

A MAGIC AFTER MIDLIFE NOVELLA

A Deader
Shade
of Pale

Book 1.5

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About the Author



You might be wondering: how did I end up knee-deep in a small lake on a Friday night while wearing a sexy black sundress?

It all started while I was on my third date in five days with Ben Myers, a blond and bespectacled lexicographer who my best friend, Judith, had sworn would be perfect for me.

And so far he was: we had similar political views, both enjoyed a good mystery and a good bottle of wine, and would never say no to a delicious meal. We'd compared the trials and tribulations of aging bodies: his thinning hair and my back pain, and had laughingly made bets on how long before either of us ended up in a mouthguard thanks to incessant teeth grinding. Ben even praised my daughter Sadie's creativeness in her cosplaying, which boded well for future dates. But there was one thing that might be a deal breaker—for him.

I brushed imaginary crumbs off the plaid picnic blanket. "We need to talk."

The salsa concert here at this lakeside park had wrapped up with enthusiastic applause, and the few remaining stragglers were now making their way home.

“Oh no.” Ben made a face, causing his glasses to slide down his nose. “I take it back. I wasn’t up arguing all night last Friday with a theoretical linguist about generative lexicon theory.” He broke into an exaggerated version of the white man’s overbite, doing some disco move with his upper body. “I was burning up the dance floor.”

I laughed and pushed his hands into his lap. “Never bust that out again. Go back to your word nerd arguments and losing track of time. Much sexier.”

Ben blushed and smoothed out his bow tie. “You think?”

“Absolutely.”

He jutted his chin up, with a mock-imperial expression. “Then I’ll have you know that I didn’t lose track. My watch had stopped working.”

“Are you sure you checked it?” I said, playing along despite my anxious need to get this talk over with.

“I consulted it at my favorite time. 11:59:59AM.” His mischievous grin made my heart ping. “It’s second to noon.”

I barely refrained from groaning. “I disagree. It seems your watch needed a hand.”

Ben clapped in delight. “You say you hate puns but you lie.”

“It’s all your fault. You’ve broken me.”

“Well done, me.” He patted his shoulder. “What did you want to discuss?”

Most people with magic were Ohrists, deriving their power from light, and many tended to dislike the few remaining Banim Shovavim like me, who drew their power from

darkness instead. Historically, they'd even hunted us into near extinction.

Jude had assured me that Ben was not one of those people, but I had to check. Plus, I was curious as to his particular ability.

“Well, you see...”

A dying ray of soft gold beamed down upon us, the sunset's streaks of warm pink and orange fading beneath a velvety indigo.

Ben reached out to tuck a strand of my dark hair behind my ears. “You're lovely, Miriam.”

Our eyes met, my heart hammering in my chest and champagne bubbles fizzing in my belly. Talk, schmalk. This was finally happening. I gave a tiny nod, closed my lids, and leaned in.

The blanket rustled and the scent of Ben's cologne drifted closer.

I pursed my lips—

Ben groaned. “Have you ever tasted anything so good?”

Say what? I cracked an eye to find my date shoveling my portion of the mille-feuille that he'd brought into his mouth, custard and flaky pastry oozing through his fingers.

I subtly checked my breath, wondering if he was trying to tell me I smelled of olive tapenade and needed to sweeten up, but no. “Wow,” I said weakly, “you're really going to town on that.”

He nodded, cramming the last bit in. “Did you know,” he said, through a mouthful, “that the alternate name for mille-

feuille, Napoleon, refers not to the emperor, but to the city of Naples, which was famed for its layered desserts?”

Now was not the time to entice my librarian side with interesting facts, damn it.

“I did not.” I trailed my fingers along my décolletage. “However, I can think of some other sweet treats to indulge in.”

Not even a flicker of interest. Ben licked a smear of errant custard off his thumb with a laser focus that had me thinking *lucky thumb*. “I don’t think I’ve ever tasted anything this good.”

Okay, what the hell? I slammed the lid on an empty container and threw it in the picnic basket. My mouth was a marvel, my kissing technique sublime. Or at least, better than a mille-feuille. Had it been chocolate cake, I might have conceded the point.

Wiping his hands on a napkin, he inhaled deeply. “Smell that night air. Damn, it’s good to be alive.”

It *was* a lovely June night. Maybe he’d just gotten overcome with emotion? That was good, right? Who wanted one of those stoic types? I could get this date back on track. “So—”

Ben sniffed again. Then he jumped to his feet and ran over to some dude smoking a cigarette while waiting for his dog to find the perfect bush to pee on.

I watched, flabbergasted, as Ben ripped the cigarette from the man’s mouth and ran off, ignoring his angry cries. Right, then. Jude and I were so going to have a word about her definition of “perfect.”

Ben ran across the sand, kicked off his sandals, and hopped into the water, splashing loudly. “Yes! Feel the cold.”

He dragged on his purloined cigarette, flicking glowing ash off the tip.

My heart plummeted into my toes. On our first date, Ben had told me he didn’t smoke because of his asthma. Oh, shit.

I pushed to my feet and plunged into the lake after him. I’d finally mustered up the courage to date again in my forties, putting myself out there, and how was I rewarded? My shins were covered in brown algae, highlighting the patch of hair I’d missed when I shaved, the underwire in my bra was tapping Morse code against my boob, and fish slime oozed between my toes.

All traces of dusk were gone, the bright clear moonlight making it easy to examine Ben’s shadow. It had flipped from looking perfectly normal to being a diseased abomination flecked with crimson and sickly gray streaks.

I gasped, blinking away the moisture pooling in my eyes, my magic burning with the need to destroy that foulness inside him. Ben was possessed by a dybbuk, a wicked spirit made of rage and violence, needing extremes to feel alive. Murder or rape might be their more common nefarious go-to, but apparently a froufrou French dessert and an illicit smoke let this one revel in feeling human again.

Budding romances were not supposed to end in a body count, but this story didn’t have a happily-ever-after. There was no way to save Ben. His consciousness or soul or whatever was gone, and this malignant specter now controlled his body, his memories—and his powers.

A dybbuk could only possess someone who had magic.

I wanted to go home and grieve this stupid, senseless loss, preferably in my pj's, while eating my feelings with the emergency pint of mocha ice cream stashed in my freezer.

But I couldn't let dybbuk-Ben harm anyone else.

Ben took a drag and, blowing out a plume of smoke, tilted his head to the starry sky. "Fuck, I missed this." His features grew pinched and he coughed, his hand pressed to his chest as he sucked down wheezing breaths.

"He had asthma," I said, dully, kicking the cloudy water as I stomped closer. "A real killjoy. But I guess body-snatchers can't be choosers."

His coughing subsiding, he narrowed his eyes behind his thick black frames. "Well, well, well. You figured it out. Who's a smarty pants?"

"What, are you going to give me a scratch 'n' sniff sticker for my effort?" I stopped a couple feet away from him and fanned second-hand smoke out of my face. "Let's wrap this up, shall we?" I said, with the same enthusiasm as someone about to get a cavity search from a border guard.

He tossed the butt into the water. "Fine by me."

The park was empty, but to any non-magic observer, Ben and I would just look like a couple of drunks stumbling around in the water.

Magic tingled under my skin like a faint itch. My animated shadow, whom I'd named Delilah, jumped to her feet, her fists up, independent of any contact with me. Simultaneously, I was both inside my body and my shadow, a bouncy, fluid entity with weight and substance. My vision also split into two: normal Miri vision and the green night vision of my shadow. I barely noticed the nausea this double sight induced anymore.

Ben stepped back sharply, the water slapping against his shins. “You’re Banim Shovavim! One of those filthy children of Lilith who manipulate death and darkness.” His amused smile was tinged with malice. This vitriol was the dybbuk talking, but that didn’t stop the pointed sting behind my ribcage. “I had no idea.”

I threw him a bland smile. “What can I say? I’m a woman of mystery.”

Delilah leapt and kicked out her left leg with a sweeping roundhouse into Ben’s hip, sending him stumbling forward, water splashing into my face.

He regained his balance. “You’re a woman who gets right to the heart of things. I like that.”

