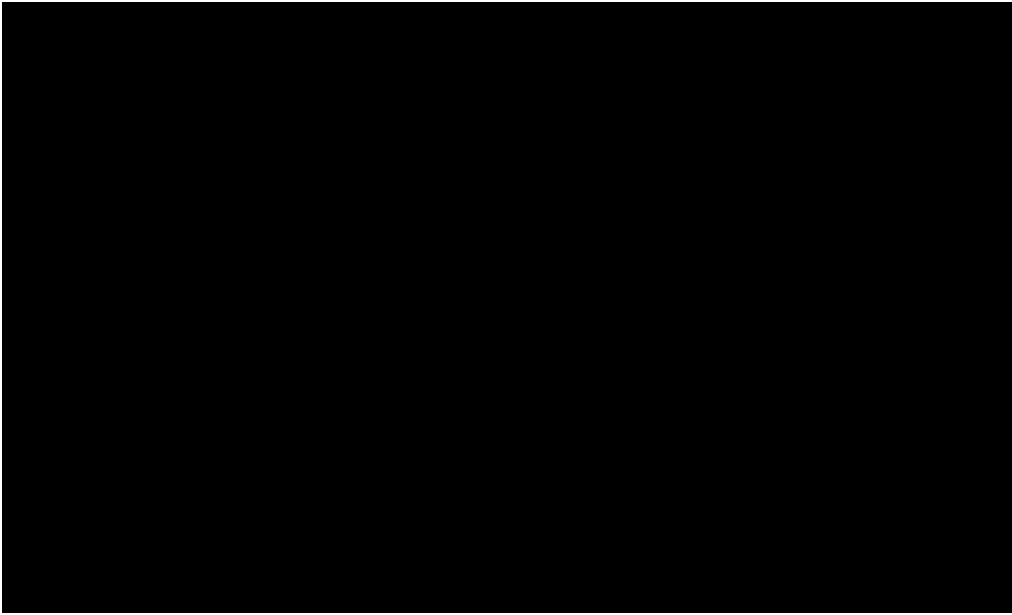


ALEXA PIPER



BLACK HEART
BLOOMING

PHOENIX IMMORTAL BOOK THREE



BLACK HEART BLOOMING

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And the story is done...for now.

About Alexa Piper

AUTHOR NOTE



Note: This book covers some of the events that occur in Moonlight Cherries. While this is the third book in a series, it can be read before books one and two as an alternative entry point. Given the character telling the story is an immortal assassin, some readers may find this book too dark.

Content Warnings:

Black Heart Blooming contains mentions of suicide, suicidal ideation and thoughts, self-harm, violence, murder, and abuse.

Conversion therapy and homophobia are mentioned.



FOREWORD



DEAR READER,

Welcome to a different part of Soyer and Amory's story. *Black Heart Blooming* takes us to just before *Moonlight Cherries* began, and we get to follow Soyer as he navigates... well, you'll see.

If you are entirely new to *Phoenix Immortal* and this is the first of the books you are picking up, that shouldn't be a problem! If you enjoy this book, I recommend you go to *Moonlight Cherries* right after.

For those who've been reading in order, *Black Heart Blooming* will take you back to some of the scenes you loved in *Moonlight Cherries*, and you may wonder why this book was necessary.

The short answer is, Soyer is to blame. By the time I finished writing *Moonlight Phoenixes*, I came to realize that there was a lot he wasn't going to get Amory involved in. I was starting to get the sense that those missing parts might be important.

And also, Soyer became an insistent presence in my head, wanting to be heard. Wanting to talk.

So here we are, with this extremely long book that will pull us deeper into a world we've barely scratched the surface of. As always, thanks go to my Ream subscribers: Divine Supporters, Monster Mates, Devil's Lovers, Creation Deities, and Divine Shippers, your support means so much and helps me write these books. In this story, you guys also made sure I got Ellery's name right (I very nearly changed it, so thank you all for that!).

A special thank you goes to Ranylt Richildis for helping with the French.

And now, let's get into Soyer's story.

Alexa Piper

November 2023

PRELUDE: FUCKING FEBRUARY



My biggest failing was, as it had always been, my existence.

I KNEW IT WAS fucking February because I had accidentally looked at the news on my phone. That had been a few days ago, though I was still lying on my bed and staring at the ceiling, following the passage of days through shadows of light and darkness.

I hadn't washed the sheets in a while, since well before the house pawns had left the motherfucking basket with the Christmas candy at my door. I hated that they did that, and it wasn't like I encouraged it by ever returning the gesture.

Either way, I knew I should probably change the sheets. And shower. At some point I would have to shower.

I contemplated those options and responsibilities for some time. The sun moved around the building, lengthening the

shadows slanting across my ceiling like whip lashes on a child's back. The landline's obnoxious ringing interrupted my musings.

Calling someone on the landline was rude these days, and I had every right to ignore it. Yet I rolled over to check my phone and found it dead. Maybe March had come and gone then. Who knew.

The landline hadn't given up, so I heaved myself off the sheets and slowly went down the fancy winding staircase. I'd liked the look of it, but I could have done without going in circles just then. In hindsight, the fucking thing was a Freudian slip of the architectural variety, summarizing and commenting on my life, and not having realized as much at the time made me feel dumb.

"Whimsical fucking staircase," I said, delicately sniffing my armpit as I went. Yup, shower.

The landline was in the large room by the front door I used for my gear, my armory. I picked the handheld up and pushed the answer button.

"Yeah?"

"Were you making tender love to someone? That's the only reason I could think of for turning your phone off and then taking ages to answer the landline," Simeon said.

Fucking vampire.

"Was that all you wanted? Can I hang up on you now?"

"Come on, it's me. You wouldn't want to hang up on me."

So I hung up on his vampiric ass. It took him twenty-three seconds to redial. I counted. I let it ring for another ninety out of spite before I picked up again.

“I’m busy.”

“Sure you are. But maybe you can find an opening in your busy, busy schedule to deal with a couple of human traffickers I think work with, for, or at the indulgence of Caecilius? In our city, I might add.”

My hand went to a combat knife on one of the shelves. It was an automatic reaction to hearing that name. Fucking Caecilius. The reason to go back to bed and continue staring at the ceiling while feeling extremely sorry for myself.

