



# Valentine's With A Vampire (Evershift Haven #5)

*Author: Aurelia Skye, Kit Tunstall*

**Category:** Fantasy

**Description:** I, Declan Stewart, am an ex-military florist with a broken-down van, a town that won't let me leave, and a glowing lantern that insists I'm fated for love—specifically with the town's most alluring (and infuriating) vampire.

Delivering Valentine's bouquets wasn't supposed to involve accidentally driving into a magical town, losing all cell service, and being told my van won't start again until a town festival decides my fate. Evershift Haven is a place where heart-shaped leaves fall from the sky, ghosts serve tea, and a glowing lantern follows me around like a clingy matchmaker. But none of that is half as unsettling as Vandria St. John—the sharp-tongued, wickedly beautiful vampire bookstore owner, who delights in toying with me.

She swears the town's magic is real. I swear I'm leaving the second my van is fixed, but as the days pass, I start getting tangled in the town's charms, and Vandria's. Between scavenger hunts, enchanted chocolates, and a suspiciously invested group of small-town magical meddlers, I realize I might be falling for the very thing I swore I wouldn't. The real question is, when the festival ends, will I actually want to go?

Welcome back to Evershift Haven—a town where magic thrives, romance is literally in the air, and even the most stubborn (and grumpy) outsiders might just find themselves believing in fate. This fifth book in the series is packed with cozy charm, quirky characters, and enough slow-burn tension to keep you reading way past bedtime.

**Total Pages (Source):** 9

# Page 1

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

I NEVER PLANNED ON trading a rifle for roses. My life once revolved around missions, intel, and the steady adrenaline that came with the job. Now I'm wrist-deep in floral foam every day, trimming stems and babying gerbera daisies like they're delicate porcelain. My grandmother always said the secret to a great bouquet is intention. If a florist's mind wanders, the flowers know. The instructions made me roll my eyes when I first inherited her business, but I do it anyway.

It's led to me heading up the successful florist business I've inherited since Gran retired, which is why I'm out on this road, delivering the last of my orders hopefully before the end of the day. The old delivery van has me nervous though. It squeaks whenever I push the accelerator, being a relic from a simpler time. My grandmother's name is still painted on the side, though most of the letters have peeled away. An echo of "Bethany's Blooms" remains, streaked from too many runs through cheap car washes.

My life these days involves early mornings, soil under my fingernails, and the occasional scowl from a bridezilla, who demands impossibly blue hydrangeas in the dead of winter. It's worlds away from my old special forces gig. Sometimes, I catch myself checking blind spots and scoping escape routes out of pure habit. Nothing says "welcome to the wedding consultation" like a man measuring distances to the nearest exit.

My phone chirps with the robotic voice of the GPS. It's an app I rely on religiously because my sense of direction has always been questionable without a compass. The mechanical tone orders me to make a left onto a highway exit that doesn't seem to exist. This place is pure farmland on one side and dense forest on the other. The evening sky glows with the last rays of sunlight, painting the horizon in gold and

dusky purple. A sign flickers on the phone screen: “Route Recalculating.”

“Wonderful,” I mutter. The clunky voice tries again, insisting on a turn at some hidden road. My grip tightens on the wheel. I slow down, gaze darting over the darkening stretch, searching for a turnoff. Nothing. My grandmother always told me I should trust my instincts. Mine are screaming that I’m missing something. A thick mist clings to the road ahead, swirling in the headlights.

One more attempt to reset the GPS does nothing. The map flickers, glitching from farmland to blank white. It cycles back, then goes dead. My phone loses all signal. The screen freezes, then shuts off completely. The charger isn’t doing a thing to revive it. I mutter a sharp curse and slow to a crawl, scanning the roadside. Heading back to the main highway is the logical plan. That’s what I’d do in any normal situation, except there’s a curious shimmer in the air and a faint glimmer drifting right across the road.

The van lurches forward, and the shimmer expands around me like a translucent curtain of light, making me tingle from head to toe. The engine coughs. I press the brake, but the pedal feels stiff. There’s a crackle over the radio. The song that was playing fizzles out into static. A jolt travels through the vehicle’s frame, and my headlights blink. The engine shudders, then quits.

I let the van coast to the shoulder, though I’m not even sure if this road has one. Gravel crunches under the tires, and the vehicle glides to a silent stop. No hiss and no final roar. I turn the key. The engine clicks once, then nothing. My breath comes out in a frustrated huff.

A faint swirl of fog drifts over the windshield. My phone remains unresponsive. The only illumination comes from a dying interior dome light, flickering and threatening to vanish any second. The entire situation is a perfect recipe for frustration, yet something about the air smells...sweet. It’s like dew-kissed blossoms, warm sugar,

and a hint of pine. My mind tries to process how the middle of nowhere can carry that aroma, but I have bigger concerns.

I open the door, stepping into the crisp air. The road beneath my boots feels oddly smooth, unlike asphalt. My headlights reflect on a surface that gleams like stone. A sign looms in the distance with letters carved into a wooden arch. The swirling script is too far to read clearly, but it beckons with a faint glow. The only option is to walk.

I grab my jacket, also a relic of my old life—lots of pockets, worn black canvas, and comforting. My breath forms wisps in the chilly air. The forest on either side rustles, though there's no detectable breeze. The hair on my neck prickles. I zip my jacket and move toward that glowing sign.

The words become clearer with each step. “Welcome to Evershift Haven.” Lanterns line the entrance, flickering with soft, golden light. The road itself transitions from gravel to cobblestone. Tall trees surround me, branches arching overhead like cathedral ceilings. Leaves drift down in slow spirals, each shaped like a tiny star. Part of me suspects I've walked onto some film set. Another part warns me that something genuinely strange is happening. A soldier's intuition is usually reliable. That intuition is nudging me to keep my guard up.

Cobblestones lead into a small clearing, then open into a charming town square. The scene glows under lampposts that don't look electric—more like wrought iron rods holding shimmering orbs. Buildings line the street with old-world architecture, their storefronts painted in whimsical colors. A pastel café with a sign reading “The Enchanted Espresso,” a shop called “Mystic Melodies,” and something across the way labeled “Moonlit Inn.” Everything is adorned in pink, frilly things and hearts. It looks like Valentine's Day threw up in the main square.

A figure appears near a lamppost. It's a man with pale skin and slicked back black hair. His posture is impossibly poised. An elegant woman with auburn hair and violet

eyes that seem to catch the glow of the lamplight stands beside him. Both wear stylish outfits reminiscent of classic gothic romance covers, all tailored suits and flowing gowns.

Their expressions brighten when they see me, as though they've been expecting my arrival. The woman lifts her hand in greeting. There's a lilt to her voice. "Declan Stewart, right?"

My heart beats a little faster. They know my name. I wonder if my grandmother ever mentioned me to folks out in Montana. She's from this area originally, but that doesn't explain a hidden town. My posture stiffens. "Yeah...that's me, and you are?"

The man steps closer. The top of his collar is buttoned, revealing no skin at the throat. His voice is smooth and cultured. "Etienne St. John. This is my wife, Crystal. We run the 'Moonlit Inn.'" He regards me with a curious tilt of his head. "Welcome to Evershift Haven."

I automatically reach for the sidearm in a holster I no longer wear, instinctively searching for reassurance. This entire encounter reeks of something orchestrated.

Crystal lifts one eyebrow. "Is your van giving you trouble?"

I fight the urge to retreat. "Died, and I couldn't get it to start again. GPS went haywire, and the phone died too. Sorry, but how do you know my name?"

She grins as though that question amuses her. Is that a hint of...fang? "We always know the names of our guests."

I tense but not from fear. The place radiates a strange warmth that conflicts with my sense of caution. "I'm not exactly a guest. I only wandered in because I didn't see another option."

Etienne's gaze settles on me in a way that suggests he's sizing me up. He dips his head toward the inn. "You look cold. We can discuss everything by the fire, if you'd like? Our parlor is cozy, and you must have had a long drive."

It's tempting, especially now that the chill seeps through my jacket. My boots feel heavy from the walk. The thought of sleep briefly enters my mind, but there's no chance I'm letting down my guard. "If there's a phone I can use, I'd appreciate it. Then I'll see about towing my van to the closest shop."

Crystal's eyes gleam faintly red—surely a subtle trick of the lamplight. She steps aside, gesturing for me to follow. "We can arrange all of that. You're exactly where you need to be."

The certainty in her tone carries me forward out of a lack of better options. The inn looms ahead, a Victorian-style mansion with ornate spires, stained-glass windows, and a wooden sign swinging gently in the night breeze. "Moonlit Inn" glows with letters carved in swirling script.

Crystal leads me through the threshold, and the door creaks with satisfying drama. Warmth envelops me. A chandelier hangs from the ceiling, each crystal droplet shimmering in a different color, painting dancing rainbows on the walls. The foyer opens onto a grand staircase that curves up into the shadows. A plush rug muffles my steps.

Etienne places a hand on a round table near the center of the foyer. He looks my way, expression calm. "Relax. We'll handle everything."

I rub my hands together, more to steady my nerves than for warmth. "Would appreciate a phone, or even a place to charge mine. I really need to let people know I'm...detained." Gran might be worried.

He inclines his head. A carved wooden door stands to the left, likely leading into a lounge or sitting area. “Let’s try the parlor.”

I follow them into a cozy room with a fireplace crackling on one wall. Overstuffed chairs face the flames, and a faint glow from decorative lamps reveals shelves filled with old, leather-bound books. Paintings decorate the walls, each depicting scenes that look suspiciously alive—like the brushstrokes themselves shift when not watched directly. The back of my neck tenses again, though the warmth lulls the tension in my muscles.

Crystal motions to a chair, and I sink into it, reluctantly grateful for the comfort. She sets a porcelain teacup on a small table in front of me. The tea steams, carrying an aroma of honey and chamomile. “Is that for me?”

She nods. “Yes. We brewed it the moment we sensed your arrival.”

I blink at the loaded phrasing. “Sensed my arrival?” The words sound bizarre, but it seems normal for them. I reach for the cup, inhaling the sweet steam, though I hesitate to drink. “This is quite the place you have.”

Her lips curve in a pleased smile. “Our home for a few centuries now.” She nods toward Etienne, who stands near the fireplace, arms crossed. He looks amused, probably reading the confusion in my eyes.

Centuries. That has to be a joke. They both appear to be in their early thirties, maybe. My mind conjures thoughts of a theme hotel, with maybe a year-round Halloween vibe, or a live-action role-play community. They play their roles well. A glance at the mirror above the fireplace reveals both of their reflections. That at least disproves the silly vampire idea swirling in my head. The idea that they might not cast a reflection is absurd. Yet the entire scenario is also absurd.

Etienne steps away from the fireplace. “Should we call for Throk, my dear? Mechanic,” he says to me.

Crystal inclines her head. “Yes, but Throk might be busy at ‘Mystical Motors’ or out with Suzette. We could send a message, and Declan can rest here until the morning.”

I shuffle forward in the chair, ignoring how comfortable it is. “If he’s the mechanic, I’d prefer to see him now. My van is stuck on the side of the road. I don’t want it vandalized, or...worse.”

Crystal’s eyes narrow, not with anger but with some quiet amusement. “No one will touch your van. Evershift Haven isn’t that kind of place.”

A soft knock draws my gaze to the doorway. Another figure stands there. This one has porcelain-pale skin, wide eyes, and hair pinned up in a neat bun. Her attire is a conservative black dress with a white apron at the waist. She appears hesitant, almost transparent in the flickering firelight. She looks at Etienne and Crystal, then looks at me. The swirl of the firelight catches a faint glow at the edges of her silhouette.

Crystal nods in greeting, a gentle tilt of her head. “Misty, wonderful timing.”

Misty’s voice shakes. “There’s a message from Grizelda.” Her gaze flicks to me. “She was wondering if we have a new visitor.”

Crystal smiles. “We do.” She points in my direction. “Declan Stewart.”

A slight bow from Misty. Her outline wavers, as though a gust of wind passes through her. My heart hammers. She’s too pale, with the edges of her figure nearly blending into the background. That’s a special effect I can’t easily explain. My mind grapples with illusions I’ve seen in big city attractions, but never something this convincing in a random small town.



Misty's voice stays soft. "Should I let Grizelda know he's safe?"

Crystal nods. "Please do."

Misty moves backward through the doorway, literally. She doesn't turn around. Her entire body drifts like a cloud. The moment she's gone, a subtle tingle ripples across my arms. My rational mind flails for an explanation. The quiet in the parlor bears down, broken only by the crackle of logs in the fireplace.

I place the teacup down, ignoring the swirl of honey-colored liquid. "That woman looked...transparent."

Etienne's gaze flicks to the spot where she vanished. His tone is calm. "Misty Caldwell is our housekeeper. She's quite friendly, though she startles visitors."

My breathing catches in my throat. "Is she wearing some kind of advanced costume?"

Crystal's smile grows sympathetic. "She's a ghost." Her posture doesn't suggest any hint of a joke. There's genuine sincerity in her voice.

A thousand retorts crowd my brain. This entire situation has to be an elaborate hoax. My grandmother's mention of quirky Montana towns never included phantasms. Though a memory stirs of childhood bedtime stories—Bethany used to speak of a hidden place where magic thrived. I always assumed those were old folk tales or creative nonsense to amuse me.

I swallow the impulse to argue. "I'd like to call a tow truck, or any mechanic you have."

Etienne moves to a writing desk near the window. His fingertips trace the edge of a small phone cradle that looks oddly antique. The device upon it resembles an old

rotary phone, polished to a high shine, but with no dial. He runs a hand across it, then glances my way. “Throk doesn’t always answer quickly. Shall I attempt to ring him?”

I stand. “Yes.”

Etienne makes a call, looking surprised before speaking. “Hello, Throk. I didn’t know if you’d answer. We have a situation...” He quickly explains my arrival to the mechanic before handing me the phone.

“This is Declan Stewart. I’m a...traveler, and my van broke down near your town. They said you’re the mechanic.”

He sighs. “Sorry, sir. Not the best timing. I’m in the middle of an engine enchantment. I can swing by in the morning.”

I clear my throat. “I’d like it sooner if possible.”

His tone remains even. “Won’t do you any good tonight, friend. That van of yours needs more than a jump, and my fiancée is holding dinner for me. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Click . The line goes dead. I set it back, meeting the calm, knowing stares of Crystal and Etienne. A swirl of frustration rises in my chest. “Guess I’m stuck until morning.”

She folds her hands in front of her. “We have a lovely vacant room. You’re welcome to stay.”

The rational side of me would normally refuse. This entire place sets my nerves on edge. Something about them already knowing me, about ghosts drifting through doorways, about a phone that’s decades out of date but somehow works... None of it

computes. Except there's nowhere else to go, and a bed would beat sleeping in the van.

I give them a short nod. "I can pay in cash or card."

Etienne waves a dismissive hand. "We'll settle accounts later."

