo?”

“Not only because of her—I just...” God, was I really going to bring up my romantic life (or lack thereof) with someone I really didn’t know? “I should have known better than to date a playboy on top of everything else going on in my life.”

Understanding dawned on Poppy’s face, quickly followed by sympathy. “Oh. Angelo?”

I nodded. “Yep.”

“Did he... erm... step out on you?”

I shook my head with a soft, disbelieving laugh. I couldn’t believe I was about to admit this aloud, but... “No, I don’t think he did. Not really.”

She frowned. “Then?”

“He didn’t show up for a date he swore he was excited for. And when he finally staggered home, he smelled like a liquor store.” I shook my head. “I’m sorry I’m even bringing this up. It must sound so... stupid to you.”

She laughed at that. “No, I’ve had my share of man trouble, too.”

“You have?” I asked, surprised because as far as I knew, she had scored a pretty amazing man who only had eyes for her. I couldn’t remember his name at the moment, though.

“Yeah. Before Andre, I had all kinds of up and downs with Roy and Marty.”

“You dated Roy?” I asked, surprised. “The sasquatch?”

She nodded. “Sure did.”

“And Marty...” I started. “Is that why he left town?” As far as I knew, Marty had left Haven Hollow to pursue other, bigger things in a different Hollow.

“I hope not,” Poppy frowned. “But getting back to you and Angelo... it isn’t necessarily about you, Lydia.”

That confused me. “What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “Just that I’ve known Angelo for a while now. He acts... different around you.”

I took a long draft of the tea before muttering, “Yeah, he hasn’t tried to take my pants off.”

“Exactly,” Poppy said with a nod and a laugh. “Call me crazy, but I think that means he wants more than sex.”

“Then why—?” I began.

“Maybe you should ask him,” she said gently.

“I don’t know,” I answered.

“Well, look at the facts,” she considered. “And they are that Angelo came home covered in booze. Maybe that means he went on a bender. Maybe it was a family thing. Or maybe you’re right and he was kidnapped, soaked in booze, and seduced by a harem of girls with triple G breasts.”

My laugh sounded creaky, even to my own ears, but it was still something. I felt

better sitting here and talking about it. Poppy wasn't judging me, telling me I was stupid for thinking an incubus could stay faithful.

"Now there's an image that will haunt my nightmares."

Poppy's smile was soft and a little sad. "The point is, I think you're freaking out a little prematurely. Talk to him. See what happened. Trust your gut if you think he's lying and break it off. But don't throw in the towel to avoid being broken up with. I think he should at least get to say something before you go."

I glanced sideways at her. I thought I could finally see why Wanda fussed over Poppy so much. Wanda was a pessimist, just like me. You needed a ray of sunshine in your life so you didn't go mad dwelling on every problem piling up outside your door.

"I think you missed your calling as a therapist," I said, finishing the potion-laced-tea. "This helped me. Thank you. I don't feel like I'm about to explode anymore. That's progress."

Poppy beamed. "That's great. At least something turned out right for you today."

I pushed off from the wall after a moment of thought. "Thanks for the tea and the talk. I should probably get back to my shop. I'm technically opening late, and I don't want to keep you from your business either."

Poppy stood as well, catching my hand before I could make a hasty retreat. "Would you like to... visit sometime? I mean, we are family."

I nodded. "The reason I haven't visited so far is just because... well, there's a lot of crap going on with Indigo and the stuff she was involved in and I wouldn't want to make you a target."

“Main Street is pretty public. I don’t think anyone would try anything in broad daylight.”

I shook my head as I realized she was still holding onto me and it felt strangely... comforting. “I think it’s best if I don’t involve you. Murrain managed to reach Indigo through all her spells and the physical barrier of my shop. And that was when she literally... exploded. I would never want to expose you or your kid to that.”

The color drained from her expression. Her next swallow sounded strained. “I understand and I appreciate you looking out for us. And... well, I’m sorry you’re having to deal with everything you are.”

“Thank you,” I said and then turned to leave, but she held on stubbornly, taking a step forward as I did. Her eyes were huge when I turned back to look at her.

“Are you talking to anyone, Lydia, about what happened with Indigo? A therapist?”

The laugh that bubbled out of me sounded hysterical. “Who would I talk to? Angelo is usually my go-to, but he doesn’t really understand everything I’m going through. That’s probably because I’m mostly human, and he’s not.”

“I’m human,” she said quietly. “And we could at least talk. Over the phone.”

My heart squeezed painfully. When I drew my hand back this time, she let me.

“Are you sure?” I asked, my throat tight. “It’s... dark stuff. Pretty depressing.”

“I would be happy to help,” she countered. “Promise me you’ll talk to someone.”

By the end of her impassioned speech, she was nearly nose-to-nose with me. I wasn’t sure if I should be alarmed or charmed by her sudden and intense interest in my well-

being. I usually took in strays, not the other way around.

“I’ll... think about it. Thanks, Poppy.”

“You’re welcome, Lydia.”

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Angelo

“You didn’t tell her?” Fifi asked, staring at me over the breakfast table in shock.

I half-expected her slice of bacon to clatter to her plate and shatter into a thousand pieces. The sasquatch liked to cook it within an inch of its life, crisping the pork until it barely resembled meat anymore. I wasn’t sure how Fifi put up with his cooking, honestly, but she must have found a solution. They’d all but moved in together in the past few weeks, and Roy had been hinting strongly that I should move back into Fifi’s vacated home. Something about keeping me from aiming my dubious charms at innocent gypsies.

I ate the damn bacon and the mountain of eggs the enormous sasquatch piled on my plate before leaving for his day job because the alternative was worse. If I wasn’t feeding my demon half, I needed to maintain the human facade I wore better. That meant no more surviving on coffee or energy drinks between feedings. Food at every meal. At this rate, I might even have to resort to supplements. Dark Ones below, I hoped not. Bacon was one thing. A multivitamin was a bridge too far.

I swallowed the mouthful of rubbery eggs with a grimace. It hit my stomach unpleasantly. It wasn’t what I wanted. If I had my way, my sister would be absent, and Lydia would appear in all her naked glory. It was almost the only thing I could think about. I was hungry. Distressingly so. I hadn’t felt anything like this in all my years topside. The only memory that came close was my father cutting me off from my lovers for two weeks to teach me a lesson about control. I felt the same snarling emptiness from the pit where my demon lay.

“There’s not a lot I can tell her,” I said, petulantly stuffing another bite of eggs into my mouth. “Until we have that footage and get it to Chief Morgan, we won’t know who or what attacked me. I’ve got my money on Andrea, though. That witch who nearly killed you suddenly pops back into your life, and I get attacked the night I try to dissuade you from doing her a favor? That seems like more than just a coincidence.”

Fifi rolled her eyes. “For the last time, it wasn’t Andrea that attacked you.”

“That you know of,” I said, jabbing my fork at her. “She wasn’t in your line of sight the entire time.”

“Yeah, but she was in my line of sight when it happened. I heard you leave. I went to the restroom and she was still using it. I could see her feet in the last stall. Unless she can be in two places at once, she didn’t attack you.”

Well, damn. My gut had been leaning toward Andrea as the culprit. She’d come into town with a man who couldn’t score a date with his own hand. Not only that, but Andrea had connections with monsters outside our Hollow that might be dangerous. Granted, she’d felt human to me but that didn’t really mean that much. She could have a charm that hid her beastly half. Any way I looked at it, she appeared guilty as hell. But Fifi was right. If Andrea had been in the bathroom, she couldn’t have been the one who attacked me. Besides, nothing on her was gelatinous enough. Whatever had attacked me had felt a lot like an octopus tentacle wrapping around my ankle. I had a vague notion it might have scooted its way up my body, but there was no indication it had done anything after that.

Nothing physical, at any rate.

Something had happened. Of that, I was sure. Even after sitting in a strip club parking lot, absorbing the ambient energy wafting from the building, I was still famished. It

felt like I'd sustained a serious wound and depleted all my reserves. Except there was no evidence to support my suspicion. I wasn't even sure how to tell a doctor to start testing for a magical assault.

I stabbed another bit of egg, nibbling the edges instead of popping it into my mouth. I was seriously considering whisking Lydia away on a whirlwind vacation. She needed the break, and I needed to feed. At some point, the mood would be right again. She wanted me. I could sense that any time we were near each other. It was as inevitable as gravity. Yes, she wanted me, and I wanted her. I always had. I'd have her. She'd have me. I just had to be patient.

"So you're seriously telling me you set Lydia up for a date, but then you didn't tell her why you canceled?" Fifi continued. "Are you a moron or just plain stupid?"

I scowled. "I still have that pocket thesaurus you chunked at my head. Those are synonyms, sister mine."

"Yeah, because you're acting like an imbecile! Poor Lydia. Dating you is going to give her a complex."

I narrowed my eyes, scowling at her. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"That you're hopeless and this dating thing is beyond your capabilities."

"What are you talking about?"

"Just that you have no freaking clue how the rules of dating work, do you? You've never had to follow them. I shouldn't even be surprised," she continued, not allowing me to answer. "You just waltz into a woman's life, have your way with her, and flee."

"Because it's safest that way," I insisted. "Humans are fragile, as you well know. I

have to spread the feedings out so I don't kill one of them. Do you want me to end up like Euryvos?"

Fifi winced and finally sat back down in her chair. I knew that case still bothered her. Like me, Euryvos had been an incubus, though he'd lived in the Hollow a few decades before I'd moved here. He'd been dating a witch, and things had gone well for a while. Except when she'd become pregnant, the child had fed on her too. It had been too much stress on her heart and she'd died.

I'd been terrified of repeating the same mistake with Lydia before I knew about the demon grafted onto Lydia's soul. It could withstand me. Koloths were among the toughest customers around, regularly conscripted for holy wars by infernal generals willing to pay their fees. Mortal women didn't have the same endurance. Keeping one person too long was detrimental to their health, so I had to move on or kill them one dark night when I pushed too far. It was easiest for everyone if I kept it casual and spread the need around. This was the first time I'd held out for someone since my power had come online. Fifi was right—I wasn't used to this dating stuff. In the past, any romantic notions I might have had had always been pummeled out of my head. If I didn't want to kill someone, I couldn't have a relationship. Until now.

Fifi sighed and sipped her coffee with a put-upon expression. "You're still an idiot. An ignorant idiot, but still an idiot."

"Stop calling me names!"

"Stop hurting my friends," she countered. "I like Lydia. I don't want you to mess things up for her."

"I didn't hurt her," I said, a touch of growl in my voice.

Fifi's brows lifted, and I realized I'd stood up at some point, my hands bunching in

Roy's checkered tablecloth. I'd torn holes in it with my claws. Except my human form wasn't supposed to have those, which meant I'd begun to shift into my demonic aspect without realizing it. It wasn't my husky human voice that drove women wild. The voice escaping my throat was my own, deeper and more resonant. I couldn't easily pit my energy against Fifi's, but the demon was still clearly ready for a fight.

I sat back down, abruptly exhausted. What the hell was wrong with me? I wasn't a teen flushed with hormones and a desperate need to hit something. It had been decades since we'd had a knockdown drag-out fight. It was traditional for young demons to battle occasionally, but neither of us had taken it seriously. Why? Because Fifi had always been lost in human romances, and I'd been too busy feeding on any woman who'd have me. We were getting older now. If I fought her, one of us would get hurt. It wasn't worth the poke she'd taken at my ego.

"Something is wrong," I groaned. "I don't know what. It feels like I haven't fed in a year, which shouldn't be the case. I'm sorry for snapping, Fifi. I just..."

Her eyes softened. "You're hungry. Maybe Lydia..."

"No," I barked. "I'm not begging her to sleep with me. Not only is it humiliating, it would be a breach of my promise. I told her I'd be patient. I'll just..."

"Do what?" Fifi countered. "You can barely finish a sentence right now. You need food."

I stood abruptly, pushing away from the table. The chair legs let out a strident squeal, and a petty part of me hoped it scratched Roy's hardwood floors. He was pissing me off in absentia. Everything was pissing me off.

"I need to leave. I'll get a breakfast sandwich on the way to my first showing or something."

Fifi stood and crossed the room in two long strides to seize me. To my shock, I realized she could hold me. That shouldn't have been the case. She might be feeding regularly now, but I still had years of surplus left.

Except... I didn't. All that energy that should have been there—it was gone. Every scrap of life force I'd siphoned off willing women over the years was missing. I staggered, stunned by the revelation.

"I think something fed on me," I whispered, my hand falling to my stomach. The cut there made more sense if it was symbolic instead of literal. A lot of magic worked that way—substituting one thing for another or making a wound on a poppet to produce results in the real world.

Fifi's eyes widened. "What?"

"It's gone. Everything I saved—all that backed up energy that should still be there. It's all gone now..."

Whatever that thing was, it might have killed me. When it had cut me open and drained my life force, it hadn't just meant to scare me. It had meant to end me. If I hadn't been such a manwhore, that kind of theft would have killed me. It would have taken Fifi out quickly since she didn't have the kinds of reserves I did.

Or used to have.

All color drained from her face. For the first time since I'd brought up the issue, she seemed to take it seriously. She reached for my shirt with shaking fingers and lifted the hem, hissing in surprise and sympathy when she saw the wound on my stomach. It made sense why that location had been chosen. Whatever had tried to end my life had done so by taking every scrap of food that could possibly extend it.

“I thought you were...”

“Being an idiot?” I guessed.

She snorted. “You’re still an idiot, but I didn’t realize it was this bad.” She looked up at me. “But I still think you should have taken Talyiah’s advice and called Lydia. I bet she’s upset right now.”

“I missed a date, Fifi. I didn’t run over her cat.”

“She’ll be even angrier when she finds out you were hurt and didn’t think she could handle it.”

I had to fight the urge to snort. Fifi was being dramatic. Lydia knew I wanted her. That hadn’t changed and wouldn’t change at this point. I didn’t think I could stop after just one taste. I craved her like I craved air.

“It’s not like that,” I said.

“Idiot,” she said with less force this time. “Tell her what happened. Consider it a condition before you come back to work. If you’re as hungry as I think you are, you’re going to end up seducing some poor woman on reflex, and then I’ll be pissed. I wouldn’t forgive you if you added cheating on a friend to your long list of offenses. You worry about Lydia, and I’ll figure out what happened in the parking lot.”

“Then you agree that whatever happened, it’s bad?”

She nodded. “I think it’s really bad.” Then she breathed in deeply. “Now march, Mister. You have some serious ass to kiss.”

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Lydia

Angelo had the audacity to waltz into the shop, sit in one of my cushy chairs, and pick up a book while I worked.

He didn't say anything to me right away. Eventually, I decided to put on a CD I knew he disliked to make a point. Yesterday, I would have paid to be in his arms, his lips on mine. It wasn't just the pheromones, though they helped. It was the way he looked at me, as if I were the most vital and interesting thing in the world.

I could still feel that look, even from across the room, but this time it just pissed me off. He didn't get to ghost me and then sit in my shop, watching me like a lion tracks a gazelle.

"Don't you have a house showing to go to?" I snapped as I passed him for the umpteenth time. He'd slid lower in the chair, his legs in the aisle.

I narrowly dodged them again as I navigated the stacks. My shop wasn't large, but it was roomier than the setup I had in Tiller. I wasn't doomed to trip over Angelo in the cramped confines of my own damned business. If I was up close and personal with him, it was generally on purpose and almost always his idea. I'd never exactly complained about the times he'd sidled close before kissing me senseless, so I thought of it as a victimless crime. It was cat and mouse, a silent agreement we'd formed over the last few months. He liked the chase. So did I.

Right now, though? It was just making me angry. Angelo gave me a somewhat affronted look when I kicked his leg out of my way, steadying the precarious pile in

my arms. I had no sympathy when he rubbed his shin idly, his gaze fixed on my back in bewilderment. I was being prickly, and I knew it.

“I don’t want to trip,” I said, unable to help myself, softening the kick with the only excuse I could think of. “Keep your legs to yourself.”

“Okay,” he said slowly, still eyeing me as I began to arrange my newest display. The new-agey stuff sold best, but I’d decided to splurge on a few more obscure texts most recently. “And no, I don’t have a house to show, to answer your question. Not for another two hours. I’m on a meal break.”

“But you’re not eating,” I pointed out.

In fact, he’d been leafing through what amounted to a sorcery-for-dummies book the entire time.

“I had a sandwich on the way over.”

“And the Subway employee who made it?” I added, my voice lowering to an unhappy grumble.

It was a cheap shot, and I knew it. Angelo hadn’t given me any real reasons to doubt his sincerity, but I wanted to question it anyway. It just didn’t make sense that someone so devilishly handsome could like someone like me. And it didn’t make sense for a playboy like Angelo to shackle himself to a monogamous relationship. If by some miracle he’d decided to defy biology and be content with just one person, why would it ever be me?

Ask, I thought to myself. Poppy gave you advice. Take it. Talk to him.

But I didn’t want to talk. I wanted to rail at him. I wanted to ask how he could do this

to me. I'd put on makeup, for heaven's sake! I almost never wore it these days. No point when I wasn't looking for a date. Angelo had slunk into my life unexpectedly, settling like an absurdly attractive fixture before I could process it. He was in my life. That was just the way it was.

Thinking of him leaving wasn't just painful; it felt unbearable, like losing a limb. But if I told him that, he'd run for the hills. And I couldn't even blame him.

Angelo reached purposefully for the display I was working on, plucking a velvety black bookmark from the knick-knacks section before neatly slotting it into the pages of the book he'd been reading. He managed to do so without ever taking his eyes off me. I felt a mortified flush creep up my neck as he stared me down. I didn't look away, though. It felt like letting him win. I wasn't even sure what I was trying to beat him at, just that I didn't want to be the one who blinked first.

The small sound the book made when it hit the end table beside his chair made me jump. It sounded like a gunshot in the silence of the shop. My radio had been trashed recently in a magic-related incident. I'd almost decided to get a white noise machine, if only to alleviate the claustrophobic quiet that tried to strangle the air from me. Pregnant silences stretched almost unbearably, like this one.

I shrank closer to the display when he stood and brushed past me, heading for the front door. For a long, guilty second, I was afraid I'd driven him out of the shop for good with the sudden and uncharacteristic bout of bitchiness that had overtaken me. I couldn't even blame Indigo for this one. She'd be back tomorrow evening when the brew we'd come up with wore off and maybe it was a good thing she wasn't witnessing this.

I expected Angelo to storm past me. Instead, he stopped just shy of the door, flicking my 'We're open' sign to the 'Sorry, we're closed' position. My heart pounded furiously when he drew the front shades down over my windows, plunging the

midday shop into sudden twilight.

“What are you doing?” I protested weakly.

“Ensuring some privacy,” he said, brushing the creases from his slacks in a brisk, businesslike fashion. “Clearly, we need to talk.”