“Just sue them and leave me out of it,” I said and hung up again.

It took him just eight seconds this time around.

“What are you, five years old?” he said.

I sneered. “Why? Wasn’t robbing the cradle once good enough for you? Looking for another piece of young virgin meat? Congrats on losing the rotary phone by the way.”

“Thank you for proving your level of maturity for me. Bennet, get your head out of your ass. That’ll make it easier for you to walk said ass over here and hear about that job we want to hire you for.”

I closed my hand around the combat knife’s blade and pressed down, inviting the pain. I pressed in tight, didn’t let go.

“I don’t need your money or your problems, Simeon.”

“Aww, you remember my name. I’m touched. And I know you don’t need the money, but let’s not kid ourselves. You get a kick out of killing for money, especially a bunch of bottom-of-the-barrel type humans Caecilius hired to vex us.”

I snorted, half-listening to the *drip drip drip* on the dusty floor. “You think you know me so well, but I’m not your fucking whipping boy.”

I never knew if Simeon had a limit, a hidden bull’s eye behind which my words would find something that was too soft, too dear for him to ever talk to me again. Some days I told myself to stop looking. Today, apparently, was not one of those days.

“Do I need to come over there and do a welfare check on you, Shuck?”

Oh, it was so fucking not one of those days. Or my day. I let go of the blade, illogically wondering whether he’d heard the sound, the *drip drip dripping* of the blood, whether he’d smelled it. I knew the leech wasn’t kidding about coming over here, that fucker.

“Fine. I’ll drop by once I’m finished here, but my rates just went up.”

“Whatever you say, Shuck. If you’re not here within the next two hours, I’ll come visit you.”

I didn’t dignify that with an answer and hung up on him again.

After I put the phone back in its cradle, I examined my hand. I'd had worse. Still, I fucking knew that Simeon would see this, smell it, and think about it and when I had sustained it in relation to this phone call. I had no fucking intention of letting him see or think about it, so I took the knife upstairs to the shower with me. Doing it up there would leave me with less of a mess to clean up.



The curse's mark, that firebird which had taunted me over and over again with its short flights across my skin, had moved its beak to my right ass cheek. I saw when I dried myself after rinsing the pink and copper down the shower's drain and wiping my knife clean. I'd have to oil the knife later, although I contemplated cutting out the fucking firebird's eye before heading out. I had a feeling Simeon would make me sit though, and having to listen to him was already going to be painful enough without an eye-sized cutout in one ass cheek.

As I headed into the upstairs storage and walk-in closet, I discovered I still had clean clothes left although I couldn't exactly remember the last time I'd done laundry. I considered making the house pawns do it and then making them watch as I inspected every single item.

“Too much fucking work, that. And they'll still get me... what's next? Easter candy?”

I slid on a pair of boxers, and unbidden, recalled the subtle taste of sweet Osterbrot, the way it felt to knead it, then how—

a long time ago—a hearth since lost to time would bake a heartier type of bread.

“Enough with this shit.” I braced against the chest of drawers, closing my eyes in order to force the memories back.

Maybe Simeon was right. Maybe killing a few assholes who deserved it would do me good.

One

FUCKING VAMPIRES



About two hundred years in, I thought I'd learn from my mistakes eventually, which, looking back, I had been mistaken about. However, I greatly appreciate irony, dramatic and otherwise.

I HAD OPTED TO go in light, meaning there was a knife at my right ankle and a tiny blade worked into the sole of my left shoe. The cyanide in one of my hidden coat pockets was still good, and I had a garotte in a cute little pouch at the small of my back. In my pocket, I had a yawara rather than a knuckleduster because I was fancy like that.

Once I'd made it to the lobby, I kept my eyes focused on the door, but my peripheral vision was too good to fully tune out the pawn at the front desk. He was new, a tiny little baby pawn with a soft baby face and the light blue eyes of the Star-Garbed Wolves.

Their pack name sounded like a cult, but then this one didn't look inbred at all. *You're not fucking any house pawns*, I told myself. That one time I had, I'd ended up with half this damn building and half a century's worth of heartache, and I was not doing anything stupid like that anytime soon. *Or ever again*, I reminded myself, pushing open the door.

Outside, a cab was already waiting. I could sense there was a pawn behind the wheel even before I checked the cab number and license plate for the telltale 47. I'd hoped Simeon hadn't sent one, in which case I would have actually waited for him to move his ass over here only to then complain about it.

The problem with Simeon was that he had some idea of how petty I could be. I got into the car and made eye contact with the pawn through the rearview. She handled it reasonably well, and I went back to ignoring her and playing with my phone, which had charged to about thirty percent in the time it had taken me to get dressed.

I checked the weather app. Newstaten was cool and overcast, but I had a few other locations far from here I liked to keep an eye on. I knew it wasn't healthy. I still did it.

Simeon's offices took up three floors relatively close to the roof of one of the fancy buildings Hawthorne owned in the financial district. The high-rise was well run and extremely private. I wasn't sure I could have snuck past the cameras and state-of-the-art door sensors, not to mention the actual security personnel. That was saying something about the standard Valentin and Simeon held their people to.

Thus, it came as little surprise that the pawn standing by the elevators watched me intently as soon as I walked in the door. The building had no doorman—in fact, it had a deceptively abandoned feel. The solitary pawn called the elevator as I made my way across the lobby’s echoey marble floor and past the statement seating in the waiting area so I could walk right into it. His suit easily cost what some people made in a month. It was well tailored to hide a sidearm underneath.

“Welcome, Mr. Bennet,” he said.

I ignored him like I always did and leaned into a corner of the elevator. The floor on which Simeon had claimed an office about the same size as Valentin’s tennis court-sized one had been created to be the kind of white and gold masturbatory fantasy rich people could get off to, all displayed in the clean lines and bare walls of a minimalist finish. Japandi, or whatever the fuck it was called.

There was an empty bowl in front of an empty canvas—both emptinesses probably costing six figures easy—a droopy, post-modern chandelier thing, and a set of bronze and golden minimalist clocks, all lined up to keep in touch with the Continental and Asian time zones.

Someone had put a vase with just greenery on the reception counter in front of the clocks, not a single flower in among the leaves. Going by the sound of the place, there also wasn’t a single person on this floor, or at least in the immediate vicinity.