Orange-green light burst out from his skin to cocoon him, its swirl of color pulsating slowly. Aura magic was rare but as majestic as a male peacock’s extended plumage, making me the drab peahen in comparison. I bounced on my toes. Male peacocks may have been prettier but it was the peahens with the advantage in the wild, since they could camouflage themselves and avoid predation more easily.

Men always placed such importance on looks.

But rare or not, Ben’s Ohrist magic was now the dybbuk’s to wield at will.

Delilah threw a left hook before he’d even straightened up, but the blow smashed into his aura like I’d punched a wall, with no damage to him.

I screamed and shook out my hand. Any injury to my shadow was felt by me and not her, and my puffy knuckles throbbed.

“I’d say you punch like a girl, but you didn’t even land it.” Ben patted his stomach. “Come on, try again.”

Delilah and the condescending asshole circled each other, then he lunged, almost dislocating *my* shoulder as he flung Delilah into the lake. It broke my psychic link with her, and she vanished, my shadow once more an ordinary reflection on the rippling surface.

Ben sprinted to land, while I followed hot on his heels, spitting out the taste of fetid water.

I stepped onto the sand with a sigh of relief, my movements no longer impeded by the lake.

Ben faced me, his aura as bright as ever, and I steeled myself to end this.

Shadow magic swirled up my body and along my left arm in a black whirlwind, settling in the shape of a scythe. Yet another nifty trick in my arsenal. I hefted the weapon, its weight perfectly balanced in my hold and its dark curve sharpened to a deadly edge. This puppy existed to dispatch dybbuks; Ben’s aura shield didn’t stand a chance.

“Mut!” I cried.

The Hebrew letters for “die” appeared on my blade and I swung the weapon. It punctured his aura, but in the fraction of a second that it took to hit his chest, my shadow scythe deflated, hanging limply down.

Ben smirked. “I guess you’re just not that into me.”

“Hum a few bars of ‘Love to Love You, Baby,’” I said, “and I’ll get right in the mood.” I restored the weapon’s solidity and attacked again, but each time his magic made a mockery of my powers.

“Get it together,” I gritted to my shadow. I tried everything, gentle encouragement, inspirational speeches, even outright nagging, and nada. Every time my weapon hit his defensive magic, it deflated. All he had to do was stand there and let me tire myself out.

The scythe grew heavier and heavier in my hands until I recalled my magic, bent over and bracing myself on my thighs. “Well, I give up.”

I collapsed on the ground, and the meatsack formerly known as my date kicked me when I was down. As the blow connected with my ribs, I summoned my scythe much faster than I would have been able to do if I was actually tired and rammed the tip into the arch of his bare right foot.

I prayed my hunch payed off and that Operation Fillet of Sole was a success.

At first, it seemed to be: Ben jumped, cursing, and his orange-green light fractured.

Rolling to my feet, I next nailed him in the sternum, but my cry of victory was cut short because no dybbuk exploded out of his body. I narrowed my eyes. Shit. I’d missed his heart. Apparently acing a 200 level biology class twenty-plus years ago did not, in fact, adequately prepare me for this gig.

I swung again, but when my weapon connected with his still-fractured aura, volcanic heat burned down into my hand, angry blisters streaking along my swollen palm. I flinched, almost dropping the scythe.

His surprised look almost matched my own, then he laughed, carefully balancing his weight on his uninjured foot. “I never managed to concentrate my aura into an offensive weapon before.”

“Mazel tov.” I circled him, noting the weak spots in his magic light and reassessing my swing.

He pressed his hand to the blood seeping through his torn shirt, his crackling aura flaring bright in its attempt to meld itself into a whole, and nodded at my burned palm. “How’s the date working out for you now?”

I batted my eyelashes coyly. “Your seduction technique needs work, but don’t worry. I’ll bring you to a hell of a big bang finish.”

Some of Ben’s smugness faded away, his eyes clouding with doubt that he might not win.

I raised my scythe for the killing blow—

Then Ben stumbled back, blinking in confusion at his bloodied hand. “Miriam?” he said in a voice laced tight with pain. “What’s going on?”

I froze, my scythe still raised, warily eyeing him. In my experience, the dybbuk-possessed didn’t tend to blank out what had happened to them. However, I’d never been around anyone when the host consciousness had just died, leaving the dybbuk in charge of the body for the first time, either.

Ben stared numbly at the blood on his hand, and swayed, draining of all color.

I caught him, the scythe winking out of existence as I recalled my magic. “I’ve got you.”

In the blink of an eye, the thing wearing Ben’s body drove a sharp uppercut into my stomach.

Sucker punched by the old “confused innocent” act.

I gasped, my body bucking up under the blow. My eyes rolled back into my head and I collapsed on the ground,

wheezing. That would teach me to show compassion to a dybbuk.

Black spots danced in my vision and our lovely picnic dinner from earlier threatened to make an encore appearance. I dug down for one final burst of energy and slammed my magic cloaking over me; the last tool in my Banim Shovavim toolbox.

The black mesh blended with the shadows to completely hide me.

Ben stomped around demanding that I show myself, but I rolled sideways. Not only was I invisible to him, he couldn't hear my racing heart or my raspy breathing.

I finally managed to sit up, but the world swung sideways in a vertiginous blur, and by the time the nausea had passed and I'd gotten to my feet, Ben's car was squealing out of the empty parking lot.

"Fuuuuck!" I yanked my underwear out of the crack of my ass, which, to add insult to injury, was wet in a UTI-inducing way, not because I was now limp and deliciously satisfied.

I'd turned down endless invitations from men old enough to be my creepy uncle/father and blocked dick pics accompanied by the stunningly original "hello beautiful." I knew I was beautiful and my vibrator Lady Catnip had six speeds, thank you very much. Against all odds, I'd found a winner with all his own teeth and an awesomely dorky sense of humor who was single.

Gay, I could have handled. I mean, I'd had years of therapy for that particular situation after my marriage blew up. But no, he was honestly what I wanted, the complete package.

He was also now a swampy-ass dybbuk, up to the usual bullshit.

Keeping one hand pressed against my bruised abdomen, I squelched my way back to my sedan. I'd once been told that it only took a dybbuk a second to upend someone's life, and I refused to be the reason for another person's misery.

Unlocking my trunk, I pulled out the small Rubbermaid containing my emergency car kit. I had a vague recollection from a long-ago first aid course that I wasn't supposed to put ointment on a burn, so I used my good hand to crack a small ice pack, binding it against my blistered palm with gauze and a tensor bandage.

I slammed the trunk closed, my fury over the loss of this good man washing over me.

The world had a surreal edge to it as I started the engine. Even the familiar lakeside park looked fake, like I could push over one of the trees as if it were a prop made of nothing more than Styrofoam and paint.

Shivering, I turned up the heat against the chill seeping through my wet dress into my very bones. The situation was simple. Ben the man was gone. And dybbuks were an evil that could not be allowed to roam unchecked.

I pulled out of the parking lot with a heavy heart, lost as to where to begin my pursuit. No, that wasn't true. On my own, I was lost, but there was one person who'd know how to handle this. Because he always did.



Hotel Terminus lay shrouded in darkness, which didn't do it any favors. Only *Ho Term* was visible in the moonlight on the faded sign over the boarded-up front entrance, like it was some kind of college for old-timey prostitutes. *Urban Change and the Seaside Doxy*, *Don't Clap for the Clap*, and *Madame, I'm Adam: spotting unsavory clients—Now Registering!*

The night accentuated the dirt-streaked stone exterior and rusted wrought-iron balcony railings of the small, three-story, former hotel, but I'd learned not to judge this particular book by its cover.

I rapped on the side door with my uninjured hand, my ear pressed to the frosted glass.

Above me, a bone-gold gibbous moon punctured the light-polluted sky like a knife.

Laurent, my wolf-shifting colleague—friend? I didn't know how we'd left it—would no doubt be taking advantage of the beautiful night, maybe lazily draped over his sofa, reading a book, while listening to his beloved jazz. Or perhaps he, too, was in deadly predator form, prowling toward a target.

Please let him be home. It was close to midnight by now, so Laurent might have been asleep, but I doubted it.