Crystal glides toward the door. "Follow me. I'll show you upstairs."

I follow, looking around as we walk. The inn's decor remains lavish and antique, yet somehow timeless, with arching hallways and paneling that gleams under ornate sconces. A few doors pass by on either side, each bearing a small plaque with swirling text. One door stands half-open, revealing a cozy reading nook that stretches outward in defiance of the mansion's external dimensions. Another corridor holds paintings of moonlit landscapes.

Crystal stops at a large, intricately carved door with silver filigree around the handle. She gestures toward it. "This is the Luna Suite. You'll rest well here."

I brace a palm against the wood, expecting the door to be locked, but it swings open with a quiet click. The room beyond glows with subtle lamplight. A large canopied bed draped in velvet commands the space.

Crystal remains at the threshold, watching me as if checking my reaction. "If you need anything, ring the silver bell on the nightstand. We'll hear it. Sleep well, Declan."

She disappears down the corridor, leaving me alone in this surreal haven. I approach the bed, pressing a hand to the canopy's soft material. The swirl of color beneath my fingers radiates a gentle warmth. A large window on the far wall reveals the street below. Lanterns illuminate the cobblestone, and from here, the entire town looks like

a scene out of a fairy tale. Mist drifts at the far edges, where the road presumably leads back to the highway, though I didn't see any sign of that highway while walking.

I cross the room and test the door, verifying it locks from the inside. A quiet click confirms it. The latch is solid. I press my back against it, seeking a flimsy sense of security. The bed offers an enticing invitation to rest. Sleep might be the best option if I'm to figure this out tomorrow. A single lamp rests on the nightstand. The silver bell glints, its tiny handle shaped like a crescent moon.

I get into bed and am immediately comfortable. It's like the bed adjusts to my preferences and shape. I sigh, and my eyes close almost immediately. The bed is too comfortable.

No sense fighting it. Morning is soon enough to track down this Throk, get the van fixed, and leave. No reason to worry about creatures of the night or living illusions, since none of this is real...right?

## Page 2

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

I SLIDE INTO THE DINING room and catch the aroma of coffee drifting from a polished silver carafe. My father, Etienne, stands near the curtained window, swirling a cup of coffee. It's ruby color reveals he's laced it with the herbed blood on which we rely. Mother sits at the head of our ornate table, finishing a plate of pumpkin waffles drizzled with syrup. She gestures for me to join them, though her bright eyes flick to the door as if expecting someone else.

She sets down her fork, the faint clink lost under the crackle of our small fireplace. "You're late, Vandria. We wondered if you'd sleep through breakfast."

I drop into the chair beside her and accept the mug she pushes toward me. "It's only late by your standards, Mother. The sun barely came up."

Etienne arches an eyebrow. "Our guest—Declan Stewart—left at dawn. He didn't even wait to share a morning meal. Strange man. You missed him by ten minutes."

That explains her watchful gaze on the door. She loves fussing over new visitors, especially uneasy ones. I cradle my mug, inhaling the earthy scent. "He left without eating? That's no fun."

Crystal tilts her head. "He slipped out looking determined. He refused help carrying his bag. I asked if he'd like a warm breakfast, but he only mumbled something about needing to explore town."

She sounds a little disappointed. My mother's nurturing streak never fails to amuse me. I reach for a slice of bacon and sink my teeth in, letting the salty flavor mingle with the faint hints of blood, herbs, and coffee on my tongue. "He's an outsider,

right? They do that. Outsiders think Evershift is some weird theme park until they realize it's...real."

She levels me with a stare. "Don't antagonize him. He's already anxious."

My father sets aside his drink and flips open a folded paper that Throk must've left. "Throk suggests it'll take at least a day to fix the van, maybe two. Declan tried to call him last night, but Throk was busy. Hence, the poor man roamed the streets at sunrise."

I shrug and reach for more bacon. "Could be interesting. The Festival of Luminaries starts tonight. He picked quite the moment to get stranded."

Crystal narrows her eyes, though there's warmth behind them. "That's exactly why you should go easy. This festival can be overwhelming. Lanterns floating everywhere, illusions swirling around—he'll be confused enough."

I fold my napkin across my lap. "Is that your gentle way of telling me to behave?"

Her expression says yes. "Promise you won't toy with him. He's not ready to hear the full scope of Evershift's magic."

I swirl the blood coffee, ignoring her concern. "If he's anything like the other outsiders who wander in, he'll likely assume we're all cosplayers until something impossible smacks him in the face." I slide out of my chair, collecting my mug as I stand. "I can't promise I won't tease him. That would be a lie."

Etienne's shoulders shake in a silent laugh. "You're impossible."

Crystal sighs. "At least try to be kind."

A playful grin creeps onto my lips. I lean down to kiss her cheek. “Always, Mother.”

She groans like she doesn’t believe me, but she knows me well enough to trust I won’t send him running for the hills. Probably. With that, I sweep out of the room and glide up to my bedroom. I tug on black leather pants, lace up my boots, and throw on a fitted jacket. My long, dark hair is braided over one shoulder. It’s easier to manage that way when spells and lanterns start swirling.

I dash downstairs, wave a quick goodbye, and head outside. Evershift Haven greets me with crisp autumn air. Cobblestones gleam under angled sunlight, and a few enchanted decorations swirl around lamp posts. The festival’s magic is already stirring.

Lanterns dangle overhead in neat rows, with each glass orb filled with swirling pastel light. They aren’t fully awakened yet. Soon, they’ll float freely to guide people toward their “destined loves” or so the legend says. I’ve seen it happen too many times to call it myth, but I still enjoy pretending it’s nonsense when explaining it to outsiders. Declan’s confusion will be entertaining.

I slip down Main Street, giving a polite nod to Willow Whisperwind. She’s positioning potted, singing sunflowers outside “Fae Fitness.” The flowers hum a cheerful tune. Willow says good morning, and I lift a hand in greeting. Beyond her, the Town Square’s ancient oak tree stands tall, branches shifting in a gentle breeze. Not many people wander about yet. Just a few residents setting up booths for tonight’s celebration.

I push open the door to my shop, and the familiar smell of old parchment, ink, and leather rises to greet me. Soft dust motes drift in the angled light. I set my mug behind the counter, flip the sign to “Open,” and start organizing a new shipment of reference books about local magical flora.

A slight shuffle at the door draws my attention. I glance up to see a handsome human standing in the entrance. He's tall and fit, with a rugged edge that sends my pulse skyrocketing. He's delicious, and I'm not thinking about his blood, though I'm aware of his rapid pulse too. Sunlight frames his broad shoulders, and tension lines his brow. He closes the door behind him carefully, like he's not sure it'll stay on its hinges.

I hang back a moment, letting him take in the shop. He's wearing simple clothes—jeans, a dark shirt, and a jacket—but his posture screams ex-military. Every shift of his stance looks deliberate. He finally meets my gaze, and for a second, neither of us speaks. The corner of my mouth lifts.

He clears his throat. “Hi. This is your store?”

I lean on the counter. “It is. ‘Vandria’s Vellum & Tomes.’ I’m Vandria. Book purveyor and occasional troublemaker. You must be the outsider who arrived last night. My parents are Etienne and Crystal.”

He gives a stiff nod. “Declan Stewart.” He cups the back of his neck.

I study him, noting the faint circles under his eyes. “Sleep poorly?” Impossible with my parents’ enchanted beds, at least from a physical perspective.

He grunts. “Not used to the bed. Or the...ambiance.”

I try not to grin. “Moonlit Inn’s” ambiance can be a little intense for a newcomer. “What brings you to my shop?”

He glances around the shelves of books, scanning the titles on spines. Some glow with subtle enchantments. He makes a face like he's wrestling with words. “I was told you might have maps. Actual, usable maps.”



My eyes light with amusement. “Of course I have maps. You planning to navigate your way out of Evershift Haven? That’s not as simple as it sounds.”

He steps closer, cautious. “I can try.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Would you prefer an illustrated fantasy map? Complete with whimsical creatures? I have a few that show imaginary roads that twist back into themselves. Quite entertaining.”

He scowls. “I need something real. Something that might get me to the main highway without...” He trails off.

“Without what?”

He exhales. “Without more weirdness. My phone died, my GPS is shot, my van refuses to start, and this entire place—” He gestures vaguely at the floating candelabra overhead. “This entire place can’t be real.”

I fold my arms. “Is that what you think?”

He shrugs, frustration clouding his features. “I’m trying to keep an open mind, but you have illusions and special effects everywhere. I saw a ghost maid last night. The folks at the inn already knew my name. Feels like I stumbled into some bizarre live-action role-play.”

My chest tightens with a laugh. “LARP? That’s a new one. Evershift Haven is absolutely real, magic and all.”

He shakes his head. “Magic.”

I move around the counter. “Your rational brain is probably telling you it’s a bunch of

props. Yet you keep seeing things you can't explain, correct?"

His shoulders hitch. "Maybe it's advanced technology. Holograms or something. I've seen weirder government prototypes." He swallows, shifting from foot to foot. "But that ghost...yeah. That one's tough to explain."

He wants a real answer, but I doubt he's ready. My mother told me not to tease him, though the temptation is strong. "We have no high-tech illusions. Only magic. This entire town is hidden behind a barrier that confuses outside travelers. Some manage to leave, some choose to stay, and others return."

He looks at me like I'm speaking Greek. "So, you're telling me I'm stuck?"

I tap my lip, eyeing him. "Not permanently. The barrier eventually releases outsiders, though not until it...or Grizelda...is ready." I brush past him and pluck a rolled map from a shelf. "Here. This might help you see how Evershift's roads connect, but it won't break the enchantment forcing you to stay."

He stares suspiciously at the rolled parchment in my hand. "What if I just try walking through the forest? There has to be a way around."

I press the map into his grip. "You can try, though the forest might decide otherwise. The trees here are known to lead wanderers in circles. Of course, you're free to attempt it. Just watch out for floating lanterns."

He snorts. "Floating lanterns? That's ridiculous."

A soft tinkling sound draws our attention upward. The candelabra shifts aside, and a single glowing lantern drifts free from the overhead fixture. That was faster than expected. Normally, they start floating at dusk. The festival's magic must be more potent today.

He steps back, eyes wide. The lantern bobs at the edge of his personal space, shining with a gentle gold light. He reaches out to swat it away, but it gently floats back. The orb pulses, almost like a heartbeat.

“Stop that.” His voice holds a tremor. “Why is it following me?”

I shrug. “It isn’t my doing, I promise. It’s the Festival of Luminaries. These lanterns choose people they believe have a destined love in town.”

He shoots me an incredulous look. “That’s insane.”

The lantern nudges his shoulder, reflecting a shimmer across his face. He flinches, tension coiling in his muscles. I fold my arms, lips curving into a lopsided smile. “I guess you’re a lucky one this year.”

He exhales a sharp breath. “Lucky? This thing is stalking me.”

I snicker. “They can be persistent.”

He grits his teeth. “Get rid of it.”

I shake my head. “It doesn’t work that way. It’ll follow you until the festival ends, or until it’s sure you’ve found your fated match.”

He stands frozen. The lantern hovers in front of him, glowing with a quiet confidence. His frustration radiates in the taut lines of his shoulders. He glances at me, a flicker of alarm behind his eyes. “Fated match. That implies—someone here is my...?”

“That’s the rumor.” I lean a bit closer. “Could be me.” I show the barest hint of fang. “Don’t worry, I already had breakfast.”

He backs away, face coloring. “You’re messing with me.”

I place a hand over my heart. “I might be teasing, but we do have real vampires, ghosts, witches, orcs...you name it.”

He seems unsure what to do with that. The lantern floats near his ear, bobbing in a friendly greeting. “I can’t handle this. You people are... Are you all serious about the magic stuff?”

I nod. “Why else would a lantern be floating next to your head?”

He closes his eyes for a moment as his pulse jumps in his throat. “I need to get out of here. This is too much.”

I press the map into his hand. “At least use this. It won’t solve everything, but it’s better than wandering aimlessly.”

He snatches it, voice hoarse. “Thanks.” He glances at the lantern, which bobs in place. “Stop following me,” he mutters.

I raise my palms in a gesture of helplessness. “Telling it to stop won’t help. Let it float. It means no harm.”

His jaw clenches while he pivots toward the door, clearly done with conversation. Halfway there, he pauses and looks back. I watch him carefully, and a flicker of regret tugs at my stomach. Maybe I’ve pushed too hard.

He shakes his head and storms out, trailing the lantern behind him. A hush settles in the shop. I stare at the door, trying to swallow the knot in my throat.

My mother warned me not to do this. He’s obviously disoriented, and I piled on a lot.

That unsettled look in his eyes lingers in my mind. I was having fun until I caught that panicked edge in his voice.

I lean on the counter, pressing my palms against the worn wood. The swirl of guilt in my chest catches me off guard. Usually, I don't regret messing with outsiders. They either accept the magic or leave. This time... I exhale. He's not just any random outsider. Something about him... Seeing him so rattled makes me wonder if I was too harsh. My parents did say to be nice.

I pick up a stray piece of parchment and run my thumb over the edges. That lantern singled him out. The festival, like our town, has ways of revealing truths people don't want to face, and Declan looks like a man already weighed down by burdens. My teasing might have been the last thing he needed.

A faint jingling from the door startles me. I glance up, half-hoping it's him returning. Instead, one of the local witches pokes her head in to ask if a special order arrived. I paste on a polite smile and wave her inside. My thoughts linger on the memory of Declan's tense shoulders, the confusion in his eyes, and the way I flippantly teased him about fate.

I sense the festival's magic stirring in the town, stirring in me. There's an odd feeling swirling in my chest, something I can't quite name. Regret, maybe. Curiosity, definitely. Possibly a spark of anticipation. My parents always say Evershift works in mysterious ways. Perhaps I should ease up on the mischief and offer an olive branch next time. Or at least a gentler explanation.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

I STEP OFF THE SIDEWALK and march straight toward the wooden arch that marks the town's entrance, determined to leave Evershift Haven in the rearview mirror. This is the fourth time I've attempted to exit since dawn, and I'm once again inspired to try after my encounter with Vandria St. John. Each time, the road loops back around, guiding me right here again, as though the universe is playing a joke.

A glimmering mist lingers in the air the moment I pass under the arch. The sign overhead creaks, almost groaning in sympathy. I find myself walking the same curve of road that meanders by the pastel coffee shop, "The Enchanted Espresso." The moment I spot that café again, tension throbs behind my temples. There's no rational explanation. I started out heading west. Now I'm approaching from the east.

I push down the urge to curse aloud. The lantern at my shoulder bobs, an ever-present companion since it latched onto me at the bookshop. I refuse to look at it, though it's impossible to ignore the faint glow. It hovers a few inches away, gold light dancing across my peripheral vision. Half an hour ago, I tried tying it to a fence post with a discarded shoelace. The lantern simply drifted free and caught up to me again. The townsfolk passing by watched with mild interest and a few stifled laughs.