I lost my nerve first, dropping my eyes to the darkly stained wood under my fingertips instead. The flush was creeping onto my face now, and I hated my traitorous blood for outing me like this. If I could pull off the cool cucumber routine he’d mastered, I’d probably sell more. I just didn’t have that kind of poker face.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” I said without raising my gaze. What little light remained glinted off the surface of a crystal ball. They weren’t actually great for scrying, according to Indigo’s snooty lecture on the subject. You got better results with potions or plain water. I’d never tried it, so I couldn’t back up the claim.

Warm fingers closed like velvet restraints around one of my wrists, pinning my hand to the display table. My breath caught in my throat as Angelo’s weight pressed into me from behind. I could feel every well-sculpted inch of him against the line of my spine, caging me in place. I could only make a small, pleased exhale when his fingers wrapped around the column of my throat with infinite care. When his teeth found purchase against the throbbing beat of my pulse, I actually moaned.

“Bullshit,” Angelo chided me. “Something’s wrong. And you’re going to tell me what it is. Keep bullshitting me and I’ll...”

The hand on my throat dipped, skimming over my blouse with lazy, confident ease, undoing three buttons before I could blink, let alone protest. His hand disappeared, deftly shoving my bra out of the way before tweaking one nipple painfully. The gasp that escaped me was one part arousal, two parts outrage.

“We’re in public!”

“The door is locked, your sign says you’re closed, and you need to wind down.”

An unpleasant bark of laughter escaped me before I could stop it. “Oh yeah, because you’re great at helping women wind down. All you did last night was make empty promises and then you stood me up.”

Angelo released me so suddenly that I sagged over the table. It shifted the display by a few inches, and only his quick reflexes kept the crystal ball from shattering on the shop floor. He replaced it with a thoughtful expression, watching me retreat to the safety of the stacks, away from his pheromones. I couldn’t think clearly when he touched me. All my reasons to be angry melted away for a while, but it didn’t change the fact that he’d been an ass.

His eyes narrowed on my face, searching for something there. He must have found what he was looking for because a mix of surprise and chagrin twisted his full, kissable mouth.

“Well, damn.”

“Damn?” I repeated. “That’s all you have to say?”

After everything we’d done last night and his attitude afterward, he was just going to write it off with a shrug and a swear word? Men. He was acting just like one. Trust them not to take things as seriously as they should.

Angelo took a deliberate step forward, putting more body language into the motion than was strictly necessary. It drew attention to all the parts of him I should have been ignoring, like the broad, well-sculpted set of his shoulders and the tapered waist that promised a delicious view beneath. I’d never seen him completely naked, and I

wanted to. Good God did I want to. But that was the problem. This whole thing was unfairly weighted in his favor. Every red-blooded, straight woman would want him. I couldn't blame him for giving me a pass.

"Yes, that's all I have to say," he replied simply. "Fifi was right. I've never done this..." Angelo paused, grimacing as though what he had to say next tasted funny. "This relationship thing. I hate being bad at it."

I stared at him for a moment. "I don't understand."

Another gliding step forward. He was like a sleekly muscled cat stalking its prey. There was grace in the movement no human could possess. But then again, he wasn't human. He was a demon who hadn't fed in months because of me.

My eyes pricked, and my gut clenched in sudden horror as the first tear spilled over. Angelo spat out a vicious curse in a language I was vaguely familiar with. The demon magic Indigo had tied to her soul told me it was foul and spoken in an infernal tongue. Almost in response, more tears started welling up in my eyes. God, this was just so... so... humiliating!

Angelo's arms suddenly clamped around my waist. My tears soaked into the soft fabric of his button-down. After a moment of hesitation, his hand came up to stroke my hair.

"Don't cry," he said, making soft shushing noises more appropriate for a cat than a person. Still, it was cute to watch him try in his own clumsy way. "I guess Taliyah and Fifi were right. I should have called. I should have told you what happened. I just didn't want to worry you. You had such a horrible day yesterday and..."

I leaned away from him slightly, staring up into his wide, slightly manic eyes as he babbled. It wasn't like him. He stopped talking when I leaned in and brushed a quick

kiss over his mouth. It was the easiest way to quiet an incubus.

Angelo leaned toward me for a moment, eyes darkening with need. My skin felt tight, desire pooling low in my belly from just that point of contact. I was still mad at him, but at least I was getting answers. If I let him ramble, I'd never follow the conversation.

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Angelo sighed. "Something happened to me last night. Because of that, I couldn't get to the office for our date."

"What happened to you?"

He shrugged. "I don't know exactly. All I do know is that I was trying to make alternate plans when I got jumped."

"Jumped?"

He nodded. "Someone hit me over the head with a bottle."

"Oh my gosh!"

"I don't know who smashed the thing over my head, but they did something to me. I woke up being towed off to jail, and by the time I got back to the house, you looked exhausted. I didn't want to make you more miserable than Rodney already had."

For a few seconds, I stared at him in confusion, my mouth slowly parting in horror as the reality sank in. I could sense Angelo's sincerity. I knew he wasn't lying. If he wanted to cheat and justify it, he wouldn't have told this story. I could back it up with Taliyah and his sister, who had apparently known about this since last night. Even if

Angelo hadn't called me, surely one of them should have? I deserved to know why he'd stood me up.

I socked Angelo in the shoulder.

"What's that for?"

"Not telling me! I was worried sick! I didn't know where you were or what you were doing. Because your sister had a client, I would have understood a last-minute cancellation. But not telling me you got hurt? That's not okay, Angelo! I need to know these things. I thought we were friends!"

"We are."

"And if you were ever thinking we could be more..."

I stumbled over the word. It felt like saying it might shatter the peace we'd formed.

"If we're dating, I need to do better," he said quietly. "You're right. If you'd kept the same thing from me, I would have been furious. We have to take care of each other. I'm sorry, Lydia."

Despite my efforts, the stinging tears flowed freely. My eyes ached, my temples throbbed, and my cheeks were more salt than skin from all the crying. I couldn't find the words to express the doubt, guilt, humiliation and fear that had fermented in my gut since the night before. It all overflowed the moment the emotions hit critical mass.

"It was Rodney," he finally blurted.

"What?"

“In the office. I saw him and Andrea there when I tried to set up for our date. Seeing him pissed me off. I was going to tell you about it in the morning.”

“Did he attack you?”

He shook his head. “No. He looked too pathetic to be the one who hit me, and as far as I know, he can’t shapeshift. Whatever it was, it wasn’t recognizably human.”

“I don’t understand,” I said again.

I didn’t understand a lot about Angelo, specifically this non sequitur.

Angelo released me, one hand going to the back of his neck in an automatic motion, rubbing it sheepishly. If I hadn’t known him, I’d have accused him of putting on an ‘aww shucks’ act to avoid the doghouse. But the look wasn’t practiced. It was awkward. He looked almost as uncomfortable as I felt.

“Rodney was in the office,” he said with a sigh. “I wanted our date to be there, Lydia. I really did. But from the sounds of things, Andrea was in the middle of trying to make a sale with Fifi.” He paused. “So, I wasn’t able to set the scene for our date. I’m... sorry.”

A sigh escaped me, and I sagged back into his arms, all my anger gone. I felt a little silly. Of course, Angelo hadn’t wanted to risk his job. Sex in his office was a little transgressive but still fun. Not to mention what had happened to him after. And here I was, upset at him because I hadn’t gotten to jump his bones last night, and the doubt made me insecure?

“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” I asked.

Angelo winced. “I think Rodney or his girlfriend might be moving here.”

Well, damn it. This new community I'd surrounded myself with was one of the few positives I'd had since this whole mess began. I didn't like the idea of my lousy ex creeping in to infect another thing in my life with his presence. I couldn't exactly order Fifi not to sell to him or to Andrea, though. That was probably several shades of illegal, and the chief of police was nobody I wanted to cross.

"You should have texted me."

"I know. But he'd already ruined your morning. I didn't want him to spoil the evening, too."

That was almost... sweet. Angelo hadn't been ducking out because he thought I needed a few rounds in the gym before I was tolerable. He was trying to spare my feelings and failing spectacularly at it. Still, I had to ask.

"So it wasn't because..."

I gestured down at myself. I thought I looked cute in the slacks and turquoise blouse. I'd even found a matching ribbon to tie my hair up with.

His eyes narrowed. "Because of what?"

"It's not because I'm not... you know, not what you want?"

"You think I canceled because I didn't want to have sex with you?" he asked in a low, deadly voice. He actually sounded offended.

I gestured down at myself. "I mean, I'm not the most beautiful thing you've ever seen, Angelo. You don't have to lie to spare my feelings. You could have hotter. Younger."

“I want you,” he insisted.

“And I don’t get that!” I raged, all the humiliation from the night before and my own tortured sense of self-esteem making themselves known. “Why? Is it the chase? Because at some point, you’ll get bored with me. I’m not a soulmates kind of girl, but I want... more than just some meaningless fling. More than just waiting for you to get tired of me.”

Angelo moved in one of those too-quick movements, pressing my back to the nearest shelf. The edges bit into my shoulders, but I didn’t care. The edge of pain, his proximity, the sheer presence of him filled my head with such a vengeance that my knees nearly buckled.

“Yes, I like chasing you,” he said. “I’m a predator. I’m not going to pretend otherwise. But I’m not going to get bored, Lydia. I can’t tell you why, and it sounds insane, even to me, but I...” Angelo hesitated. He didn’t say the word I was hoping for, but there was something there. “I care about you. It’s absurd to even say it, but it’s the truth. And if you ever imply that you’re unworthy again, I’m going to make sure you don’t stand straight for a week.”

My heart tried to pound right out of my ribcage, and I wouldn’t have been surprised to find that my underwear had evaporated on command. There were a lot of things I could have said to his statement. A lot of things I could have done.

But what actually came out of my mouth was a quiet, pleading, “Promise?”

He seized me by the nape of the neck in reply, planting a maddeningly soft kiss right on my mouth.

Angelo

Lydia's knees buckled the instant our lips touched.

It wasn't an uncommon reaction to an incubus's power, but I'd never felt it like this before. It usually drew an amused chuckle from me. Stimulus, response. Easy. Humans were what I'd been born to hunt, and it had always been easy to get what I needed from them. But Lydia was more than human, infused with the energy of other creatures due to Indigo's interference. The Kaloth demon was the most present, grafted onto Indigo and now Lydia's magic through less savory means. It left an overwhelmingly spicy aftertaste to her naturally tangy mock orange. The jasmine notes had to be from Indigo's meddling. They were almost gone now, with Indigo's consciousness repressed. It felt incredible to have Lydia to myself—mostly.

My hands found the small of her back in a dance as old as time, drawing her in tightly. I should have waited. Should have marched out of the shop and been honorable. But she didn't want honorable. She wanted to be ravished. I could feel it in the quiver of her lips under mine. The need billowed off her like a strong perfume. She hadn't felt satisfaction in so long. And I could give it to her. I wanted to give it to her. I wanted to swallow her whole.

Lydia's chest heaved, breasts straining against the white lace of her bra. I liked it. It contrasted nicely with her skin—the snowy color even paler than her ivory complexion. That complexion was flushed with desire now, the heat spreading through her in a slow, inexorable wave. She let out a breathless gasp when I tore the remaining blouse open, sending buttons flying to the corners of the room.

I needed this now, with Lydia, or I was going to go insane.

Her heart thrummed like a hummingbird's wings. Another gift from foreign magic. The kelpie was a faerie, which meant a higher metabolism. It meant that in times of excitement, Lydia's heart really raced. I wanted to hold that fascinating beat between my hands and feel it flutter like a butterfly against my skin. I could practically taste her excitement. I'd barely eased myself into her metaphorically, and I could already feel her drawing taut like a bowstring, a lifetime of being underappreciated bubbling to the surface.

I took it in one long draught. Took the doubt, the anxiety, the self-recrimination and drank it down alongside the trust she offered me so freely. It was bittersweet, an odd aftertaste that I nonetheless enjoyed. Lydia's mouth tore free of mine, her breathless scream muffled. The hoarse sound of pleasure built and echoed beautifully like music. A smaller, almost adorable, sound escaped her throat when my teeth found purchase where her neck met her shoulder.

Lydia writhed, pressing every enticing inch of herself against me as she struggled. She was strong—stronger than most human women I'd met, thanks to her unique circumstances. But I was still stronger, and I reminded her of as much, caging her in so that even riding out the aftershocks required my permission. Her hands were trapped between our bodies, effectively shackling her.

"That's cheating," she said breathlessly, her lips curling in a tiny pout. I had the visceral urge to sink my true teeth into that shiny pink pout. I wanted to taste her more than I wanted air.

Still, I managed to step back when the words left her lips. Her eyes widened in shock as cool air flowed over her. I'd managed to get most of her blouse off before she had her first orgasm. That blouse now fluttered fitfully in the breeze from the AC unit. Her eyes looked huge and luminous in the low light of the shop. Her lips were

swollen. Despite the intensity of my kiss, enough to bruise a mortal woman, it still wasn't enough. I wanted to pull her close and live in her warmth. I'd never felt something this all-consuming before—something that dwarfed even my hunger for flesh.

“What are you doing?” she asked quietly, her expression almost eloquent with surprise.

“Stopping,” I answered, panting and in shock that I was doing exactly that. “I agreed not to cheat.”

Lydia's eyes flashed with sudden fire—literal fire. I saw embers flicker in her pupil once before the demon magic within her settled enough to allow the flames to retreat. I didn't know enough about the Koloth species to guess if that was a positive reaction or not. The only thing I did know was that Lydia wasn't meant to have that ability. Nothing like this had ever happened before. There was no telling what Lydia's natural magic would do when combined with a Koloth's power. I didn't have enough information to know what Indigo was doing to Lydia, and it bothered me—a lot.

“It was just an expression, silly,” she said, giving me a light shove. “Which of us is supposed to be the sex demon here? I'm playing hard to get. Keep up.”

A thrumming began somewhere behind my breastbone. It took me a second to realize the nearly subsonic sound filling the room was coming from my chest. Lydia shrank back—not in fear exactly, but in the way prey usually did. She was captivated by me and frightened by the power I could and would use to blind her to anything but me. For the first time in my life, I wanted more than just a night. More than a weekend, more than a fling. I wanted Lydia flushed and at my mercy for years—maybe even longer. Forever?

The realization should have made me run screaming from the room. Whatever

commitment delusion had seized Fifi had finally caught up to me. Perhaps it was a familial plague or shared madness— folie à deux at its finest. And I simply... didn't care at the moment. Not while she stood only a few feet away, half-dressed. The clothes were simply too much to bear.

“Strip,” I ordered, a little surprised to hear some of my demon's voice in the mix. I usually had better control than this. “Now.”

Lydia's chin lifted defiantly, and more fire sparked just behind her eyes. The incubus within me trembled with anticipation for the meal to come. It would taste even better if I chased the tender little thing down.

“Or what?”

“Or I'm going to shred every article of clothing on your body, lift you onto the cash wrap, and take you on camera. I'll keep the security footage of the...” I considered, “next few hours as a souvenir. If you want to do this in your bed, you should probably run. When I catch you, I'm going to have you then and there.”

Lydia's defiance faded. She paled at the threat, seemingly torn between horror and arousal.

“You wouldn't dare!”

“I would. And I'll enjoy it even more knowing there's a recording I can rewatch later. I'll give you a head start. Ten seconds.”

What little color remained in her face fled. She seemed to realize how deadly serious I was. I didn't care where I took her, just that it happened soon. But I knew her well enough that I knew she'd have to work up to a little voyeurism.

I laughed when she bolted, leaving a small, frightened squeak in her wake.

“Ten...” I began in a victorious sing-song. “Nine...”

Lydia

There was a demon literally out for my ass, and I could barely move in a straight line. I cursed Angelo’s name in my thoughts. It was his fault my legs were the consistency of cooked egg noodles and wouldn’t support my weight properly. I couldn’t remember a time I’d felt so satiated after sex.

Except, it hadn’t been sex. It had been a kiss. And yet I’d had one of the best orgasms of my life. I knew Angelo could use any touch to snare his would-be victims, but I’d never imagined climaxing after just a brief makeout session. But that’s exactly what had happened—something within me had unwound, luxuriating like a cat under the attention of his hands. He hadn’t just sabotaged my legs. He’d unlocked a new emotional equilibrium inside me, and it was throwing me off.

I cursed as I drove an elbow clumsily into the wall. The staircase leading up to the loft was narrow, and I was staggering like a drunk. At this rate, he was going to catch me on the stairs. I wasn’t sure how he’d make the positioning work, but he was a creative demon. I knew he could figure something out. If kissing him had made me see stars, I was certain whatever bruises it left on my back would be worth it.

Still, my heart kicked into a higher gear when I heard Angelo’s voice, a little nearer now as he approached the stairs.

“Two... one...”

The spurt of adrenaline gave me enough stamina to climb the rest of the stairs and collapse into the living room. I managed to crawl only a few steps before strong hands flipped me onto my back. I had only a second to see Angelo, black-eyed and demonic above me, before his mouth was on mine again, tongue plunging into my mouth mercilessly. The seal of his lips muffled the scream as a second, even stronger wave of bliss pulled at my thoughts like a riptide.

When I surfaced, he had followed through on his threat. Cool air from the AC unit gently blew across my bare skin. I didn't look down to see how badly he'd mangled my outfit; I would check if Wanda could do repairs later. All I knew was that I felt incredibly exposed as those inhuman eyes roved over my body. Waiting for doubt to surface and choke me, it was mysteriously absent. I felt a bit of unease, like an entranced mouse before a serpent, but I couldn't feel insecure while his power settled like the weight of an orgasm behind my navel.

"Lydia," he said, his voice jarringly gentle against the inferno raging just beneath our skins. It looked like that restraint cost him dearly. "I need..."

"Take it," I whispered, hands coming up to grasp his face. "Take me. I want you to. I'm done running. I want this. I want you."

It was all the urging he needed. He nudged my thighs apart with practiced ease and watched my face as he coaxed every inch of himself inside me. I didn't know when he'd removed his pants. I wasn't sure if he had, or if his need to take me had been so great that he'd just shoved them down enough for movement. A smirk curled the edges of that full, kissable mouth as he watched my reaction. I wasn't sure what face I was making, but he seemed to like it, judging by that almost purring sound his demon made when it fed off me. The aftershock of that sound was an almost perceptible vibration, edging me closer to a sobbing climax.

"I can't," I gasped eventually. "It's too big. Too much."

The belly laugh that earned actually thrust his hips against me, plunging his erection deeper inside me. I keened, tears pricking my eyes. It was overwhelming. It wasn't just that he was huge, though he was. (A sex demon couldn't go around sporting a lackluster appendage, could he?) It was also the feeling of having him so deep in my head, stroking something inside me. I doubted anyone else he'd slept with could sense things the way I did. I could almost feel his demon at work, taking from me. It didn't hurt, per se, but it was an invasion of a place inside me that had been hitherto private.

"Do you want me to stop?" he whispered.

"If you stop, I will literally kill you."

I wanted this. I wanted to give him what I could. He'd waited so long, respected every boundary, and put up with my insanity. Not only that, but I'd waited so long. Now, I wanted to feed him, even if I was the meal. But... this was going to take some getting used to.