The quiet hush was only broken by the faint rumble of a passing motorist. Even my knocks sounded jarringly loud, and I was glad that this wasn't a residential neighborhood.

Railtown had been the epicenter of Japanese-Canadian culture in Vancouver before that community was forced into internment camps after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The old warehouses and factories in this tiny neighborhood wedged between Gastown and Chinatown were slowly being converted into edgy microbreweries and office spaces for creative professionals.

I banged on the door one final time, almost falling forward when it was whipped open with a growled, "What?"

Laurent Amar leaned against the door frame, the jeans sitting low on his hipbones revealing a strip of olive skin with defined abs, and his faded green T-shirt stretched tight across his lithe torso. His hair was a riot of chocolate curls, calling to mind rumpled sheets, but his gaze was sharp, the wolf shifter on constant alert.

His eyes dipped down to the gauze and bandage around my hand. His irises were a brilliant emerald compared to Ben's pale green, with a shrewd intelligence versus the dybbuk's sly cunning.

I'd removed the ice pack, but under the shifter's scrutiny, I hid my hand behind my back.

"Merde," he swore.

"I need help." I shivered, the burn sending waves of chills and flushes through my body in equal succession.

"That much is evident." Nothing like French-accented English to really nail monumental disdain. Laurent tugged me inside and slammed the door, wrinkling his nose. Nat King

Cole crooned softly from a large art deco radio on the mahogany hutch, and there was a stack of sheet music tossed on top of the old upright piano. “Why do you smell like seaweed? You are aware, Mitzi, that a sushi roll is a delicacy, not an exercise, yes?”

“For your information, I was on a date.” I wrung out the hem of my dress, taking a petty satisfaction when he winced at the water dripping onto his hardwood floor.

“Did he misunderstand the concept of getting a woman wet?” He said it in a perfectly polite voice with a bland smile on his face, and never had I wanted to punch someone so much.

No, that wasn’t true. As far as snarky comebacks from him rated, this barely cracked the top five.

Laurent stepped back, and I ran my tongue over my teeth, realizing my answering smile might have been a tad feral.

“Come in and warm up.” He nodded across the former lobby to the sofa.

The checkerboard parquet gleamed like molten sunshine and the scent of pine filled the hotel lobby that Laurent had lovingly restored into a large living and dining area. Honey-rich scone light bounced off the pale-yellow arched ceiling and reflected off the deep red walls to transform the space into the inside of a bejeweled genie’s bottle.

I couldn’t appreciate its soothing beauty because every passing second wound the vise around my chest tighter. Had Ben already found the first person to prey upon?

“There’s no time,” I said. “We’ve got a dybbuk on the loose. I’ll fill you in while you get your shoes on.”

“I’m not listening to you like this. Your chattering teeth are irritating me.”

You charmer. I made a “get on with it motion” with a twirl of my finger, remaining where I was. “You can work out your irritation when you rip out the heart.”

He fished a motorcycle boot off the shoe rack and dropped it on the floor. “You saw one on your date?”

“Yes.”

“And you couldn’t bear to miss even a moment with this paragon to deal with it?”

“Not exactly.” I jingled my car keys. “There’s no time for details.”

Laurent narrowed his eyes, a hard slash of green under his dusky sweep of lashes. “Details are the difference between life and death.”

I examined my car fob with a studied nonchalance. “The dybbuk was my date.”

The shifter exploded in laughter, great belly laughs that made his entire body shake. Every trace of his usual guardedness was gone, his face softer and more innocent. He braced his hand on the doorframe, his curls bouncing crazily, and his merriment radiating outward like the happiest song on a perfect summer day.

At any other moment, I’d have caved under its lure and joined him, but all my amusement with this evening had died back on the shore of the lake. “Get over yourself. I need you to sniff him out.”

From one breath to another, his mirth vanished. “I’m not your tracking dog.”

His iciness sucked all the warmth from the space. Laurent was the most guarded person I'd ever met and right now, I didn't have the energy to deal with his defensiveness. But I didn't want to hurt him either.

"I didn't mean..." I placed my uninjured hand on his forearm, which tensed under my touch. "I lost the dybbuk and all I can think about is how anything that happens is my fault because I wasn't good enough to kill it."

"Nothing he does is your fault," he said gravely. "If the ones that I hunt do terrible things before I get to them, do you think I take those onto my conscience?"

"Even if I don't blame myself, other Ohrists will. They might intellectually understand the reasons why he had to be dispatched and not hate me, but it'll be awkward and uncomfortable running into them. You, of all people, know it's true."

Laurent scrubbed a hand over his face, looking much wearier than a moment ago, and sighed. "Yes."

"And that's the best-case scenario." I paced in a tight circle. "Any Sapiens in his life will either be fed a lie about his death or told nothing at all, leaving them to forever wonder if they could have done something to prevent it."

A prime directive of the magic community was that no Sapien, the magicless humans who made up most of the world's population, ever learn about the existence of magic.

Laurent loosely gripped my wrists. "Stop. Torturing yourself won't help."

"We kept our drinking to before sunset. I wasn't totally foolhardy."

Those with magic knew better than to drink during the Danger Zone—sundown Friday to sundown Saturday—because dybbuks were given the Sabbath off from being tortured in Gehenna and would just move right in to any magic person with lowered inhibitions. Go figure. Humans had to wage strikes for the right to a weekend, but the evil dead things got a VIP day pass, no problem.

“And the extra tragic icing on this shit cake? Ben didn’t get inhabited because he was drunk or high,” I said sadly. “He stayed up too late last week because he was crazy passionate about linguistics and his defenses were lowered due to his exhaustion.”

“Miriam.” Laurent rarely used my full name. “Enough.”

I pulled away. “Yeah. Okay.”

“Attends.” He spoke the French command and jogged out of the room.

Laurent had once called me a soft-hearted fool for showing compassion to my target. While I refused to live in a world that had no room for mercy, there was a difference between compassion and a moment of weakness. Ben hadn’t deserved this fate, and I’d so badly wanted to believe it was still him in there.

After a divorce, a couple forgettable short relationships, and feeling invisible, I mourned the loss of hope as much as I did Ben. Was a giddy, fizzy romantic connection even a possibility or would the shadow path I’d chosen keep me away from that light?

Laurent was wrong about none of this being my fault. If I’d been more decisive, more hard-hearted, I could have

prevented Ben's escape, and if anyone got hurt—or worse—I'd have to live with that.

Even if I dispatched Ben before he harmed anyone, *I'd* be causing pain to his siblings and friends. His family had already lost one of Ben's brothers to heroin. They didn't deserve to suffer more. Also, I was trying to make inroads in the magical community after being absent from it for so long, and killing Ben couldn't be smoothed over with a "Hi, sorry about that!" batch of cookies.

I longed to sink into the huge sofa with one of the books from the wall-to-wall bookshelves and let the warmth seep into my chilled bones, but I only permitted myself a single longing glance. I could wallow after the dybbuk had been caught.

Laurent returned and tossed me a bundle of fabric in a plastic bag.

"Put these on," he said. "If we're hunting him down, you can't do it in wet clothes."

"Has Hell frozen over? You're not going to argue with me about coming along?" I picked up the thick socks that had fallen to the ground.

"Has Hell frozen over and you'd listen if I did?" He arched an eyebrow imperiously and strode over to the sofa, boots in hand. "Speak while you change. Don't leave anything out."

Shifters had a very relaxed attitude towards public nudity, but while I liked my middle-aged body, there was a difference between appreciating it and disrobing in front of a ridiculously toned sort-of-former-partner male who was also a few years younger.

I could tell Laurent to turn around and deal with his eye roll or... Launching into the tale, I strode past the burnished curving staircase which led up to the closed-off second floor.

The old-fashioned copper elevator doors carved with diamonds and swirls were ajar, as was the inner gate, so I stepped inside and shucked off my sandals. The car had been converted into a bunker-like room lined in iron with handcuffs on heavy chains bolted to the wall. Some people had in-home theaters, others had dungeons capable of holding all kinds of supernatural creatures. To each their own.

One eye on the elevator door, I peeled off my wet clothes. “Dessert,” I fumed, recalling the kiss-that-wasn’t. “He didn’t even choose to have his wicked way with me. Second-rate dybbuk.”