I headed past the reception desk and then left to the southwest corner. Behind Simeon's secretary's desk, I spotted none other than Elias, pouting at a stapler.

The baby vampire turned his pout my way when he saw me coming down the corridor.

"He says he wants the spreadsheets collated, not stapled," Elias explained.

"Fascinating, Young Hawthorne."

He frowned. "Mr. Bennet, would you show me how a stapler works?"

"Not in the mood for stapling. Papers or other. Should I care why you're sitting out here, stapling shit you shouldn't be stapling?"

"Well, do you?"

"What?"

"Care, Mr. Bennet. Do you care?"

"Not as such, but Fernando usually makes a point of announcing me."

"He gave Fernando the day off. Because he's punishing me. By making me work an office job."

He was going to tell me what kinky thing had led to this, or to which kinky thing this would lead next, and I was very much not here for that.

"It's only work if you do something. Like stapling all the sheets you're not supposed to staple."

The vampire sighed in a dramatic manner as I walked past him toward the door. “I suppose you are right, Mr. Bennet. Thank you for the advice.”

“Pleasure,” I said and opened Simeon’s door.

For someone who’d once gotten beaten up in a pigsty and had then just lain there in all the mud and pig shit, Simeon cleaned up nicely. He wore a navy pinstripe, dark blue shirt and silver tie. Blond and blue-eyed, he’d have been good at modeling.

He rose from behind his desk, walking to his round conference table where I could already see a file waiting. I followed.

“Thought I’d have to come looking for you,” he said, giving me a once-over, though he was subtle about it.

“That child out there you abducted from his family is about to staple shit.”

Simeon stifled a grin. It was as subtle as the look he’d given me, but I saw. “He’s cheeky like that. He’s also over a hundred years old. And thinking about enrolling for the next semester. Poor thing is getting bored again.”

“To think you’d be using college as a pacifier.” I took the seat that allowed me eyes on the door.

He sat opposite me, folding his long legs. “Straight to business then?”

“By all means.”

He slid the file over to me. “These are the personal profiles one of my investigators put together of the three individuals we would like you to handle.”

I opened the file, and—lo and behold—was faced with a mugshot of a tall white guy with a buzzcut and just the kind of rap sheet I found inspiring when contemplating suitable end points to a wasted life.

“What are they doing exactly?” I asked and pretended to skim.

“They are the co-owners of a lovely little place called Poison.”

“Night club?”

“Strip club. They have supernaturals working there. So far so legal, if not something Valentin would tolerate for long. The thing is, we’ve heard about things happening in the basement. Things that are a lot less tame. They have two flavors of disgusting: one, cage fighting, two, forced sex work.”

“You don’t say,” I said, and thought, *One of these days, someone will find you and gut you, Caecilius, and if whatever gods still live are cruel, it’ll be me.*

“Valentin wants them dead and the whole operation shut down. If supernaturals are helping them and not being coerced to do so”—He shrugged—“He’ll pay you for them as well.”

“Valentin should consider taking over the police force,” I said.

Simeon smiled. “He has you for that. And we have very good relations with the chief of police and the mayor. And several of the members.”

“Hmm. Have you ever wondered why he prefers you deal with me? Wondered what that says about your relationship?”

Simeon rolled his eyes, but I saw him fidget. The latter told me he was annoyed, the former he was trying to hide it. Despite their often-constant fighting before Elias, Simeon and Valentin loved one another. I hated them for having that, just a little bit.

“It says he admires my patience, I’m sure. Your normal rate plus ten percent.”

“Fifteen.”

“Twelve.”

“Fifteen.”

“Fourteen?”

“Fuck you.”

“Fine, Shuck, fine. We’ll add fifteen percent to your normal rate. Make a tax-deductible donation every now and then, why don’t you.”

“Child welfare? To make sure no big bad vampires get to them?”

He fidgeted again, just the tiniest movement of his index finger. I’d never gotten him to fidget the way he did when he wanted to bend Elias over his lap and spank him. More than

once I'd wondered what about me didn't get that specific reaction from him.

"Speaking of, if you have it from here, I should go confiscate that stapler."

I took the file, stood. "Specific timeline?"

"Don't take too long."

"That's a no; could've said no."

Simeon, ever neat, slid his chair back against the table while I left mine where it was.

"Just get it done."

"I always do. Are you going to be needing their heads?"

Simeon stopped on his way to the door, turned. "You have a forwarding address for Caecilius?"

Now he sounded suspicious, and granted, I got that.

"I don't. But I know there's a glove maker in Florence he likes. He doesn't go there, obviously, but a bunch of body-less heads at his favorite glover's door would get reported back to him."

"Would you like to share that glove maker's address? For a finder's fee, of course."

"Well, you'll be able to read all about it in the papers once my delivery arrives there, won't you?"

I walked past him, or tried. He didn't stretch out his arm to block me, but the way he brought his shoulder out implied it, and I did stop.

“Since I’m your lawyer, can I speculate that the fact you have this information and haven’t yet done anything with it indicates that you have plans to use it?”

“I do. I want to send him a bunch of heads. What other fun activity do you think I had planned?”

Simeon hesitated before he said, “Hawthorne doesn’t want to move against Caecilius directly. But he seems to be going in a direction that Valentin doesn’t like the sound of.

“You know Valentin and I don’t often agree, but we do in this. We find ourselves wondering whether you might be able to mitigate some of Caecilius’s more drastic intents.”

I looked him over. He was absolutely serious about this, which irked me to the extreme. It meant he thought there was at least some likelihood of this working out. Of me and Caecilius working out. Ugh.

“You assume I’d like fucking a man-snake, Simeon, only to get his fucked-up god complex mitigated? I’m not interested.”

“I never said that. There are more ways than pillow play to mitigate a situation.”

I nodded. “That’s exactly what I said: heads. To mitigate a fucking man-snake who thinks he deserves power through the mere act of existing.”

Simeon’s nostrils flared. “Now that you’ve heard it, I’m sure you’ll manage to think about it.”

“I’m sure I won’t,” I said and stormed out of his office, leaving the door open.

Elias had been busy stapling a bunch of printouts, the papers painfully misaligned.

“Thank you for stopping by on such short notice, Mr. Bennet,” the baby vampire called after me cheerily.