"Want me to go slow?" he asked, skimming my ear with his nose. The velvet of his lips brushed my face, and I writhed. I couldn't help it. It felt obscenely good to have him still and full inside me. I was sure I'd die and go to... wherever I was meant to go if he did more.

"Yes."

Angelo pulled out, laughing at the keen protest that escaped me. I hadn't even realized I could make that needy sound. I was learning a lot about myself today. Angelo made it up to me, shedding his pants and underwear in a move that belonged on the cutting room floor of a Magic Mike rip-off, deemed too dirty for the R rating. Every inch of him looked like well-aged perfection.

I almost cried in relief when he drew me to the couch, spooning me against him. I let out a hiccupping gasp when he thrust into me again, moving in gentle surges. It was like the ocean sucking at my toes, rather than the avalanche it had been moments before. He seemed to know, without words, how to handle me delicately. I wanted more. I wanted to enact scenarios on him that would make Penthouse salivate for a tell-all. I wanted him to take me hard on his desk someday. But my psyche couldn't handle more than a gentle tussle. We'd have to work up to the kinds of things I liked to read about in my guilty pleasure romance novels.

Angelo showered gentle kisses over my throat, shoulders, and upper arms—anything he could reach. When he truly began to plunge into me, his teeth found my pulse and held on, anchoring me with the sharp, enticing pain of a love bite. It was a simple point of contact, but one I clung to as he gained momentum, setting a punishing pace.

He manacled my hands when I tried to reach between my legs. His coarse fingers felt like a textured glove as they found and stroked my pearl, driving spikes of feverish pleasure into me. I felt warm. So warm and so...

I screamed again. I couldn't help it. I was helpless before an inferno. It saturated every part of me, but in Angelo's embrace, it didn't hurt. I was consumed by the fire, and it felt incredible.

When I could finally blink back to reality, I found Angelo resting on his side, watching me with an amused smirk.

"Was that five times or six?" he asked.

I frowned at him. "Trust a man to keep score."

"I only get one, Bean." He licked his lips, drawing my gaze down to his mouth. I wanted to kiss him again. It felt like an ache, a hunger igniting at the sight of him.

“And I enjoyed mine immensely, in case you were wondering. It isn’t about competition. Not with you, at any rate. I’d like to know the exact number when I rub Rodney’s inferiority in his face.”

That probably should have made me angry, but I could only manage a light laugh.

“Eight, if you count the one downstairs.”

“I don’t. That was an appetizer. You wouldn’t be half as responsive if you’d had someone worthwhile before I came along. Sated women require a little more effort than that. It tells me Rodney is even more of a limp-dicked bastard than I originally thought.”

I nodded. “If it happened, it was never on purpose.”

“It will be now. Your orgasms are mine, Lydia. I’m going to taste every single one. Understood?”

I raised an eyebrow. “What if I want to do it by myself?”

“Mine,” he insisted, a touch of that demonic growl in his voice. “You are mine.”

I should have argued. But I couldn’t. It was the truth.

“Yours,” I agreed.

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:18 am

Lydia

“ What the hell were you doing in here while I was away? ” Indie asked inside my head once she’d awakened. “ Did you lose a wrestling match with your bookshelves or something ?”

Indie’s voice was like a splash of cold water on my dreamy haze. I came to, spluttering and gasping for my life as she settled back into the brain space we shared. It had been like a subtle ache, the place where her thoughts were supposed to be. Now she’d returned with a vengeance. And she was loud.

“Ugh...” I moaned, turning onto my side and pressing a pillow over my ears as though it might accomplish something. Indie’s voice wasn’t something I could muffle, despite my fondest wishes for that to be the case.

“ Seriously, Lydia. What happened? Did we get into a fight? And if we did, I hope you kicked some ass. ”

It was the concern in her voice that finally broke me. She’d never admit it, but she cared about me. Not just because I was her host body, but because we’d become... friends. It seemed impossible, but we’d managed it.

“Not a fight,” I admitted.

I struggled to keep what Angelo and I had done private, but let just a few images slip past the careful filter by way of explanation. My back caged against the bookshelf. Running, tripping, and being captured by a very hungry demon. I let her do the math.

It only took a protracted second. Indie remained carefully neutral.

“ Oh. You got laid. Finally. Good for you .”

A trickle of guilt slipped in to dampen the warm, floaty afterglow. It wasn't my fault that Indie couldn't be getting some with the man she loved, but I felt responsible anyway.

Indie's sigh breezed through my head. “ Don't do that. I know what you're considering, and you need to stop it. It won't help. ”

“You don't know what I was going to say,” I snapped defensively.

Indie snorted. “ Yes, I do, you feather-brained gypsy. I'm in your head, remember? Even if your lover wanted to share you with Anthony, I wouldn't let you. You don't have to rent your body out for my use. It's... wrong.”

“Indie,” I thought back.

“I know that's rich coming from me, but the point still stands. I know you don't feel that way about Anthony. I don't want you to do something you don't want to do for my sake. You're right. It's not your fault that I'm in this predicament. ”

Not my fault, but still my problem. Liking Indie came with hiccups of its own. Namely, that a normal, well-adjusted person wanted their friend to be happy with the man she'd fallen in love with. Except it was my lips he'd kiss, not hers. My body they would both use to try to be close to one another. It did feel a little icky, now that I thought about it.

“ Did you enjoy yourself at least?” Indie asked, trying for a more upbeat tone.

I groaned. “Are we really going to talk about my sex life? I thought you’d leave me alone once I finally did what you suggested and...” I made finger quotes in the air. “‘Got some man meat’. I still can’t believe you called it that, by the way. And to a vegan, no less.”

“It’s the only meat you’ll eat, right?”

“Oh, my God...”

Heat flooded into my cheeks and swept down my body in a prickling rush. It felt like I was on fire.

No... scratch that. I was on fire. A small but genuine tongue of flame had blossomed between my fingertips at the embarrassing thoughts. I yelped and batted it out on the coverlet, which was a stupid move when I really thought about it. But come on, my hand was on fire! The last time it had only been a lighter, and only for a second or two at a time. The scorch marks left behind were proof enough that this flame had lasted longer, even when the sparks dancing over my fingertips went out.

“What the hell was that?” I shrieked at her.

I kept waiting for it to hurt. For my skin to begin to peel and blister. Burns were some of the worst injuries, in my book, devastating in both a physical and magical sense. Fire purified and could kill just about anything if you stoked it hot enough. But the pain I braced for never came, and when I examined my hand more closely, I realized why.

There was a definite burgundy cast to my skin that hadn’t been there a few hours ago. It wasn’t as obvious as Angelo’s true form. It looked like it had fused with the paleness of my human self to create a sun-kissed shade any celebrity would envy. My skin looked smoother, and lines of gold ran beneath my skin where the maps of veins

should have been present.

“Oh my god,” I whispered, staring down at myself. “What... what is this?”

“Demonic transference ,” Indigo said with a sigh. “ Damn it...”

“What do you mean, damn it!” I shot back. “You have to give me more than a cryptic remark, Indie! I swear to God I will reach into my own cranium and strangle you like a weed if you don’t start giving me answers!”

Indigo’s laugh stopped my tirade short. It sounded bitter enough to choke on. “ This reaction only happens in a fraction of a percentage of us who take on demonic attributes. They’re usually the baseline extension package that Murrain offers.”

“In stupid people speak, please.”

“ It makes you nearly impossible to kill, but it’s not meant to mingle with other types of demonic magic past a certain level. I think sleeping with Angelo seized on the energy you took from him and mingled it with the Koloth demon’s, making it more powerful than the other attributes I acquired. Some of the genetic markers seep through. You see how your skin looks? ”

I looked at it again. “Yeah.”

“ That’s what it would look like if you were half-succubus, half-koloth. I imagine the rest of you has changed dramatically as well .”

I was on my feet and staggering for the bathroom before I could stop myself. The bathroom in my loft was nearly as narrow as the staircase, a glorified closet with a toilet and a shower. I felt like a bull in a china shop when I tripped into the room, clutching the towel rack for stability.

What I saw in the mirror above the sink stopped me dead.

It had been jarring enough to wake up a few days after Indigo's death to find I'd undergone a spontaneous dye job. My hair wasn't just black now; it was as lustrous as a cat's, shining with dark highlights when I moved. The strands swayed without any breeze to actually stir them. The ends of my hair had lightened to the color of a sullen ember, pulsing with light at odd moments.

"Fire," Indigo said with a sigh. "Koloths live in a similar infernal level to the Reaper demons. Congratulations, you're pretty much immune to fire now. Unfortunately, most things in the mundane world aren't though, so you're going to have to be careful not to set anything ablaze."

If Indigo had been in front of me at that moment, I would have decked her. It wasn't enough she'd burst into my life and plastered herself to my soul. It wasn't enough that I'd accidentally become party to the evil scheme she'd participated in. Now her evil deed had transfigured me. I barely recognized myself in the mirror. I mean, demon Lydia was good-looking. The luminous skin, huge eyes, pouting lips, and burgundy color might do it for a lot of mortal men. I just needed a rounder ass and a tail to entice a certain section of the population. But when I looked in the mirror, the alluring woman I saw wasn't me. It seemed fundamentally wrong that sex should have given me an instant makeover.

"This is so not okay."

"Fine," Indigo said sharply. "Freak out. Try to pick it all apart and tell yourself it was a bad idea. I'm sure it will go over swimmingly with your lover."

I didn't think she'd earned the pissy tone she was using, but she was right about one thing. Would I have had sex with Angelo, even if she'd mentioned the remote possibility of this happening?

Yes, I would have. Because I needed it and because he needed it. Because it had been beautiful, and thrilling, and perfect and I...

I caught myself before I could whisper the truth to myself, but Indigo had heard it.

I loved Angelo.

“It’s a bad idea .”

Loving a sex demon sounded like an oxymoron. Emphasis on the moron part.

“I am so screwed,” I whispered to my sober reflection.

“And not even in the fun way,” Indigo chimed in.

“Yes, thanks so much for that.”

“Anytime, Lydia. Anytime .”

Angelo

“You’re being ridiculous,” I muttered, rushing down the pavement that stood between us and answers.

The coven house’s driveway was full, as usual. I’d been forced to park down the block and navigate the cracked sidewalks leading up to the coven house.

The Tudor Revival had been on the market for a while, and I’d considered it almost unsellable, even with my incubus charms. It required more renovation work than most people wanted to undertake. Then Lorcan Rowe came to town and bought nearly every one of our challenging properties, investing time and resources until the properties were worth almost double what we’d been willing to sell for. Truly, the vampire’s obsession with his now-wife had been a boon to every realty company in the area. He’d ensured all of them suited her expensive tastes. Selling them would be easier next time if he ever chose to sell.

Lydia picked up the pace, half-jogging to keep up with me. We were quite the contrast. I’d been dressed for work when I seduced her. She’d worn a conservative outfit that I thoroughly enjoyed reducing to ribbons. I’d pay for it later, but it had been worth it. There was something viscerally satisfying about clearing everything in my path. I needed her flesh on mine. It hadn’t just been a matter of hunger; it was finally having her. Of her wanting me to have her, no holds barred.

Now she wore a pair of sweats and one of my oversized coats, covering herself from head to toe with fabric, lest someone see the changes she’d undergone after we’d been together. I didn’t find the changes unpleasant, but she looked so stunned and

scared that I indulged her request to visit the coven. They'd have more answers for her than I did.

Lydia's glance up was tinged red with the glow of embers. Her magic wasn't just unstable now; it was evolving, physically changing her. I should have expected something like that, especially after her magical dye job. Indigo's magic had seeped into Lydia's body. It made sense that the demon would come to the forefront the longer she spent with a similar species.

She drew the drawstrings of her hoodie even tighter around her face, leaving only a red-gold slice of her skin visible. Her lips looked fuller, which only made me want to take another taste, to see how they felt against mine.

"I have horns," she hissed. "I think people are going to notice!"

Maybe, maybe not.

Humans could be spectacularly unobservant when they wanted to be. Lydia's horns weren't like mine or Fifi's, which were blatantly obvious in either form. Hers were more like the nubs you'd see on a baby goat—small and only half-formed. They weren't so different from a half-demon's—an imp, to use the catch-all term. Different from most, but not so strange that anyone would question it in the infernal layers.

"Your hair mostly covers them. Besides, I think they're cute."

She grimaced. "You would. You're taking this demon thing really well. Indigo freaked out. Hell, I'm freaking out. Why aren't you? It's a big change. We don't even know if it's permanent."

I stopped, pulling Lydia to my side instead of letting her stalk past me onto the porch of the coven house. Once we crossed that threshold, I'd be pushed aside as everyone

crowded around her, trying to figure out what had happened.

Lydia let out a soft sigh when my hand cupped the side of her face. Her skin felt feverishly warm, a side effect of the fire at a Koloth's core. I'd have to get used to her being a hot sleeper when I shared her bed again.

"Because it doesn't matter. I'd still want to do what we did. Do you regret it?"

Lydia sighed. "No, but..."

"No buts. I enjoyed myself. If your screaming orgasm was any indication, so did you. If I had to do it over again, I wouldn't change a thing."

It had been one of the best feedings I'd had in my entire life. Maybe Fifi was onto something. Sex with feeling was so much more fulfilling than a casual fling. The emotions were deeper, the anticipation a thrill in itself. I still had a ways to go before I was fully recovered, but just being inside Lydia had done a lot to replenish what I'd lost. It made sense. She was essentially five beings in one: herself, Indigo, and the creatures that Indigo had attacked and absorbed. While none of the other parts had been aware or even alive, they had been present, and I'd taken what I needed. She didn't even look fatigued, which was a plus. It would take days to wear her out, and I was looking forward to testing her limits.

Color flushed into her cheeks, ruby red against her new skin. It looked good on her. I liked making blood bubble just beneath her cheeks. It meant I had an effect on her, which was exactly what I wanted. I wanted to keep her red-faced and panting. Her moans were music to my ears, thrilling a part of me I hadn't known existed. It wasn't just that she looked dead sexy when she orgasmed; it was that she'd let me in deep. She'd trusted me. That meant a lot.

"You can't just say things like that!"

“Watch me.” I leaned down, whispering so only she could hear. “Next time, I’ll be well-fed, not a starving demon. When I have you again, I’ll take my time with you. I want to taste every part of your body.”

Lydia’s body quivered, and I could see the outline of her nipples through the fabric, peaks hardening at just the thought of my mouth on her. I wanted it so badly I could taste it. But I doubted she’d appreciate it if I pinned her and made her a meal here and now. Too many people passing by. Not to mention that a certain faerie police chief would have our horns if we tried it.

She let out a nervous laugh. “How do you do that?”

“Turn you on? That’s what I do, Bean. And I intend to keep doing it.”

She flushed an even darker shade of red. “No, you sex fiend. I mean, how do you always know what to say to make me feel better?”

Oh. Well, that one was harder to answer. The relationship between us was unexpected—nearly unprecedented. I didn’t know how I’d ended up where I was; I just knew I liked it.

I let her go, stuffing my hands into my pockets with a shrug. “I’m just that good.”

That made her laugh, a sound that warmed me from the inside out. No matter what else changed about her, I liked that her laugh had stayed the same.

“Okay, okay. Let’s go talk to the witches, hot stuff.”

I held out my arm. “Beauty before age, dear.”

Lydia gave me a coy glance over her shoulder, adding a little extra sway to her hips

as she walked ahead. “You just want to watch my ass as I walk away.”

“Guilty as charged. It’s a nice ass.”

“It’s demonically enhanced.”

“And it still belongs to you,” I pointed out. “The point is that I want you, no matter what you look like. This just makes you harder to hurt, which works for me.”

Lydia chewed her lower lip. “Do you really mean that?”

“I do. Now stop stalling and march your sexy ass inside so we can get on with this dog and pony show.”

She did, and I watched. I was reformed, not dead.

And it really was a nice ass.

Lydia

I stared down at my fingers numbly, half-hoping I hadn’t just heard what I thought I had. I couldn’t curl my fingers around Angelo’s hand, even though he’d offered it while Betanya and Olga examined my aura thoroughly.

The process felt a lot like being stopped and frisked by a handsy cop. Having Angelo’s hands on my energy was one thing. He’d given me pleasure back, even as he’d taken from me. I hadn’t felt the transfer, though it had definitely happened. Angelo looked more relaxed than I’d ever seen him, his expression open and self-satisfied. He was the cat who’d finally pounced on the pesky canary. And the stupid

canary had loved every second of the tussle.

Having nosy witches touch my aura, on the other hand, felt unpleasant, like being poked in the ribs by an older relative. I knew they meant well, but it was still uncomfortable as hell.

I couldn't take Angelo's hands because of what they'd discovered. If it was true, Angelo was going to hate me. I hadn't meant to do it, but if they were right...

"What do you mean, a mate bond?" I asked in a small voice.

Olga sat back, folding her hands primly in her lap. She looked like what I'd been taught witches ought to look like. The German was a well-preserved sixty-something to the uninitiated observer. She was infinitely older than that in reality though—three hundred, if she was a day. She'd twisted her long white hair into a graceful knot on top of her head, holding the stragglers in place with obsidian hairpins. It matched the dark gown that fell to her ankles. Just the quiet, confident aura of the witch across from us had made Indigo fall into respectful silence, even in her own thoughts. Indigo didn't follow many rules, but she still looked up to older and wiser witches than herself.

"Just vat I've said."

I waited for her to elaborate, but apparently, that was all the soft-spoken woman would say on the matter. Thankfully, she wasn't the only witch with experience in these matters.

Betanya Tayir looked about Wanda's age, clearly in her midlife. Granted, a witch's midlife was around one hundred and fifty. According to several sources I trusted, Betanya had spent at least a few decades in a parallel dimension to escape a blood-crazed vampire.

Yeah, my friends' lives were strange, to say the least.

Betanya's hair wasn't a fluffy white or a rich, lustrous black like the other witches I'd met. Her hair was dark red, riding the line between scarlet and burgundy. It made Indie prickly for a reason I couldn't decipher.

"She's a red-haired witch," Indie said, as though the sentence made complete sense to her.

"And?"

"They're dangerous. Odd magic, odd ideas, odd in general. Sometimes they go completely off the range and start interfering with humans. It usually makes the history books."

"So who better to look at our odd situation?" I countered.

Indie didn't have a good answer to that. I could practically feel her sulking in a faraway corner of my mind. She knew I was right but didn't want to admit it.

Betanya gave her fellow witch a long-suffering look before turning her attention back to me. Her eyes were a dazzling shade of emerald. I felt a sudden pang of envy. Were these witches all beautiful? Did it just come with the genetics of being a witch that they'd all be hot and exude confidence?