I veer onto a side street, determined to find a different way. The air smells like cinnamon and faint wood smoke. A swirl of pink leaves blows across my boots with each leaf shaped like a heart.

A sign near the corner reads "Mystical Motors" in shifting letters made of gears. Throk's garage. He was unavailable last night, but I figure it's worth a shot now. The large metal doors are halfway open, revealing a cluttered workshop inside. Hissing steam escapes from a contraption near the entrance, and wrenches float by

themselves, turning bolts. It's all so bizarre I almost turn around. Then I remember my van, stuck at the entrance to this insane town.

A giant shape steps into view—broad shoulders, greenish skin, and tusks jutting slightly from his lower lip. This is not a man in a costume. The green skin extends up his neck, blending seamlessly with a stubble-like texture near the edges of his jaw. Muscles ripple beneath a sleeveless work shirt. There's no zipper or hidden seam. He towers a solid foot above me. Everything about him screams orc, and that word shouldn't even exist outside of fantasy.

He narrows one eye, scanning me as he sets down a massive spanner that's floating at his elbow. The moment he releases it, the tool hovers upright, waiting for instructions. "You're the guy with the broken van."

I nod. "Yeah. Declan Stewart."

"Throk Ironheart." He nods once, then turns. "I towed it in this morning but haven't had a chance to look at it yet. Follow me."

He leads me through the workshop. Spare parts lie in neat clusters, with each cluster labeled as Engine Components, Hex Removers, Tire Enchantments, and the like. I scramble to categorize what I'm seeing. The air hums with an otherworldly energy that sets my nerves on edge.

We step around a half-dismantled motorcycle that seems to gently rock on invisible currents. Throk lifts a palm. "Your van is around the corner." He strides outside, ducking under a large overhead beam. I follow.

My van rests on a small platform near the edge of the lot. Throk approaches, sets a hand on the hood, and closes his eyes for a moment. Nothing about that gesture is normal. It's almost like he's talking to the engine. He pulls back, scowl deepening.

“Yeah. That thing’s not working until the festival’s over.”

My gut twists. “Festival’s over? That’s days away. I can’t wait that long.”

He shrugs, large shoulders rolling with casual finality. “The enchantment that snagged your van is strong. Thanks to Grizelda’s pregnancy, town magic is in overdrive. Your best bet is to wait it out. I might do some patchwork, but it’ll fry again if you drive too soon.”

My fists clench at my sides. “There has to be something you can do.”

He slides a rag from his back pocket, wiping a smear of oil off his forearm. “Not unless you want me to completely rebuild your engine with enchanted parts. That can cause more trouble once you leave Evershift Haven. Most folks don’t prefer a magically altered vehicle in the human world. Trust me on that.”

My chest feels tight. This is ridiculous. I gesture at the hood. “Surely, you can patch it enough to move.”

He glances at my scowl, then snorts. “I get it. You’re upset. Problem is, it’ll break again as soon as you hit the barrier on your way out if you rush things.” The lantern at my shoulder flickers. Throk eyes it with a grin. “That thing mark you as a festival favorite?”

I grit my teeth. “Apparently.”

He raises a brow. “Tough luck. They don’t let go easily. You’re stuck with that orb until it’s satisfied, or the final night closes it down.” He snaps his fingers. “Oh, that reminds me. Grizelda gave me this. Something about your leftover flowers.”

He ducks into the garage, rummage around a cluttered workbench until he emerges



with a small pink misting bottle. The contents shimmer when he holds it up. “She said the flowers in your van were starting to wilt. This stuff is supposed to keep them fresh.”

That detail drags my mind back to the reason I was even on the road, to deliver Valentine’s bouquets. Fortunately, I’d already dropped off the roses for a big wedding happening yesterday. Thank goodness, because she had been a true bridezilla, and she wouldn’t have understood me being a no-show, especially if I tried telling her I was held hostage in a magical town.

He opens the back doors to reveal a few remaining bouquets and presses the spray nozzle. A soft pink mist drifts onto the drooping petals. The effect is instantaneous. The petals straighten, vibrant color floods back, and the stems look firmer. I stare, words catching in my throat. There aren’t many orders remaining, and I’ll never get them delivered today, Valentine’s Day, but it’s still amazing to see the spray’s effects.

He grunts in approval. “Works like a charm. You want some more, ask Grizelda. She might charge you. Might not, depending on her mood.”

I approach, hands spread. “That’s...actual magic.”

He hands me the bottle. “She told me to use it all if you plan on trying to salvage those flowers for your delivery. Keep spraying them until we can fix your van. They’ll last.”

I test one spritz on a single bud that’s almost dead. It practically blooms in front of my eyes. No illusions. The color intensifies from pale pink to hot fuchsia. I step back, mouth dry. This defies any scientific explanation I know. I whisper a thanks. He nods and wanders to a rolling toolbox that’s stenciled with runes. A floating wrench zips over his head.

My voice cracks when I speak again. “Is Grizelda far from here? I’d like to see if she’ll sell me more.”

He jabs a thumb over his shoulder. “‘Enchanted Emporium’ is two blocks past ‘The Enchanted Espresso.’ She’s probably there. Don’t let her spook you.”

A swirl of confusion rattles me, but I manage to keep my expression steady. “Thanks for your help.”

He waves the rag. “Just doing my job. Plan on seeing me in a few days for the van, but I’ll let you know if something changes.” He vanishes behind the workshop’s parted metal doors.

This is too much for one morning. I return to the street, lantern bouncing happily around my shoulder. A few passersby grin as they notice my frustration. Three or four murmur greetings, as though they see a new neighbor. I tighten my hand around the pink bottle. The only bright spot in this fiasco is the possibility that I might have found a way to keep flowers fresher longer if I can arrange some kind of delivery once I’m back in the real world.

My stomach grumbles when the sweet aroma of pastries and coffee drifts from the pastel café ahead. The swirl of fresh-baked pastries teases my senses, reminding me I haven’t eaten since a quick snack on the road. A sign out front advertises a Valentine’s-themed special called “Hearts Aflame Latte.” Just in time for Valentine’s Day, but maybe that isn’t a holiday celebrated here. It’s probably for their festival instead.

I shove open the door. Warmth and the hum of conversation greet me. Floating cups drift by, gliding from behind the counter to waiting customers. I watch one sail past, carrying whipped cream dusted with red sprinkles. My mouth gapes a bit, then I clamp it shut.

A woman with a barista apron approaches. Her nametag reads “Bella.” She beams when she spots the lantern next to me. “Welcome. I’m Bella Brewster. You must be Declan. Word travels fast in Evershift Haven.”

I manage a nod, throat tight. “Yeah, I guess it does.”

She gestures to the chalkboard menu. “We have all the usual things, plus our special Hearts Aflame Latte, which causes an eruption of hearts.”

I rub the back of my neck. “Sure. I’ll take it.” My skepticism is waning, replaced by weary acceptance. This place is so weird that a latte that spawns hearts sounds almost normal.

Bella looks delighted and nods at the floating cups near the espresso machine. One drifts my way, empty. She flips a switch, and pink steam hisses from the machine then hums a soft melody, pours the steamed milk, and sprinkles tiny candy hearts on top. The cup floats in front of me, glowing slightly.

My eyebrows shoot up. I reach out and grab it before it can bob away.

She points to a table near the window. “Take a seat, if you like.”

I glimpse an empty chair in the corner and head that way, but someone stands from a nearby seat and steps into my path. It’s Vandria, the black-haired woman from the bookstore, who teased me mercilessly. She holds her own mug, which has steam curling upward in a swirl of pink. There’s a cautious smile on her lips. She lifts a hand in greeting without speaking, then gestures to her table.

My pulse kicks up a notch. She’s probably the last person I want to see—except the tug in my gut suggests otherwise. The memory of her fangs unsettles me, though her green eyes are bright, not menacing. She inclines her head, inviting me to sit. My

stomach churns with conflicting emotions. I hesitate, then place my latte on the table and sink into the chair.

She folds her hands around her mug. “I owe you an apology.”

I stare at the swirl of foam on top of my latte. “For what?”

Her brow creases. “I pushed too hard earlier. You’re new here, and I turned it into a joke. I’m sorry if that overwhelmed you.”

I stare at the heart sprinkles dissolving into pink foam, creating a bubbling mass as the surface becomes agitated. “You’re right. I was overwhelmed.”

She watches me, expression gentler than before. “This place can be a lot. I should have let you breathe.”

I blow out a slow breath, uncertain how to respond as I watch my cup seem to form a volcano. “Uh... I appreciate the apology.” Is it going to spew?

Her posture relaxes. “Join me for a few minutes? Unless you plan to run out the door again.”

I’m not sure if she’s joking. I pick up my mug, which seems to have stabilized for the moment, taking a careful sip. The latte is sweet with a hint of spice. Suddenly, a cone forms as soon as I finish the first sip.

In seconds, it flings out tiny pink hearts like a volcanic eruption. They remain, gossamer but seemingly durable as they swirl in the air around me, dancing near my shoulders. One drifts close enough for me to see it’s formed of shimmering light. I gasp softly, anticipating more eruptions when I take a longer drink, but this time, it only releases a small cloud of hearts.

She lifts her mug, covering a faint smile. “Bella’s monthly specials are always...theatrical.”

I glance at her, feeling oddly shy. She’s unnervingly beautiful, with the kind of ethereal look that suggests she isn’t fully human. She mentioned being Crystal’s daughter, but Crystal looks maybe ten years older than me. Vandria is maybe a few years younger than me. I search for a logical explanation. She might have excellent genes or a great cosmetic surgeon. Or she really might be a vampire, which is insane.

She glances around the shop, then lowers her voice. “You must have questions.”

I set the latte down. “Understatement of the year.”

Her smile reveals another flash of fang. Ask anything.”

I clear my throat. “Crystal looks a few years older than me, and I’m thirty. You look a bit younger than her and me, but you’re calling her your mother. That can’t be right.”

Her lips twitch. “Vampires don’t exactly age the same way humans do.”

My stomach knots. I lean back, crossing my arms. “You really believe you’re a vampire?”

She lifts her cup, sipping slowly, eyes glinting with a flash of red over the rim. “I don’t just believe it.”

A heavy silence hangs between us. The pink hearts continue drifting around my shoulders, making the scene look ridiculous. “I can’t explain your reflection in the mirror or your mother’s either. Vampires don’t have reflections.”

She laughs. “Old myths. Reality is quite different. Before you ask, we drink blood,

but it's not from sentient beings. It's also fortified with a magical concoction to reduce the need for consumption as well, and we can still eat food."

I press my elbows against the table. "And you're their daughter."

She nods, gaze steady. "I am. I was born seventy years ago, and my mother is over two hundred. That's normal for vampires, who can be born or turned."

My spine stiffens. "That's not normal." Then I catch the flash of hurt in her eyes, and my tone softens. "Look, I'm sorry. That came out wrong."

She runs her thumb along the edge of her mug. "It's fine. We're used to it." She straightens. "You don't have to believe right now. Just give yourself a chance to see this town for what it is."

I breathe in coffee-scented air and shake my head. "This is still too much."

She shifts her focus to the lantern, which floats near my right ear. "That thing likes you. People are starting to talk."

Two older women at a nearby table glance over with impish grins. One jots something into a small notepad. The other stifles a chuckle, gaze flicking between me and Vandria. My skin prickles.

She squints at them. "They're placing bets."

My jaw tightens. "Bets on what?"

She tilts her chin, annoyance crossing her features. "How long until you accept the magic." She forces a thin smile in their direction, then focuses on me again.

My stomach churns. “They’re treating me like a sideshow.”

She lifts a shoulder. “Small-town curiosity. They don’t mean harm.”

My gaze drops to the steaming latte. I swirl it, watching tiny hearts dissolve. “I’m not here for a magical matchmaking experiment.”

She looks away for a moment, gaze shifting to the window where a cluster of lanterns hovers in the distance. “You might not have a choice. Our barrier is stubborn. The festival is in full swing. The lantern does what it wants.”

My fingers drum the table. “Is the festival because of Valentine’s Day?”

She arches a brow, prompting me to tell her about our holiday. Vandria shakes her head. “No. It’s from a fae tradition, I think. Something about finding one’s mate before the spring equinox to ensure maximum fertility.” She grins. “I hear you’re stuck here for now.”

I nod. “The orc said probably not until the festival ends.”

She hesitates. “You might not want my advice, but...embrace the magic, at least a little. It might help you accept what’s happening here.”

I push up from my seat, ignoring the hearts that swirl around me. “I refuse. This is insane. I’m just trying to leave.” The frustration almost chokes me. “I can’t do this. It’s all so ridiculous.”

She shifts her weight. “I’m sorry.”

My jaw tightens. “It’s not your fault.”

She glances at the lantern. “I hope you find a way to cope with that thing. If you need me, my shop is open.”

My throat feels scratchy. “Thanks.”

With a nod, she rises and departs the café, crossing the street toward her bookstore. A swirl of confetti bursts above the clock tower at the center of town, signifying the official start of some midday event. People gather in small clusters, likely preparing for the festival’s big night. Children laugh, chasing after floating hearts. Musicians test their instruments near the fountain, each note sparking a tiny rainbow in the air.

I can’t keep scowling at everyone. The energy in Evershift Haven is so joyful, it’s impossible to stay angry forever. That irritates me even more.



## Page 4

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

I PACE THE LENGTH OF my bookstore in a swirl of restless energy. The overhead lanterns twinkle with pastel hearts. Customers drift through the aisles, flipping pages and whispering idle gossip about the grumpy newcomer. More than one claims he's skulking around town, refusing to take part in any festivities. Naturally, that piques my curiosity and tugs on my remaining guilt.

A pair of teen witches huddles at the front display, giggling behind their hands. They're pointing at a local newspaper article that references "the disgruntled human florist." The headline just appeared on the page, which fills itself in each time there's a new story, so the reporter is moving quickly.

I slip behind the counter, smooth my jacket sleeves, and tell the store's animated quill to hold down the fort. Nobody seems to need urgent magical texts right now. I swing the door sign to "Back Soon" and head into the bustling midday sunshine.

Evershift Haven is in full festival mode. Heart-shaped leaves drift across the cobblestones, couples lounge in front of pop-up treat booths, and kids chase pastel illusions of floating candy hearts. The entire atmosphere buzzes with romance. Normally, I'd find it charming. This year, I'm scanning the crowds for one surly face with a personal lantern in tow.

It doesn't take long. Right outside the Town Hall, I spot Declan leaning against a lamppost, arms crossed, and scowling at a paper in his hand. I think it's the map I gave him. Judging by his scowl, he's in no better mood than before. A few people pass by and glance at him, but no one dares approach.

I stride up, hooking my thumbs into my belt loops. "You hiding from the entire

festival, or just the parts that involve fun?”