“Good job temping, Young Hawthorne.”

I was about to round the corner when I heard Simeon say, “Elias. Come into my office, please. Bring the printouts.”

He said that in his husky, commanding voice, and I heard Elias gasp in response. Now it made sense why no one was around in the office today. Playtime.



I took a taxi home and headed back upstairs. First thing, I made myself a nice big Turkish coffee, strong and sweet, grabbed my laptop and settled in at my dining table.

Three heads I was going to take, three generic white douches. Simeon’s PI had done a decent job, as always, but I did my own research, using the two rap sheets as a starting point and digging up everything on the one guy who didn’t have one that I could find before my coffee got stale. That most of these things could be done online these days if you knew some rudimentary coding made planning a hit a lot more convenient.

I then looked into the establishment in question, Poison. They had only set up the bare bones, no glimmery homepage, no list of glowing reviews. It made me think they operated on

an invite-only basis, which was fine, because I'd finished my lukewarm coffee and was aching to go for a little walk.

I considered changing the contents of my pockets, but in the end only added a billfold.

The elevator took me to the basement parking lot. The pawns washed my cars whenever I brought them in dirty. I considered the SUV, but the hybrid was actually a better fit for what I had in mind.



Valentin was not a king, and he didn't style himself as one. However, he was the vampire ruler of this city, a ruler who felt responsible for all the administrative bits and bobs that went into that kind of nonsense.

Poison had nothing that should have drawn his attention, but it had drawn someone's, and with the information I had access to, it didn't take a genius to know whose.

Gold & Sage had a homepage, ratings, and high-end liquor on the bottom shelf. It sat right on the border between the financial district and the downtown area. These days it called itself a club, and you had to be a member to enter, although years ago, under a different name, it had taken walk-in customers.

I wasn't a member, and the pawn at the door eyed me when I parked my car right outside the front entrance in their no-parking zone.

This one wore a suit just as nice as Simeon's elevator guy, sans the hidden gun. His earrings, a lapel pin, and cuff links came adorned with golden flowers. It was priestly garb more than anything.

He'd taken a step toward the hybrid, ready to inform me of the no-parking thing, but then I got out of the car, and he recognized me.

Before I could make eye contact with him, a tingling at the back of my head made me turn. I didn't see anyone watching me, but across the street, I caught a head of chocolate brown hair, tall build, a winter jacket. It was the weirdest thing. For just a second, maybe less, everything seemed to stop, and all I could see was the back of that person's head, their windswept hair, pale fingers adjusting the jacket's collar as if it had tickled their neck.

"What pleasures may we honor you with this day, Mr. Bennet?" the pawn asked.

The world moved again, demanding my attention, and I turned to face the pawn.

"I'm here to see Shamhat," I said, clicking the lock button on the fob.

"The lady Shamhat is busy," he said, looking uncomfortable and adjusting one of his cuff links, a silphium in bloom.

I stuffed the fob into my pocket and headed past him. "That's fine. I won't take that long."

“M-maybe you could wait? We’d gladly provide entertainment in the meantime?” the pawn said as he followed me inside.

His voice came laced with a little more than just hopefulness I’d say yes to that, but he was smart enough not to overdo his power of seduction.

“No, thank you. Just Shamhat. You can either point me in the right direction, or I start looking,” I said, stopping in front of the first painting.

Shamhat—not her name, but her goddess’s—had decided to run her operation not as what you would expect from a place where lust could be bartered and bought, but as a gallery. I had no idea who did the art, if she commissioned it or invited artists here to grant them inspiration through ecstatic delirium. Either way, whether subtle or overt, each canvas held beauty.

This piece was watercolor soft, a rendition of Enkidu and Shamhat—maybe the goddess, maybe this Shamhat. In it, she was taming his wild nature. Flowers standing in vases and floating in bowls lined the floor space between this painting and the next, a different style, oil on canvas, showing Enkidu, now tamed and for all intents and purposes, Shamhat’s first priest, attempting to pass on his taming to Gilgamesh.

“Well, I...” The pawn started toward me. Then he swallowed, considered his options. “You really wouldn’t want to wait, Mr. Bennet?”

He tried harder this time. I could feel his power wash over my skin. Either something inside of me or that ink-dark curse

mark made sure very little of it stuck, by no means enough to move me.

“Honey,” I said. “What you’re doing is a very stupid thing, and it won’t lead to the outcome you are hoping for.”

“Leave him,” said a woman, her voice echoing from the other end of the gallery.

The pawn bowed, mumbled an apology, and left to return to his guard spot outside.

Shamhat arrived wearing nothing but a bathrobe, although it was an elaborate bathrobe, run through with gold thread and flower patterns. She was an old power. Cursed for sure, though she had stopped seeing it that way a long time ago, if she’d ever seen it that way to begin with.

She was my height, her skin darker than mine, the rich soil which cradled civilization. Oddly, her eyes were blue, not unlike Simeon’s.

“Every time you cast your shadow on my temple, I feel a creeping sense of unease,” she said, approaching me in bare feet.

“Hello to you too, Shamhat.”

“You’re here because of that thing I told Valentin to take care of.”

I nodded. “Thanks for making this straightforward. How do you know about it?”

“Nothing is ever straightforward in this world. For one thing, you come here, and you will not let yourself be made to worship.” She examined me, and it was entirely uncomfortable. I knew there were no gods, but at the same time, age provided the power of observation, and Shamhat had that in spades. “You would benefit from it. That dark thing inside you; you’ve called it the Black Shuck, but have you ever wondered if that’s all there is to it?”

It really wasn’t my day. Why did I have to have both a vampire and a sex demon attempt to head shrink me in the span of just a few hours? I should’ve stayed in bed. More importantly, I should have gotten rid of the landline years ago.

“It calls for blood, all the time, even now.” I held her gaze. She was one of the more difficult people for sustained eye contact.

“You are not as scary as you make yourself out to be.”

“People would beg to differ.”

Shamhat shrugged. “I never said you weren’t dangerous. I said you aren’t scary in the way you think you are, and you do not scare me. I would tame the thing inside you, but you’d have to let me.”

“Shamhat, I don’t care for what you offer. Tell me how you found out about Poison, and we can both go back to fucking and killing, respectively.”