"I think what Olga is trying to say is that the mate bond was formed during sex. An assortment of factors came into play. Indigo's..." Betanya paused, struggling to hide her revulsion. "Activities grafted something foreign onto your soul. That alone would have consequences. Your fusion is unprecedented. I was a Blood Witch for many years, and even my power didn't warp to that degree. There are just some magics we shouldn't be exposed to, and I'd rank a Koloth near the top. It's a very

temperamental and violent species. Their mating practices are deep and abiding. They choose a mate for life, hunting, battling, and traveling together. It's rather the opposite of what most incubi do, so it surprises me that the bond could have formed so easily between you both. The species must be more closely related than they think, or there were other factors we don't know about."

Oh. Oh God. Had I done this to him?

Had loving Angelo affected the exchange that profoundly? Had I subconsciously tied him to me? It sounded reprehensible. He should have a choice in the matter, damn it!

I needed to look. I had to know how he was taking the news. But I couldn't tear my eyes away from my hands. I once again felt like an observer in my own mind. Nothing about my body felt right. I felt like I'd undergone a radical metamorphosis in hours. I didn't look or feel like myself. That alone was panic-inducing. Knowing that I'd essentially performed a demonic shotgun wedding after our first time together was even worse. Surely mating for life was just another form of marriage? No, it was even worse than marriage! It sounded like it was forever binding.

Now I wasn't just more of a freak than I'd been; I'd dragged Angelo into a bond he would never have agreed to. If I was scared of commitment, then Angelo actively feared it. He was a sex demon, for hell's sake. He wasn't made for commitment or monogamy or a freaking mate bond!

"What exactly do Koloths do when they establish this bond?" Angelo asked, his voice was low.

I examined his tone for panic or disgust but found none. It was reassuring enough to allow me to risk a glance up at him. It was a mistake. Angelo wasn't just looking at me. The intensity of his gaze was blistering. I had to yank my eyes away. If I fell into his gaze, I'd be Play-Doh in his hands. This house was far too occupied for that. I'd

happily christen every surface in my home, but doing so in front of a crowd was a bridge too far.

Betanya chewed her lip in thought. “Do you remember the details, Olga? It’s been years since I attended the Academy. I’m sure you’ve heard the courses more recently than I have.”

Olga nodded. “Ya. Koloths value strength. Zee female leads zee male on a chase to see if he is fast und strong enough to copulate viz her, ya? It’s usually zee prelude to every sexual encounter. Zee mating bond forms vhen both eliminate all ozer potential suitors. One or both parties can initiate, ya, but it must be accepted by both.”

I saw understanding dawn a moment later in Angelo’s expression. I watched him mouth the words to himself as they spun around in my mind.

“Mine.”

“Yours.”

Angelo had asked. I said yes. I’d meant it. But that didn’t mean it didn’t scare the hell out of me.

I stood abruptly, almost upending an end table in my haste. The air felt suddenly stifling. I couldn’t take in enough of it. I had to get outside. Had to escape his stare. I couldn’t think, let alone talk. I dodged Angelo’s grasping hand, backing away with a gasp.

“I need to... I have to... I’m...”

Tears stung my eyes. I had to get out of here. I had to be alone with my thoughts. Well, as alone as I ever was. Indigo would be here, likely unhelpful. It was still better

than having three sets of concerned eyes on me.

Angelo called after me. I almost turned back. Then the first tear fell.

I turned and ran.

Lydia

I couldn't keep up the pace for long, even with my new and improved demon body.

Makeover or not, I was still out of shape. I managed to make it almost twice my usual jogging distance before I ended up bent double, panting. I caught a woman about my age moving in the opposite direction giving me a sympathetic glance before continuing on her brisk walk. She didn't seem to notice the faintly luminous cast to my skin or the nubby horns I could feel on the crown of my head. She saw what she wanted to see. A woman who hadn't kept up with her exercise routine.

I stayed like that for a while, hands on my thighs, staring at the cracks in the pavement under my sneakers. Forcing myself to breathe, I was able to clear some of the dark fog away, allowing me to think again.

“ Are you done throwing a fit?” Indigo asked when my breaths eased into gasps instead of the impulse to throw up breakfast all over someone's yard.

I wished I could turn to her voice and smack her. I did not need the sass right now.

Her sigh breezed through my mind. “ Sorry. That was crueler than I meant to be. Are you about done with the panic attack? ”

No, I wasn't. Because I wasn't just in a relationship; I was mated, whatever the hell that meant. All I knew was that I was tied to Angelo in a way he hadn't asked for.

“ Didn't you hear what Olga said? He did ask for it! If the feelings hadn't been

mutual, he wouldn't be bound to you. It isn't like you forced him .”

No, but I felt I should have at least warned him. If he'd known, he might have avoided being tied to me for life.

“ You couldn't have warned him. You didn't know.”

“And whose fault is that?” I shot back.

Another sigh. “ Mine. You don't have to constantly throw it in my face, Lydia. I know what I did was unforgivable. I know I can't make it right. I'm no better than a shade, trapped in the head of a gypsy who has been blessed by the goddess with a lover, a business, and a comfortable life. Lydia, I would trade everything I have left to be in your place. But I can't change what happened. Only you can choose what happens now. You can panic and say something you don't mean, or you can go back and figure this out.”

I hated that she had a point. I also hated the edge of despair that cut me to the quick. She'd definitely gotten the short end of the stick in our current arrangement. The only times she'd been able to emerge were fraught with danger. Something about a life-or-death situation could finally allow me to shrink back enough to let her come to the fore. Maybe there was some way to make it more permanent—a potion or something.

Indie made a soft, scornful sound. “ Your body isn't an apartment I live in. You can't make it a timeshare situation. ”

But I could feel the thought churning in her head. She'd think about it, even if she ultimately turned me down. She wanted Anthony, and the idea of being with him was tempting, even if I could only offer her a few hours at a time.

“ You're mated. I don't think Angelo would care for another man touching your

body. Even if I'm in the driver's seat, it's your neck that's still getting a hickey. Not to mention how it would look to everyone else."

"Like I had two boyfriends."

"Right."

"Angelo said he'd do it if I wanted it. Of course, he'd prefer to share me with another woman. You know, typical man. But if I really wanted to, he'd share me—you—with another man. I think he has to be the one to pick who, though."

"Because you're a sexually submissive woman. God, it's such an embarrassment to be attached to your fantasies."

"You've never wanted to be tied down?"

"No," she replied, a little too quickly and forcefully.

Then a barrage of images hit me without warning. I had to white-knuckle my thighs as the pictures washed through my mind.

Rope. One length of enchanted rope was all that kept me from freedom. Murrain was taunting me, leaving freedom so close yet still so impossibly out of reach.

Terror slid like an icy blade between my ribs, stopping my heart for a moment too long. Pain blossomed across my chest seconds later, a phantom echo of a very real blade that had plunged into Indie's body during the week Murrain had tormented her.

"How many times did he stab you?" I asked in a small voice.

"Too many to count," she said, her tone flat and exhausted. "He handed me over to

a Reaper for torture. Not Simon, thank the goddess, but still a Reaper. He came up with a lot of creative ways to hurt me. I healed, of course. I wished at that point I couldn't. Death would at least have been the end."

"How did you escape?"

My stomach turned. I couldn't feel the emotions she was suppressing. I probably didn't want to know if the mere mention of it made her nauseous.

"I'll take that secret to the grave... or whatever else is waiting when this half-life is over. I'm not telling anyone how I did it. I refuse."

I didn't try to dissuade her. It was her trauma, and she'd deal with it her way.

"Why did you come to my shop?" I asked for the umpteenth time. I'd asked variations of the question for months, and she dodged almost every time.

"Because I finally tracked down my mother's second journal."

And this was something I'd never heard before. And it surprised me—not so much that Murrain had hunted down her mother's journal, but that she was admitting as much.

"She had another one she kept from her days at the Academy," Indie continued. "She met Murrain there—at the Academy. They were close. She joined him, and later I did the same thing. But the difference is, she got out. She survived long enough to pen another book of shadows—the one she had to keep from Murrain. That book has her most powerful spells."

"Where is it now?" I thought back.

“It ended up in mundane hands somehow, and I tracked it halfway across the country before I found a lead .”

I was pretty sure that’s what had led her to me and my store. I was also pretty sure that Rodney had bought the book at some point and failed to label it correctly. He’d always done things like that. He’d bring in inventory without consulting me and then expect me to do the organizing. I was a firm believer in the adage: everything has its place.

“ The point is, you have an opportunity, Lydia—you have the opportunity to be happy. To live an amazing life with the man you love. Don’t waste it like I did .”

She was right. Again. Yes, the situation looked bad. This mating thing had been an accident, but it was going to completely alter the course of both Angelo’s and my life. Mated pairs had certain rituals they performed to keep a relationship healthy. I had to learn more about them before my magic spiraled out of control again and made everything worse. Because as far as I knew, there was no way out of this.

Unfortunately, I needed to go back to the coven house. Talking with him about this might be painful. It could be personally devastating for me if he wanted space to think about things. But the uncertainty was what would bring the house down around my ears. If Angelo wanted to leave, I’d let him go. If he didn’t want me after what I’d done, it would hurt. At the end of the day, though, I’d survive it—at least, I hoped I would. I’d survived Rodney’s petty cruelties. Oddly, I trusted Angelo to treat me more fairly.

And speaking of Rodney... Was I going crazy, or was I hearing his voice? I almost preferred that explanation—that I was losing my marbles. At least going nuts came with a wide spectrum of good drugs and four-point restraints. It would be a lot more fun than confronting my husband. Soon-to-be ex husband, with any luck.

“Lydia.”

I turned toward the sound and paused when the accompanying visual and emotional gut punch hit me. It wasn't just seeing him, though that was bad enough. He was the last person I wanted to confront on a residential street. We'd get in a shouting match, and someone would call the cops.

Or maybe Rodney would keel over, saving me the trouble of calling them. He certainly looked like death warmed over. Slick with sweat, his skin was gray and waxy. His lips were a darker color, as though he'd gotten frostbite. His eyes were watery and didn't focus well on me. But he'd been the one calling my name.

“ What the hell is he doing here? ” Indie asked.

In response, I allowed her access to my memories of everything that had gone on over the last couple of days that she'd been asleep. Well, minus certain sexual details.

“ I'd offer to hex him for you ,” Indigo said with a note of amusement in her tone. “ But I think someone already beat us to it. What do you want to bet that Andrea has witch blood in her? She probably caught him stepping out on her.”

It wouldn't have shocked me. Rodney's expectations of women were unattainable. I couldn't be perfect enough to match whatever ideal he had in his head. I still didn't want him to get hurt, though. He'd ruined parts of my life, but I still didn't want him to be seriously injured. I just wanted him to have an inconvenient and itchy condition for a few decades.

“ Why does he look like he's about to drop dead?” Indie wondered aloud.

“ Andrea said he has anemia. At first, I thought she was lying to save face. It seems like the sort of thing a politician would consider a winning proposition .”

Indie lapsed into a thoughtful silence as Rodney came level with me, barely able to glance my way without his lip curling. Even sick and in a flop sweat, Rodney was still going to be Rodney. I was sorely tempted to let him weave into traffic. He really was the worst partner I'd ever had. The juxtaposition between Angelo and Rodney wasn't even close to fair. Angelo wiped the floor with my ex in every metric. And Angelo was mine now. My mate, whatever that actually entailed.

"Lydia," Rodney said, sounding as breathless as I felt.

A line of sweat poured down one temple and into his eyes. He didn't even have the strength to lift his hand to bat it away. He blinked too fast, eyes wide and glazed with confusion.

I could have escaped him. He didn't look healthy enough to chase even a regular woman down the street, let alone one who'd recently come into her powers. It might have been the smart thing to do, given the changes in me he was sure to notice. He'd subtly mocked my appearance before. Horns on my head were definitely enough fodder to keep him going. But I was afraid that leaving now would mean abandoning him to collapse in the street.

"What do you want, Rodney?"

Rodney staggered forward a step, trying to seize my elbow. I backed up, and he nearly toppled onto the pavement at my feet.

"I don't... feel good."

"That's why there's urgent care and emergency rooms. You should go to one or the other. You look awful."

His face took on the color of a blanched onion. I could almost see his blood moving

sluggishly under his skin. His pulse looked labored, and he even smelled sick. The Koloth could sense disease or a festering wound and was eager to investigate. I hoped that wasn't the 'hunting together' Olga had mentioned in the coven house.

"No hospitals. She said no hospitals or she'd..."

Rodney swayed dangerously, completely losing the thread of what he'd been saying. His eyes slid out of focus, and I only had a second to realize what was happening before he pitched forward. I was there to catch all two hundred and fifty-plus pounds of dead weight. It was easier than I would have thought, but it still made my arms ache. I could lift a lot, but I wasn't practiced at it yet. And I didn't care how in shape a person was; no one expects the uneven weight of another person to fall on them. I ended up half-collapsed under him.

"That sounded ominous," Indigo muttered. "Three guesses who she is. You were right to worry about her, just not for the reasons you think. I'd say that woman is a monster."

"So what do we do about it?"

"Get your ex-husband to a hospital. Whatever curse or malady he has will kill him if we don't act quickly. I wouldn't blame you for wanting to leave him to his fate, but we won't get answers unless he survives."

"Add to the list that 'leaving people to die' isn't a good thing, Indie."

"Yeah, yeah, that too. But practical reasons matter more right now. Andrea poses a threat to your ex's life. That's where the plan started, and I doubt that's where it ends."

"So I should call 911?"

“ Yes. And then the coven. We have a ritual to perform .”

Angelo

I ended up walking in on the tail end of a party I hadn't been invited to.

Roy hadn't even bothered to put me on the list, guessing (correctly) that I wouldn't have kept quiet about his plans.

The son of a bitch had proposed to Fifi on a commercial property he'd bought from Bea. The cake and decorations made the interior of the realty office too bright and sweet-smelling for my taste. Then again, I wouldn't have been thrilled with the development even if they hadn't thrown an after-engagement party in my place of business.

Mating was one thing. I'd claimed Lydia as mine in a proper demonic fashion. Not this... romance stuff Fifi enjoyed. I would much rather play games with my infernal mate than chase children on a sun-soaked lawn.

Fifi, on the other hand, looked transcendent, happiness pouring like light from her skin. Her demon was closer to the surface when she touched her betrothed, making her appear brighter, younger, and more fiercely predatory than I'd ever seen her. No one could deny she was a beautiful succubus. If Roy ever did anything to wipe that look off her face, I'd find a nice, secluded place to stash his body.

Some of her enthusiasm dimmed when I gestured for her to join me in her office. At first, I thought she'd tell me to F off. I'd probably earned that sentiment by now. But after a moment, she broke away from a group of well-wishers, dragging the strapping sasquatch in her wake.

Fifi wasn't outwardly intimidating, certainly not as menacing as the wall of muscle who decided to stand sentry by her door, ready to thrash me if I said or did something stupid near his girlfriend. Well, fiancée now. She had a rock on her finger and everything. Mother would admire the ring, even if she hated what it stood for.

“Do I say ‘congratulations’ or wait patiently for you to read me the riot act about what not to do while I plan Roy’s bachelor party?”

Fifi’s lips quirked, and she couldn’t help an adoring glance upward. She looked at the brutish sasquatch like the moon and stars shone out of his broad, overly muscled frame. I wasn’t the biggest fan of the male physique. It could be intriguing in the context of the female he was with but almost never by itself. I preferred the fairer sex. Still, I supposed he ticked enough boxes of conventional attractiveness to convincingly snare an odd duck succubus.

“You owe me five bucks,” she said in a lilting sing-song.

I raised an eyebrow. “Do I want to know the bet you’ve got going, or will it just piss me off?”

Roy shrugged. “I was sure you’d react badly to our engagement. And if you had reacted badly, I would have taken it very seriously, and Fifi would have hated that. I don’t like anything that makes Fifi unhappy.”

“Your point?”

He frowned at me. “I don’t get why, but I know she loves you.”

I dared a glance at Fifi. I didn’t want to meet her gaze for too long, sure she’d see the mortifying truth the instant we locked eyes. I’d gone completely insane. I had betrayed every ethos I once held dear because... the ‘why’ didn’t matter. Not when I

was with Lydia. To my horror, I found my sister watching me with a small frown on her face.

“I’m beginning to think your underwhelming reaction to the news is less about me and more about you. What’s happened now? Did Lydia break up with you for your idiocy last night?”

The note of worry in that last question almost made me smile. Fifi had too big a heart to be a demon. We were selfish creatures. Or we should have been. I knew I shouldn’t want Lydia the way I did. Even if it felt insurmountable to slap a label on it yet, I knew without a doubt that I’d been locked into a Koloth’s mating bond. It should have frightened me, made me angry, disgusted me. I wasn’t built for this.

Instead, I hated to admit it, but I was thrilled. Utter insanity to feel this way. Fifi would laugh herself sick when she pieced it together.

“Sort of the opposite.”

Her brow furrowed. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, you aren’t the only one bound by a foreign nation’s customs and rituals.”

“What is he going on about?” Roy asked her. Fifi shook her head.

“Except, I don’t think Lydia meant to do it,” I continued and by this point, I was pacing. “I mean, we consulted the coven when Lydia had some physical changes occur. But the long and short of it is, Lydia and I...”

I paused. It seemed a bit indelicate to describe what we’d done. ‘Sex’ was too tame a word. ‘F-ing’ was too harsh and blunt to adequately describe it. I’d gone deeper into Lydia than I’d ever been into a woman’s mind before. Usually, it was just a flickering

image or a breathless thought that urged me in the right direction. Sexual tableaux were as varied as the people in them, so even a sex demon enjoyed a little silent prompting now and then. With Lydia, it hadn't just been a mingling of energies. She'd given me more than that, and it floored me. She hadn't said it aloud or even to herself, but she...

She loved me.

It was the only explanation for our current predicament. Koloths mated for life and were fiercely loyal. And that should have frightened me. Now, I was just grateful. It's hard to argue with a fact when it's got its magical hooks into you. And the truth of the matter was that I wouldn't be mated if she didn't feel deeply for me. And I liked it. Craved it. Wanted her now more than I ever had before.

"You had sex," Roy said bluntly when I failed to come up with the right words.

"Yes. And unbeknownst to either of us, the Koloth's magic was seeping into Lydia's soul. When we were together, it sparked something. She looks... different. Demonic, like us. I don't know if it's reversible, and she's understandably freaked out. But she's even more freaked by the mating bond she initiated. It's apparently permanent. So plan for a double wedding, sister mine. It'll save you on venue costs."

Fifi stared at me in shock before spluttering, "She what?"

"She enacted a mating bond with me. It's quite similar to yours, I'm told."

She and Roy exchanged a longer, tenser look before they both turned back to me. "How big an asshole were you about it?" Fifi asked.

"I wasn't," I replied curtly, frowning at her.

“According to you or according to the rest of the world?” Roy asked.

I gave him a look before I returned my attention to my sister. “The long and the short of it is that I’m not upset about it.”

Fifi and Roy appeared stunned.

“You aren’t?” she asked.

I shook my head. “No. It was an accident, and there are worse people to be tied to for life. At least Lydia’s smart, gorgeous, funny, and deliciously kinky in the bedroom. It could have been a troll like Ramona that I got stuck with. Or a literal troll.”