He looks up sharply, eyes flashing with a mix of annoyance and relief. “I’m not hiding. I’m...trying to figure out if there’s any exit that won’t loop me around again.” He rattles the map from my shop.

I arch a brow. “How’s that going?”

He huffs. “About as well as you’d expect. Every road leads back here.”

A breeze blows through, carrying the scent of cinnamon and chocolate from a nearby booth. I catch his gaze flicking to my fangs, half-hidden by my lips. I force a gentle smile, hoping to disarm him. “Word is, you’re in a bad mood.”

He stiffens. “I wouldn’t call it a mood. I’m trapped.”

“Semantics.” I gesture around at the heart-shaped streamers overhead. “You might as well make the most of it. If you can’t leave, you can at least have a good time.”

He glances away, tension in his jaw. “How? By letting these weird illusions chase me around while everyone laughs at the outsider with the clingy lantern?”

I inch closer, lowering my voice. “I know it feels like the whole town’s mocking you, but they aren’t. They just...enjoy the spectacle. If you join in, they’ll stop treating you like a sideshow.”

His gaze flicks to the golden orb bobbing at his shoulder. “I doubt that. This thing won’t quit.”

I plant a hand on his folded arms. He doesn’t recoil, but he does tense. “Listen, Mr. Florist, you’re stuck here until at least the end of the festival. You can sulk, or you

can...live a little.”

His eyes narrow, but he doesn't jerk away. “What exactly did you have in mind?”

“Chocolate,” I say simply, tapping the air like I'm reading off a list. “Dancing. Maybe a fortune-telling booth that's rumored to give scarily accurate predictions.”

He snorts. “Chocolate? I guess that doesn't sound too bad.”

A slow smile curls at my lips. “See? There's hope for you yet.”

He frowns. “Fine. One activity. Then I'm out.”

I link my arm through his before he can protest. The lantern flares a cheery gold, as if it approves. “One at a time. We'll start with the chocolate-tasting.”

We navigate the festival stalls lining the Town Square. Vendors in colorful aprons showcase trays of handmade truffles, fudge, and all manner of sugary confections. A portly dwarf manning the main table spots me and waves. “Vandria? You found a partner for the contest?”

I sense Declan tensing beside me, but I beam at the dwarf. “Absolutely. Sign us up.”

Declan tries to pull his arm free. “Wait. Partner for what?”

The dwarf chuckles. “Our annual chocolate-tasting contest. Pairs compete to guess flavors, some of which are enchanted. You in, big guy?”

Declan shifts, scowl returning for a second before he nods. “Okay, I guess. Let's do it.”

We step behind a long table, where other pairs wait, including an elf couple, two local witches, and a pair of giggling pixies. A row of covered dishes sits before us, each sporting a mysterious question mark. The dwarf rings a little bell, and we raise our lids simultaneously.

A wave of chocolate aromas hits me, along with mint, cherry, caramel, and other enhancements. Some look normal, but others sparkle with swirling illusions. Declan picks up one with pink stripes, sniffs suspiciously, then pops it in his mouth. He jolts, eyes widening. “Hot pepper,” he croaks. “Really hot.”

I fight back a laugh. “Might be a chili-cinnamon infusion.”

He coughs, steam literally coming from his ears. Our neighbors giggle while the dwarf notes something on his scoreboard. I choose a dainty truffle that glimmers with gold flecks, nibble it, and savor a smooth hazelnut mousse center. “Mm, hazelnut. A subtle enchantment that tastes like a campfire.”

“Campfire?” Declan mutters between coughs.

“It’s cozy,” I say breezily, scribbling down my guess.

When another bell chimes, we rotate to the next dish. This time, Declan’s more cautious. He picks one shaped like a little heart with pink sugar crystals on top. He sniffs, then tries a bite. For a moment, his eyelids flutter shut. He looks almost peaceful. Then, around his head, half-translucent hearts flutter, drifting away into the air.

He scowls. “Why does everything in this town produce floating hearts?”

I shrug. “It’s the festival.”

We continue sampling flavors, occasionally guessing right. Other times, we end up with illusions that make Declan sprout cartoonish hearts on his jacket or swirl pastel confetti around me. By the end, we're tied with the elf couple. The dwarf announces them as the winners.

Declan wipes chocolate smudges from his mouth. "I could've done without the illusions."

"But you liked the tastes, right?" I angle my head, catching a hint of a reluctant grin.

He shrugs. "Might've been good, except the hot one."

I grin in triumph. Progress.

We wander through the crowd. A swirl of upbeat music from a live band echoes by the fountain, where couples dance on a temporary stage. Paper lanterns overhead glow in soft pink, a preview of the luminous show tonight. The wind picks up, making the ribbons around the lampposts flutter.

Declan slows, gaze locked on the dancers twirling across the platform. They're all smiling, a swirl of color and magic drifting around them. He shifts his weight as though he'd rather be anywhere else, but his eyes linger. I tug at his sleeve.

"You've handled chocolate like a champ. Ready for something else?"

He hesitates. "Not sure dancing is my style."

I can't resist a little tease. "Afraid to show off your moves?"

He snorts, crossing his arms. "I'm ex-military, not a ballet dancer."

I extend a hand. “Let’s see if that discipline translates.”

He looks from my hand to the stage, then back to me. The lantern at his shoulder bobs encouragingly. With a sigh of resignation, he uncrosses his arms and slips his hand into mine.

The warmth of his palm sends a small tingle up my arm. I feign indifference, leading him onto the dance floor. A swirl of lively strings and percussion surrounds us. We step among the other couples, and I guide him into a simple waltz pattern.

At first, he’s stiff and self-conscious, glancing at my face then away. The music shifts to a slower tune, giving us a chance to settle. His shoulders relax marginally. I press closer, feeling the firm line of his torso. He’s strong, which makes sense, given his background.

He fumbles a step. “Sorry.”

I smirk. “Don’t worry. You’re better than half the partners I’ve danced with.”

A corner of his mouth twitches. For a brief moment, we slip into a rhythm and circle around the stage, sidestepping confetti illusions that burst at the music’s crescendo. The band transitions into a more romantic melody, and for a few blissful seconds, I forget about the stares or the bets people have on him.

He looks at me, and we both freeze. Electric tension arcs between us. Then, as if remembering he’s not supposed to be enjoying this, he clears his throat and steps back. The music continues, but he stops dancing.

I move a step away, letting my arms drop. He coughs, raking a hand through his hair. “I, uh... That’s enough dancing, right?”

My chest tightens with an unfamiliar disappointment. “Sure.” I force a bright smile. “Ready to check out something else?”

He nods quickly. “Yes. Please.”

We slip off the dance floor and back into the buzzing crowd. A small kiosk catches my eye: bright purple drapes, a crystal ball on a pedestal, and a sign that reads “Madam Threads’ Fortune-Telling: Love Edition.” Usually, she’s a clothing enchantress, but for the festival, she moonlights as a fortune teller, weaving illusions.

“This should be good,” I say, tugging Declan forward.

He eyes the booth warily. “Fortune-telling? Not sure I believe in that.”

I arch a brow. “We have flying lanterns and orcs, but fortune-telling is where you draw the line?”

He exhales, conceding the point. “Fine. One reading.”

Madam Threads beckons us with glittering eyes. She’s dressed in a shimmering wrap with a large cameo pinned at her throat. She gestures to two stools in front of the crystal ball. We sit.

She runs gnarled fingers over the glass orb, swirling pink light inside. “Ah, welcome, welcome,” she croons in a melodic tone. “Your hearts are entangled with the festival’s magic.”

Declan shifts uncomfortably, arms on his knees. “Uh, sure.”

She ignores his hesitation and leans in. “Let me see your joined auras.”

I catch his eye, and he sighs, placing his hand next to mine on the booth's velvet cushion. Madam Threads peers through the orb. At first, it glows faintly, but then it flashes a brilliant, fiery red. Declan flinches, and I wince at how intense that color is.

Madam Threads cackles. "Oho! A strong bond, or a budding one. The flame is potent."

Declan jerks away his hand, heart definitely pounding—it's visible in his clenched jaw. "That's enough. Thanks."

She grins slyly. "Destiny weaves an interesting tapestry."

He mumbles a tense goodbye and practically bolts from the booth. I send Madam Threads a quick wave of thanks before hurrying after him. His lantern trails behind, flickering in an amused pattern.

WE END UP NEAR THE fountain, which is decorated with floating rose petals and a subtle pink glow. He stops by the water's edge, hands braced on the stone rim. The air smells like flowers and sugar, but his frustration is palpable.

"Why does everything keep pointing at...that?" He gestures vaguely, presumably meaning romance.

I tilt my head. "That's the festival's vibe. If you're singled out by a lantern, folks assume it's leading you to someone."

He shoots me a guarded glance. "It's all nonsense."

I shrug, leaning beside him. "Maybe, but the illusions and potions here are rarely wrong."



He runs a hand down his face. “It’s overwhelming.”

I rest a palm on his back, just briefly. “I get it. You’re not used to magic or constant talk of love. If you want to bail, I won’t force you to continue.”

He exhales and straightens. “I’ll manage.” Then his expression shifts to wariness as a hush falls across the square.

A hush drapes over the square. Mayor Ambrosius Spellbinder stands atop a raised platform, adjusting his tall, starry hat. He lifts his staff, clearing his throat. “My friends, thank you for joining our Valentine Festival. The time has come for our grand scavenger hunt tonight.”

Declan halts, tension rolling through him. He looks at me like he’s hoping he misheard. The crowd buzzes with excitement as the mayor continues, “Pairs, assemble at once. Your first clue awaits on the dais. Follow each riddle, collect items from across Evershift, and present them at the final checkpoint. Only then shall you be declared victors.”

Chatter explodes around us. People scramble to form teams. A few already hold clues, scanning them while weaving through the lantern-lit square. My father strides past with an elegant tip of his head, and my mother offers a wave.

“What do you say? Wanna pair up?”

He eyes me for a moment but grunts in what I assume is a yes. “Let’s get the clue then.” I drag him to where it’s posted, ignoring his hint of resistance.

Within the ringing of midnight’s tower,

Seek the shape that holds time’s power.

Count gears of gold and name them all—

Share the sum or watch them fall.

He blows out a breath and looks at his map of the town. “So...Celestial Clock Tower?”

I grin. “Looks like it. Ready to hunt?”

The music in the square changes to a lively tune, and lanterns begin bobbing in sync above us. Declan’s orb hovers near his shoulder, glowing brighter, as if eager to begin. He tightens his hold on the clue. “Yeah, let’s get this done.”

A mischievous thrill flickers through me. “We’ll see if you’re as good at scavenger hunts as you are at tasting chocolate.”

He glances at me, lip twitching in a near-smile. “At least the chocolate had rules I understood.”

“Don’t worry.” I hook my arm through his, leading him from the square. “Just follow my lead, soldier boy.”

He snorts but doesn’t pull away. We dart toward the glow of the clock tower. Around us, couples race past with their own clues, everyone fueled by excitement. Even he is wearing a small grin.

## Page 5

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

I'M RELUCTANTLY DRAWN in and soon running alongside Vandria as we round the corner, heading toward the Celestial Clock Tower. There's no time to process how I ended up in a full-blown scavenger hunt. One moment, I was sulking under a lamppost, the next I'm sprinting through Evershift Haven with a vampire at my side, chasing magical clues like it's a normal Friday night.

We reach the tower, which stands in majestic contrast to the swirling illusions overhead. Metal cogs bigger than car tires spin silently behind the tower's transparent face. Lanterns bob around, guiding other teams. Several pairs crowd near the base, reading the parchment pinned to the clocktower.

“Within the ringing of midnight's tower,

Seek the shape that holds time's power.

Count gears of gold and name them all—

Share the sum or watch them fall.”

She points upward. “We need to identify every gold gear up there. That means we're climbing, right?”

I glance at the spiral staircase snaking up the tower's interior. “Uh, yeah, guess so.”

“Better than letting someone else claim the prize first.” She flashes a grin that lights something inside me. Maybe it's the festival, or maybe it's her. Either way, I'm not about to back down.

We slip in through an arched door. The tower's interior hums with clockwork. A slow, rhythmic whirr resonates in my chest. A flicker of excitement breaks past my frustration. I've always enjoyed challenges, and I guess you can't get more challenging than a magical gear-counting puzzle.

Vandria leads the way up the stairs, footsteps echoing on iron steps. Partway up, we pass a sign that reads No Unauthorized Tampering in shifting script. Someone's scrawled "Good luck, lovebirds," underneath. Vandria laughs softly when she sees it, but she doesn't comment.

We reach a broad landing where giant cogs mesh in front of a window. Each gear is a different shade of gold, silver, or bronze, all spinning in hypnotic precision. She pulls out a small notepad and scribbles tallies.

I inch closer, counting each golden cog through the tinted glass. The tower's mechanical heart thrums steadily. My shoulder brushes Vandria's, and that faint contact sends a jolt down my spine.

After a minute, we compare notes. Vandria's brow furrows. "I see fifteen. You?"

"Fourteen," I say. "Where's your extra gear?"

She points to a partially obscured cog behind a bigger one. Leaning in, we both peer through a narrow gap in the machinery. The space is so tight, our arms press together. My heartbeat stutters. She tips her head, nearly brushing my cheek. "See it?"

My voice drops. "Yeah, you're right. Fifteen."

Her smile warms me in an unsettling, pleasant way. "Let's hope that's correct. Now we sho—"

A swirl of pink confetti flutters down from an overhead vent. We jump back, startled. Then we exchange a look and burst into unexpected laughter. Something about the absurdity deflates my tension.

I clear my throat, stepping away. “We’ll go with fifteen. Next clue says we name them all to someone. Probably the caretaker, Chronos Ticktock?”

She nods. “There’s a kiosk on the ground floor. Let’s go.”

We head back down, passing other teams struggling to see behind gears. Outside at the kiosk, a clockwork golem wearing a vest of brass plates awaits. Its mechanical eyes whirl with a gentle hum.

I steel myself. “Fifteen gold gears, right?”

The golem’s mouth opens with a clicking sound. “Correct. Please proceed to your next clue.” A miniature door slides open in its chest, presenting us with a sealed envelope.

Vandria snatches it, scanning it quickly. “We need to head across town to the restaurant. “Beastly Bites,” and something about an enchanted kitten. Let’s move.”

We jog off, the golden lantern flickering in enthusiasm at my shoulder. A competitive urge flares in me, surprising in its intensity. Maybe I want to prove I’m not just a surly outsider, or maybe I’m enjoying the challenge more than I’ll admit. Either way, Vandria’s right by my side, matching my pace stride for stride.

“BEASTLY BITES” IS BUSTLING with festival-goers grabbing dinner. We slip around the corner to find a smaller courtyard, following the riddle’s instructions. “Seek the creature that darts through flame. Catch the stolen clue and make your claim.”

“Darts through flame?” I mutter. “Some kind of fire spirit?”