She cocked an eyebrow. “Maybe another day, then. One of mine will tell you what he knows.”

She turned and walked past more of her explicit yet divine art, assuming I'd follow. I did. She had to have gotten some of the pieces she displayed from Victorian collections, either that, or the statues and prints were her own, a trove she'd built over time. She even had a Hokusai, for fuck's sake. The scent of flowers grew stronger, the flowers themselves picked for their beauty alone, not for their many disparate meanings.

The staff door, which would lead to storage and the less glamorous part of art dealing in a normal gallery, took us to a stage. Individual rooms split off from here, this temple tunneling from one building to the next, a work of generations.

The stage was for the public worship, although thankfully, no one was here at this hour. It was round so that every performer or group of performers would have to walk through the sea of pillows on the floor surrounding it, the first step of involving the audience.

In the center of the stage, a pawn was writhing around and up and down a pole.

“This is Cinnamon,” Shamhat said loud enough for the spicy dancer to hear. “He works for one of our other ventures, one of the clubs, but part-times here. Cinnamon, Mr. Bennet wants you.”

The dancer slid down the pole, muscles set in scene perfectly by his workout clothes. And by the way he walked through this massive cuddle puddle setup.

He grinned at me. “Oh, yeah?”

I said, “I’m on my way to kill three men and cut off their heads, and I was wondering what precisely made you recognize their depraved ways?”

Cinnamon nearly stumbled over a pillow, caught himself, looked at Shamhat. His face had fallen, shifted from jock glad to have been picked for the team to scared little boy waiting for the belt. Well, maybe I was fucking projecting with that last one. All the fucking head shrinking by people having no business to do so.

“Tell him,” Shamhat said with a regal handwave.

He flinched. “I thought you weren’t going to tell Hawthorne that it was me.”

“I didn’t,” Shamhat said. “This one showed up at my temple by himself, of his own will. There is purpose in that. Tell him what he wishes to know.”

Cinnamon nodded. I didn’t think he had the same type of polished charm the doorman had, because if he was still trying to hit me with it, I wasn’t feeling it. Maybe that’s why Shamhat only let him practice here but had him strip elsewhere.

“I didn’t grow up in Newstaten,” Cinnamon started.

“Shamhat, if you instructed this one to tell me his life’s story, my civility might lapse.”

“Get to it,” she told her stripper.

Cinnamon flinched and looked down. He was a head taller than me, so all that really did was make it easier for me to

stare at him, which I did.

“Rae is a friend of mine from when we were little. I met them here, sheer accident. We were both looking at the same eye shadow. They’re half and half and never fit in. They have a half sister the Poison people are keeping—“

“Half sister on what side?”

He flinched. “Their father, I think.”

“Apparently, the girl in question is human,” Shamhat said before I could complain about Cinnamon missing context clues.

Cinnamon nodded. “Right. Sorry. Rae told me bits and pieces. They are scared, which is rare. They used to deal with the father when they were a kid—“

Which just did it. I was going to kill someone today, and I was going to make it hurt.

”—so even though they said not to, I went to that club, and it’s just so vile. They’re selling people there, our kind.”

Shamhat waved a hand at Cinnamon, dismissing him. He looked smaller, hunched over, and didn’t head back to the stage, instead vanished through one of the white-lacquered doors.

“You scared him,” Shamhat said.

“He’s clearly not at your level yet if my wildness can do that,” I said and walked toward the exit. Then stopped and turned back toward her. That man I’d seen outside the Gold &

Sage, something about him felt like a déjà vu I didn't remember having. "Shamhat, were any of your people running errands outside earlier? When I came in?"

She crossed her arms. "Are you asking whether they are looking for worshippers on the street?"

"I just thought I saw one of yours. Or someone. Outside."

She huffed. "To think you had eyes for anyone."

"My mistake." I turned, ready to leave and forget all about some random guy in the crowd.

"Perhaps one day you will take me up on my offer, oh undying omen of death," Shamhat said, throwing her voice like an actor who had learned the skill on an old stage, a stage in the wilderness or an amphitheater where verse was recited by the light of fires.

"Perhaps not," I said and left her sweet-smelling temple behind me.

Two

POISON



*I don't miss the place I come from, yet why it still haunts me,
I don't know.*

BY THE TIME I got to the club, I was calm again, and I'd toyed with a few possible ways to play this. I parked on a side street and walked half a block. It was still cold, but I ignored the urge to shove my hands into my pockets and watched my surroundings instead, the failing February light producing enough shadows for things and people to hide in.

This area of town was full of office buildings and cheap hotels. It wasn't run-down by any means, but it lived in a careful balance of selective ignorance and people just minding their own business that could easily go bad in all the worst ways. I didn't think Valentin would let his city acquire a slum, but decay of this kind was a creeping disease.

It was also very much not my problem. Poison, noticeably, had the whole fancy outside appearance of a nice night club with the velvet rope and the bodyguards outside. This one looked bored, wore sunglasses at four-thirty in the afternoon, and was dressed in an ill-fitting off-the-rack suit. All in all, it made the place look silly, seeing as there was no line to warrant all this theater.

I fished a hundred from my billfold and held it out to the man.

“Enjoy your time,” he said and unhooked that silly rope for me.

“Heard great things,” I said, doing my best to not roll my eyes. Even the cheap carpet they’d laid out on this side of the door was filthy, rain and snow stains mixing with who knew what else. Why would you even put out a carpet if you couldn’t be bothered to dry and clean it every morning?

The club—and calling it a club was generous—smelled. Sweat, spilled beer, and cigarette smoke. It was too early for many people to be here, but I saw one asshole grab a server’s ass within ten seconds of the door falling shut behind me. The girl was, by far, too young to have anyone touch her like that.

I ignored that, taking stock of the room. It looked smaller on the inside, not as deep as it should have been. They had benches and low tables set up so that you couldn’t have danced if you’d wanted to, and from the bar on my left, the keep could see both the restrooms as well as a fancier door with, of all things, a heavy chain and padlock in front of it.

Talk about inconspicuous. Between the stains on the floor and the faded eighties furniture in stale blues and purples, this place wasn't, but that fucking padlock pushed it totally over the top.