Fifi leaned forward, pressing the back of her hand against my forehead. I batted it away with a huff.

“What are you doing?”

“Making sure you’re not delirious with fever or something. Because it sounded like you said you’re a happily married man.”

I scowled at her. “Don’t test me, Fifi. I will scrap with you the way we did when we were kids. I still feed more. I’d kick your ass.”

“No you won’t,” Roy answered, giving me a frown.

“My God you are boring,” I managed in response.

Meanwhile, a broad, creeping grin had replaced Fifi’s confusion, and her eyes sparkled.

“You love her.”

I frowned at her. “Keep provoking me and see what happens.”

Fifi leaned back in her chair and laughed—not the exultant laugh I’d feared but a pleased one. She had every right to mock me for my hypocrisy.

“Fine, you grumpy asshole. I won’t poke you where you’re still tender,” she said.

“How does Lydia feel about this?” the only dud in the room asked.

“Embarrassed about the out-of-control magic. Scared and intrigued by her new form. She’s worried that I feel deceived.”

“Do you?” Fifi asked.

“Of course not. I knew her magic was unpredictable from the start.” I paused, smirked, and then settled on a much lighter jab. “And besides, to Mother and Father, it will look like I found a beautiful and powerful halfling to have my children. I’m still coming out ahead of you in their familial affection. I think it might be enough to weasel back into Father’s good graces if we do things the traditional way, as they’ve been urging.”

Fifi crossed her arms over her chest. “Participating in a fertility ritual and then trapping ourselves in a private ski lodge until we’re confirmed to be pregnant? It has too much Cro-Magnon vibe for my taste. I think I’ll stick to Sasquatch traditions, thank you very much.”

“Your loss. I’m sure your beastly groom-to-be would love to see some of the negligee our realm has come up with.”

I didn't have to look up to know Roy's interest was piqued. Any male regarded the stuff as decoration, easily discarded to get to the prize beneath.

It was Fifi's turn to scowl. "Cheater. You just had to mention the ritual clothing, didn't you?"

"I'm trying to help you. If you let Mother win on small issues, she becomes less insistent on the larger ones. Agree to a ritual now, and she won't continually badger you about setting a date. If she has a guaranteed grandchild, you'll have a free pass back into their good graces."

"You call getting smashed, doing sex magic, and getting knocked up a small thing?" she asked, sounding genuinely outraged.

"No, I don't," I replied firmly. "I imagine it will be difficult for you at times. But don't deny you want his child." I said the words with distaste as I looked at the man in question, who seemed pretty happy at the thought of having children with Fifi.

Fifi sagged a little and nodded. "We've been trying. No luck so far."

"Because you haven't been home often enough, sister. You need to stimulate your magic. Thus, the ritual."

"You manipulative bastard," she sighed, but there wasn't much anger in her tone now. "You're probably right. I do need to make an appearance. Dad's miffed that I missed the family events for three years running."

"I'm glad you have next month's agenda so well thought out. Now can we focus on the reason I actually came here?" I asked.

"What was the reason again?" Fifi asked.

“I want to build or adapt a home on our books with your help. Lydia’s flat is too small, and her place might go up like a tinderbox now that she’s manifesting fire powers. Ivan moved after the Grave Eater incident.”

I couldn’t even blame the ill-tempered dragon for it. If I’d been mauled within an inch of my life and watched Lydia dragged off to be torn apart by an abomination, I wouldn’t have wanted to stay either.

“So?”

“So, I’m thinking Ivan’s fire-proofed home would do nicely, but I need your help to make it feasible. What do you say, Fifi? Spot me this once? I’d like to make sure Lydia’s safe.”

Fifi beamed like a proud schoolteacher who’d finally hammered the answer into Timmy’s thick skull.

“I’m sure we can work something out.”

Fifi’s phone rang, and she answered it with a pleased smile, but the expression dropped a moment later. She held the receiver to her shoulder and mouthed ‘Taliyah.’ I held my hand out for the phone, which she handed over reluctantly.

“Angelo Stedham speaking,” I said.

“Come to my office, Angelo. I’ve just received the footage from the camera facing the parking lot. I think you should see this.”

Lydia

I always hated hospitals.

It didn't matter if I was a patient or just visiting; I disliked being there. The empathy that manifested as a minor magical gift within me reacted badly to suffering. No one arrived at the hospital happy, healthy, and well. It was temporary housing for the sick and dying. It had been difficult to be here as a patient, but pacing the halls, waiting for news about Rodney, brought the suffering to a new level.

I'd worn a path through the waiting room carpet so often that I was surprised there wasn't a visible trail. Dr. Sherman didn't seem amused by my constant circling. At least one thing had gone well since then: Poppy had given me just enough Confusion Oil to muddle the doctor's senses. The blonde surgeon speaking to me wouldn't recall the horns, just my inability to stay still.

"Could you sit, please, Mrs. Rourke?"

"It's Lydia Morton."

"Not legally," the doctor replied in a tone of strained patience. "Technically, you're still married to Rodney. And he hasn't replaced you as his power of attorney."

"The point?" I asked, frowning.

"The point is that I need consent to perform exploratory surgery."

“Surgery?” I repeated.

She nodded. “He appears to have aplastic anemia without any of the conditions I’d expect to see associated with it. Unless there are things he’s been diagnosed with that he hasn’t told his doctors about?”

She looked at me expectantly, as though she assumed I had nothing better to do than keep up with Rodney’s health problems. We hadn’t talked about anything as ordinary as our health in a long time. I’d expected his condition to worsen in my absence, but not like this. I was the one who remembered to make appointments and pay the insurance. He would, I thought, have worse than average colds and suffer through them. Not this.

“What conditions could cause this?”

Dr. Sherman tucked a strand of blonde hair behind one ear. She looked tired. I couldn’t blame her. Rodney had needed transfusions when he arrived. It had been bizarre, to say the least. Other than being on death’s door, he seemed otherwise fine.

“It can be an inherited condition, like Shwachman-Diamond syndrome, but that would have presented in infancy. Most of the time, it’s an indicator of a larger problem in the body. Viral infections that affect the bone marrow can deplete the number of cells the body makes. Some autoimmune conditions can achieve the same result. Do you know of anything like that in his history?”

I wanted to throw my hands up in defeat. It wasn’t my fault that my information was out of date. If anything, it was Rodney’s fault for leaving the medical documents as they were. I was certain it was a way to drag me back into his life one last time. Once the divorce was final and he could put a ring on Andrea’s finger, she’d be his go-to person.

“ Unless she’s the one killing him ,” Indigo said. “ Pestilence demons can cause all kinds of havoc in the human body .”

“ What about a vampire? ” I asked. “ I mean, he’s basically anemic. Doesn’t that scream bloodsucker to you? ”

“ It would if there were puncture marks and several missing pints of blood. Vampires might bleed someone to the point of anemia, but there’d be loss of volume as they fed. Rodney’s blood isn’t missing; it was just destroyed, and his body isn’t producing enough to let him bounce back. That’s why he looks so pale and confused. He’s not getting enough oxygen to his brain. For once, we can’t blame the idiocy on the man himself. ”

Ugh. She had a point, and I hated it. I liked Occam’s Razor. The simplest answer was probably the truth. Andrea couldn’t be a vampire. I’d seen her in daylight. She hadn’t even layered up to limit her exposure. She looked like a gorgeous former model dressed to emphasize her huge boobs and long legs. Maybe she was a demon?

Dr. Sherman cleared her throat, drawing my attention back to her. I took another turn, moving past her.

“We’ve been going through a messy divorce for almost three years now. The only things Rodney tells me about are court dates to decide what we’re splitting next. If he developed anything in the interim, I don’t know about it. You might call his mother; they were close.”

I gave her the number, which she wrote down politely. She still looked unimpressed with me.

“I don’t think I need to tell you that this is a serious condition. Life-threatening, even, if we can’t figure out what caused it. Our team has exhausted most imaging and blood

tests. Rodney's losing blood cells, and we're hoping to see a physical cause we can't spot on his MRI. He's probably going to need a bone marrow transplant at some point. Would you be willing to get tested?"

"Yes," I said automatically.

"You're kinder than I would be. I wouldn't even spit on him, let alone allow someone to stab a large needle into me and take my cells."

I understood Indie's hostility. I really did. But it was the difference between us. I'd help Rodney even if I hated him. He deserved a chance to be better, even if he actively spurned it. If I could save his life, I would. Then I'd cut him out of mine completely. Surely he could leave me alone if I saved his life?

Dr. Sherman pelted me with questions, most of which I couldn't answer. I used to be able to rattle off everything about Rodney. Now, my information was like Swiss cheese. I didn't like it, because the gaps in my knowledge might mean the difference between life and death.

It took another five minutes, but Dr. Sherman finally exhausted the topics she'd come to discuss. Another five minutes passed before my allies found me still pacing the small waiting room. I'd been forced to wait most of the day for news about Rodney, and by the time everyone was available to help, it was evening. It was just as well, since the most powerful witch in the county couldn't leave her house until after dark. Pretending to be a vampire came with certain downsides, such as a lack of sunbathing. Wanda wouldn't burn up, but her enemies had to believe she would. Thus, we were planning to defy hospital rules. There would be at least six more people in the room than allowed in this wing, and it was happening well after visiting hours. More of the Confusion Oil would help smooth things over, but we still needed a distraction to facilitate the ritual.

Wanda made a beeline for the coffee machine in the corner, seemingly indifferent to the fact that it was probably strong, if not completely overdone. She dumped a generous portion of creamer and sugar into the cup before knocking it back. Her tall, overbearing warlock cousin made a face at her.

“I don’t understand how you can chug that stuff,” he said, folding himself into a chair opposite her.

“I drink the stuff you make, right? It’s about the same. I’ve been desensitized by your utter lack of skill in the area. I could probably drink motor oil now, and it would have about the same consistency.”

Maverick flicked his fingers idly, and the cup burst. Wanda made a spluttering sound as the last droplets went flying, spraying her face and hair. A brief scuffle ensued, ending with both of them looking like they’d been mauled by a malicious hairdresser. Maverick’s hair was standing on end, as though teased for an ‘80s retro look. Wanda’s had an oily texture, as if she’d applied product all over it. She glared at Maverick.

“I’m going to make you pay for that later.”

“Looking forward to it,” Maverick said, baring his teeth in a snarl of challenge. I didn’t think he was really as angry as he was pretending to be. This was just how the two of them were together—like siblings.

A woman with dark skin and a killer smile stepped between them, hands up in a pacifying gesture.

“As much as I’d like to see you hex some sense into Mav, this isn’t the time or place, Wanda. You started it.”

Wanda sighed. “I suppose I did. Sorry, Mav.”

Maverick jumped, looking startled for just a moment, before accepting the apology with a nod. Did he really not get apologized to often enough for this to be novel? If that was the case, I needed to befriend the poor man. I said sorry often, even for things I wasn't guilty of. It was the result of being exposed to my very Southern great-aunt at a formative age. He didn't quite look at Wanda when he muttered his return apology.

Olga stared at a stack of materials displaying Andrea's face. Someone had tucked it near the coffee machine. From the number of signs on lawns I'd seen on the way over, she was popular. The Colgate smile on Andrea's face had faded into the background, just another political ad until she'd started dating my ex. Then it had felt personal. Now I had no clue what to make of it.

“What happens if she turns out to be a monster?” I asked quietly. “Isn't it illegal or something for her to run for mayor?”

I still hadn't read all the Hollow's bylaws. The document was as thick as my waist, which meant it was a beast, even for someone as familiar with the literature as I was. What little Indigo had explained was deceptively simple. Secrecy was paramount, no matter how that looked. Memory charms or potions were standard if there was an accident, but mostly, monsters were supposed to keep to themselves. It was safest for everyone that way. Except Andrea was insinuating herself into a mundane government position.

“Nein,” Olga said with a frown. “It wasn't something the founders anticipated, so it was not explicitly banned. Discouraged perhaps, ya, but not illegal.”

“Not registering is,” Wanda pointed out. “If Andrea is something inhuman, like Lydia suspects, she'll be in deep trouble for not coming to the Council when she first

declared her intention to move here. I called Taliyah and Roy both and there's no record of Andrea consulting the Council, even in passing. Taliyah says she's owned a residence for a while, but isn't regularly in it. It's for political purposes, so she can satisfy the requirement of being a resident."

If Andrea was a monster and had been hurting Rodney, then we had a bigger problem than breaking a few Hollow rules. If she was preying on him somehow, it could put all of us at risk. Rodney's symptoms made no sense. If he didn't die, he'd become a medical mystery, which didn't exactly help us remain covert.

"Say we find out she's not human," I started. "Then let's say she gets into office. What does that mean for us?"

"A very bad time," Indigo said. "If she is something inhuman and she intentionally concealed that fact, she probably means us harm. The last time someone did that, it was one of Murrain's fellow Masked Lords."

My stomach performed an uneasy roll as I thought that one over. Indigo and I had barely survived Animus, one of the monsters who'd organized a trafficking and murder cottage industry in the shadowy corners of the magical world.

"Do you recognize her?"

"No, but that doesn't mean anything," she said, sounding exhausted. I'd never be sure how she managed to feel so tired without doing any physical labor. "We were kept in small cells for a reason. If I was captured or flipped on them, I could only expose one link in a large chain. I was placed higher than most, but even my information was limited by design. Lucretia was willing to take it, regardless. It's more progress than she's made in the last decade."

"So she could be a masked lord?"

“No. Those titles are all held by men. It’s been a boys’ club for a while. She could be the right hand of one, though.”

Huh. Even in gangs of immoral body snatchers and monster killers, sexism was still alive and well. Go figure.

Everyone exchanged nervous glances. Finally, Poppy chimed in. She’d been sitting near the door like a blonde afterthought. In a room full of strong personalities, she was the only one who didn’t face disrespect. Even bad-tempered warlocks held their unpleasant impulses in check around her.

“It’s smarter to address that situation when we come to it.”

Wanda cocked her hip to the side, eyebrows raised. “What do you mean?”

“I mean, let’s see if there’s any reason to worry before we start planning. Maybe Andrea is a victim in this too. There’s more than one reason she might not want Rodney going to the hospital. I’ve had relatives with phobias around blood and needles. She could have lost someone recently, so it’s hard to be here with him.”

Wanda rolled her eyes. “You’re too optimistic for your own good, you know that, Poppy? It makes me worry for you. Some big bad bear is going to eat you while you skip through your house.”

Poppy bit the inside of her cheek, trying not to laugh. “I think you’re mixing your stories again.”

“What?” Wanda demanded.

“You’re thinking of Goldilocks. Also, she skipped through their house, not her own.”

“Well, let’s avoid bears and unknown predators,” she answered. “Are you and Lydia ready to perform your little routine as a distraction?”

“You make it sound like we’re about to do gymnastics. It’s a lot simpler than that. How long do you need for your ritual?” Poppy responded.

“Five to ten minutes if you can manage it,” Wanda answered. “We have specific ritual objects and herbs that have to be burned at the right time. It would be great if you could spill something noxious to hide the smell of sage.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” Poppy said dryly. Then her gaze shifted over Wanda’s shoulder to me. “Are you ready?”

I sucked in a deep breath and replied with the truth.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

So we went about our respective tasks. Poppy spilled the noxious potion after commandeering a janitor’s cleaning cart. The smell of rotten eggs, combined with the Confusion Oil rubbed thoroughly into her skin, was enough to draw most eyes to her location rather than watch a parade of women pour into a single room and close the door discreetly behind them.

Poppy wasn’t a good liar, but with her magic at play, she didn’t have to be. Anyone she touched seemed to grow bemused, happily accepting the excuse that she’d had an accident and “oh my goodness, let me just clean this up.” It worked like a charm. Before long, there was a doctor and a handful of nurses clamoring to help her.

I stood back, Indigo perched like an overgrown bat in the front of my thoughts, so present that it almost hurt. Usually, she hung back, watching my life like a television show she couldn’t tune out. At least the potion we’d worked out let her turn it off

every once in a while. It had to be miserable watching someone live a life she couldn't.

I had to find a way to let her out. No matter what she'd done in the past, this half-life was too harsh a sentence. It was nearly solitary confinement. Torture. I couldn't let it go on if there was a way to fix it.

“ You're sweet, but I don't see it happening ,” Indie said. Her voice sounded soft now. Maybe I was projecting, but she almost sounded... touched. “ I'm not precisely a ghost, so channeling me like a medium wouldn't work, even if you had the ability. For whatever reason, I seem to only function when you can't. I made my bed, and now I have to lie in it. ”

“ I'm going to make it happen for you. Just watch me .”

Indigo laughed, retreating just a little as I rounded the corner. I was supposed to be the lookout while Poppy did her “aww shucks” act in the hall and to join in if the crowd looked like it was losing interest. The smell was overpowering, so I didn't see anyone ignoring it anytime soon.

“ What is that stuff?” I asked.

“ It's old potion water or oil medium, I believe. Once you sterilize it, it's neither magical nor toxic to the human body, but leave it long enough, and it gets stagnant and odd-smelling, just like anything else. It's rancid goo. It won't stain or hurt their skin .”

“ So... it's like... water from a clogged sink?”

“ Essentially. A magical kitchen sink, but yeah, the byproduct is similar .”

I edged along the wall, trying to keep an eye out for any approaching staff. The halls were empty except for one man. He leaned his frame against the wall, watching me scoot covertly down the hall with a hint of amusement. I recognized him a moment later, and goosebumps broke out over my skin.

And then I ran.

I ran because I couldn't let him near Poppy.

I ran because protecting her from this guy was going to be nearly impossible without backup.

And thirdly, I ran because he scared me.

I didn't make it far.

A moment later, a hand seized me roughly by the wrist, dragging me into the nearest ladies' room. The door handle made a protesting shriek as he twisted the metal into an almost unrecognizable shape, trapping me inside with him.

"Ah," Vin purred, his voice hitting my libido like an erotic slap. "Alone at last."

Angelo

“Why did you bring in the mundane?” I muttered under my breath. “Are you trying to make this more difficult than it already is?”

Taliyah didn’t say anything, but her displeasure with my tone was clear. Frost began to spread across the desk, crackling into existence seemingly without cause. To her deputies outside, it would look like a magic trick. And it was, in a way. Taliyah Morgan was the queen regent of the Winter Court, and she could be downright scary when she unleashed her faerie powers. Thankfully, she had better control than that. I could see her toying with the idea of locking me in icy manacles or gagging me with snowballs.

“Erm... boss?” the mundane asked, watching in alarm as the ice spread rapidly across the desk. At least he wasn’t screaming and shouting, “Burn the witch!” That was better than most of them could manage, even on a good day.

Taliyah glanced at her fingers, swore viciously, and yanked her palms away from the wood grain of her desk. The frost almost immediately evaporated, leaving the desk chilly but otherwise unharmed.

“Sorry, Roland,” she said, offering the mundane police officer a weary smile. “I’m usually better than this. Priss has been keeping me up. She’s breaking curfew left and right. Scares me to death.”