We spot a tiny kitten on the patio, tail aflame with harmless purple fire. Its big eyes fix on us. Then it meows, dashes over, and snags a scrap of parchment from Vandria’s belt with its teeth. Before either of us can react, it blinks out of sight, reappearing on a balcony ledge above.

Vandria stifles laughter. “Teleporting feline. Perfect.”

I roll my shoulders, locking onto the cat. “I got this.”

The next few minutes are a series of humiliations. Each time I edge close, it teleports behind me or onto a higher ledge, flicking its flaming tail tauntingly. The courtyard crowd giggles as I scramble after it.

At last, Vandria stands in the center of the patio, arms folded, a sly grin on her face. “That’s not working. Let me try.”

She crouches, extending a hand. In a coaxing tone, she whispers nonsense words. The kitten cocks its head. Slowly, it teleports down, touches her hand with its little nose, and purrs. Vandria strokes its ears, retrieving the stolen note.

I watch, half-exasperated, half-impressed. “Good job.”

She laughs. “It’s the vampire charm.”

I straighten. “I thought you said you’re just another species?”

She sends me a wicked grin. “Yep. A species that can be very persuasive.”

She hands me the clue. I try not to think too hard about how her eyes can do that to

me too.

We hurry to the next location. According to the note, we must find a riddle hidden in the “Moonlit Inn’s” library. The hallways are quieter now that most folks are out hunting clues. Candlelit sconces cast flickering shadows on the wood-paneled walls. My footsteps slow as we approach a large door labeled Private Reading Room.

Inside, rows of ancient books line tall shelves, and a battered table stands in the center. A single open tome rests there, glowing faintly. Vandria glances at me. “Looks like our riddle.”

We inch closer, each leaning over a corner of the table. The text shimmers, reorganizing into a new message.

When dawn meets dusk in whispered hush,

Look to the lines that hold the rush.

Find the phrase the lover penned,

Say it aloud, your heartbreak to mend.

I blow out a breath, scanning the old book. It’s a romantic epic about star-crossed lovers in a magical realm. Vandria flips pages. Our heads practically bump as we skim lines. Heat creeps up my neck, aware of how close we are. She murmurs directions, pointing to passages in a swirling language that half translates itself.

Finally, she finds a phrase in bold. “We’re bound by fate, yet free to choose.”

My pulse trips in my chest. Something about the line resonates too closely with my current situation. Her mouth curves into the barest smile before she whispers the

phrase, “We’re bound by fate, yet free to choose.”

The text in the tome flashes gold. A new scrap of parchment unfurls from between the pages, falling into my hand. My heart races, though I can’t name why. Maybe it’s her intoxicating proximity, or the riddles that keep hinting at destiny. Either way, I’m relieved when we gather up the clue and hurry out of the room.

Back on the inn’s front porch, the new clue says “A rosebush stands in the garden fair, and hearts will bloom if you truly care.”

We slip around the side yard, where a spiral of steppingstones leads to a rosebush brimming with tight buds. The lantern overhead flickers excitedly when we approach. Vandria arches a brow at me. “This might be more illusions.”

Tentatively, I lean in to investigate. Several buds quiver, then pop open into red hearts. It’s so abrupt, I jerk backward, and she laughs under her breath.

“Why hearts?” I grouse.

She points to a small plaque: “These blooms respond to the presence of attraction.”

I glance away, a knot forming in my stomach. The bush keeps sprouting hearts, and a few swirl gently toward us. I cough, ignoring a flush creeping up my neck. “It’s broken, obviously.”

She hides a smirk, stepping closer to a blossom. Immediately, more hearts open in a flurry. My cheeks blaze.

She murmurs, “Must be a glitch, right?”

I press my lips together. “Totally.”



Despite my denial, the cascade of heart blooms intensifies whenever we stand near each other. My pulse soars, but I force myself to focus on searching for another clue. She helps, rummaging under leaves, until we find a small scroll tied to a thorny branch. We pluck it carefully, ignoring the hearts floating around us.

She unrolls it. “Last location is...my bookstore?” She glances up, confusion flickering across her face. “Why would it end there?”

I shrug, clearing my throat. “No idea. Let’s just finish this.”

NIGHT DEEPENS AS WE jog through winding streets. Some participants look tired, but the festival’s energy hums on. We approach “Vandria’s Vellum & Tomes,” where the lights are dimmed. She fiddles with the door, and I’m surprised to find no one waiting for entry to finish the scavenger hunt. Could we be the first to figure it out?

Stepping inside, we find the interior eerily still, lit only by a few floating candles. I shine my phone’s flashlight over the shelves, breath still heaving from the sprint here. The place is empty. Our scavenger clue claims the final token is here, stashed among rare volumes. She flips the last note in her hand, scanning it again, eyes narrowed.

“According to this, it’s hidden near the archives. That’s in the back.”

We’ve been racing all over town collecting riddles and items—enough that my mind is whirling. A piece of me never expected to get so into it. Another part notices how Vandria’s eyes glint whenever she solves a puzzle. Each success has drawn us closer, in ways I can’t fully explain.

She leads me past the main counter. The air smells like dusty parchment and a hint of vanilla. The deeper we go, the quieter everything becomes. A single candle flickers on a nearby table, casting long shadows on the old wood floor.

A heavy door at the back stands ajar, enough to let us slip through. I take the lead, elbow pushing the door open. The space beyond is dim, cluttered with half-labeled boxes and stacks of books. I blink, letting my eyes adjust.

“There.” She points at a squat wooden chest in the corner.

We weave around random crates. The chest’s lid stands propped open, revealing a swirl of parchment strips. My pulse beats faster. This must be it. I tug one out, scanning the words, but can’t make sense of them. The swirling letters slip through my focus like illusions.

She crouches next to me, shoulder against mine. “It might rearrange if we read it together,” she says, mouth near my ear.

I hold the parchment toward the nearest candle. The text wavers, then clarifies, forming a single sentence:

“Love’s final token blossoms where hearts meet.”

Vandria traces the words. “Sounds like an item or a sign.”

“Guess so? We should—”

A sudden slam behind us cuts me off. I whip around, heart lurching. The door is shut. I rush back and twist the handle. It won’t budge.

She stands, approaching to join me. She tries her key in the lock, but it won’t move. “Magically locked.”

My fist hits the solid wood. “Locked from the outside?”

She crosses her arms, gaze darting over the runic etchings across the frame. “Feels like magic. Or Grizelda messing with us.” Her voice drops, slightly annoyed. “She must’ve timed this to create some forced bonding moment.”

A frustrated breath leaves me. “We can’t just break it down?”

She tilts her head. “Might cause more trouble. The bookstore is warded. Kicking in a door might set off enchantments.”

My shoulders sag. “Great.”

She steps closer, calm despite the predicament. The single candle flickers, reflecting in her eyes. “We might have to wait it out. Magically locked rooms eventually open, but it could be half an hour or hours.”

My chest tightens. “This is ridiculous.”

She places a hand on my arm. “Deep breaths. We’ll be fine.”

I swallow, trying to steady my pulse. The swirl of adrenaline from the scavenger hunt still courses through me, but there’s nowhere to channel it. The golden lantern that’s been haunting me all day floats in, bobbing near the ceiling.

She picks up a trio of stubby candles from a shelf, ignites them with a whispered word, and hands me one. I crouch and set it on an overturned crate. Warm light spreads over the space, revealing a cleared patch of floor with a couple of pillows, maybe left over from some reading circle. Musty but serviceable.

She lowers herself onto a pillow, folds her legs, and gestures for me to join. “We might as well get comfortable.”

My laugh comes out ragged. “Sure, why not?”

I sink onto the other pillow, the tension in my muscles refusing to leave. She offers a small, sympathetic smile, and that knot in my chest loosens a fraction. The door is locked, the festival roars on without us, and I’m stuck in a small, candlelit corner of a bookstore with a vampire. The thought should drive me crazy. Instead, it leaves me feeling oddly safe.

“It’s fine,” she says softly. “We’ll wait.”

I nod, swallowing. “All right. Let’s wait.”

A moment passes, thick with unspoken tension. She reaches for a spare blanket draped on a crate, spreads it over the dusty floor, and gestures for me to scoot in. My pulse flutters again. There’s nothing else to do but settle in.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

I KNEEL ON THE BLANKET , adjusting the candle so its glow spreads across our little corner of the bookstore's back room. My entire body still hums with the adrenaline from the scavenger hunt. Declan's mood seems equally charged. He sits nearby, back pressed to a stack of crates, those broad shoulders looking too tense for comfort. The locked door behind us remains silent. No new attempts from Grizelda or the festival's magic to barge in.

My pulse beats in my ears. The hush feels heavier than any illusions we encountered tonight. A swirl of leftover energy sparks between us whenever our eyes meet. He fiddles with the hem of his jacket, gaze shifting over me, the blanket, and the dim corners. A flicker of longing crosses his features, but he clamps it down, forging a stony look.

I adjust my braid, letting it drape over one shoulder as I move closer. He keeps one hand on his knee, the other trailing across the floor, as though he's not sure where to put it. My ribs tighten.

"Maybe we should talk." I set the candle on a wooden crate so the light falls softly on his face.

He draws in a measured breath. "About what?"

His voice is steady, though a subtle tremor runs beneath it. The tension in his jaw suggests he isn't comfortable opening up. There's a raw vulnerability swirling in the air.

I inch closer, resting on my knees. "About the military?" My fingertips hover near his

arm, not quite touching. “Or maybe about how you ended up a florist?”

He huffs, gaze drifting to the stacked books behind me. “You must think it’s ridiculous.”

I settle back, letting the blanket cover my ankles. “No. People find peace in the strangest places.”

He takes a shaky breath, gaze darting to mine. “Peace. That’s funny. My old buddies used to laugh when they found out. They said men in our line of work do not become florists. Yet I stuck with it because... I don’t know. It felt calm. Grounded. I learned I liked experimenting with color palettes and blooms. My grandmother says I have the right touch.”

A warmth spreads in my chest. “You sound proud of it.”

He lifts a shoulder. “I guess I am. Didn’t expect to be proud, but yeah. I put together arrangements for weddings, births, and anniversaries. People rely on me to help them celebrate. It’s different from my old life of...not so celebratory things.”

I watch him carefully. A flicker of pride mingles with the torment in his eyes. “It’s a purpose. You’re good at what you do.”

He finally glances up, mouth curving at the corners. “Thanks. Maybe that’s what I needed. A new mission. A reason to keep going.”

I graze his forearm, a light brush that sends a spark through my veins. “That’s not silly at all.”

His gaze lingers on the candle’s flame, revealing a faint quake in his hand. “The problem is, I can’t switch off certain instincts. Sometimes I look around and see only

threats. The day I arrived here, I checked for exit strategies every two minutes. That's how I ended up tying a lantern to a fence."

A quiet laugh escapes me, though it's laced with sympathy. "The entire town saw or later heard about your attempt."

He closes his eyes, exhaling. "Perfect."

I rest my hand over his. "They don't think less of you for it. They're just entertained. Evershift Haven loves a spectacle."

He drags a fingertip across the blanket, nodding. "I'm starting to see that." His gaze turns more solemn. "I might have judged them...and you...too harshly."

I press my lips together. "People here can be overwhelming. They keep pushing fate and romance and illusions. Hard to breathe under that pressure, especially if you never believed in magic to begin with."

He studies my face. His expression softens. "It's not just the town that's overwhelming."

My heart pounds. I dip my chin, uncertain if I want to face the words forming between us. "What do you mean?"

He shifts, leaning forward to rest his arms on his thighs. "You. This connection. It's unsettling how fast it's happening. My brain keeps screaming that it's illusions or the festival's matchmaking. Something about you isn't easy to ignore."

Heat floods my cheeks. "It's not illusions. I'm not that powerful."

He looks unconvinced. "You're a vampire. Magical is your middle name."

“Vampires in this town are just another species with certain...traits, but I can’t conjure illusions like that. I can’t force you to feel anything.” My voice quavers. “I wouldn’t even if I could.”

He looks down at our joined hands, and a corner of his mouth twitches. “I know. Sorry.” I’m not used to feeling so out of control.”

A swirl of tenderness wraps around my chest. “I get that. I keep my guard up because it’s easier than letting people in. Mortals come and go so quickly. I’d rather not break my heart every time.”

He lifts his eyes. “So, you push them away.”

I nod, gaze drifting to the half-burned candle. “That’s safer. Or it was, until you waltzed in with your van and your scowl.”

A faint laugh escapes him. “I scowl less when I’m not trapped by magical roads.”

We share a smile. The hush returns, though it’s no longer tense. Something softer has taken its place. I sense the spool of tension unraveling in the flicker of candlelight, opening a path we’ve both skirted around.

I shift onto my knees, bracing a hand on his shoulder. “Declan?”

He lifts his head. “Yeah?”

Words stick in my throat. My pulse thrums, but I can’t break eye contact. “I... Sorry if I teased you too hard. That day you arrived, I saw how flustered you were. I thought messing with you was fun. Didn’t think it would matter. Then we started talking, and you...matter more than I expected.”



His jaw tightens. He sets both hands on my waist. The heat of his palms seeps through my clothes, stoking a low ache in my belly. “I should hate this place. I should hate everything about being stranded, but I don’t. Not anymore.”

My lips part. The tension in his voice and softness in his eyes collides in a wave of longing. We hover like that, locked in each other’s gaze. A swirl of leftover festival magic crackles in the air, though I can’t tell if it’s real or just my own pounding heart.

He exhales, then leans in with slow deliberation. Our mouths meet in a gentle brush that sets every nerve in my body aflame. I press closer, breath catching. His lips part. The taste of chocolate and coffee from earlier still lingers. A faint groan rumbles in his throat, and I answer with a quiet sigh. The kiss deepens in gradual, tender motions, as though we’re both unsure how far we dare go.

He moves one hand up my back, fingers splaying across my spine. My body arches involuntarily, seeking contact. My breath hitches in surprise at how perfectly we fit together. Each time he tilts his head, the angle sends a fresh spark through me. The warm hush around us magnifies every small sound—our shared breathing, the faint rustle of clothes, the flicker of candlelight.

I shift my weight, sinking into his lap. His arms close around me, steady and sure, and my heart slams against my ribs. This is real. Not illusions, not forced. My lips move against his in a slow, desperate dance. He breaks away for a moment, breathing hard, eyes glimmering.

“You’re sure about this?” His voice drops, husky enough to stir the ache pooling in my belly.

A shaky nod is all I manage. “Yes.”

His mouth claims mine again, more urgent now, and I melt into him. Every touch

burns like fire, but I want more. Need more. I run my hands over his broad shoulders, savoring the feel of muscle beneath fabric. When I reach the collar of his henley, I tug at the buttons, fumbling in my haste. He chuckles softly, pulling away long enough to help me undo them. Then he shrugs out of the garment, letting it fall to the floor.