My second sweep of the room I disguised as selecting a nice table. I took note of the bald asshole behind the bar, Kevin, according to Simeon's file, though I was going to call him Aggravated Assault to better reflect his character.

His buddy in club ownership had been the one to grab the server's ass, and I was going to refer to his blond ass as Drug Possession. The third douche, Mr. DUI-that-had-never-been-filed-thanks-to-daddy, I didn't see yet, but there was a second door behind the bar, one with an actual "staff" sign on it and no fancy padlock.

Other people present were about a dozen patrons, two of them chatting noisily with Drug Possession, and two servers. While the girl was human, the other one wasn't.

I picked a table and walked toward it over the sticky floor. It didn't take the pawn server very long to walk over to me. They wore something too tight, too short, and too ill-fitting for them to have picked it out themselves. The only thing pristine about them was their eye makeup, which struck me as an odd entry in the defiance column.

"What can I get you?" they asked. Their voice was neutral, but I didn't miss for a heartbeat the way they looked at me. Not so much at my face but at my shoes and belt buckle, at the

place where a normal gun holster would have made my coat bulge.

“I’m trying to figure out what’s good here,” I told them.

They did a delicate calculation in their head, the type of mental math that had nothing to do with numbers. I’d seen people everywhere on the planet do the same, wondering whether it was safe to get into this particular car, whether it was safer to stay still and simply let it happen than to fight. Whether to speak or stay silent.

Their calculation done, the pawn slid onto my lap in a silky smooth, near-feline movement. “Maybe I can help with that,” they said, putting the flat of both hands against my chest, definitely feeling what, if anything, I was hiding under my coat.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Drug Possession take notice. I also saw the other server take notice, only she wasn’t happy at all, seeing what she was seeing. Aggravated Assault just licked his lips and, for the sake of all the fucking clichés, polished a beer glass with a filthy rag.

“Do you know who I am?” I asked the server, keeping my voice low enough for the music to hide it.

“Yeah.”

“And you think planting your butt on my lap is a bright idea?”

They narrowed their eyes, and a small muscle in their jaw worked while they kept their smile in place. “Maybe there’s

something I can do for you? Anything. They say if you've never been with my kind, you haven't fucked."

They whispered the last bit into my ear, leaning in and sliding one hand lower. All things considered, I liked their frisking skills.

"What even is your kind? I mean, what are you, succubus, incubus? Not that I can tell the two apart. Is there an actual difference?"

They snorted. "Sure. A succubus will fuck you from the top, an incubus from behind. Any preferences, Black Shuck?"

I had to strain to hear them now, but their lips were close enough to mine to read anyway.

I said, "I have something to sell. Who here does the intake?"

Their carefully crafted mask faltered. "To sell?"

I spoke loud enough to be overheard. "Yeah. And not an old bitch like yourself, if you catch my drift. Get me your buyer."

Aggravated Assault and Drug Possession exchanged a glance that was meant to be subtle. These guys, seriously. It was like the money they came from hadn't been enough to keep the stupid out of the gene pool.

Aggravated Assault dropped his rag on the counter. Even from where I was sitting I could see stains on that counter, on the table I'd picked as well. As I waited for Aggravated Assault to cross the filthy floor and posture in front of me, I imagined grabbing him by the neck and using his face to wipe

the place clean. If nothing else, it was a fine distraction from wondering whether I'd end up with scabies after this.

“You giving out free lap dances now?” he asked the half sex demon on my lap.

“No, of course not,” they said. “I checked him, like you said.”

“You piss off then, do something useful.”

The server gave me one final look full of loathing and hope. Or no, maybe not hope. Maybe just a kind of satisfaction about knowing who was on their side—no one—and who wasn't—everyone else. If given the chance, they'd try their sex demon lust control on me only to then clobber me with a bottle.

They dashed away, moving smoothly like someone who couldn't really help it, like someone who loved dancing and how their body felt when it was in motion.

“That one too old for you, you say?” Aggravated Assault asked with a modicum of suspicion.

“Could we forego all this? I know you cater to a certain kind of taste here. I don't care for it myself, not the fighting or the fucking.” I shrugged and put on what I generally thought of as “put-upon straight dude” look. “Please, sit. I'd like not to draw too much attention.”

He looked intrigued. Curious at least. “Why? Got a trust fund on the line?”

I narrowed my eyes at him, projecting “rich college kid caught smoking pot.”

I waited long enough for him to get it, then said, “If it were only that I’d not bother with this, this place, this conversation.” I flinched. “I drove my fucking hybrid to this part of town, can you believe that? Cosmic irony.”

He crossed his arms. “Are you a cop?”

“No.”

“Huh.” He sat. “Still don’t like the look of you.”

Really, just walking in here and creating a more public crime scene would have been easier, and given that I didn’t like the look of him either, I asked myself why I was putting myself through the torture of playing with them.

I came up with exactly no answers I wanted to consider further and decided to get on with it. I cast a furtive glance left and right.

“Believe me, I don’t like the look of myself being here. I heard about this from an alumnus. He posted in the anonymous section of the message board. I...I have this half sister.”

His eyebrows moved with the interest of the dull and deviant. “Huh?”

I swallowed, clasped my hands, looked at them as if this was really, really unpleasant. “Dad fucked the housekeeper. It’s... that girl...she’s not, you know. Normal.”

Saying that last word to convey the meaning I wanted it to took a certain skill. I had acquired it by observation, and because every now and then, I liked playing with my

metaphorical food like I was doing right now. It was when Aggravated Assault licked his lips that I wondered whether Caecilius had sent these fucks here because he understood that about me.

The pawn who'd made themselves comfortable on my lap glanced at me. I wasn't sure exactly how good their hearing was, but they weren't looking at me as if they wanted to kill me anymore. I didn't care about that, but it was always good not having to worry about a bottle coming out of nowhere.

“Whaddya think we'd do about it? We serve booze here.”

Now I looked right at him. “I watched her through the pool house's window when my parents were out for brunch and she thought I'd left with them. She stripped. And I thought...you know, I wouldn't mind the show, but then...then...she turned into a...a”—Pause for dramatic effect—“a *werewolf*.”

He shook his head. “Nah. Happens only on the full moon.”

Well, Aggravated Assault was still not trusting me. If only I gave a fuck.