Priss. I’d heard about her from Fifi. Apparently, it was short for Apricity, Queen Olwen’s illegitimate older sister. By all rights, the crown should never have been

hers, but Taliyah's unwillingness to take up the mantle meant alternate plans had to be made. Through legislation and harsh measures, Taliyah had laid down her laws to ensure no one like Janara could ever perform a violent overthrow again. So far, there hadn't been much dissent. The faeries I'd heard from (though there were admittedly few who lived nearby) seemed to approve of the move. Taliyah hadn't been born and raised among them. She was the faerie with the mind of a mundane, and the consensus was that she wasn't fit to rule for at least a lifetime, which suited Taliyah just fine. Molding her teenage-presenting half-sister into a leader was much better over the long term.

Roland pulled a sympathetic face. "I get it. My oldest keeps sneaking off to see boys. It's annoying, but we can't stop them from living their lives."

"I can," Taliyah said darkly. "I can form a wall of ice so thick she won't be able to chisel her way out of her bedroom."

"I think that's unlawful imprisonment, Chief," Roland said, though the grin on his face softened the words. He was a bland man in his forties or fifties with thinning hair and round cheeks.

And peering closer, he was also the source of sexual frustration in the room. I'd caught him looking at me more than once. It wasn't overt, but I knew when I was being checked out. It was an incubus thing, which meant someone wasn't out of the closet yet. Ah, lovely. A repressed bisexual cop.

Roland's cheeks flushed an interesting shade of pink when I caught him looking at me. He dutifully looked elsewhere in the room, pretending not to notice. But he had noticed. In fact, his interest was almost painful. He needed to find a man, and soon. Maybe I'd send him Ty's way. Ty was one of the few completely gay incubi I'd ever met. He'd rock Roland's world if the man was interested in experimenting.

“While I’m sure your day-to-day lives are fascinating,” I said, speaking louder for the human’s benefit, “it’s not really the point of the meeting, is it? You said you had something to show me. And I still want to know why he’s in the room with us. I thought mundanes were supposed to stay out of Council politics.”

“He’s not in politics,” Taliyah argued. “But he needs to be in the know. Astrid was right when she came to me, saying we needed more infrastructure. If we’re going to keep the secret in this age of technology, we need people outside our circles who can go to bat for us. I’m planning to get most of my deputies on board. Roland is the first to be in the know.”

I thought about telling her that she ought to inform him about the supernatural encounters he’d forgotten. Roland’s face would be quite a bit ruddier if he knew that I knew he’d been seduced by an incubus. Even if they hadn’t gone all the way, he’d been nearly naked by the time Taliyah intervened. I decided it wasn’t my problem—neither the mundane nor the secrets being kept from him. My purpose in coming here wasn’t to tell Taliyah Morgan how to run her department. I’d come for answers.

“Fine, can we just move this along? I want to get a good look at the bastard who hit me.”

Roland winced. He’d been the one to drag my whiskey-soaked ass to jail last time. “Sorry, I didn’t know you weren’t...”

“Drunk and hurt?” I finished. “Well, I was. Here’s a tip for living in a Hollow: Don’t attribute to alcohol what can be explained away by monsters.”

“Don’t listen to him,” Taliyah said, giving me an arch look. “It can and often is both. You wouldn’t believe the amount of drunk or high shapeshifters I’ve had to drag out of tight spots. Sometimes it’s a monster acting maliciously, sometimes it’s an

accident, and sometimes it's not even one of our people doing it."

I waved at the computer screen. The grainy image hadn't shifted since I entered the room. All I had to do was jab the start button, but they'd rather talk about teenagers and curfews. Honestly, it was a wonder anything got done in this Hollow without busybodies kicking our asses into gear.

"In this case, it was done maliciously," I said. "I obviously didn't bash myself over the head with a whiskey bottle or cut open my own stomach. I'd like to see what I'm dealing with, if you don't mind."

Taliyah leaned forward with a sigh and pressed the keys more gently than I would have. The still image blurred into motion. At first, I could only make out the parking lot. Not every car was visible, but I made it a point to park far away from Fifi most days. There was a spot close enough to a streetlight to be seen in the dark, but not so bright that I couldn't use shadows to conceal what I was up to. It was helpful when you were with a woman in the backseat and didn't want anyone to see. In this case, it just made locating the attacker harder.

"I can't see anything," I admitted, even as I watched myself settle into the driver's side.

"It's coming," Taliyah said. "It took me a while to spot it." Then she looked at Roland. "Was it the third or fourth viewing?"

"Fourth," Roland answered. "And it's pretty subtle. You have to be looking specifically to see."

"See what?" I asked, unable to stop a little growl from seeping into my words. I wanted to know whose teeth I needed to knock loose. It seemed only fair since they'd bashed my head in, stolen my reserves, and put me in the doghouse where Lydia was

concerned.

Rodney jabbed a finger at the screen. “There.”

I still didn’t spot what he was getting at. I winced when the bottle burst in a spray of glass and sticky liquid. It had been a pain to scrub all of it off. I was shown the attack another few times before I could see what they were pointing out. Most people wouldn’t have noticed the flicker of light as something hazy settled on top of the light pole. I had just a moment to see leathery wings fold against the back of a female figure before the shape blended once more with the night sky. Magic. A flying monster with enough power to shift its form and remain essentially invisible, even to the most observant of demons. Granted, I’d been preoccupied, but I’d known it hadn’t been a human that attacked me.

What looked like a gleaming rope of intestines flickered into being above my vehicle, swaying in the breeze. To a human eye, it wouldn’t have been visible. Even to Tally and my keen senses, it was barely noticeable.

“What is that?” Roland asked. “Rope?”

I didn’t have the heart to tell him he was looking at grayish intestines. Some things were better left unsaid.

A second, longer appendage pooled next to the intestines that had lowered to the ground, coiling like snakes beneath the figure.

“That is a tongue,” I said, trying to keep my tone deadpan. I wasn’t sure I succeeded. “I was right. Whatever attacked me also fed. They probably cut me with glass and shoved the tongue in to take what it could.”

The thought made me vaguely ill. I’d taken energy from women through little

touches: a brush of fingers, the caress of lips. No one I'd fed on had asked me to do so first. I'd certainly never knocked anyone unconscious and had my way with them. But that was exactly what the creature had done to me—shoved its tongue through my flesh and taken something important from inside me.

“Do you know what that is?” Taliyah asked, mercifully pausing the video before a tongue darted through the window to embed itself like a Capri Sun straw in my skin.

“No,” I admitted. “I’m not like Fifi—I don’t do the kind of research she does on monsters. She wants to make all of them feel welcome and see to their needs. I don’t really care. Although, after seeing that thing, it might not even meet the standard for being in a Hollow.”

“Standard?” Roland repeated.

I nodded at him. “There are dangers we have to consider that other Hollows don’t. Anything that views humans as prey and feeds in an involuntary or painful manner can’t come here.”

“Can you call your sister?” Taliyah asked me.

“And interrupt the celebratory sex she and Roy are no doubt having?” I responded, shaking my head. “No, thank you. I don’t need to hear the house-shaking routine they do every time. She’s engaged, and if our parents have anything to do with it, they’ll have her undergoing rituals back home to get her pregnant soon. I’ll let them have their fun before kids come along.”

Taliyah looked torn between amusement and irritation. “Is there anyone in town who might know more about predatory monsters than you do?”

I did. There was a witch’s son and prolific monster hunter in town. He lived only a

few blocks from Lydia, in fact, he was always making moon eyes at her. Anthony Boline wanted Indigo, but that didn't stop me from feeling irritated every time he glanced Lydia's way. It was Lydia's body, not Indigo's. He had to accept that, or we were going to have problems.

I sighed and pulled my phone out of my pocket, putting it on speakerphone. I didn't like having to turn to the arrogant son of a bitch, but I had his number, anyway. He was Lydia's assigned protector. He'd take the call, just in case it had something to do with her.

Sure enough, he answered on the second ring with a crisp, "Anthony Boline speaking."

"Angelo Stedham," I shot back. "I need to ask you a question."

He let out a mirthless chuckle. "And I doubt there's any way I can prevent you. This ought to be good."

"I was attacked yesterday. We're reviewing the footage now, and we're seeing a winged creature with an abnormally long tongue and... erm... intestines, I think. It's hard to tell with the footage being this grainy."

Anthony sucked in air through his teeth, sounding more shocked than I'd ever heard him. As the bounty-hunting son of a high witch and monster killer, he'd witnessed some of the worst things our world had to offer. If he sounded shocked or distressed, it was my cue to wade in swinging. I wouldn't like the results if I didn't act proactively to defend myself from a threat he obviously feared. His voice was sharper, more urgent than it had been just a moment before.

"Where are you? Is Lydia there?" he asked.

“No. She ran into her useless ex, who had the gall to pass out on her. She called an ambulance. I would have slathered him in honey and rolled him into an anthill, personally.”

“What did he look like before he passed out?” Anthony pressed. “Sick? Unfocused? Confused? Too pale?”

“Exactly like that,” I answered. “Are you saying whatever attacked me also attacked Rodney?”

“Yes. If it’s what I think it is, he’s probably doomed. That level of exposure to a manananggal is usually fatal.”

“A manawhat?” Roland repeated, giving Taliyah wide eyes.

“Who’s that?” Anthony asked.

“The Chief and one of her informed deputies. She’s trying to track down whatever jumped me.” I paused. “But I also second the question. What’s a manawhat?”

“A manananggal,” Anthony repeated, as if everyone in the room was stupid. “It’s a very distant offshoot of the vampire line, likely crossbred with local fauna or a demon species in the Philippines. It appears to be a beautiful woman when she approaches her victim but reveals her true colors after dark. Her torso can separate from her legs, and the winged upper half will fly around looking for prey. They mainly target pregnant women, but some prefer killing men. They tend to kill their victims over a span of weeks or months.”

“And they drink blood?” I asked.

“No, they don’t drink blood, exactly. It’s the essence they need, not the liquid. A side

effect of their saliva is the destruction of blood cells and the degradation of marrow over time. They feed on life essence through magically significant places: the womb for women, usually the gut or the sexual bits on men. You woke up with your dick intact, right?”

I paled. Nightmares and numerology. Had I come that close to singing soprano? I’d have to kill the vampire just to settle the score. You didn’t chop off an incubus’ favorite appendage and get away with it. It was tantamount to taking off part of a human’s jaw.

“I did, thankfully. There was a scar on my stomach, though. This vampire of yours took almost everything I had.”

Anthony chuckled. The bastard. “If you hadn’t gluttoned yourself in the past few years, she would have killed you. Make no mistake about that. If this is who I think it is, she would hate someone like you, especially. She probably thought she’d taken enough from you to guarantee your death in the near future.”

“Who is she?” Taliyah asked, inserting herself into the conversation before I could get another word in.

“Andrea is the human translation of the name,” Anthony answered. “It’s Andanarine to those in the know. She’s an incredibly deadly assassin, but usually works more quietly than this. She must have had a reason to leave you alive, Stedham.”

“She wanted me to attack Lydia, I’m pretty sure.”

“Attack her?” Anthony repeated.

“Feed on her,” I clarified. “And even if my feeding didn’t kill Lydia, she’d never trust me again, leaving her vulnerable to whatever Andrea had planned for her,” I said,

following the line of logic to its chilling conclusion. “If I’d fed on Lydia without her permission, she’d hate me for it, making her susceptible to someone she might let her guard down around.”

“And then she’d be a dead woman,” Anthony said. “Do you see my problem now? Please tell me you at least suspect her human identity.”

If what he was saying was right, a lot of things made sense. Andrea’s ability to be in two places at once. My main suspect had been crossed off the list due to Fifi’s assertion that she was in the bathroom because she’d seen Andrea’s legs. Except it had only been her legs in the stall. The rest of Andrea had crept out to attack me in the parking lot. Another, more terrifying thought struck me.

“You’re right about the human translation of the name. She’s going by Andrea Reyes and she used to be a Filipino model. Allegedly. I don’t know how much of the backstory they give their operatives is actually true, though. Now she’s running for office in Haven Hollow. I don’t think Lydia is the only goal here.”

“What do you mean?” Anthony asked.

Praying I was wrong, I sucked in a deep breath. “I think the Masked Lords aren’t content to skulk in and out, attacking us individually. I think they’re putting a woman on the inside. Do you know how much harder life could be for us if the bureaucracy suddenly turned hostile to our existence here?”

Anthony cursed. My sentiments exactly.

“Where’s the hospital? I need to secure Lydia before this gets out of hand.”

“I’m coming with you,” I insisted.

“Fine. Give me the address.”

I did. He hung up, and I wordlessly strode from the door.

“Where are you going?” Taliyah asked.

“To save Lydia. You can come if you want.”

“If I want?” she almost yelled at me. “It’s my job to keep Lydia safe, Angelo.”

I nodded. “Then let’s get in your cruiser and turn on the lights and sirens, Chief Morgan, because we’re going to need them.”

Lydia

Vin's arms closed around me like iron bands, crushing me to him for the second time in as many days.

This time, he wasn't trying to be gentle. He rapped my head against the wall so hard I saw stars. My knees buckled, and I sank bonelessly, held aloft only by the strength of his hands. If it had been Angelo, the grip might have been reassuring. Strange as it was, I trusted Angelo with my body and my heart. Maybe I'd regret that someday, but right now, there was no one I wanted more than my demonic protector.

Unfortunately, the incubus who actually had his hands on me wasn't half as clever, handsome, or talented as the one I'd hitched my demoness to. I wasn't sure if it was the Koloth or human in me that wanted to be violently sick. The sensation of his hands on me and the throbbing at the base of my skull had my last meal rising up my throat.

"You're going to cooperate now," he hissed. "Once Andrea has what she wants from you, I'm going to enjoy you for the next few weeks."

So Angelo had been right. Andrea was more than just a blow to my fragile self-confidence. She really was bad news. I still wasn't sure what I was dealing with or how Vin fit into her plot. Only one thought repeated over and over, a breathless motto in my brain.

Move, move, move. Run. Get away.

I wasn't sure if the words were mine or Indigo's. But it didn't matter: in this, we were in total agreement. It was easier to run from a demon than to get into a fight in the bathroom. The only problem here was that the ruined door handle would make escape nearly impossible, even if there wasn't an angry demon in my way.

A hysterical laugh bubbled out of my throat without my permission. It didn't sound like mine, nor did the voice that came out of my mouth. In times of pain or extreme panic, sometimes Indigo could wiggle into the space I usually occupied, flooding my limbs with crackling energy. The desire to be sick receded alongside my mind.

It was my aching head that struck the bridge of Vin's nose, which broke with a satisfying crunch, and he backed up, howling in pain. He'd had nearly the same reaction to being bitten in the courthouse. Was he really such an entitled piece of shit that he expected capitulation every time? He didn't just get to shove an unwilling woman into a wall, hike up her metaphorical skirts, and get away with it scot-free. He was about to learn that lesson. His pheromones, already dulled by the mate bond with Angelo, had even less effect on Indigo.

"You're a fool," Indigo said, speaking through me. "You don't even know what Andrea is or what she's planning to do to this town. You were just offended that someone didn't want you, weren't you?" She didn't wait for his response. "What did Andrea promise you, other than Lydia's body? A place in her organization? A better job? Parasites like you attach themselves to something until they exhaust all the things they want from it."

Vin's handsome face twisted into something almost bestial, a wash of crimson spreading over his neck and cheeks like a bloodstain. I knew better. It was his skin. The nubs pressing against his hair were the beginnings of horns. He was transforming. He'd get bigger, stronger, and meaner once he completely shed his humanity. The change in my scent registered, causing him to pause with his head cocked.

“What the hell?” he muttered, more to himself than to me.

“Fool,” Indigo muttered. “Andrea didn’t even tell you what you were dealing with, did she? You were just cheap, dumb muscle.”

“ Stop antagonizing him!” I hissed. “ Unless you forgot the fact we’re trapped in here with a pissed-off demon?”

“ I’m well aware ,” she thought back, her mental voice dry. “ You don’t always have to point out the obvious to me, you know. ”

“ Like the obvious fact that making him mad is bad?”

I felt my lips curl into a smile that wasn’t my own. There was always something hard and bitter about Indigo, no matter how much she warmed to me. The hard knot of grief at her center had morphed into disillusionment and rage that she was still struggling to unpack.

“ That depends. If he likes his skin uncrisped, he’ll open the door.”

My fingers formed rigid claws at my side, my blood warming beneath my new skin. If I turned my head, I could see the lines of fire that formed like cracks on my skin. I kept waiting for the heat to lick agonizingly across my body, but it stayed just beneath the surface. I felt like a brittle sheet of cooled lava, just waiting to break into pieces and drop whatever poor sap stood nearby into the slow-moving but destructive depths of my demonic energy.

And it seemed to be my energy now. Indigo was having a harder time controlling it than before. I had to take a mental step forward, sliding a metaphorical hand into hers before the flame could spring into being, clutched tightly in one fist. A brief glance in the mirror would have frozen me to the spot if I’d been the one in control.

I looked like a vaguely feminine statue that had been through a house fire. It shifted in subtle hues in the lines beneath my skin and made the black that had overtaken my eyes look intentional and exotic. I could see a hint of the heart-rending beauty of a female demon in the shape, especially as she moved our body, vaulting sleekly over the arm he tried to drive like a steel bar at our stomach. Vin let out a yelp when the tips of her fingers found his back, the heat of my touch catching the fabric and setting it alight. He had to shed the coat before the flames could spread rapidly to reach his neck and long hair.

“Bitch!” he swore, rounding on me in one of those too-fast movements. His foot slammed into a stall door, exactly where my head had been just seconds before. It dented the metal and sent a bass clang echoing through the room. Someone would have heard it. And that meant I just had to survive him long enough for the mundane staff to hear and intervene. The optics were firmly in my favor. He was an overbearing man in the women’s restroom—one who had destroyed property and tried to assault me. One call to Taliyah, and Vin was as good as charged.

Indigo strode for the door, fully intending to melt the deformed handle into a puddle and escape that way, but she never got the chance. We were yanked back by our hair, hands scrambling to break free of Vin’s restraining arms. His hand closed around my throat, cutting off my air.

“That’s the thing about fire,” he hissed into our ear. “You need air to fuel it. And since it comes from inside you...”

His fingers flexed, trapping precious air in my lungs. My head began to pound in time with his words, and black spots began to parade across my vision. He seized his flaming jacket and used his superior reach to hang it on a sprinkler set into the ceiling.

“I’ve done legal work for this hospital,” Vin said in a low, conspiratorial whisper. He

didn't even seem to care that Indigo was raining physical and magical blows down on him. "I've slept with a fair number of the nurses, too. It means I know certain things about how their emergency systems work. Most of them have a trigger mechanism. It's a little ampule filled with a glycerin-based liquid that expands when heated. So if there's a fire, it..."

He glanced expectantly at the ceiling, smirking when a chirping alarm went off in the distance and began to pour stale water onto our heads. Smoke rose from my skin, blinding me momentarily.