“You appreciate that it’s totally fucked up to be upset about that, yes?” Laurent said from the main room.

“Yes! But I expected better, I mean, worse, from an evil fiend.” Ben and I had never made it to our first kiss and we never would. I pressed Laurent’s sweatshirt to my chest, unsure whether having that memory made it easier or not.

“Why didn’t you check if Ben was enthralled?”

“What were the odds that the first guy I’d dated in ages would have a dybbuk inside him?” I got dressed in the dry clothes, trying not to use my burned hand.

If a dybbuk did inhabit a host, there was a week of enthrallment, where they battled for possession of the body. While I could sense if a person was enthralled, their shadow still looked normal, and I really had to probe to discover the fiend inside them. Ben had been enthralled when I met him; our relationship was doomed before it began.

Had I known on some level that he was inhabited when I met him? Had I been attracted to that? Creatures of darkness unite! I shook my head, refusing to believe it. Banim Shovavim magic was the only thing that could detect when a host was enthralled. I would have been the only one who could have gotten the dybbuk out of Ben and saved him. But now it was too late.

“Ben was an Ohrist, he knew it was preventable,” I said. “And it’s not like he displayed any of the sudden personality changes inherent to being enthralled during our other two dates or even tonight before his final metamorphosis.”

“Soft-hearted,” Laurent chided.

“Or just not totally cynical. Besides, I did my pre-date homework, as my ability to imagine worst-case scenarios is beyond compare.”

He chuckled softly.

“I grilled Jude about every potential downside of meeting Ben, including the possibility of hitting it off only to discover that he had multiple families stashed in various cities, but him going full dybbuk hadn’t even occurred to me.”

“And yet multiple families was a likelihood?” Laurent mused.

“Read the internet. It happens.” I pressed my nose to the shoulder of the sweatshirt, sniffing the trace of his cedar scent. “Should I ever do this again, candidates can damn well fill out a detailed questionnaire before I agree to anything.”

Stuffing my wet dress in the plastic bag, I described Ben’s aura magic and gave a summary of our fight, then returned to the living room, rolling up the legs that were about six inches too long for me.

Laurent tilted his head, his eyes flaring hot and bright before narrowing for an instant, an indecipherable look on his face. “You can keep those.”

“Uh, okay.” I wrapped my arms around myself, my shoulders creeping up to my ears. Not knowing what he was thinking was preferable to the contempt he’d lather on when he heard this last part.

“Then what?” he prodded at my lapse, tapping his phone impatiently against his thigh.

“Ben got all confused and upset and swayed helplessly, and...” I screwed up my face.

Laurent leaned back against his couch, one elbow draped carelessly over the back. “He blinked his big blue eyes and you were helpless to resist?”

“First off, they were green.”

A muscle in Laurent’s jaw tensed. “That’s what you think is relevant right now?”

I balled up the bag with my dress, crinkling the plastic. “Look, the host and the dybbuk fight for control during the enthralled stage. I thought that happened immediately after full possession.”

“It doesn’t. He played you.”

“Yes, thank you. I cottoned on to that fact.”

“Is that when he burned your hand? At the end?” He sounded angry, although whether it was at me or at the dybbuk remained unclear.

I flipped my bandaged palm up. “No. That was earlier. This time he just punched me and left. Typical guy. Got his rocks off and didn’t wait for the woman to finish.”

Laurent frowned, but I'd caught the quirk of his lips. "Anything else?"

I thought about it, then shook my head.

He stood up, holding out his phone's screen. "Is this him?"

The photo from Ben's sole social media profile had caught him laughing and holding a raised glass of wine on a balcony overlooking a vineyard.

I smiled wistfully. "Yeah."

"Do you know where he lives?"

"No. Why?" Did he assume this date had gotten hot and heavy? Was he judging my behavior?

"Newly possessed hosts will often hunt in the neighborhood most familiar to them."

Oh. "What happened to 'don't shit where you live'?"

"Dybbuks don't care," he said. "They exist to cause misery."

It made sense that they'd start with the people who knew and loved them the most closely.

"Jude might know where Ben lives." I called my best friend but reached her voice mail. She was probably in her studio with pottery clay on her hands and not checking her phone. Even though I left a message, we couldn't depend on her getting it in time to help us. "Now what?"

Laurent glanced at the photo once more without comment. "Now we find him."

I jogged behind him to the side door. "How will you track him? Do we drive around until you pick up his scent?"

He stopped so suddenly that I whacked into his back. “Oh, no. I am not riding in the Give-Up-Mobile again,” he said, referring to the horrid name he’d given my car.

I rubbed my nose. “That is not and will not ever be its official label. Besides, my sedan is perfectly serviceable.”

He leaned in. “But my motorcycle is fun.” His accent shivered through me.

No, fun was what I had with my sixteen-year-old daughter when we hung out. Riding on Laurent’s bike, my cheek pressed against his leather jacket and my arms hugging his hips, with the sights and sounds of the city rushing past me, feeling brilliantly alive was...

I exhaled. A smart, funny man had died tonight because he’d stayed up too late and in his fatigue, a dybbuk had possessed him. “Another time,” I said brusquely.

Laurent heaved a sigh and shrugged into his leather jacket. “Allons-y.”



He directed me to an address downtown, then rested his head back against the passenger seat, his eyes closed.

“Why do you always nap when I drive?” I turned onto Cordova Street following the curving road through the downtown eastside.

The normally crowded streets were devoid of life this late at night, but the overflowing trashcans, payday loan businesses every few blocks, and rows of dingy single-room-occupancy hotels were a reminder that this was one of Canada’s poorest neighborhoods.

“What do you want me to do?” he said.

“Talk to me.”

He cracked an eye open. “Fine. Tell me another of the trivia you are so fond of and then I will comment on it.”

I sniffed. “Some people enjoy my wealth of knowledge.” Ben had.

I gripped the wheel, but needle-sharp pain gnawed at my burned flesh, and with a wince, I quickly relaxed my hold. If only I’d never met Ben, never traded nerdy jokes, or gushed over our shared love of British crime dramas. If only he’d been a stranger whom I could coldly dispatch.

Up ahead, the light turned red and I braked, flexing my injured hand and checking for pus or blood. “Spider webs were used as bandages in ancient Greece and Rome.”

“Doctors wrapped them over honey and vinegar salves on injured soldiers.” He mimed the action as he spoke. “They dried out open wounds faster and had antifungal and antiseptic properties to keep bacteria away.”

“Really?” Happily, my bandage was seepage-free. No spider webs necessary. “That would minimize the chances of an infection at a time when infections were as deadly as the wounds themselves. I didn’t know that part, but it makes sense.”

Laurent tapped his head. “The wolf is book-learned, remember, Mitzi? Up your game.”

“Is that a challenge?”

He shrugged. “Only if you don’t want me to nap.”

Once the light changed to green, I turned left onto Richards Street, new high-rises displacing the older single-story buildings. “Am I here for your amusement?”

He grinned. “You said it, not me.”

I looked away because I hadn’t stifled my smile as thoroughly as I’d liked. “How about you entertain me for a change?”

“I already entertain you plenty.”

“Eh. You mildly amuse on occasion.”

He shot me a lofty look, motioning for me to pull over in front of a condo complex made of pale pink stone blocks. “Prepare to eat your words.”

Laurent's predatory nature rolled off him even as he loped along the sidewalk, his animal side a part of whatever skin he wore. This wolf shifter who surrounded himself with books and music was a fascinating enigma. He seemed to embrace both halves of himself, but I wondered if he clung to art and culture as a way to anchor his humanity. Was he only ever a breath away from turning feral forever?

Some Ohrists believed he was already too far gone to be brought back to "civility" and treated him like a dog that needed to be put down, but even those who didn't share that impression treated him with disdain for doing the dirty work of killing dybbuks.

Shaking my head, I hurried to catch up, grateful for the warmer clothing. My sandals were still damp, but tolerable with the thick socks Laurent had provided, while the sweats kept the night breeze at bay. I joined him at the high front gates, hooked my fingers around the iron filigree design, and peered into the inner courtyard, which was lit by orbs of warm light staggered along the walls.