The sight of bare skin, a few degrees warmer than mine, makes my pulse race. I trace my fingertips along his chest, exploring each ridge and valley. He inhales sharply, tensing under my touch. I lean forward and kiss him again. He responds with equal fervor, tongue sweeping past my parted lips. One hand slides up my neck, cupping the base of my skull. The other slips under my shirt, calloused palm rough against my stomach. I squirm, gasping.

Heat floods my veins. My whole body feels electrified. I break off our kiss to pull my top off. His gaze rakes over me, hungry and appreciative. Before I can react, he dips his head to nuzzle my breastbone. “Declan, I—”

“Shh.” He presses a finger to my lips, then replaces it with his mouth. His kisses trail lower, following the curve of my breasts. I arch toward him, whimpering. He takes one nipple between his teeth, teasing lightly. Pleasure shoots straight to my pussy. I grind against his thigh, seeking friction. He growls, biting harder.

“Oh...” I gasp, clutching at his hair. He switches sides, lavishing attention on my other nipple until I'm panting.

Then he lifts his head, grinning wickedly. “What do you want?”

“More,” I whisper. “Please.”

He nods, sliding his hands down to my knee boots, unzipping them. I kick them off, along with my socks. He runs his palms up my calves, massaging gently. I shiver, leaning into his touch as he works his way higher. By the time he reaches my thighs,

I'm trembling. He pauses, glancing up at me.

“Are you okay?”

“Y-yes.” I swallow hard, trying to regain some composure. “Just...sensitive.”

“Good.” He flashes another devilish smile before slipping his fingers under my waistband. I lift myself slightly so he can slide off my pants. They join the rest of our discarded clothing on the floor, followed by my panties. Now I'm completely naked, exposed to his scrutiny. I flush, fighting the urge to cover myself.

He doesn't seem bothered by my modesty. Instead, he studies me intently, drinking in every detail. His gaze travels from my face to my toes and back again, lingering on certain parts longer than others. Heat pools low in my belly when he focuses on my pussy. I bite my lip, resisting the urge to squirm.

Finally, he meets my gaze once more. “Beautiful.”

I blush deeper, unable to form words. He smiles and leans forward to kiss me again. I respond eagerly, wrapping my arms around his neck. He pulls me onto his lap, positioning me so that I straddle him. His erection strains against his jeans, pressing against my inner thigh. I moan softly, grinding against it. He groans, bucking his hips.

We continue kissing while rubbing against each other. Soon, I'm soaked with arousal. His cock throbs beneath me, straining against the denim. I reach down to unbutton his fly, freeing him at last. He sighs in relief, thrusting upward. I wrap my hand around his shaft, stroking slowly as I adjust my position. Then I guide him toward my entrance.

He grips my hips tightly, holding me steady. “Wait.”

I pause, looking at him questioningly.

“Condom,” he explains. “Do you have any?”

I shake my head. “No, sorry.”

“It's fine.” He releases me to rummage through his pockets. After a moment, he produces a foil packet. “I...can you get pregnant?”

I shrug. “By a vampire, certainly. It's less clear if I could with a human.” I take the packet to tear it open. “Better safe than sorry.”

He watches silently as I roll the condom over his cock. Once it's secure, I resume my earlier position. He holds himself still while I sink onto him. We both groan as my pussy stretches around him. He fills me completely, stretching me almost painfully. I rock my hips experimentally, adjusting to his girth while he grunts, digging his nails into my flesh.

“Vandria...”

“Mmm, yes.” I start moving slowly, riding him. He matches my pace, thrusting upward. Our bodies move together effortlessly, finding a natural rhythm. The pressure builds inside me, growing stronger with each stroke as he hits all the right spots. My muscles clench around him, drawing him deeper. He moans loudly, gripping my ass tighter.

Soon, we're both panting heavily. Sweat beads on my forehead as I struggle to maintain control while chasing release. He seems equally affected, grunting and cursing under his breath. Finally, I lose it. My orgasm crashes over me, sending waves of pleasure rippling through my body. I cry out, shuddering violently. He follows suit, spilling himself inside the condom with a low moan.

We collapse together, chests heaving. Every muscle throbs with an afterglow so intense it borders on pain. My mind floats in a haze, struggling to ground itself. He shifts, arms wrapping around me in a loose embrace. The tip of my nose skims the side of his neck, inhaling his sweat and something undeniably masculine.

We lie like that for a beat, hearts thumping. My eyes slide shut, peace washing through my limbs. A faint swirl of pink illusions drifts at the edges of my vision, probably leftover from the festival. I half-laugh, half-sigh into his shoulder.

“Didn’t see that coming,” I murmur, voice shaky.

He strokes a hand up my spine in a soothing gesture. “Neither did I.”

The hush thickens, though it feels content. My mind starts to grasp how monumental this is. I never let myself get this close, never risk heartbreak for fleeting passion. Yet right now, I feel safe. The grin building on my lips is unstoppable. The entire town might guess. I might not care.

His lips press a soft kiss to my temple, breathing steadier. A question forms on my tongue, but the words never come. My gaze locks on the golden lantern overhead. The orb pulses once, then glows with an intensity I’ve never seen.

He tenses, lifting his head. “What—?” He doesn’t finish.

Radiance engulfs us. The lantern’s aura envelops my vision, becoming a shining bubble that expands around our joined bodies. My chest clenches with both awe and alarm. Threads of gold flicker across my arms while arcs of light dance around his shoulders. The air hums with a static charge.

A heartbeat passes, and the lantern dims. The swirling bubble collapses, leaving stardust drifting in the air. The orb deflates, slumping to the ground like a wilted

balloon. My mouth goes dry. That display was the festival's final confirmation. The magic recognized we'd completed some cosmic step.

He jerks away, eyes widening, and body going rigid. I see panic flood his features before I can speak. He rolls off me, fumbling for his clothes. I flatten my hand against the floor in surprise.

He yanks on his pants, refusing to meet my eyes. The color drains from his face. "That means... you're..." His voice shakes. "My... fated match? That's what you said the lantern was for, right?"

I watch him, heart slamming behind my ribs. "That's how it usually works." My words wobble. "Maybe it just means we found something real."

He stiffens, pressing his lips into a thin line. "You said illusions can't force anything." He drags his shirt on, hands trembling. "So, maybe that was real. Maybe it's fate, but... No."

His refusal stings like a slap. I sit upright, blanket sliding to my waist. My breathing feels ragged. "What do you mean, 'no?'"

He avoids my gaze, scanning the small room for his jacket. "I can't do this. This is too much. I can't jump from a one-night stand to...fated love. I'm not prepared for that."

My stomach twists. "Who said we have to define it right now? We can figure it out."

He finds his jacket behind a crate and shrugs into it with clumsy haste. "The lantern literally just lit up like the Fourth of July. Everyone in town expects me to become your... I don't know. Some fairy-tale romance. That's insane."

My heart clenches. “Wait.” I scramble to my feet. “Please don’t run.”

He rubs his face, turning half away. “I need air. Need to think.”

I reach for his arm, voice cracking. “This was real. Don’t shut me out.”

His eyes flick to mine for a split second. Agony flickers in those dark irises. He inhales sharply, pulling free of my grasp. “I’m sorry.”

He marches for the door. It unlocks easily, as if the block never existed. He wrenches it open, footsteps echoing into the corridor. The hush that remains feels suffocating.

The door swings shut behind him, leaving me alone, naked except for the blanket draped around my waist. Shock and confusion war inside me. The swirl of leftover golden sparks from the lantern fade into the darkness. A tremor starts in my fingertips, then moves up my arms.

I stare at the deflated orb on the floor. My chest constricts. The festival’s final reveal was supposed to be a moment of celebration, or at least acceptance. Instead, I’m alone, unsure if I messed up by letting down my guard.

I scramble for my clothes, heart pounding so hard it hurts. Each movement triggers the memory of his hands on me. The harsh contrast rips open an ache in my chest. My throat tightens around a whimper I won’t let escape. I will not break down. Not here. Not yet.

After fumbling with my clothes, I sink onto the blanket, knees pulled to my chest. The candle flickers, casting dancing shadows on the crates. My breathing slows as the tears threaten to spill. This is why I never let myself get involved with mortals. They run. They fear time. They fear me.

I smooth a hand across my mouth, recalling the taste of him. My mind replays the desperation in his voice when he realized the lantern's meaning. That reaction wasn't mild confusion. It was panic. Perhaps he spent so long in charge of his own fate that the idea of a cosmic bond is too big a leap.

A strangled sound bubbles in my throat. I rub my eyes, forcing composure. My bookstore is empty. The festival's music hums faintly outside. The rest of Evershift Haven is celebrating. Declan is probably wandering the streets in shock. Maybe he'll keep walking until the barrier loops him around again. Maybe I'll see him in an hour. Maybe I won't.

I stare at the deflated lantern. The leftover spark flickers once, then fizzles out. No illusions. No forced bond. Something real. My heart clenches again. Real or not, that doesn't fix the heartbreak blooming in my chest.

I press my forehead against the crate, fighting tears. The intense joy from moments ago has shattered into confusion and pain. The hush envelops me, and I wonder if that's the festival's last trick—giving a taste of something profound, only to tear it away. Evershift's magic can be cruel.

My lungs expand slowly, searching for equilibrium. There's a fleeting urge to chase him and demand we talk. My pride flares. My wounded heart begs me to let him go. My mind reels from the swirl of emotional whiplash.

The candle flickers, nearly spent. Wax drips onto the crate, forming a small puddle that glistens in the final glow. I watch the droplet roll, mesmerized. Each second that passes cements the reality: he's gone. For now, anyway.

I lift my head, fighting to gather my scattered feelings. My gaze settles on the ring of illusions that swirl just outside the small window, hearts drifting on the night breeze. Evershift Haven's festival is still in full force. All that romantic energy mocks me in



the starkness of this storeroom.

My voice emerges in a bitter whisper. “Declan, please come back.”

No reply. No footprints in the hall. No heavy sigh or knock at the door. Only emptiness. I exhale a ragged breath and force myself to stand, adjusting my clothes with trembling hands. The time for illusions is over. The festival’s glow might surround me, but inside, I feel the creeping chill of disappointment.

I gather my things, blow out the candle, and step into the corridor. The bookstore’s front room remains dim. The moment I cross the threshold, every sense begs me to search for him. My heart demands I do something. My mind warns me not to push him right now.

I walk to the shop’s front windows, pressing my palm against the cool glass. The Town Square is alive with music and dancing. The sight of couples spinning in the lantern-lit plaza sends a jolt of envy through me. My chest tightens again.

Tears threaten. I grit my teeth and wipe at my eyes with one sleeve. This is the risk I always avoided. The moment felt perfect. The aftermath is anything but. I stand there, leaning my forehead against the glass, letting the distant tunes of flutes and violins wash over me. My eyes scan the dancing crowd for his face. No sign of him.

One shaky breath leads to another. I swallow the ache rising in my throat, bracing for the unknown. If this truly is fate, then I don’t know how to fix it. If it’s just some cosmic joke, maybe I’ll wake up tomorrow and carry on. I told him I learned to keep my heart guarded. Now I discover too late that the guard isn’t enough when magic decides otherwise.

Standing there in the half-darkness, I remember the warmth of his skin and the look in his eyes when he first kissed me. Something deep inside me hopes he’ll come to

terms with the lantern's sign. Another part whispers it's best to let him run. I can't decide.

A single tear slips free, trailing down my cheek. I let it fall. No illusions can fix the raw sting in my chest. The enchantment that lit our moment now stands between us like a wall. He fled from the possibility of something real. I might have lost him before we even began.

I close my eyes. The night presses on, but I'm done braving the crowds. I wish I could conjure a protective shield around my heart. The only plan now is to wait to see if he'll come back, or if Evershift Haven's magic has driven him away for good.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

I STRIDE THROUGH THE winding streets of Evershift Haven, heart banging in my ears. My mind churns. Vandria's stunned expression when I left her store, the lantern's brilliant glow right after we... I shake my head, trying to banish the memory that refuses to go away.

Late-night lanterns bob overhead, flickering pastel lights across the cobblestones. The townspeople are still partying, but I ignore their curious glances. They probably see my agitation and guess it's about the vampire who's snared my heart. A cluster of them whisper, but I'm done being their sideshow.

I pass a row of shops with closed shutters. Candles burn low in the lampposts, shaped like hearts that drip pink wax. The whole place feels like it's pressing in on me as I search for Grizelda. From what I've gleaned during my brief stay, she's the only one who can remove this so-called "hex" or "guiding spell" or whatever meddling enchantment tricked me. My chest burns with the aftermath of too many swirling emotions.

I jerk to a halt at a wrought-iron gate that squeaks when I open it. The front yard is a tapestry of exotic plants with gleaming leaves, some releasing tiny puffs of glowing pollen. A narrow path leads to a bright purple door. Painted steppingstones hop gently beneath my feet, as though assisting me along. A swirl of wind lifts the corner of my jacket, carrying the scent of rosemary and something floral.

I bang on the door. "Grizelda?" My voice echoes across the yard. "We need to talk."

No immediate response. My teeth grind. A sign shaped like a broomstick dangles from the handle and reads Closed For Cat Nap . I pound again. "Open up." A cat's

hiss sounds on the other side, then a rustle of movement.

The door swings open, revealing a woman with green skin and wild purple hair streaked silver. Her robe drips with embroidered runes, and the fabric reveals her pregnancy. Those bright, curious eyes scan me. She's not the slightest bit surprised to see me. "Declan," she says, voice smooth. "I wondered when you'd come around."

I push past her into a foyer that's cluttered with floating jars and half-labeled potion bottles. A black cat perches on a wooden stool, tail flicking. My eyes skim over shelves of shimmering powders, dried herbs, and various mismatched trinkets. Everything hums with that intangible energy I've come to associate with Evershift magic. My fists tighten at my sides.

"I want you to remove the hex," I say, doing my best not to shout. My breath comes hard. "Or whatever it is that forced me into—"

She slides the door shut calmly, then faces me with a tilt of her chin. "Forced you?"

I swallow. "Yes. That lantern, the illusions, and the entire town pushing me toward Vandria. You must have something that can break this."

A sparkle of amusement crosses her gaze, though her tone stays measured. "Sit down, dear, before you topple my potions with your pacing or disturb Atlas. He's asleep, and he's grumpy if he doesn't get his full nine hours." She gestures to a small table near the hearth, where a teapot puffs pink steam. The cat leaps from the stool, strolling lazily around me before curling up near the fire.

I remain standing, arms rigid. "I don't want tea. I want answers."

She hums in acknowledgment, taking her time to set two teacups on the table. "You smell like heartbreak. So does the air around you. Spells can't cause heartbreak, dear

boy, unless they reveal something you refused to face.”

My nostrils flare. “Then undo it.” My voice echoes in the cottage’s wooden rafters. “Stop the heartbreak, the illusions, everything.”