"Puts it out. Just like that. Isn't modern technology great?"

Then he punched me in the face, laughing when I hit the floor with a thud.

Angelo

“What do you mean, you don’t know where she is?”

Wanda gave me a flat, unfriendly look. I suspected she was more upset about the state of her hairdo than Lydia’s absence. Wanda was a beautiful woman. Even I could admit that. But all the smoldering good looks in the world didn’t help when you looked like a drowned rat.

“I mean, I don’t know where she is,” she said, rubbing a trickle of water from one eye with a sigh. “She and Poppy were supposed to distract security and any personnel that might interfere with the ritual. We didn’t even get a clear visual on what was preying on Lydia’s ex before the alarm started blaring and water started gushing from the ceiling. It effectively ruined all our preparations. And I will have you know that said preparations took especially long to set up because we couldn’t bring our familiars with us. Cats or dogs might get a pass in the hospital, but not an owl, skunk, raccoon, or piglet.”

She was probably right, but that didn’t mean I had to like it. And I didn’t like it! I raked a hand through my hair in frustration, scanning the crowd hopefully for any sign of Lydia. Whatever had activated the sprinkler system had forced three hospital floors to evacuate. There were sick or wounded humans as far as the eye could see, but no alluring gypsy in sight.

“Didn’t you have a fallback plan? What about looking out for members of your coven?”

Wanda's furious scowl was all the warning I got before the hex hit me right in the mouth. It wasn't as painful or obvious as a swing that resulted in the crunch of bone, but it still felt like I'd been struck in the mouth with a tennis ball. My teeth clacked together painfully, and it took everything in me not to lunge at the witch on instinct.

"What the hell was that for?" I demanded, once I could find my voice again.

"For insinuating I don't care about my coven," she hissed, giving me an arched brow stare. "You know damn well I care about every single member, even if Lydia still hasn't committed to the ritual. I'll bring her into the inner circle if she wants to try. I was willing to die for my people. You only care insofar as it concerns Lydia. Would you be spitting this much venom if it was Poppy missing instead of Lydia?"

I had to think about that for a moment, and some of my anger faded. Wanda was right. I wouldn't have been as upset if Poppy had disappeared. I should have been more concerned about my fellow monsters, but...

"Poppy doesn't have the kind of enemies that Indigo earned," I said quietly. "You heard what happened to Indigo the first time she died. They had to aim a curse so destructive at her that it blew her original body to smithereens and destroyed part of Lydia's last shop. They had to bury Indigo's remains in a plastic bag."

I couldn't escape the gruesome visuals in my nightmares. I didn't share the same trauma Lydia carried from the event, but she'd screamed herself awake often enough for me to understand. And now she was in danger from the same people, all because she'd had the misfortune of fusing soul-to-soul with a witch.

Wanda's face softened. Her fingers twitched as though she considered taking my hand to give it a squeeze. She seemed to think better of it and let her hand fall back to her side.

“I’m sorry too,” she said, though the words came through clenched teeth. She wasn’t the only one unused to eating crow. “That must be terrifying for you both.”

She had no idea. Some days, it felt like I was the last line of defense against a rapidly approaching army. I was strong and skilled. But not strong and skilled enough to defeat a half-dozen supersoldiers as capable as Indigo used to be. We were fighting things well outside our weight class, and it was going to kill us someday.

“Especially with a manananggal on the loose,” I said, watching as Wanda’s eyes widened. Clearly, she knew what the monster was, or she’d at least heard of it.

“How do you know that’s what it is?”

“Taliyah, and her deputy caught on video what attacked me in the realty office parking lot,” I explained. “And Anthony told us what it was.”

“So, what is it?”

Okay, so maybe she didn’t know as much as I thought. “It’s a type of vampire crossbreed that feeds on energy after inflicting a wound on someone. It took almost everything I had to survive. Feeding on Lydia helped, since she had more than human reserves to help me heal.”

Poppy sidled up to my side, her eyes glistening with tears. She kept glancing up at the hospital, as though expecting to see Lydia come jogging out of the emergency bay’s double doors.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered. “I was supposed to help her. But I got caught up by a doctor who wouldn’t stop talking. I was about to throw more Confusion Oil on him before the sprinklers went off.”

Rendering Poppy's most potent weapon useless. Of course she'd gotten caught up in the hustle and bustle. Her potions would wash off if she tried to use them to find Lydia. She had to evacuate with everyone else or be noticed and likely arrested. The cops wouldn't look too closely at the crowds. They'd be searching for any suspicious characters lingering after the fact.

"You can still help her, Poppy," Wanda said, steering the weepy gypsy to a stop. "I can use one of the brews you packed to start a tracking spell. It's a good spiritual anchor."

"Put it on me."

Both of them glanced up at me in surprise. I was surprised to hear the words coming out of my mouth, too.

"What?" Wanda asked.

"Olga and Betanya confirmed that Lydia and I have a bond. That should mean I can home in on her whereabouts faster and more accurately than you can. Anoint me, put me in the passenger seat of a car, and let's find these sons of bitches. I'm not letting them take her without a fight."

Poppy's lips quirked in a small, tremulous smile. "A bond?"

"Yes, a bond," I said impatiently, glaring at her. "Tease me about monogamy later. We have a gypsy to rescue now."

Wanda bounced her keys once in her hand, smirking. "So we do. Get in the car, loverboy. Let's find your lady and save her from the mean old vampire."

My eyes narrowed. "I'm going to get you back for that."

Wanda bared her teeth in a feral smile. “Oh, I’m looking forward to kicking your ass. I still owe you for that shitshow with Fifi a few years back.”

“Just as long as we save Lydia’s life,” I agreed. “Then we can duel as often as you like. Just don’t go crying to your vampire lover if you lose.”

“You’re on.”

Lydia

I woke up to someone grinding their heel into the back of my palm, cruelly digging a stiletto into the fragile bones as though considering snapping them in two. I couldn’t stop myself from bolting upright with a scream, trying to pull my hand away. The heel pressed harder, squashing my fingers against the carpeted floor. Something ground into my hand, and my stomach revolted; I barely turned my head in time to avoid splattering my clothes with vomit.

That, at least, succeeded in freeing my hand. The owner of the shoes didn’t appreciate vomit on the expensive footwear. When I could wipe the tears streaming from my eyes, I found a light layer of soot plastered to my skin, the aftereffect of a nearly complete demonic transformation. Someone had attempted to wipe it off my body with limited success and had completely removed the clothing I’d worn to the hospital. The scrubs they’d taken from the hospital hung off me, barely concealing the evidence of what I’d done. I wondered how they’d gotten me out of the hospital without anyone noticing... and promptly found the answer, hovering near the ceiling.

The foot that had pinned my hand to the floor like a struggling moth was attached to a long and scrumptious-looking leg. And just the leg. What should have been rounded hips leading to a dramatic curve of a waist stopped short, ending in a bloody stump.

But worse than that was the thing gripping the ceiling tiles above. I vaguely recognized the venue as a nearly defunct community center. Another, grander place had been built across town, leaving this one for kids' birthday parties and church groups handling baby showers and dinners after funerals. No one would find me here—not until it was too late. I doubted anyone would discover my body until it was ripe, drawing blowflies from the world outside.

The thing near the ceiling was worse. The creature that had called itself Andrea Reyes had shed bits of its skin so that whatever remained stretched tight against its frame. I had the impression of bloat near the stomach, with a nest of dangling entrails extruding from the remnants of a nice bodice. The original color was lost in a burst of blood. It seemed impossible that something so mutilated could be alive, but here we were. I was staring at a flying torso with its guts out.

I'd finally seen everything now.

“You and me both,” Indigo said, equally put out.

To my surprise, I actually remembered the name of this particular creature. It didn't fit perfectly with any of the creature feature books I'd sold in my store, but the visual of hanging intestines was unmistakable.

“You're a manananggal,” I said, my voice coming out as a rasp. My throat still burned from the violent tossing of my stomach.

Andrea's face split into a wide grin. Too wide, in fact; her lips peeled back farther than they should have, revealing rows of sharp, needle-like teeth. In full monster form, she made a vampire's bite look like a playful nip from a puppy. If her jaws locked onto my throat, I was a dead woman.

“The little bookworm actually decided to learn something useful before she died. I

personally hoped you'd be a little slower. It's always more fun to get the drop on a completely unsuspecting victim. Their screams are so satisfying."

"Like Rodney?" I guessed.

I belatedly realized my aggression had been misplaced. Rodney was a bad ex. He was a terrible person in general and pathologically incapable of admitting it. That didn't mean he deserved to be a meal for this sadistic creature.

"I'd originally planned to take your mother," Andrea said pleasantly. "Take her in one bite one night and leave you to find what I left behind. But Murrain said I had to be more oblique. Your ex-husband is a vile little man, isn't he?"

"Sure is," I agreed, trying to scoot away from the legs that had parked themselves beneath her torso. I wanted to be able to run if she glued herself back together. "Is that why you tried to kill him? To get to me?"

Andrea shrugged one shoulder, managing to convey grace that this twisted monster shouldn't possess. "Among other things. I knew I could manipulate you into situations more easily if you were distracted by that pathetic waste of skin. And it worked. I would have had you sooner if Vin could have done his job worth a damn."

A movement in my periphery drew my gaze to the incubus in question. It was satisfying to see he hadn't come away from the fight in the bathroom completely unscathed. Rings of yellow-brown bruising had formed beneath his eyes. Indigo had broken his nose when she'd thrown my skull against the planes of his face. He'd managed to feed on someone long enough to make the wound appear weeks old, but it was still something.

"You said I should be able to lure her with my pheromones," Vin muttered. "You and your boss were both wrong on that count. If I'd known she was going to cause this

much trouble, I would have bailed. You better double my pay. A romp with you isn't enough, especially when you look like this."

Andrea's mouth twisted in distaste. He didn't catch the longing glance downward or the flexing of her intestines, as though she was dying to wrap them around Vin's throat. The man was either stupid or spectacularly arrogant to think he could dictate that she give him anything. He was lucky he was alive and still had a penis. If he knew the alternative, he'd take what he had and be grateful.

"You'll get what Murrain has promised you," Andrea said, her sweet tone completely at odds with the flickering flesh above his head. I kept expecting it to burst into a flurry of movement and come after one or both of us stuck on the ground.

"I'd better. Take what you want from her and go. I want to leave town before my cousin realizes she's gone. He's strangely protective of this one, but he won't be so keen when I've put a few extra miles on her."

I'd kill myself before I let him have me. There was only one demon in the Hollow that I wanted, and he was at a police station, reviewing footage of what had attacked him. I knew he'd come to the right conclusion eventually. I was just afraid it would be too late to do me any good.

Andrea's legs marched away from me as she descended toward me. I barely had time to think, let alone move, and then she was on me, her weight settling like a smelly boulder on my chest. I flailed, getting nowhere. When I tried to push her off, I found only a slippery mass that oozed through my fingers. I couldn't get a grip on anything.

I could only watch, wide-eyed, as Andrea's mouth unhinged like a snake's and a gray, jelly-like tongue plunged down, thrusting deep into my chest.

Angelo

The oil led us straight to a barely maintained building I recognized by reputation, not sight.

I avoided the feeling-laden parties common here like the plague. It made sense for the enemy we faced, though. It was dimly lit, remote, and unlikely to be well-traveled. Andrea could squat here for days at a time, eating her meal in peace, with no one the wiser.

Which was exactly what she was doing when I burst through the door, the rest of Lydia's would-be rescuers fanning out in a line behind me.

We all stopped. We all stared.

For a second that seemed to last an eternity, I could only gawk at the tableau before me. It looked like something out of a horror movie. No, scratch that. Most of the people I hung out with belonged in horror flicks. This was the prelude to a supernatural snuff film, complete with a blood-bursting, soul-sucking fiend looming over the woman I...

Loved.

Hell below, it sounded completely absurd, but it was the truth. I did love her. Maybe it was the mating bond. Maybe it was something about the other creatures attached to her soul. I didn't care. I wanted Lydia in my life, and there was no way I was going to let an overgrown bat with slippery entrails eat my mate.

Before I could lunge forward and rip the ugly, crouched figure off Lydia's chest, I was knocked to the side by a large, well-muscled shape. The blow sent me spinning in the opposite direction, an alarming ringing sound coming from that side. I caught myself on the support beam before the hit could knock me entirely on my ass, but the force of the blow left me gasping. Blood ran in a thin stream down one side of my face, soaking my shirt. It didn't take long to figure out why.

Vin stood only a few paces away, a metal chair held aloft. It was no nut shot, but I could tell he'd enjoyed taking back a little of his own on me. But there was something he seemed to have forgotten about this whole thing.

I was stronger than he was. I always had been.

Superior build and superior pheromones. He'd always lived in my shadow. He was attractive and successful enough that he intimidated mundanes and lesser monsters. But I wasn't a lesser demon. I wasn't a woman alone, comparatively helpless in the face of a predator. I was a motherfucking demon, just as he was, and he'd pissed me the fuck off.

I kicked him. Hard. In the face.

It sent him staggering back the way he'd come, spitting blood and a rain of teeth. It bubbled over his lips and splattered down his thousand-dollar suit, adding insult to injury. I used the distraction to advance on him, plucking the chair from his flailing fingers. I broke one, just because it felt good to hear his bones snap and his throat close around a scream.

Lydia's scream drew my eyes back to the fight. Andrea had plastered her body to Lydia's front, squishing the bunched entrails and her long, slick tongue between them. It made a stomach-turning squelch, and I was helpless to do much while Andrea's teeth rested so close to Lydia's throat. Sure, she didn't need the vestigial

fangs to feed, but they worked as well as a knife. She didn't have to blow Lydia sky high to kill her. A severed artery worked just as well.

It was disturbing to look at Andrea. There was enough smooth, unblemished flesh on display to make any mundane man stop and stare. She hadn't bothered to cover her top half after separating from the bottom, leaving her breasts bare. It might have been interesting to see Lydia pressed so tightly to another woman if that other woman's tongue hadn't snaked its way where it shouldn't be. I could smell the rich tang of iron from her direction. Lydia was bleeding, and the stuff bubbling out had begun to stain the manananggal's front, fusing to her ashy gray skin, all life automatically sapped on contact.

Vin tried to crawl toward her, crying out when a boot came down on his wrist and the blade he'd produced from somewhere on his person. I followed the shoe up to its owner and found a sour-faced Anthony pinning my downed cousin, a crossbow aimed firmly at his temple. The tip of the bolt was stained with something dark and viscous—probably poison from our home dimension. Even if Vin didn't expire from a headshot, he'd die slowly later. No matter what he took from human women, it wouldn't be enough to sustain him forever. He'd starve to death. In my opinion, taking the bolt and praying for death was faster and less painful.

"Don't move," Anthony said, his free hand curling into a fist.

There wasn't enough aura of power to be visible, but I sensed the magic in Anthony all the same. He didn't have to be a warlock throwing blood bolts. At this distance, magic was like a gun. It didn't have to be large-caliber to ruin someone's day. I could finally see the realization of that play across Vin's face as he stared up at Anthony. For once in his spoiled life, he realized he wasn't above consequences. It would have been a satisfying moment to witness if Lydia hadn't bucked, nearly unseating Andrea.

Andrea slid a little and dug her nails into Lydia's arms to anchor herself in place.

Blood welled in the deep crescents, and an answering snarl built in my throat. I wanted to tear her head off. But Taliyah had it covered. The manananggal stilled immediately when the barrel of Taliyah's service pistol pressed to the side of her head.

"Stop whatever you're doing, right now," Taliyah said, her voice admirably level, but I saw the flinching around her eyes. The screams would haunt her too. "Withdraw your..." Taliyah paused, seeming a little flustered before finishing with, "tongue and step away from Ms. Morton."

The throaty chuckle that escaped Andrea was the sort of sound you heard in the bedroom, not a pitched battle. The bat wings, tattered ears, and ichor-stained bare skin clashed so violently with Andrea's lazy, sensual laugh that it made me feel ill.

"Your bullets can't kill me, your highness."

Andrea added that last bit with a mad cackle. Her eyes gleamed with a similarly manic energy as she twisted toward the gun. She didn't reach for it, as I expected. Even if she couldn't be killed by a jacketed round, getting shot would still hurt. I'd been shot before. It ranked up there as one of the most painful experiences I'd endured.

Andrea's gaze swept the room, taking in the gaggle of witches, a stern-faced faerie police officer, a monster hunter, and a pissed-off demon that had formed a loose circle around her. It wasn't a favorable position for any monster, but even less so for this murderous bitch. It almost made one grateful for Hollows in general. They weren't always successful, but their premise was sound. We were stronger and better off when we banded together against threats, instead of waiting for them to pick us off one by one.

"Maybe, maybe not," Taliyah said flatly. "But I don't have to shoot you to kill you,

Andrea. I just have to wait. You still have a vampire's weakness. If you remain separated from your legs, you'll burn up when the sun rises, isn't that right?"

Andrea didn't respond, but the rapid, nervous flick of her batlike ears was answer enough. When she licked her lips, it was with a portion of that rubbery appendage that moved. I didn't remember having it stuck in me, but I couldn't imagine it felt pleasant. From the soft whimpers coming from Lydia's throat, it hurt when the deed was done to a conscious person.

"What guarantee do I have that you won't kill me the second I step away from your friend?"

None. I wasn't letting her live, no matter what happened. If she burst into flames, good. I'd drag her off Lydia and then dance around the ashes. Maybe I'd leave and return with marshmallows, just to commemorate the event.

Taliyah's look cut sideways, as though she'd heard my thought. Her lips pursed and she cast me a strained glower before turning back to Andrea.

"You have my guarantee. Leave Lydia alone and you keep your life. Fail to do so, and your days are numbered. I have armies now. Your Lords have another thing coming if they think I'll allow another incursion into this Hollow. Lay a fang or finger on someone under my protection and I will bury you."

Andrea's wings flapped so suddenly that Lydia's ring of protectors flinched, just an inch. It was enough, though. Vin scrambled out from beneath Anthony's weight just long enough to seize one ropy entrail, squeezing it for all it was worth as Andrea took to the air, nimbly dodging my attempt to grab her by the hair. She dragged Vin along like a woebegone streamer in her wake, flailing and cursing as more of her organs slid messily down her torso to splatter on Vin's head, blood and thicker substances oozing out to coat his face. I took some solace in that. At least he'd gotten some

comeuppance for what he'd done to Lydia. The mess in a vampire hybrid's intestines was a good start, as far as I was concerned.

No one contradicted Taliyah. Andrea fled the building unscathed, leaving a twitching Lydia on the ground. I lunged for her the second we were in the clear, my knees hitting the floor beside her with an audible thump. Only the flutter of a heartbeat against the pale skin of her throat kept me from transforming completely, off to perform a rampage that would have made the Dark Ones themselves proud. The rest of the scene was bad enough.