Laurent gave a soft whistle: one long blast followed by two shorter ones. He nudged me and I craned my head up.

A dark shape hunkering on the roof's edge scampered down the side of the building on all fours.

My mouth fell open as the gargoyle silently leapt onto the sidewalk next to us with a balletic grace.

The stone sculpture sat on her back haunches, the top of her head about chest height, exposing stubby claws on each of her three long back toes. She blinked slowly, her eyes fathomless beads under a heavy forehead textured with the same "fur" that mottled the rest of her body, and her mouth wide and mobile. Studded stone bracelets circled her front

legs, but she had no tail, and her ears were much wider than a regular cat's.

She was exquisite—and rare. Most gargoyles were exactly as they appeared, inanimate objects.

“Laurent,” she purred, her Italian accent pure honey. She rubbed her head languorously against his side.

“Ciao, Giulia,” he said, doing a kind of squirmy shuffle. Dude was terrible with physical closeness. He'd probably run for the hills if anyone tried to hug him.

I raised a tentative hand in greeting, my rush of awe tempered by the desire to hide myself with my cloaking magic. A real cat had almost taken out my eyeball once, and while I may have been taken in by Ben's performance, even I wasn't dumb enough to believe I was the alpha where any cat was concerned. “Hi. I'm Miriam.”

Giulia trailed a claw back and forth across her throat, while marking Laurent even more with her cheek.

I wagged a finger between the two of them. “Should I give you some privacy so you can pee on your territory or can we get on with it?”

Laurent looked horrified and stepped away from the gargoyle, but the stone cat looked at me thoughtfully.

“Is she always like this?” The gargoyle used her paws like human hands, gesturing with the same expressive jabs as the sharp-tempered Sicilian woman who owned my local deli.

“Unfortunately,” he said.

Giulia gave another slow blink, then nodded. “Va bene. I don't like people, but if you give this one grief, you may stay.” She rubbed her head against my side as well.

“And my night is complete,” Laurent muttered.

“Oh. Okay.” Caught off-guard by this transfer of affections, I figured I’d return the sentiment and pet her, but Laurent caught my hand with a swift motion, shaking his head no.

“Any trouble tonight?” he asked her.

The gargoyle stretched sinuously, then calmly licked a stone paw. “Always with the dybbuks,” she said in a petulant voice. “You never come to just visit me.”

Laurent crouched down, his hand resting on her head. “Au contraire, Giulia, I find every excuse to be in your presence.”

I rolled my eyes hard. He always laid his French accent on thick when he was being charming, which meant it was never used on me. To be fair, he was smart enough to know better than to try.

“Sadly, he is a man of finite imagination,” I said.

Laurent upped the charm offensive with a piratical smile, flashing even white teeth between his lush lips. “C’est vrai.” He pursed his lips sadly. “I go blank in your presence, Giulia, such is your effect on me.”

I made a gagging noise and he kicked my ankle, but the gargoyle was eating it up.

She preened and gave a happy rumble.

Laurent pulled out his phone and showed her the photo of Ben he’d found earlier.

She studied it for a moment, then between one blink and the next, she lay on her belly, her eyes turning from black marbles to an eerily glowing gold and flickering like a movie projector.

“What’s going on?” I murmured.

“Giulia sees through the eyes of those who blindly watch,” he said. “Statues, ornamental faces on the façade of a building, all become her eyes in the city. If the dybbuk is out on the town, she’ll find him.”

“I didn’t know gargoyles could do that.”

“It’s tied to their original function of warding off evil. The few who gained sentience and had wings were able to fulfill that duty by flying over the city and seeing what evil lurked. Those without wings, like Giulia, did it by gaining sight through the sightless. Letting them be her eyes.” He grinned. “You’re entertained, aren’t you?”

“I’m freaking blown away.”

Giulia’s lashes flickered, but she didn’t snap out of her reverie.

“Five bucks says Ben’s hunting on the Granville Strip,” I said, referencing the popular entertainment district that would be teeming with people coming out of bars and clubs.

“It’s too close,” Laurent said. “I’d smell him.”

“What do dybbuks smell like to you?” I said.

He scowled. “Patchouli.”

“My condolences.” I stiffened at the sound of raucous laughter drawing near, but it was just a couple tottering drunkenly back to a nearby condo tower. “Why can’t you sniff him out yourself no matter where he is?”

“My range is limited to that of a wolf’s, which is still far superior to most.” Laurent spread his hands wide, as if saying he couldn’t help being better than everyone.

“Not bears,” I said. “They totally out-smell wolves. They’re smarter, too.”

“Debatable,” he scoffed.

“Nope.” I rocked back on my heels, trying to keep a straight face. “It’s pretty much empirical fact. But it’s okay, Huff ’n’ Puff.” He scowled at the nickname I’d bestowed on him at our first meeting and I flashed him a thumbs-up. “You’re still special.”

“That is also empirical fact and much more interesting than that other rubbish.” He got that grumpy look on his face that always made me want to grin and ruffle his curls.

Laurent definitely was special where his magic was concerned. Ohrists derived their powers from “ohr,” the Hebrew word for light, and the Kabbalistic concept of a supernatural life force that existed organically in the universe.

While Sapiens weren’t able to sense or tap into “ohr,” Ohrists were gifted. Their ability to manipulate light and life energy manifested in many different ways: healing, animating objects, manipulating auras or blood or body parts, even shooting lasers or hard light orbs, and, of course, shifting, though they generally only had one talent.

Laurent was the sole Ohrist with the ability to scent dybbuks out, but only once they’d fully possessed the host. How he’d trained to do this remained a mystery that I was very curious to solve.

A text came in from Jude giving Ben’s neighborhood and asking for date details.

I sighed and replied that I’d speak to her in the morning. “Ben lives somewhere off Commercial Drive.” The Little Italy area of Vancouver.

Laurent zoomed into a map of that area on his phone, muttering under his breath as he dismissed different possibilities.

“Save yourself the time. He’s at Grandview Park,” I said. “Right off the main street, packs of roaming teens hanging out, dark. Good hunting grounds for a dybbuk.”

“Perhaps,” he said.

I hadn’t forgotten why we were here, but I’d allowed myself a precious few minutes of easy banter while we waited for Giulia’s response. With the thought of Ben hurting any kids, however, the mood shifted, the weight of my task pressing in on me more forcefully than ever.

Giulia shivered, the gold glow vanishing. “Grandview Park.”

“Merci,” Laurent said, ignoring my smirk.

“Yes, thanks, Giulia.”

The gargoyle licked first Laurent’s hand and then mine, her tongue rasping against my skin like the brush of sandpaper.

“Ciao, ragazzi.” She launched herself off the sidewalk, soaring high to land once more on her skyscraper perch.

It just wasn’t fair. Ben and I had spent a lovely June evening together, sharing delicious tapas and light-hearted banter, salsa music from the nearby live concert providing a sultry soundtrack. Making genuine connections in a superficial world was hard, but hope had taken root in my chest like a delicate stalk that I’d found someone who could make me happy.

I’d been divorced now for ten years and I had great friends and a loving family. I didn’t need a man to complete me, but I

still craved an emotional connection with someone I loved and respected on a life partner level.

Just like my parents had had.

The one thing that had shone brightly in my last few moments with them was their love for each other. Looking back, that was the last time anything in my life had truly been normal and with everything that had happened recently, I craved that more than ever. An anchor to ground my world. But how was that even possible when bonding over a glass of wine on a Friday night date or staying up late, talking about everything and nothing, finding that person who could be my safe harbor, could lead to dybbuk possession and death?

Did living with magic mean never fully relaxing my guard, never fully being comfortable?

Never having any sense of peace?

Laurent studied me, and I hurried ahead, needing to get out from under that keen gaze and compose myself for what was yet to come. I beeped the fob on my car, but glancing up at Giulia, a motionless statue once more, I shivered.

We'd gotten Ben's location, but were we already too late?



Laurent instructed me to pull over a block downwind of the park. He stepped out of the car, inhaled, and swore. “He’s gone.”

“No!” I sprinted up the sidewalk past darkened houses, despising the activity every bit as much as I had in high school gym class, and turned into the park, which occupied a couple of city blocks.