She settles onto a creaky chair. “Magic doesn’t force love or desire, Declan. If you think it did, you’re mistaken.” Her eyes gleam with quiet sympathy.

My jaw tenses. “Then why did that lantern do what it did? It flared up right when—” Heat flushes my neck. “Right when we—”

She lifts a brow. “When you two consummated your connection?”

A low growl of frustration slips from my throat. “Yes.”

She pours tea into delicate cups. The liquid swirls with faint sparkles, releasing a soothing aroma of chamomile and lavender. “Lanterns sense truth. It recognized you accepted your feelings, even if only for a moment.” She hands me a cup. “Drink. It’ll help calm your nerves.”

I want to refuse, but the constriction in my chest intensifies. My fingers shake as I seize the teacup, ignoring the gentle swirl of magic around the rim. One sip floods my mouth with warmth, reducing the tightness in my breathing. “Calm” isn’t the same as “fix,” though.

She leans forward, expression earnest. “The lantern’s magic never forced anything. It’s designed to open your heart to possibilities. The rest was always your choice.”

I glare into the teacup. “It didn’t feel like a choice when I was locked in that store with a glowing orb.”

Her lips twitch with a barely hidden smile. “Haven’t you heard of coincidences?”

I slam the teacup onto the table, liquid sloshing over the rim. “You’re telling me being locked in was coincidence?”

She sighs, gesturing with both hands in an are-you-really-that-surprised way. “All right, maybe I had a role in that part. The festival’s final scavenger clue often leads to forced quality time for pairs who are too stubborn to see what’s in front of them.” She picks up a napkin, dabs the spilled tea. “But the emotions? The attraction? That’s all you.”

I grit my teeth. “I barely know her. Everything happened so fast.”

She sets the napkin aside. “Fast or slow, real connections form as they will. Magic only helps nudge what’s already possible.”

My pulse thunders. My mind replays the rush of Vandria’s lips, the surge of devotion that soared in my chest, and the sheer panic that followed when the lantern flared. I rub my temples. “I never asked for this. I can’t handle being told I’m part of some cosmic pairing. My life was supposed to be my choice, not fate’s.”

Grizelda’s gaze softens. “Even if you disclaim fate, can you disclaim what you feel?”

A hiss of air escapes me. “I don’t know.”

She turns her attention to a swirling orb on a nearby shelf. Soft candlelight highlights the worry lines around her eyes. “I recall your grandmother telling me a story. You always sought meaning beyond the battlefield. Then you tried to find meaning as a florist but still felt adrift. She’s certain Evershift Haven is your real chance.”

I recoil. “My grandmother told you that?”

“She wrote me months ago, asking if I had a subtle guiding spell for a lost grandson. She suspected your heart needed a place like this.” She shrugs. “I offered the spell. That’s all. The lantern was just a tool.”

My mind reels. “Gran arranged this?”

Grizelda nods. “She never wanted to force anything. She only lit your path, trusting you’d find your own reason to stay. She’s on her way here, by the way.”

The floor seems to drop from under my feet. “That can’t be real. She’s back home. Or was.” A wave of betrayal collides with confusion.

Grizelda stands, rummaging through a shelf of potions in neat rows. “Bethany missed Evershift Haven for decades. She left for her own reasons but always thought you might fit here. She helped your road trip along with one small enchantment to glitch your GPS, just enough to drive you into the barrier.” She drops a bag of dried herbs onto the table. “No malicious hex, Declan. Just a chance to find your place. The rest is up to you.”

My limbs feel disconnected. Silence stretches as I stare at the scattered potion bottles. My throat works, but no words come. The swirl of betrayal at my grandmother is overshadowed by the bigger truth. The lantern didn’t create my bond with Vandria. It only revealed it. My chest tightens all over again.

“Was any of it real?” My voice cracks on the last word.

She steps closer, resting a cool palm on my shoulder. “Ask yourself that question, not me.” She tilts her head at the door. “Because someone’s waiting out there to find out your answer.”

My pulse jolts. I pivot, glimpsing motion through the window. Vandria stands on the

porch. She's wearing the same jacket from earlier, arms folded around her middle. Even from here, she exudes a tension that matches mine.

"Hello? Grizelda?" She sounds uncertain. My entire body tenses as I swallow hard. I'm definitely not ready, but she's here.

Grizelda meets my gaze then gestures for me to decide. My feet refuse to move. She steps into the foyer, pausing when she sees me. That flash of hurt returns to her face, replaced quickly by a guarded mask. "Declan." She says my name quietly, gaze flicking between me and Grizelda. "I heard voices. Figured you'd be here."

My mouth opens, but words evade me. She lifts her chin, clearly bracing for more rejection. That subtle shift in her posture twists my stomach in knots.

Grizelda breaks the tension by clearing her throat. "Vandria, dear, I suspect you two have things to discuss." She raises an eyebrow at me. "You might want to wait until after your grandmother arrives."

I snap to attention, startled. "She's here already?"

A new voice drifts in through the open door. "I made good time."

I spin around. My grandmother, Bethany, stands at the threshold, looking far spryer than I remember. Her silver hair is pulled into a neat bun, and her cheeks are flushed with excitement. She clutches a carpetbag that probably holds half her life's belongings. My shock morphs into an odd wave of relief and betrayal, all tangled together. She sets down the bag, scanning the room.

"Hello, dear boy." She clucks her tongue at me. "You look like you haven't slept."

I sputter. "Gran." My throat constricts, and I'm uncertain whether to hug her or



demand an explanation.

She takes away the choice by stepping forward and wrapping me in a firm hug. My arms fall around her shoulders automatically. Vandria stands behind us, silent.

Gran draws back, hands on my shoulders. “Let me see your face. Mercy me, you do look awful.” She turns a bright smile on Grizelda and Vandria.

Vandria’s expression is carefully neutral. Her gaze remain trained on me, though.

I step away from my grandmother. “Gran, please tell me this is some misunderstanding. You didn’t really plan all this behind my back.”

Her expression twists with sadness. “I nudged you. You’ve been lost, sweet boy. I guessed you might find what you wanted here. So I wrote Grizelda, arranged a small guiding enchantment. The rest was up to fate.”

My chest flares with anger. “I’m not a puppet, Gran.”

She sighs, tears brimming in her eyes. “I know, and I’m sorry if it felt that way, but you were drifting. You never told me you were happy or content. I wanted you to have a chance at real belonging.”

Grizelda edges around us to put the kettle back on, giving us space. Vandria lingers near the door, arms tight across her body. I can’t take my gaze off her. The memory of how I left sits heavy in my gut.

Gran asks, “You blame me for interfering?”

My jaw locks. “I might, but I also blame this place—everyone’s illusions, that lantern—”

A sharp sniff from Bethany. “Illusions only reveal what you already carry. I did nothing but open the path.” She glances at Vandria, who looks torn between leaving or staying. “I see you’ve complicated matters.”

That’s the understatement of the year. I run a hand down my face, wrestling with the swirl of anger and heartbreak. “I can’t just accept fate meddling in everything, Gran. I need to know I have a choice.”

She lays a gentle palm on my cheek. “You always have a choice, Declan. Magic never forces love. The only question is whether you want to embrace the love you’ve found.”

Silence. The tension in my chest returns as my gaze drifts to Vandria. She’s quiet, eyes shining with unshed tears, and her posture guarded. My heart wrenches.

Gran steps aside, giving me a direct line of sight to Vandria. “Stop torturing yourselves,” she murmurs softly. “None of this is destiny commanding you. You decide.”

Grizelda’s cat slinks across the floor, weaving between our legs as though encouraging us to talk. Vandria shifts her weight, exhaling. “Declan.” She doesn’t continue, perhaps not trusting her voice.

I force a breath. “I... I’m sorry,” I manage. The words come haltingly. “I freaked out, and I left you alone.”

Her throat works. “Yeah, you did.”

My mind races, searching for how to explain. “I never believed in soulmates or fated love. Then that lantern flared, and everything felt locked in. I panicked.”

She nods once, lips pinched. “I understand.”

Grizelda collects her cat, slipping out of the room with Bethany in tow. They vanish into a side chamber, giving us privacy. The hush returns. Vandria’s gaze flips from the open doorway to me. “So you hate me now, or...?”

I cross the space between us, stopping a foot away. “No. Never hated you.” My pulse hammers. “I hate feeling like I’m not in control of my own life. This place has me spinning.”

Her arms remain folded, knuckles white. “Magic thrives on chaos, but it never tried to chain you, not truly.”

I step closer, lifting a hand in a silent request for permission to touch her. She hesitates, and a heartbeat passes. Then she lowers her arms, letting me rest a palm on her shoulder. The contact sparks a wave of warmth that floods me with longing. The memory of her body pressed to mine in that candlelit storeroom flickers through my mind, stealing my breath.

My eyes close for a second. “I ran because I felt something real, and it terrified me. I’ve spent so long pushing people away. I was drifting, never letting myself get attached, and suddenly, you were...everything.” I swallow hard. “Too fast. Too big.”

She releases a trembling breath. “And now?”

I open my eyes, letting the swirl of leftover heartbreak show. “Now, I don’t want to lose what we started. If you can forgive me, if you still want me, I’d like a chance, but it has to be our choice, not a lantern’s.”

Her gaze glitters with tears. She lifts a shaking hand and rests it against my cheek. “I’ve guarded my heart, afraid mortals would die, leaving me behind. Something

about you shattered that guard.” Her voice turns quiet. “It’s terrifying, but it’s also the first time in decades I’ve felt alive.”

My throat tightens. “I’m not promising an easy road, but I promise if we do this, it’s because I want you.”

She presses her forehead to mine, eyes closing. A tiny sob escapes her. I slide my arm around her waist, pulling her close. The tension in her shoulders melts, replaced by a trembling acceptance. I bury my face in her hair, inhaling the faint scent of lavender and parchment.

For a long moment, we breathe each other in, letting the swirl of magic settle. Then footsteps creak in the next room. Bethany and Grizelda quietly reappear, pausing in the doorway. My grandmother’s eyes shine as her lips curve in a gentle smile.

Vandria and I step apart, though I keep one hand linked with hers.

Gran approaches, setting her carpetbag down again. “That answers my question, I suppose.”

A faint blush colors my cheeks, but I keep my chin high. “Gran, you meddled in a big way, but... thank you. Maybe.”

She laughs, eyes misting. “That’s better than I’d hoped.” Her smile lingers. “Now you can decide what’s next. Will you stay in Evershift Haven? Will you return to the human world? There’s no right or wrong answer. Only your heart.”

I trade a glance with Vandria. Her lips tremble, waiting. My chest clenches with the weight of the decision. My old life calls, offering a sense of normality, but that always felt hollow. Evershift Haven might be insane, but it’s also the first time I’ve felt truly alive since I left the military.

I blow out a long breath. “I can’t walk away from Vandria.”

Relief brightens her expression. She grips my hand tighter. Grizelda beams, clapping her hands with a jingle of bracelets. “Fabulous. Now, we must celebrate with a nice pot of tea—”

Gran raises a hand. “Maybe tomorrow, dear. Declan and I need a private chat, and he’s owed a thorough explanation of how I parted ways with Evershift Haven all those decades ago.”

Vandria edges back. “I’ll give you space, but...will I see you soon?” She glances at me, voice laced with lingering insecurity.

I squeeze her fingers. “Yes. We’ll figure it out.”

She nods, blinking rapidly, then slips out the door with a ghost of a smile. My heart aches to follow, but Gran touches my shoulder, gently steering me back toward Grizelda’s messy table. The teapot puffs its pink steam again, as though celebrating.

She gestures at a chair. “Sit, my boy.”

I lower myself, exhaling. The swirl of left over tension lingers, but relief seeps in. I’m not running anymore. Gran glances at Grizelda, who hums a contented tune while fetching more cups. The cat purrs near the fireplace. It all feels so normal in this decidedly abnormal place.

She sets her hand over mine. “We have a lot to discuss, but first, I need to say I’m proud of you, and I hope you find happiness here. That’s all I ever wanted.”

My eyes mist with tears. I clear my throat roughly. “I’m still angry you tricked me.”

She squeezes my fingers. “You’ll forgive me eventually.”

Grizelda laughs softly, pouring fresh tea. I sink deeper into the chair, tension unwinding. The wind outside rustles the bizarre plants in the yard. Evershift Haven remains as magical and confounding as ever, but I don’t feel trapped. Not anymore.

I cradle the warm teacup, letting the possibility of a real future bloom in my heart. Vandria. My grandmother. This entire crazy town. Maybe it’s all the second chance I never knew I needed.

## Page 8

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

NIGHT DRAPES OVER EVERSHIFT Haven like a velvet cloak, and the festival glow casts dancing pink lights against every building. I stand under a lamppost near the edge of the Town Square, fiddling with the collar of my jacket. I keep glancing in the direction of Grizelda's cottage, where Declan went earlier. My stomach knots with uncertainty.

A swirl of conversation drifts past me from couples enjoying the holiday illusions. Bram and Fiona pass by, tipping their heads to me in greeting. I manage a small smile, trying not to worry too much. He said he was staying, which is what I want, but he seemed uncertain...

I consider walking away to give him more space, but then I see him exit Grizelda's gate with Bethany at his side. Though her face is lined with age, her eyes sparkle with the same magic that infuses the rest of this town. Declan stands a step behind her, arms loose at his sides. Our gazes lock from across the street, and a swirl of nerves tenses in my gut. Are we about to talk, or is he leaving again?

Bethany spots me, offers a nod, and murmurs something to him. She continues on toward the Town Square, presumably giving us privacy. He hesitates for a second before he starts my way.

When we're within a few feet of each other, he stops. I try to sound neutral and stand casually, but I'm a mess of nerves. "So?" My voice sounds smaller than I'd like.

He runs a hand across the back of his neck, exhaling. "Gran explained everything. Why she sent me here. She left to see the world for a bit, always planning to return, but then she met my grandfather, a human, and gave up the idea of returning to

Evershift Haven when she fell in love with him. You were sort of dragged into all this. I owe you an apology, and a conversation.”

My heart twists. “You already apologized. Sort of.”

A faint grimace tugs his mouth. “Not enough. I blamed magic for everything, when maybe it was just me scared of losing control.” He meets my eyes. “I’m not proud of running out on you.”

A swirl of conflicting feelings floods me—hurt, relief, longing, and fear. I remember the look of panic in his face after the lantern flared but then remember how it felt having him in my arms, his body aligned with mine. I tremble with longing and a bit of confusion. I want him to stay because he wants to. Is he still doing what he thinks magic is forcing him to do?

His brow crinkles. “Are you cold?”

I shake my head. “No.” I glance at passersby, but no one’s paying close attention. They’re too busy with festival festivities. I risk a step closer. “I’m just uncertain where we go from here.”

His sigh shivers. “Grizelda and your mother might say the magic is done. The lantern is gone. We’re left with whatever real feelings remain. I guess the question is, do we want to explore them?”