Lydia's stomach hadn't been torn into, nor had Andrea inserted that long, proboscis-like tongue into her womb. Instead, Andrea had ripped open her blouse, plunging through the material of her bra so that the white lace was stained scarlet. Rivulets of blood ran from the wound. It didn't appear deep, or I would have worried about Lydia's heart. A divot about the size of a golf ball had been carved just to one side of her breastbone, exposing her glistening insides to the air. It looked like a hideous invasion, and I had the visceral urge to slap a hand over it. I liked Lydia's body exposed for my private viewing, not laid bare and carved like a Sunday roast.

A pair of witches knelt beside me. Without a word to each other, they got their hands beneath her arms and began hauling her to her feet. I recognized Wanda's curvy frame on one side and the spare frame of a man on the other.

"I've got her," Maverick barked. "You call ahead. We need to get her to the coven house. Or Taliyah's house, failing that. I'd rather not, though, since she's got kids. We need to get Lydia behind wards."

"Why?" I asked, the word slipping out before I could stop it. "Andrea is gone."

I stood, barely feeling my legs as I trudged after the pair. Maverick moved at a fast clip, ignoring an indignant Wanda bobbing near his elbow, just waiting to catch

Lydia if she tumbled. Lydia was moving, barely, but still didn't seem conscious. It was a relief when Maverick swung her up into his arms. I wanted to be the one holding her, but my limbs wouldn't seem to cooperate.

Nothing about this felt right. Lydia looked fine, but a hollow ache had settled in my middle that hadn't been there only a few minutes ago. The sense of dread and grief intensified, nearly bending me double. I couldn't put my finger on what was wrong, but there was something.

"Because manananggal feed on essence, not blood," Anthony said brusquely, sliding into the backseat of Wanda's vehicle without being told. "And the places it chooses to feed are significant, as I explained."

"Nads on men, wombs on women, I remember," I said. "Why does that matter right now? Andrea didn't poke her tongue into Lydia's uterus, genius."

"No, she did worse," Anthony said, expression twisted tight with grief. "In some traditions, the soul is located in the heart or lungs. Indigo was fused to Lydia there."

Oh. Oh fuck.

"She took Indigo's soul?" I asked, sounding out the words. They didn't feel right.

"I think so," Anthony whispered. "That's why Murrain sent Andrea in the first place. To get rid of the threat before he moves on the Hollow in a larger show of strength."

So, he was planning on attacking Haven Hollow? At least this time we were prepared. Maybe we'd have enough warning to evacuate the human population before they arrived to slaughter us.

"Is there anything we can do about it?"

Anthony shrugged, eyes tightening when Maverick laid Lydia flat on his lap. I took the other end when I lowered myself into the seat next to his. He looked weary.

“Not unless Andrea vomits up Indigo’s soul,” He answered.

“They can do that?”

“Murrain wants to punish Indigo, so he might demand it,” Anthony said as Maverick nodded.

“A soul can be stored for brief periods in certain containers,” he explained. “Imani would be the one to ask about it. It’s more her area of magic than mine.”

“But Indigo can be saved if that happens?” I pressed.

“Maybe,” Anthony nodded as he looked at Maverick who shook his head.

“I’ve never tried to do anything like that. This circumstance is rare.”

Taliyah’s lights and sirens blurred to life nearby, and Wanda wordlessly followed the speeding cruiser further into town. I caught her glancing at us in the rearview mirror now and then, eyes wide and concerned, but she thankfully said nothing. She meant well and didn’t need me taking her head off for trying to apply a well-meaning but ultimately useless comment.

Lydia’s breathing evened as we drove, which should have calmed my nerves. It didn’t. There was something wrong with the cadence of her breaths, the beat of her heart. It wasn’t right. Neither was the scent. Lydia was tangy, mock orange, with a bit of surprising heat at the tail end. It was a scent and flavor I craved. The stuff wafting off her skin now was... jasmine. And her hair was still a thick, sweet-smelling mass of black, not the cloud of gold it ought to have been if Indigo truly had been parted from

her.

My stomach sank.

“This isn’t Lydia,” I said.

Anthony glanced up at me and frowned. “What?”

“There’s a difference in her scent and magic. I’m attuned enough to it now to know the difference between—” My stomach suddenly felt sick. “Andrea didn’t take Indigo,” I said, my tone hollow as the reality sank in. “She took Lydia.”

Anthony understood a second later, his face blanching white. He couldn’t help but cast a small, hopeful glance at Lydia’s body and the stranger who was now its sole occupant.

And then he recoiled at the sound of my angry snarl.

The End

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Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 2:18 am

Petra and Me

The vacation I took to England's West Country was one of my best and earliest memories.

I was eight or so at the time and it was my first time on a plane, my first time out of the country and the first time I remember leaving New York and its environs. For a child who'd known nothing but the city and its suburbs, the rolling fields and majestic hills of Somerset and Wiltshire (our American pronunciation of which greatly amused the locals) was a fantasy landscape, like the Shire from *The Lord of the Rings*.

My parents and I stayed in a bed and breakfast in a village called Morley-on-Avon, through which the river lazily snaked. It was a wonderland that imprinted itself on my young mind and I swore I would someday return.

But the trip was mostly memorable because it was the location where Petra became my constant companion, the 'imaginary friend' about whom my parents smiled quietly and for whom they even set a place at the table (as recommended by various parenting guides on the subject of 'invisible friends'). Of course, that was before I patiently explained that Petra didn't need to eat.

The day I met Petra is still etched in my mind in such vivid detail, it feels as if it were only yesterday.

"Petra Shearwater," the tour guide had announced, an almost circular man with a moustache that appeared to be trying to take over his face. He was dressed in a red,

velvet outfit that looked as if it was meant to mimic something Henry VIII would have worn, though the guide's was a cheap imitation. I was fairly sure it was mustard that was staining the ruff around his neck. While the guide's outward appearance was bland (with the notable exception of his monstrous moustache), he seemed to make up for that blandness with the shrillness of his voice and the theatrical waving of his arms. He looked like a man about to take off for the clouds.

"It was within this house, or just outside it, that she died and some say, she still haunts it." He pointed at the dirt patch on which he stood and then did a strange little jig, as if Petra were reaching up from her grave to tickle the undersides of his feet. "On this very spot here, that I'm currently standing upon."

We were standing in the mighty shadow of one of the great stately homes of the county. Not the biggest or most expensive that Britain had to offer (not quite Downton Abbey scale) but an impressive 'country pile' never the less. It was called Chambon Hall.

"Though, of course, it only got that name in the sixties when a pair of monied hippies," the guide raised his eyebrows to show what he thought of said monied hippies, "Lucius and Delphine Chambon—better known as 'Thor' and 'Feather' to their circle of unwashed ragamuffins—bought it up for a song after the de Crecy family, who had lived on this site since the fifteenth century, went broke following bad investments. On the ponies," he added with a wink and then did a little twirl that seemed to surprise all those in attendance.

"But back to Petra," the guide continued. "She didn't live in Chambon Hall, but she was a guest of the de Crecy family, from back when they were at their peak," the guide went on, nodding at everyone in turn. "This was in the late nineteenth century, mind you. The Victorian era." The guide cleared his throat and his voice rang out even louder. "Petra was invited to stay because young Roger de Crecy," at which point the guide winked at my parents and continued, "Roger by name and Roger by nature—saving your daughter's presence, aye?" My parents nodded uncertainly, and

the guide continued on. “Roger had taken a fancy to Petra, who was renowned as a bit of a looker—which was perhaps exactly what had appealed to Roger. So, Petra was invited to stay and quite quickly into her stay, she died, some say by mysterious circumstances,” (accompanied by much wiggling of fingers). “She fell to her death, right here on this here spot.”

“Not true,” said a woman’s voice from beside me. “I fell over there,” and then she pointed to a place that was a few feet away. When she faced the guide again, she cocked an irritated brow in his direction. “And I certainly do not appreciate the fact that every time you tell this story erroneously, it is my reputation that suffers as you fail to mention that the de Crecy’s were cousins to my family and thus, I was not simply visiting an unattached man with whom I had no affiliation.”

The woman, presumably Petra, appeared to be in her early twenties with dark hair that was done up in curls around her face. She wore a bonnet and was dressed in a long and beautiful, emerald gown with bilious skirts that sashayed around her and touched the ground. I couldn’t help noticing that she was slightly transparent, so I could see through her to the tree line at the fringes of the lawn. Of course, I assumed that had to mean she was a ghost, but I wasn’t in the least bit frightened of her.

“Some believe Petra was killed by Roger’s father, who thought her to be ill-suited to marry his son,” the guide continued.

She, meanwhile, scowled at him. “Yes, yes, always this about my being ill-suited for the rascal Roger de Crecy. The truth was, I had no interest in marrying the scoundrel! And as to the particulars of my death...” the woman went on, shaking her head as she made a dismissive gesture at the guide who had, apparently, gotten it all wrong. “I can’t recall why I was killed or by whom. Perhaps it was simply an accident.” Then she shook her head like the whole thing was one big shame and sighed. “You get the details incorrect every day on every tour and you never listen to me correcting you because you can’t hear me. None of you can.”

“I can hear you,” I said.

The transparent woman looked down at me and her mouth dropped open in shock.

“Well, that’s nice to know, little lady,” smiled the guide. “But I’m over here.”

There’s no need to go over the rest of the conversational cross purposes because you can probably guess how the rest of it went. The important thing is that, at the end of the day, Petra sat beside me in the back of our rental car, heading to the hotel in which we were staying. And it was no surprise either, because for over a hundred years she’d had no one to talk to but other departed spirits, whose conversation was apparently ‘limited and self-involved’, and who usually ‘moved on’ pretty quickly. Now she had a companion, and she wasn’t letting me go.

I was perfectly happy with my strange, new friend, and still happier when Petra regressed to childhood, appearing my own age and dressing in appropriate clothes for a Victorian child. As an only child, I’d sometimes struggled to make friends—now I had one who came with me everywhere. When we left for New York a week later, Petra was in tow.

It should be relatively clear by this point that Petra was not an imaginary friend, she was, for want of a better word, a ghost. But I didn’t really think of her as a ghost because there was nothing about her that was ghostlike or frightening. To me, she was more like a magical fairy who could change her appearance at will and who mostly just wanted to gossip. But she wasn’t the only deceased person I could see.

Maybe it was owing to my first seeing Petra, to whom I had some indefinable connection, but that day in Morley opened the floodgates, and from then on, I saw ghosts on a semi-regular basis. Only a few were like Petra, though: clear and almost solid to look at. Most were varying degrees of flickering translucency, some barely even human-shaped. I don’t recall ever being scared of them, though—they simply became a part of my life.

As I grew older, and began to better understand what it was I was seeing, then I also began to understand, mostly through Petra, what the rules were about the deceased and how it all worked.

The majority of people, after they died, moved on almost instantly, to that incredibly bright light that was the afterlife. Those with some unfinished business might linger around in a place Petra described as a sort of Limbo which existed in its own space and time. The walls between Limbo and the living world were pretty thin though, and those spirits would often manifest here, intentionally or otherwise, usually in the place where they died. Initially, the confusion of death made them unfocused, unable to communicate in words, but only able to radiate their emotions—I called those sorts of spirits ‘apparitions’. The longer they remained in Limbo, the more ‘normal looking’ they became—Petra being the ultimate result, a full-on ghost. Most didn’t stay anywhere in this realm nearly as long as Petra had. Once they understood what had happened to them and accepted it, they went elsewhere.

But even though Petra fully understood that she was dead and had been for a long while, she never seemed interested in moving on. And she never seemed able to recall what exactly had happened to her that caused her death in the first place. At first, I thought she just didn’t like to think about it—that her death had traumatized her and, thus, she didn’t want to focus on it. But as the years went on, I became more and more convinced that she really couldn’t remember the particulars. It was almost as though the whole thing was so terrible, that she’d simply forgotten all details—maybe as a way to protect herself? I wasn’t sure.

But as to moving on to the other side and Petra’s inability to do so, she said she liked things just as they were and that was why she stuck around. That was just fine with me because Petra became the sister I’d never had—only my sister was see-thru.

“Can you look any age you want?” I’d asked her once.

Petra shook her head. “Only an age I’ve been. It’s the same with clothing—I can’t

dress like you because such clothes weren't around when I was. And thank the good Lord for that—what passes as fashion these days should be criminal!”

Petra had many opinions regarding the modern era—most of which weren't necessarily positive opinions. And I supposed that made sense, seeing as how she was brought up during a time in history that was known for being especially prudish and repressed. The ideal Victorian woman was ‘pure, chaste, refined and modest’ as Petra would tell me time and time again (usually in response to something I'd said or done that was decidedly not pure, chaste, refined or modest).

How much was choice and how much instinct, I never fully understood, but Petra always appeared my age, so as I grew up, she grew up with me. Until, that is, I passed twenty-two, at which age she'd died. And so, somewhat irritatingly, she stopped aging while I continued to do so for another (at the time of writing) twenty years.

By the time Petra and I were twenty-two, I'd already embarked on the career to which I'd devote my life. I'd always written stories, and maybe it was the presence of Petra that dictated the direction those stories would eventually take. Without making a conscious decision, the genre I always seemed drawn to was in the direction of mystery, often with a folk horror twist. I'd become fascinated by mythology and legends, and spun those threads into my books in a way that, without any false modesty, seemed to appeal to the public. And so it was that I celebrated my twenty-fifth birthday with a first bestseller under my belt, and at the party thrown for me by my literary agent, I met the man with whom I was to spend much of the next fifteen years.

When talking about Ian, I don't know whether to speak from my head or my heart. Maybe it's better to stick to the facts because otherwise I'd be here all day and Ian is a relatively small part of this story—as in, he's part of the set-up, not the narrative.

Anyway, we never got married, so maybe there was always something in the back of both of our heads telling us this relationship was only for as long as it lasted, not

forever. But for as long as it lasted, it was good enough.

In the end, we still liked each other, but we'd ceased to love each other. Maybe you don't notice that happening when you're so used to a person, when you see them every single day. Making the final break can be hard, even when it's preceded by months of tense, sexless silence, while waiting for the other person to step up and say something.

It was Ian who finally stepped up and said something, and my major regret was that I hadn't said something sooner. Maybe we could have revived our relationship if I'd said something sooner—maybe there would have been something there worth saving if we'd found it in time? I didn't know and supposed I never would. Regardless, the end of the relationship meant that someone had to move out of the apartment we'd comfortably shared for the last fifteen years. It also coincided with the release of a retrospective anthology of my 'best' work.

Looking at that volume, I found myself feeling dissatisfied, not with what I'd done, but with the idea that it was all I was ever going to do. Skimming through stories I'd written a decade earlier, I realized how similar they were to those I'd written last year. And that meant one thing: I was in a rut, and there would never be a better time to make a change.

I told Ian to keep the apartment.

The day after my forty-second birthday, I boarded a plane to keep a promise I'd made to myself when I was just an eight-year-old girl.

I was going back to Morley-on-Avon.

"Going home!" Petra enthused and beamed the biggest grin I'd seen in quite a while.

"Nothing was stopping you from going back a long time ago," I pointed out.

“It’s quite a long walk.”

“Couldn’t you just go into Limbo and come back out in Morley?” I teased.

She gave me a look. “Gwendolyn,” (she always insisted on calling me as such, even though Gwendolyn wasn’t even my name. It was simply: Gwen). You know that is not how the afterlife works.”

I knew. I wasn’t sure exactly how it did work, but I knew she couldn’t just come and go as she pleased.

A housing agency in the UK had set up some viewings for me in Morley, but there was one place that appealed to me beyond all others, a place that was right in the heart of Morley—a real British cottage. Little and proper and completely adorable. How could I not buy it? And it was almost crazily cheap, presumably because if you’re English, then you don’t appreciate how wonderful such sorts of things are.

“I should imagine there’s quite a bit more to it than that,” said Petra, eyeing me in that way of hers, which meant she knew something I didn’t. Or thought she did. Strangely, for being alive over a hundred years, Petra didn’t really know much more than I did. And the things she did feign to know, were usually wrong. I wasn’t sure if it was owing to the fact that she hadn’t been a very informed person when she was alive, or maybe she just became confused after death, but Petra would quite literally just make stuff up. “The cottage shouldn’t be so inexpensive—you know what they say about such things.”

“Actually, I don’t.”

She responded by propping her nose into the air as she did when she was about to come up with a whopper. “I should imagine it has a... troll problem.”

“A troll problem?” I repeated, frowning.

“Yes, they really are quite beastly creatures—worse than raccoons. And if you’ve a troll problem at that humble little estate you’re considering, they will hardly be done away with easily.”

“I’ll take that bet,” I answered, not really in the mood for any of her shrewd opinions or ridiculous ideas. This was a new adventure, and I was planning on finding myself again in a different country. Not that I’d necessarily lost myself, but sometimes relationships begin to define you (especially the long ones) and pretty soon, you find yourself sans relationship and sans a sense of self. I had a feeling I’d find that self again in Morley-on-Avon. “You’ll see, there’s nothing wrong with it—no trolls and no raccoons.”

Petra shook her head. “When you reach my age, you’ll be more circumspect.”

“You’re twenty years younger than I am.”

She waved me away with an unconcerned hand. “Only in the physical sense. And since I have no physical presence any longer, that hardly counts, Gwendolyn, dear.”

In Morley-on-Avon we were shown around the houses by an agent, who pointed out each house’s good points and smiled a lot, but my mind wasn’t sold on any of these places.

I wanted the cottage.

The cottage was called Bluebells and looking around it, I found it even more perfect than it had appeared online. Yes, this was where I wanted to live. This was where I wanted to write, and my mind was crowded with the possibilities of the sorts of stories I could dream up in such a place.

“Tell me you don’t like it,” I whispered to Petra as we looked around. I was careful to talk to Petra only when the agent wasn’t within hearing distance. In my long

association with her, I'd learned how to avoid appearing as if I were speaking to the air. After all, people get very uncomfortable when you speak to others they can't see.

"I never said I did not like it, though it is rather small," Petra answered and she glanced around herself with what appeared to be distaste. "Such accommodations would have been quite substantial for the servants back in my day, but alas... times have certainly changed." That was a common rejoinder for Petra whenever she was comparing the Victorian age with the modern one and finding the modern lacking. "Do I get my own room?"

"No," I responded. "You have your own plane of reality."

Over the years, Petra had become more of a visitor than an actual house guest. As children, we'd lived and played together, but as I got older (as we both got older) that became less comfortable, particularly after Ian and I moved in together. Petra was nothing if not accommodating and always made herself scarce during dates, romantic dinners, and what she primly referred to as 'amorous congress'. I think it was more along the lines that she was extremely uncomfortable with anything that was 'taboo' and simply couldn't handle displays of affection and certainly not 'convivial society' (another of her terms for the horizontal mambo).

Limbo was only ever a footstep away, so she always had somewhere to go and read a book or whatever it was they did in Limbo—it was a subject on which she was cagey for contractual reasons.

"All I said was that there was something wrong with the place," she insisted, propping her hands on her hips as she glared at me. "A reason it should be so inexpensive," she repeated.

"Don't be silly." I shook my head and hoped she was wrong.