Wheezing, one hand pressed to my side, I hurried over to the group of kids hanging out on the bike polo courts, passing around contraband bottles of vodka coolers, their laughter too sharp and high.

I leaned on the chain link fence. “Hi there. Were there any other kids here tonight?”

The teens ignored me.

I peered at the group, then waved at one boy I recognized. “Hey, Tyler.”

The scrawny boy hunched into his jacket as if he wished he could make me disappear. Please. This kid had been in school with my daughter since kindergarten. I’d spent a half hour with him feeding ducks during a petting zoo school trip,

feigning interest as he explained Minecraft in excruciating detail. He owed me.

“How’s your mom? Did she ever switch from corporate law to family law?” I smiled at the group. “And Kelsey. Love the haircut.”

I could keep going with at least three more kids, but the two I’d singled out slunk over to the fence.

“Well played,” Laurent said.

“I am not without my talents,” I murmured.

“Don’t I know it?”

I grinned at him, but schooled my face into a suitably stern expression to face Sadie’s friends.

“Are you going to bust us?” Kelsey said.

“Nope. That’s a conversation for you to have with your parents. But I do need to know if there were any other teens here tonight and if you saw a blond man with glasses.”

Kelsey shook her head. “It’s only been us for the last hour.”

“What about the man?” I said. “He might have looked injured.”

“Don’t know about injured,” Tyler said, “but yeah, some perv with glasses was watching us earlier.”

I glanced at Laurent, but he shook his head.

“Do you know which way he went?” I asked.

They consulted with their friends then pointed east, down the hill.

“Thanks. Now go—”

Laurent nudged me. “Until we find him, they’re safer here than running loose.”

I nodded. “Stick together tonight.”

“Stranger danger?” Kelsey smirked.

“Something like that. Watch over each other, okay?”

“Okay, Miriam,” they chorused and returned to their friends.

We set off. Dread weighed me down, turning every step into a massive effort. “Do you smell patchouli?”

“No, just weed.”

“That’s a given around here,” I said.

Laurent jogged down the sidewalk, stopping by an entrance to the Britannia complex, which included two schools and a community center. He walked a few steps in different directions, sniffing the air.

“Anything?” I said, when I caught up with him.

“Faintly.” He frowned and headed onto the track located out back of the high school. “It’s hard to get a lock on it.”

“I’m slowing you down. Take off and catch him.”

Laurent stiffened and laid a finger against his lips. “Wait. I smell vamps.”

Immediately, I reached for my magic. Black mesh swam up to hide us and mask the sound of our heartbeats and breathing from everyone—unless the head vamp here in Vancouver was with them, in which case, my cloaking was useless.

Gripping Laurent’s bicep, I rose onto tiptoe to ask that whispered question, feeling the tickle of curls as he shook his

head.

He pressed two fingers against my arm.

Two against two. Pretty good odds, depending on how old the vampires were. I gnawed the inside of my cheek.

Ben was still out there, but he might not be up to anything nefarious right now, while we were the only things standing between the vamps and those kids. The bloodsuckers hadn't sent out a specific memo regarding their intentions, but it wasn't cupcakes and pony rides.

"We are like Butch and Sundance in the movie." I could hear the grin in Laurent's words.

"That didn't end so well," I hissed. "They were bleeding so hard they could barely hold their guns, then they stepped out to a hail of bullets. Now be quiet."

"It ended in a freeze frame of them shooting," he said with an infuriating matter-of-factness, making no attempt to whisper. "They blazed their way to freedom."

I blew my hair out of my eyes with an annoyed huff, and my grip on him tightened as I used him for balance to rise up and whisper into his ear. "Do you actually believe this nonsense or are you just arguing to annoy me?"

A male vampire with green hair matching his army jacket and a female with an impressive mohawk, both sporting big shitkicker boots, stepped onto the far end of the track, not even trying to be stealthy. In fact, if it hadn't been for their pale skin practically glowing translucent in the moonlight, I would have dismissed them as just another couple of punk youths.

The male's voice carried clearly. "You're sure the dybbuk said to meet at Grandview Park?"

“Positive.” The female vamp clomped along, kicking pebbles. “Mr. BatKian is through the roof over everyone disrupting his schedule today, so you and I get to be the lucky ducks to negotiate territory with this dybbuk.” She grimaced. “I hope this doesn’t turn into another Mei Lin situation.”

I tightened my grip on Laurent’s shoulder. The vamps weren’t after the kids. They were to meet Ben on behalf of the head vampire. Bloodsuckers’ agendas never boded well for humans, especially if they wanted to make a deal with a dybbuk. I’d seen people die because of callous immortals and refused to let it happen again.

By failing to kill Ben earlier, had I brought this about? Had he arranged this meeting with the vamps, knowing that if they protected him, Laurent and I would be forced to let him roam free?

I frowned. If that was true, why had Ben left the park? What was more important than making this meeting?

Laurent had stilled, an anticipatory gleam in his eyes, tracking every footfall bringing the vamps closer.

I glared at him, slicing my hand along my throat in warning not to do anything rash like—

He shrugged mischievously, like a kid at the back of a classroom about to launch a paper airplane when the teacher wasn’t looking, and stepped out from under the cloaking with an evil grin. “Come and get me, espèce d’enfoirés!”

I sighed. Anything rash like hurl himself headfirst into danger, as the shifter was so fond of doing.

He ran at the vampires, plowing into Green Hair and crashing him into the chain link fence, sending a jingling

ripple along it. The male vamp recovered immediately and Laurent flipped backward to avoid a punch.

I summoned my magic, glad to have Delilah stand shoulder-to-shoulder with me as we faced the female vamp.

“Are we really doing this along gender lines?” I asked.

The female vamp swaggering toward me stopped. “Huh?”

I gestured at the boys, pummeling each other with over-the-top grunts and curses that did little to hide that they were in their happy place. “Why can’t I fight him?”

Mohawk glanced back at them over her shoulder.

Laurent barked a laugh, already lost to battle mania. Blood streamed down his left shoulder and his eyes were aglow with a wild light. He deftly avoided his opponent’s punch, rolling his shoulder up and forward, and tucking his chin to his chest. Shifting his weight, he pivoted with crazy precision to bob in close and slam his palm up under the vamp’s chin.

He was poetry in motion, almost breathtaking in how destructive he was.

But his opponent had his own moves. Hooking a foot around Laurent’s ankle, he took the shifter down. Laurent’s skull hit the ground with a meaty thud, but instead of trying to get away, he ignored his injuries to redouble his efforts.

Here he goes again, I thought tiredly.

“Yeah.” The female vamp scowled. “Why am I stuck with the weak link?”

“I’m hardly weak,” I said. Delilah dropped into fighting stance.

The vamp cracked her knuckles. “I ate people like you for breakfast when I was still human.”

“When you say ‘ate,’ do you mean that literally, metaphorically, or is that a sexual euphemism?”

Mohawk slammed me up against a metal fence post, squeezing my windpipe, her long purple fingernails digging into my skin.

I closed my eyes, seeing her through Delilah’s green night vision.

The vampire’s fangs descended...and she froze, unable to close that final hair’s-breadth and sink her teeth into me.

Oh good. She was still an undead youngster and wouldn’t be able to move while Delilah clutched her shadow. Which Delilah was currently doing, thanks to my expert talents.

I tore free, then pulling my lighter out of my purse, I took the vamp’s shadow into my own grip. Icy darkness glooped through my fingers, turning the tips white but numbing the burn. Look at that, vamps were good for something. Not wanting further damage to my poor palm, however, I shoved the flame into the heart of the bloodsucker’s shadow.

She gave a high, thin cry and dissolved into ash.

I’d made my peace with killing vamps, but I still spared a second to mourn the loss of life. Well, it had been her or me. I whistled sharply, but neither of the males paid attention until Delilah kicked the male vamp in the crotch. Yowling, he doubled over, clutching his groin.

I snapped my fingers at Laurent. “Shift.”

“I don’t need to.” He twisted the male’s arm up behind his back.

“Fine. Stay here with your new playmate. I’ll go after Ben.”