My eyes flit over his expression. “Do you?”

He lifts one shoulder, a half-shrug betraying vulnerability. “I’d be lying if I said I wanted to leave you. The idea of heading back to my old life with no closure is impossible now.”



A swirl of relief spikes so sharply it nearly makes me dizzy. “And the fear? The panic from last night?”

He nods slowly, gaze fixed on the cobblestones. “Still there, but you’re worth facing it.” He lifts his eyes. “If you’ll have me.”

My chest tightens, tears burning at the corners of my eyes. I swallow them. “I want that,” I whisper. “Despite everything.”

He lifts a hand, palm open in an invitation. I slide my fingers through his. The contact sends a ripple of warmth. We exchange tentative smiles, like two people tiptoeing over thin ice.

Footsteps approach, and I glimpse Bethany’s petite form returning. She halts a short distance away, clearing her throat. “No desire to interrupt, but we have important matters to discuss as well.” Her gaze lands on me with a mixture of warmth and apology. “I owe you an explanation, Vandria. I never meant to meddle so deeply in your life. I had no idea if his match was here, or who you’d be, but I hoped.”

Her lips purse. “I suspected he needed a place like Evershift Haven, and that the festival might nudge him, but I didn’t know you specifically. Your mother and I were friends many years ago, but I had no idea her daughter would be my grandson’s perfect match.”

Declan squeezes my hand as we listen. My pulse thumps. Bethany sets her carpetbag on the ground with a soft thud, rummaging inside until she produces a small crocheted shawl. She drapes it around her shoulders.

“Horace—my husband—passed away a few years back,” she says quietly. “I realized Declan was adrift after he left service when his knee was injured. Not enough to disable him, but too much for him to stay in as a Ranger.”

I glance at him while trying to remember if I saw any scars on his leg. Nothing comes to mind, so it must have been an internal injury.

His grandmother continues before I can ask for details. “I worried he’d go on existing without finding true connection., so I wrote Grizelda and arranged for a subtle push. The day he took that road trip, I wove a tiny enchantment on his GPS. The rest was the barrier doing what it does best—leading him into Evershift Haven.” She glances at me, eyes shining with sincerity. “I never imagined he’d collide head-on with your path like this, but I’m grateful.”

I tilt my head, letting the confession settle. She left our town for love once, so she knows the stakes. She risked everything to push Declan here. My voice comes out gently. “I’m not angry with you. A little shell-shocked, maybe.”

Bethany smiles softly. “Your mother might have a different opinion once she hears I’m back, especially if it leads to grandbabies.” The older woman glances between Declan and me. “I meddled with the best intentions. If you two want no part in it, no one’s chaining you here, but let me ask you something, Declan.” She fixes him with a piercing stare. “Do you really want to live without Vandria in your life?”

He closes his eyes briefly, swallowing. “No,” he says finally. “I don’t. I’ve already told her that, Gran.”

Bethany’s face lights up, lines creasing in a smile that’s equal parts mischief and joy. She dips her chin as though passing a silent blessing.

Declan turns to me, eyes nervous but resolute. “Walk with me?” he asks, voice husky.

I nod. We drift away from Bethany, who picks up her bag and waves us off, probably heading to see Grizelda or my parents. The festival’s final night hums around us with swirling illusions and dreamy music. We pass booths selling heart-shaped pastries

and stands where folks pluck floating candy from the air.

He reaches for my hand again. “Hope you’re not sick of me,” he says, trying for a light tone.

A bubble of laughter escapes me, tension easing. “You still scowl a lot, but I’ll manage.”

He groans good-naturedly, guiding me past a stall decked in pink ribbons. “I scowl because this town confounds me, but I’m starting to see its charm.”

We meander to the fountain at the center of the square, a place that’s witnessed countless festival dances and romantic confessions. Tonight, a gentle glow emanates from the water, shifting from pink to purple in slow waves. A row of lanterns floats overhead, each orb flickering as couples pass beneath.

Declan halts, turning to face me fully. The rhythmic hush of water splashing sets a calming backdrop. “So,” he murmurs, “I’m staying. I can’t just walk away.”

My chest aches. “This place can be home if you let it. The florist in you might adore what we can do with magical blooms.” I arch a brow. “Just think of the possibilities.”

He huffs a laugh, something warm lighting in his eyes. “I’ve already messed around with that pink spray from Grizelda. A few times, actually. Might be fun to stock that in the human-world shop, once I figure out the logistics.”

I lean in. “You’ll put half the normal florists out of business.”

He lowers his voice to a near-whisper. “About earlier... I’m sorry I left you alone after what we shared. I meant every part of it. It wasn’t just festival illusions, and fear guided my freakout, but I never wanted to reject you.”

“I know. It was real for me too.”

He puts his arm around my waist. “If you’ll have me, I’d like to see where this goes. Maybe I’ll grumble and scowl, but I promise I’ll be all in.”

My heart thrums. “I can handle your scowls, soldier boy, as long as you’re scowling by my side.”

A grin cracks his lips. “Deal.”

Instinct tugs me to lean up, pressing a gentle kiss to his lips and gliding my fang over one. He flinches but doesn’t pull away. When we stop kissing, I say, “I’ll never bite without permission. You don’t have to be afraid of what I am.”

He nods. “I know, and I’m not.” He exhales, leaning into it. He draws me closer until the crowd, the music, and everything blurs into background static. His touch makes my head spin. This moment tastes of promise. Eventually, we break apart, both breathing raggedly. I rest my forehead against his.

A swirl of confetti drifts overhead, produced by some passing fairy. We watch the bits of shimmering paper twirl past us, dancing in the fountain’s breeze. A pair of townsfolk glides by, tossing us a knowing grin.

Someone calls out, “Told you he’d come around.”

Another voice says, “Pay up. I had two days in the pool.”

My cheeks flush. Declan grumbles, rolling his eyes, but the corners of his mouth lift faintly upward. He tugs me along, weaving through the crowd. We pass an arch of roses that shift color as we walk under them. I catch him glancing around in mild fascination and sense his guarded posture relaxing more by the second.

Eventually, we stop at a quieter corner near the “Moonlit Inn,” stepping onto a wooden walkway lined with hanging flower baskets. He takes in the blossoms, some glowing faintly. His expression softens. “When I see these, I think about how we can create new arrangements. Something that merges my style with the magic here.”

My heart warms. “I’d love to see that. You might even outshine the local bloom makers.”

He snorts. “Or I’ll blow up the shop with a mis-aimed enchantment.”

I laugh under my breath, imagining half-singing daisies raining from the rafters. The mental image is so ridiculous, I press a hand to my mouth. He chuckles with me, that tension in his eyes momentarily replaced by pure ease. Something inside me clicks. We’re on the cusp of real partnership. Perhaps fated or perhaps chosen, but either way, ours.

We wander farther, hand in hand, until we find ourselves at a vantage point overlooking the edge of town. A swirl of fog drifts beyond the barrier, faintly shimmering with pink. He pulls me close, and I lean my head on his shoulder, watching the illusions swirl. The day’s chaos, heartbreak, and revelations fold into a sense of calm possibility.

A hush builds. I sense him searching for words. Finally, he clears his throat. “So, are there rules about living arrangements? Because I can’t keep paying for the inn forever. Especially if I’m staying.”

I raise my head, scanning his face. “I can help you find a place. Grizelda can also alter any fruit or vegetable into a very fine home or floral shop. Or you can move your floral business in at the edge of my shop’s property. I have a big storeroom that’s mostly unused. Maybe it can be your workshop?”

He nods thoughtfully. “I might take you up on that.”

My lips tilt up. “I’d love that. We can see if we drive each other crazy.” A flicker of humor glimmers between us. “Besides, I’m sure the townsfolk want you to set up a permanent floral shop for the festival seasons.”

He slants me a sidelong look. “How many festivals are there, exactly?”

I grin. “You’ll find out.”

His quiet chuckle is warm. We stand like that for a while. This is what I wanted—to trust someone enough to share life’s weirdness, to risk heartbreak because the alternative is emptiness. My heart brims with genuine hope.

Eventually, the swirl of nighttime breezes grows chilly. He rubs my arms to keep me warm. “We should get back. It’s late, and your mother might appear out of nowhere to demand an interrogation.”

I groan. “She definitely will, but maybe in the morning. Let’s slip away now.”

Hand in hand, we return to the heart of town, passing more couples who wave or congratulate us. My cheeks flare, but I can’t stop smiling. It’s surreal, but he’s chosen to stay, to see this through. I relish the steady warmth of his hand around mine, the easy rhythm of our footsteps.

We reach the boarded walkway leading toward the bookstore and florist side of Evershift Haven. Lanterns drift overhead, glowing soft pink and gold, reminiscent of the orb that once haunted him. I look at him, half-expecting him to scowl. Instead, he shrugs a little, a rueful smile tugging his lips. He’s come so far in accepting the magic around him.

I brush my thumb across his knuckles. “Look at you, not even glaring at the lanterns.”

He snorts quietly. “Don’t push it. I might still try to tie one to a fence if it follows me home.”

A laugh bubbles out as he pulls me into a gentle kiss. We part, and I savor the warmth in his gaze. I whisper, “Welcome home, Declan.”

He nods. “Yeah, I think it might be.”

## Page 9

*Source Creation Date: August 4, 2025, 9:37 am*

I STAND UNDER THE ARCHING branches of the Heart of Haven—a centuries-old oak at the Town Square’s center—watching the festival lanterns drift skyward. A swirl of pastel illusions sparkles under the moon’s glow. It’s been a full year since the night Declan stumbled into Evershift Haven. The memory makes me smile.

He’s beside me, wearing a neatly rolled-sleeve shirt that shows the floral ink on his forearm—a new tattoo he got to celebrate opening his Evershift Haven shop, having decided to leave the human one to be managed by a competent manager in the human realm. He visits a few times per year, but Evershift Haven is home. His scowl from last year is gone, replaced by a calm contentment. He’s still not a grin-at-everyone type of guy, but his eyes gleam with quiet satisfaction.

Bethany never left. She stands near my mother, and they’re talking about something with animated body language. They keep glancing at us, sharing conspiratorial smiles. I catch Bethany’s wink. She’s immersed herself in Evershift Haven again, rekindling friendships she thought she’d lost. Now, the townsfolk treat her like a beloved old friend returned home.

I shift my gaze to the small strip of stores across from my bookstore. Where once stood an empty lot, now a massive, enchanted tulip blossoms in vivid pink, grown large enough to house a full-fledged florist’s shop. Grizelda used her magic to transplant it and coax it into a building. Leaves curve around a wooden door, and petals overhead forming a natural awning. Lights twinkle among the stamen, giving the interior a perpetual golden glow. “Stewart’s Enchanted Blooms” is a place where flowers sing, hum, or shift color in tune with the recipient’s emotions. The sign out front is shaped like a leaf, etched with swirling script.



He follows my line of sight, lips quirking. “The shop’s busier than I expected. Locals love music-lilies and love-fern corsages.” He pretends to grumble, but pride warms his voice.

I slip an arm around his waist. “Told you they’d go crazy over living bouquets.”

He shakes his head. “You did. I still get jumpy whenever the daisies start reciting poetry though.”

Laughter escapes me, remembering a mishap last week when a new batch of daisies wouldn’t stop quoting love sonnets at every passerby. He handled it with minimal swearing—a big step from the man who tried tying a lantern to a fence. My heart swells with gratitude at how far he’s come.

We meander toward the small path bridging our shops, a short stone walkway etched with runic script. The closeness of our businesses feels right, almost symbolic. We’re still separate people with our own passions yet connected in a way that fosters synergy.

He murmurs, “Never thought I’d be living in a giant flower.”

I smirk, leaning my head on his shoulder. “Strangest part is you love it.”

He snorts. “I do.”

A hush sweeps across the square as the final ceremony of the festival begins. Mayor Spellbinder lifts his staff, and the crowd quiets. Lanterns flicker overhead, swirling in lazy patterns that trace star-shapes across the sky. The mayor’s voice raises. “Friends, welcome to another year’s end of the Festival of Luminaries. Let us release these final lanterns, that they may guide new hearts to their destined paths.”

Applause bursts, and the lanterns detach from ropes, floating freely. Families cheer,

couples hold hands, and visitors stare in awe at the luminous display. Bethany stands near us, wiping an emotional tear as she murmurs about the first year she's spent truly happy since Horace passed. Mother loops an arm around her, beaming.

We slip out of the immediate crowd, wandering to the base of the oak. We rest against its trunk, watching the orbs sail higher and higher, their glow painting the night sky with shifting colors. I lean into him, letting the hush of the moment sink in.

He presses a kiss to my temple. "I still can't believe how this all worked out."

I tilt my head to look up at him, a soft smile forming. "Don't pretend you haven't embraced it."

He gives a half grin. "I appreciate it more than I ever expected."

Warmth radiates through my chest. He came here a guarded stranger, refusing to believe in magic. Now he's integral to the community.

I poke his side. "That meddling vampire must've helped too, right?"

He chuckles, hooking an arm around my waist. "She might've."

Footsteps shuffle behind us, and Bethany emerges, discreetly giving us space but also wanting to share a moment. She pats Declan's shoulder. "Proud of you, dear boy, and you too, Vandria. This year has been something special."

We exchange smiles. She drifts off to rejoin Grizelda, leaving us in the comforting hush. A final swirl of illusions drifts by, shaped like shimmering hearts. He scowls at them in mock annoyance. I hide a laugh against his chest.

A single lantern remains, hovering lower than the rest—a deep gold that reminds me of the one that once chose him. Declan watches it drift overhead, expression pensive

until it floats by.

I lift onto my toes, pressing a kiss to his mouth. The hush of the festival enfolds us, the last lantern shining above like a silent blessing. We hold each other until the lanterns vanish into the sky, leaving only the glow of lampposts and the quiet rustle of the ancient oak's leaves.

He takes my hand, lacing our fingers, and we stand there in companionable silence, hearts thrumming with the certainty of shared future. The festival winds down around us, but inside, everything feels just as bright.

He presses a kiss to my temple, voice low. "We heading home?"

I grin at the word home. "Yes. Home." I glance toward the giant tulip store and the small apartment built within, all courtesy of Grizelda's magic. We drift away from the oak, weaving through the thinning crowd, arms around each other.

Laughter and final festival songs echo softly in the square. My mother and father wave from the steps of the "Moonlit Inn." Bethany waves too before going into her mushroom house at the end of the street. She's wearing a big grin on her face. Declan rolls his eyes, murmuring that his grandmother is way too pleased with herself. I smother a laugh in his jacket.

He glances down at me. "Ready for a quiet night?"

I nod, contentment surging. "Lead the way, soldier boy."

We vanish into the gentle glow of Evershift Haven's lantern-lit streets. Hand in hand, we move forward into a future built on risk, magic, and undeniable love.