“Then she's something worse. I don't know. I don't care. Dad's going to put her in his will, and I don't know if it's because of that, because the housekeeper is like that too and making him, or because...because he doesn't know, but...you do buy them, right? People like that?”

He smirked. “If they have fur, they ain't people.”

I smirked right back at his stupid face. “I don't care what you put on the receipt. I don't even need one.”

“Funny. You’ll have to talk to Rick about this.”

Finally. Mr. DUI, aka Richard Hopkins, was the one I’d picked the hybrid for after all. He’d gotten away with that DUI on account of his father’s bank account and because his grandfather was a judge. Who cared that someone had been in the car with him, who cared about the person he’d run over?

Aggravated Assault led me through to the back. I zoned out, kind of, keeping my focus on what I needed to. The way the place smelled, blood and spilled beer, semen. Seedy wasn’t even beginning to describe this place. Half-open doors to tiny rooms made my gut churn. This place, it was nothing like Shamhat’s temple.

DUI was alone here, the room he’d picked as an office decked out nicer than he was. He had fancy liquor here, matching his fancy shoes and watch and phone.

“I’d like to sell you my freak sister,” I let him know after pleasantries.



By the time I was done chumming it up with DUI, it was almost 9 pm. Twice during our conversation, I’d very nearly lost it on him, but that was bound to happen when you bonded over “shared experiences” of the kind he’d had.

In his case, the housekeeper had “fallen off the stairs” and had died later on in the hospital due to the head injury. We didn’t even get to the DUI that should have been. He was shit

mountain, just so much shit, and he was selective about what stains to present first.

I sweet-talked him into sending me away with a thousand bucks so I could lure my sister here. When I walked back out with his phone number and the money in my pocket, the pawn server and the human one were busier as the place had filled up.

I watched a sale go down on Drug Possession's table. It almost surprised me that they were handling this aspect of their business themselves, then again who was I to judge a bunch of bottom feeders.

Back in the hybrid, I considered what to do with the rest of the night. Someone still had to die, of course, so there was that, but I'd passed up on about a dozen opportunities for murder already. I could tell myself it was to avoid a mess, but the truth was, getting back into working mode always took me a while.

I headed back to the apartment and went straight to my small armory by the entrance.

A bulletproof vest would have been smart. It had aired out since the last time I'd used it, and it sat there on its shelf, ready to be worn. I couldn't bring myself to put it on.

Instead, I collected plastic sheeting, plastic bags and a bone saw in a small duffel, adding some duct tape. The individual items, I always kept stocked up on, because there was nothing worse than running out of duct tape when you needed it.

“It’s a fucking serial murder kit,” I said when I unpacked and repacked the kit for the second time to make sure I knew where everything was and that nothing was missing. “Although, maybe I should pack zip ties.” I did. And some hedge clippers and pliers, just because.

I then spent a few hours location hunting. Above ground was always tricky. You just couldn’t control things as well there. People walked their dogs, themselves, and homeless folks might inadvertently see something they didn’t want to.

The easiest for this was taking the subway so the Hawthorne cleaning crew could get there fast after I pulled the emergency brakes. I texted Valentin to ask for a low traffic line with a pawn conductor.



It was around three in the morning when I met with them, Mr. DUI parking his ass on the hood of his silver BMW. Honestly, a smarter criminal wouldn’t have met with me like this, but DUI...well, DUI wanted to be admired by Aggravated Assault and Drug Possession. And the way he’d joked about how even “these beasts” were the same as us when you just had the patience to cut deep enough... I might have brought the serial killer kit, but he had the makings of one.

For now, I’d left the kit in the SUV which I’d parked closer to the subway entrance. It was a bit of a hassle, but I would be lying if I said I didn’t need the workout.

DUI spotted me first. “Where’s your sister?”

“Oh,” I said. “She wouldn’t come.”

“Huh?” Drug Possession asked.

“I told you something was fishy about this guy,” Aggravated Assault said. Really, he was the smartest among the lot.

I said, “Maybe she doesn’t like me very much. I could never blame her, not with all the things Papa used to say and the way I counted myself lucky if Mother ignored me.”

I sighed. Told myself this was cathartic, seeing as how they’d die soon. Did the dead ever talk? Would these three tell the long-dead peasant and his wife? Their daughter? I decided it didn’t matter when my back itched, an imagined sensation to remind me of the lashings that had first killed me.

“The fuck you talking about?” Aggravated said.

“Death,” I said.

Drug Possession chuckled. “Whatever you’re on, I want to sell it. Richie, you gave this asshole cash?”

DUI remained calm. Serene. Very dangerous. “He’s going to give that back now.”

“Well, you see—” I said. And ran.

For a long time, early on, I’d lived off pickpocketing and begging. Of the very first years, I didn’t remember much because I wasn’t myself, wasn’t really even a person. When I’d gotten back to the semblance of that, I’d learned how to

effectively outrun people on account of the fact that I'd decided I wouldn't always be a piss-poor pickpocket.

Years and years later, when I'd learned the high art of bringing someone down using martial skill, I'd botched the pickpocketing intentionally so they'd run after me. The skill I'd mastered then was to never truly outrun them but stay just far enough ahead of your pursuers so they thought you might, at any moment, vanish from their sight. It would make them push themselves and keep them from realizing they were prey.

Granted, these were not the streets of Constantinople, and the three idiots behind me couldn't catch a lame duck, but it was nice to remember that I had an actual skill set. Other than murdering people.

My timing wasn't perfect. I checked my phone's time as I jumped down the last three stairs of one flight that began the descent to Cross and Chapel. I was early.

Behind me, Assault said, "Stop, you little fuck, or I'll break your legs."

I rolled my eyes and ran on.

The station was one of the bigger ones with multiple access points. I ran the length of one of the underground corridors on the level above the tracks, probably making them think I was making for the exit on the other side.

Consequently, Assault barked back for Drug Possession to "cut the fucker off." I looked over my shoulder. DUI had overtaken his buddies. Murder gleamed in his eyes. For this

one, tonight hadn't been a total loss. I'd need a really long shower once I was done with this shit.

Ads flashed neon as I ran the length of the corridor in a few seconds, barely winded, unlike the two behind me. Drug Possession apparently had found an energy bar or something because he was already coming down the stairs ahead of me. Funnily enough, a graffiti artist had sprayed a stylized "cunt" on the step, and I caught sight of him just as he hit that step, the word entirely descriptive in this perfectly timed moment.