Laurent rammed his knee into Green Hair’s stomach. “Not without me.”

“Then get on with it already.”

“Killjoy,” he said. But he jogged away, pulling his shirt off, his back muscles flexing and bunching.

Green Hair followed a half dozen steps in that direction until I grabbed his shadow, gritting my teeth against the cold. He struggled for a moment, but then he freed himself, homing in on me.

Shit. He was a much older vampire, skilled enough to break my hold entirely.

I backed up on rubbery legs, tracking Laurent’s progress in bursts of sound: the slide of fabric against skin, the clank of a belt buckle, the thud of a shoe.

The vampire grinned, knowing Laurent was vulnerable in this state, and sprinted off.

Not being an Olympic runner, I threw Delilah at him once more. She jumped on his back, choking him out, while he spun in a circle, attempting to dislodge her.

Laurent gave a pained yowl, his tearing skin sounding like a paper bag crinkling loudly. I instinctively glanced over, flinching at his spine grinding into its new shape and his shoulders morphing into haunches.

Laurent’s wide eyes met mine, his expression haunted.

With Delilah still on his back, my attacker wrenched *me* up by my hair. The sharp blaze of pain in my head snapped my

psychic link with my shadow as I struggled to get free without tearing my scalp off.

The fiend looked at me with death in his eyes and slammed me down over his knee, dropping me like trash.

I hit the dirt, winded and coughing through the taste of bile. My lower half blazed with pain. This was going to require a chiropractor/massage therapy double hitter to heal—if I lived that long.

The vampire moved swiftly, his shadow melding into the others on the ground so I couldn't differentiate it to seize hold of it.

“Laurent,” I said in a broken whisper.

He crouched on all fours, fully in wolf form, save for his arms and head. One elbow snapped into its new anatomical position with a sharp crack while his ears shrank to nubs that crawled up the side of his head, growing into furry triangles.

The vampire rammed his boot into my side, kicking me onto my back like a rag doll.

I clutched my ribs and jerked away, narrowly avoiding being curb stomped.

Laurent charged him, his transformation not yet complete, but the bloodsucker flung him off with super strength, hurling the shifter into a concrete wall. With a wet gurgle, he slid to the ground, leaving a bloody streak in his wake, and slumped over, part-wolf, part-human and entirely motionless.

I couldn't breathe.

That wasn't supposed to happen. Sure, Laurent had agreed to come along because killing dybbuks was his calling and he was a danger-prone idiot, but he'd had my back in this fresh

hell, simply because I asked. It mattered if he was hurt because of me.

Adrenaline flooded my system like an icy serpent trying to escape, sweat beading the back of my neck. I pushed onto all fours, but my arms gave way with a jolt of pain and, half-sobbing, I crashed down.

“Zev is going to shit himself!” the vampire crowed, high off his kill. “I crushed that fucker.”

The words entered my brain in an almost robotic fashion, each individual one having meaning, but the overall shape slipping away. Laurent couldn't be dead. He was too lethal—no, too stubborn—to be killed that easily. But he'd been in a vulnerable in-between state and strain as I might, I didn't see or hear anything. Not a growl, a rumble, or the faintest click of claws.

Mustering up my last reserve of energy, I looked over at my fallen partner, willing him to breathe, but he was an unmoving pile of bloodied fur. I lay my forehead against the grass, feeling like I'd sunk into a dark bog, sorrow punching through my soul and eating away at the very marrow of my bones.

Ruthlessly shoving all my grief down, I pushed to my feet. There was only one way to honor Laurent and make sure his death hadn't been in vain. I'd kill the vampire then dispatch Ben before any deal with Zev BatKian could be struck.

My iron-clad determination gave me a rush of energy to speed up—and immediately freeze as a loud growl pierced the air.

Laurent rose fluidly to his feet in a serious warrior ninja move.

Alerted, the bloodsucker ran towards him, but my friend finished his shift in record time. His head jolted backwards, his face rippling violently before a heavy muzzle snapped out, his teeth lengthening and changing shape.

The wolf bared his lips, light glinting off his fangs, his eyes furious green slashes. He sprinted at the vamp in a blur of white, tearing his throat out with a savage howl.

Green Hair's head hurtled through the air.

It bounced on the ground like a lost kickball, limply rolling to a stop by the track. I blinked. Then a laugh escaped me and I kicked the head into the wall like I was scoring the winning goal in the FIFA World Cup. "Asshole."

The wolf leapt across the track into the grassy center, landing silently beside me on massive paws with a lithe elegance. His wounds bled freely but every coiled muscle was imprinted with deadly intent. He reminded me of a perfect rose, my mind glossing over the fat thorns capable of rending flesh, in the face of such heart-stopping beauty.

He was also happily gnawing on a rib.

I could have kissed his nose.

"Nice that you got a snack." I pointed up across the track. "Go get 'em, champ. But leave the killing for me."

He dropped the bone, flicked his tail, and set off for the dybbuk in an easy lope that was still stupidly fast, his tongue lolling out like he was gamboling through the woods.

Green Hair's various remains cast nice sharp shadows, so I took a moment to thrust them into my lighter and turn them to ash, before hiding Laurent's clothes in a dark corner. A mom's clean-up never ended.



My second wind hit me, sort of, and I hobbled across the track, following the growls that Laurent threw out like breadcrumbs.

The wolf had Ben cornered in the playground of another neighborhood park, this one much smaller than the first. The dybbuk wore a zipped jacket, hiding all traces of his torn shirt and blood, yet he didn't even bat an eyelash at the angry wounded shifter prowling back and forth in front of him. Had he already harmed someone? I had to get him to tell me.

“Oh, hey, we foiled your plans,” I called out. “Killed the vamps who were supposed to meet you.”

Ben rocked himself slowly on a swing with one foot. He blew out a cloud of smoke, infusing the air with a skunky musk, then ground the joint out under his foot in the dirt. “Did you?”

I stilled, his nonchalance filling me with unease. “Why did you leave the original meeting spot at Grandview Park?”

“You and the wolf showed up, so I left.”

The wolf's fur stood on end and his rumbling growl vibrated up through my toes. Yeah, yeah. Calm down.

“Impossible. Laurent didn't smell you.”

Ben toed at the joint. “Weed overpowers a lot of other scents. It was worth a shot.” He chuckled. “And here I was worried those kids had sold me oregano.”

A dybbuk who could disguise his scent from Laurent and evade detection would be horrific. We had to dispatch him now. Except he knew our intentions and it was weird that the dybbuk wasn’t already rushing in for a fight, instead of getting high. Was this some sort of trap?

But wait. Earlier, Ben hadn’t attacked me until I struck first. And now, he was making no moves on the wolf, so what if his impulses were self-destructive? Or rather, what if the dybbuk’s only interest was in causing pain to the people who cared about Ben most?

I sucked in a breath. “You’re not planning on physically hurting anyone. You never were. That’s not your style, is it?”

The dybbuk cocked his head, eyes glimmering with darkness. “You got it. I’m a pacifist.”

“No, you’re a saboteur. You intend to make Ben’s friends and family watch the man they loved die slowly,” I continued, my hands clenched at my sides, “killing himself through addiction, preying on their mercy as they try to help him. You want them to suffer because they don’t realize he’s dybbuk-possessed.”

He shrugged. “Everyone goes for the big violent act, but those sudden changes in character are a dead giveaway that the person they loved is gone. Pretend I’ve fallen prey to an addiction? That’s entertainment.”

“It wouldn’t just be you that friends and family have to helplessly watch go through this. You’d also be forcing them to relive Ben’s brother’s death all over again. But worse,

because as awful as his OD was, he went quickly, whereas you could draw their suffering out for ages with this act of yours.”

Ben threw me finger guns. “You’re sharp. I liked that about you.”

I opened my mouth, but I had no pithy comeback this time. There was no possible outcome other than his death, yet I hesitated manifesting my scythe.

The wolf gave an impatient growl and charged at dybbuk-Ben, who bolted from the swing and scrambled up a wooden play structure.

Orange-green aura magic spilled over Ben’s body, undulating instead of forming a cocoon around him. Ben wrinkled his brow, the light pulsing more insistently, but it didn’t cohere together. Guess that weed *was* stronger than he’d realized.

In one fluid leap, the wolf landed next to Ben, forcing him backwards over the swaying bridge. The shifter extended his claws, which glowed like they were made of pure light.

Killing dybbuks was Laurent’s job. So I wouldn’t be the one to avenge Ben. Not being able to murder the thing that wore his face didn’t make me a terrible person.

The dybbuk launched himself backwards, hitting the ground in a soft crouch, his toes barely making contact before he flew back to the swings with the wolf hot on his heels.

I dug my nails into my palms, feeding off the pain of my burn and wishing I could drown in the ocean of my self-loathing, but I only managed to take a few steps closer.

Ben ran through the swing set, hurling the seat up and over the bar. The chain caught the wolf on its way down, whacking the animal hard enough to make him yelp.

The beast bristled, his fur standing on end, his ears forward, and his lips bared in what looked like a deranged grin. He stalked Ben, driving him around and through the equipment, until the dybbuk lost his footing and tripped, his aura magic falling apart entirely.

The wolf gave a pleased huff, and it snapped me into action.

It didn't matter if Laurent enjoyed killing these spirits or if it was his job or even his calling, it wasn't right to add this death to the weight of all those he already lived with.

Black shadows swirled up my left arm, and the scythe appeared. "Stop!"

Growling softly, the shifter swung his muzzle my way, but at the sight of my weapon, he trotted around the dybbuk to block off any escape.

"Miriam," Ben cried, his voice trembling. That flash of vulnerability was back on his face. "Save me!"

Rationally, I knew that the man who'd begun our date no longer existed. His soul or consciousness or whatever had been killed by the dybbuk, who now not only controlled Ben's body, but his magic as well. Still, the freckles on his left hand were Ben's, as was the way he smoothed the front of his shirt down with one hand because he was nervous.

But while I, too, looked like myself, I wasn't the same person who'd started this date, either.

"Mut!" The Hebrew letters for die appeared on the blade as I swung my scythe. My determination made my aim true and I drove the tip directly into Ben's heart.

His expression softened in surprise, one hand reaching out for me, then he crumpled to the ground, the light draining from

his eyes.

The host body was dead.

A seething mass of crimson and gray exploded out of his corpse—the dybbuk now freed and attacking me in a whirlwind of fury.

The world crystalized into a heightened clarity: Ben's black frames discarded in the sand, the rumbling bass of a passing car a few streets over, the smell of mulch.

I slashed the scythe through the dybbuk's mass, all the color leaching out of it, turning it as pale and bloodless as a corpse's skin. The spirit imploded with a sucking noise and winked out of existence, and yet I couldn't stop slashing at the empty air. This dybbuk had taken something precious from me and from everyone who'd known this great guy.

My rage left me all at once, and spent, I sank onto the ground next to Ben, committing his face to memory before I closed his lids. The playground was quiet and there was no sign of the wolf. Hugging my knees to my chest, I recited the first line of the Mourner's Kaddish under my breath.

Yitgadal v-yitkadash sh'mei rab, b'alma di v'ra chirutei...

I couldn't remember the rest, so I sent a wish for Ben to rest in peace, the breeze washing over us both like Mother Nature's benediction.

Footsteps drew near.

"I've called the Lonestars to retrieve the body." Laurent crouched down next to me. He must have shifted back and found his clothes by the track. "You can go if you want."

I nodded. There would be questions, and I had no desire to get on the radar of the magic police. Not that I'd be in trouble

for killing a dybbuk, just that with my past, I'd rather they not know I existed at all. "I'm sorry, I chickened out."

"The first time I had to destroy a dybbuk in the body of a friend..." He clamped his lips tight and shook his head. "Let's just say you handled it better than I did."

"He wasn't a friend. Not yet. But..." I shrugged, blinking rapidly to clear my damp eyes.

Laurent's face was clouded with worry and he watched me carefully, so I forced out a joking tone, hoping he couldn't see the hole in my chest. "We're lucky that dybbuks aren't the Casa Gelato of the supernatural world."

"Casa what?" He sat down next to me.

I planted my hand on my hip. "How do you not know Casa Gelato? It's the greatest gelato place in the city."

He scooted back on his butt, his hands outstretched to ward me off. "Are you okay? Will you snap at me if you don't get fed?"

"You mean, am I hangry?" I refrained from looking at Ben's corpse.

"Another ridiculous English expression," he muttered. "Like anyone is going to be fun if they need food. It is redundant."

"I'm fine. I'm making a comparison. Rather than the 238 flavors that Casa Gelato serves, with dybbuks, it's more like there's this shady corner store with a dusty freezer filled with a handful of shitty treats that aren't even real ice cream, just that junk they call 'frozen desserts.'"

Laurent gaped at me, his brows furrowed.

I rubbed my hand over my mouth. “Do I have something on my face?”

He cautiously tapped my forehead like he was scared of what he might unleash.

“All I’m saying” —I slapped his hand away— “is that it’s good that they have limited patterns of behavior.”

“*That’s* what you were saying?”

“Obv...” I scrubbed my hand over my face, my capacity for teasing sharply evaporating. “Does killing dybbuks ever get easier when you know the person?”

“No,” he said softly.

I exhaled, the world a little dimmer. “If nothing else, I’ve accepted my new normal.”

“What’s new about it?”

“You’re kidding, right?”

“I’ve never been more serious,” he said. “There’s no single formula for what constitutes normal. Everyone’s life is unique, filled with their own ups and downs. Right now you’re grieving Ben. And that’s okay. It doesn’t matter if he was a dybbuk in the end or not, the person you knew is gone now, and that’s a tragedy.”

“How do I deal with all this and still have a happy life?”

Laurent was silent for a bit, his expression thoughtful. “Maybe you don’t.”

“Well, that’s depressing.” I dropped my chin to my chest, my shoulders slumped.

“What I mean to say...” He spoke with flustered gestures. “Doesn’t everyone seize happiness where they can? It’s not

this filter you drop down over your life, et voilà. It's the tragedy and bullshit we experience that makes things sweeter. That define the happiness."

"Maybe I need to grieve my notions of what constitutes a happy life," I joked.

"Maybe you do."

I cocked my head to look at him. "Are you happy, Laurent?"

From the hints I'd gotten about his life, he had his share of tragedy. Perhaps too much tragedy, I thought.

"Some days." He took my uninjured hand. "You did what you had to do tonight. No one else is going to suffer. There's happiness in that." He hung on for a moment longer, then with a squeeze, he let go.

"Thanks for being there." I stood up.

Laurent pushed to his feet as well. "Yeah, well, next time you're having a bad date, don't come crying to me."

"You're a jerk." I smiled to take the sting out of the words.

He gave his infuriating Gallic shrug. "I am French."

"Trust me, I never forget that fact." I paused, folding my grief into solace that I'd live to fight another day. "Goodnight, Huff 'n' Puff."

"Goodnight, Mitzi." Our fingers brushed one final time.

Then with a silent farewell to Ben, I left, shadows swirling around me as I strolled into the night.



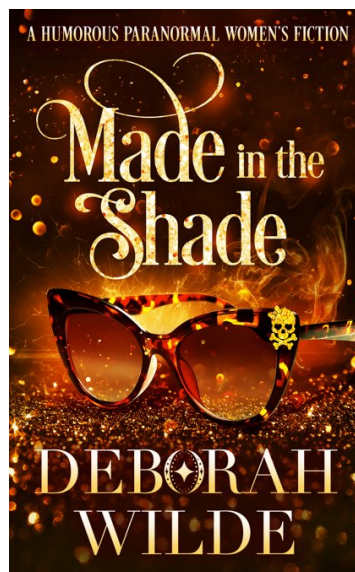
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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Former screenwriter, global wanderer, and total cynic with a broken edit button, Deborah Wilde writes funny, sexy urban fantasy books and paranormal women's fiction.

Smart, sassy women who can solve a mystery, kick supernatural butt, banter with hot men, and still make time for their best female friend are the cornerstones of Deborah's stories. Her books are beloved by readers craving magic adventures, swoon worthy steamy romances, hilarity, and happily ever after.

“Magic, sparks, and snark!”

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