I turned right to where the escalators were, rushed down them.

"You little cocksucker," Drug Possession said.

I chuckled, wondered how he knew I enjoyed fellating the right kind of person.

The incoming train echoed through the subway. The arrangement was for things to happen in the next car after the conductor's, but while I had no issue making it from one end of the station to the other, the three behind me weren't that fast.

Well, cleanup would just have to walk a little farther. I jumped on, choosing the nearest car door. And froze. There was someone on this train, and he wasn't a pawn.

Three

HIM



When you try the same thing over and over again to the same, disappointing results, you are either a failing romantic poet or just plain dumb.

TIME DIDN'T FREEZE BECAUSE time never fucking does that. Still, those wide blue eyes, that pale, tired, yet somehow innocent face staring at me as if I were a meteorite coming in for destruction, it made me think nothing else for the better part of a whole second.

Then of course, the three douches entered just barely making it before the doors closed on them. The boy's eyes widened further, his shoulders tensing, chin falling. He didn't want to be seen, didn't want to be noticed.

I saw you though, I wanted to tell him. Didn't, obviously.

DUI mouth-diarrheaed at me.

“Did I...” *not tell you to shut up?* I wanted to say, but really, I couldn’t because I hadn’t.

The baby-faced guy stared harder, his eyes widening and his jaw dropping just a tiny bit. I really wasn’t going to be able to do what I had planned on doing. With a low exhale, I resigned myself.

Aggravated Assault cordially inquired where the money was I had been given, stressing the importance of his inquiry with the blade of a knife against my throat and his unclean fingers wrapping around my shirt. Why, the nerve.

I imagined wrapping my hand around his knife hand, controlling it while I twisted out of his hold and levered him into submission, took the knife from his hands.

Shouldn’t have brought a knife to your death, I would have told him. I didn’t like the way he looked at me. I could have plunged the knife into his left eye. Would have improved his ugly face.

As I played through the steps I might have taken, then—just two, then a kick to Drug Possession’s groin—the fucker—DUI—moved. The most dangerous, he noticed Baby Face. He *shhed* him.

I wanted to rip DUI’s throat out for it, not quite sure why. Baby Face wasn’t supposed to be here. I maybe wasn’t either, but more importantly, I wasn’t supposed to care. *Shouldn’t.* And yet. Another fucking volta in my fucked-up existence.

Don't go shushing people you have no business looking at, I wanted to tell DUI. I imagined saying the words while he had my boot on his neck. Right after I kicked his kneecap into oblivion.

That didn't happen. What happened played out like a part of me had wanted it to play out. I let it. Let it, because they were so angry, so focused on me when I told them I had stolen their money that the quiet human guy who sat there hugging himself because he was scared, didn't really draw their disgusting attention. I could do this, and he could remain unseen.

And I was fine with that. I was also fine with being right. Someone did die, and it was I.

Four

MESS



One thing death taught me: to take all my pain, anger, and heartache, drain the fast-acting poison out of them, and keep it bottled up, not near my heart, but in my mind where the darkness lives. I don't remember when it became the Black Shuck or when the Black Shuck became me.

THE KNIFE SLICING INTO my neck didn't really hurt all that much. I felt heat rush into my lungs, telling me my trachea was in the mix. My prey left at the next stop, their noise draining from the subway car like the blood was draining from me. I thought that was going to be it, but no.

Baby Face came over. Bleeding always made colors look funny, and so he stared down at me, all haloed and looking like an angel. Huh. I didn't exactly remember falling to the ground, but Baby Face was kneeling.

"I'll call nine-one—"

I reached for him, somehow managed to catch his fingers, his hand. I needed him to not make that face, needed to let him know everything would be fine. Fuck. I didn't get random urges to tell people everything would be okay, just didn't.

My skin grew hot, the skin on my back especially. It wasn't normal. This never happened, not like this. I was pretty sure I was bleeding out. I didn't want to. For the first time in I didn't know how long, I didn't want to die. Why? This guy who was concerned for a stranger, holding a stranger's hand, comforting a stranger in their last moments?

His eyes weren't exactly blue, I thought, moments away from losing sight. There was a golden ring around the pupil, rich gold, feathering outward like a crown.

My back was hurting, actual searing pain the kind I rarely felt. It went from where the first whip lash had broken skin to everywhere else, dissipated. It was like all the lashes I'd been given bundled into the same hurt, the fire being drawn into a singular point, then burning through me, from the outside in, seeking my heart.

My eyes went dark, but I was pretty sure the fire was just my imagination playing tricks. A death dream, nothing real, maybe a side effect of not wanting to die for a change.

But death came, the sure taker that it always was. For me, there wasn't a transition from one thing to the other, from dying to being alive. I'd often struggled to describe it, but since the invention of powered appliances, it had become

easier: like unplugging a TV—first colors, then nothing, and colors again when you plug it back in.

My eyes flew open, and the first thing I saw was Baby Face. I knew two things in that moment: one, that I needed to find out his real name, and, two, that he was the most beautiful thing, haloed and sad, shocked, still scared.

I wasn't holding his hand anymore, and that pissed me off just a little bit.

I couldn't worry about the handholding now. "Thanks," I told him, eager to have a whole entire conversation, but not here or now.

The subway came to a stop, the driver probably freaking out a little bit right about now since he'd expected me to pull the brakes. Not my biggest worry.

I pulled Baby Face to his feet—he was shaky all over, also bloody all over since I'd sort of leaked a lot. Somehow, despite all of this, he still managed to look innocent, like a spring lamb, shaky on his feet, scared of the world.

I told myself it was dying and not the way he shined that made me kiss his cheek. I told myself it was gratitude and not the desire to smell him and get the scent of my own blood out of my mind.

His skin was so soft, freakishly soft, and I thought, *I want to cum on his face, mark it as mine, make sure he sees me first when he closes his eyes*. It wasn't desire either, but a need, hunger or thirst, something wild. It scared me.

He was so...soft, after all, and I had never been good with soft. The subway's doors opened.

"Got to go," I forced myself to say and exited the car.

Baby Face stood there, still too pale, staring like he'd seen a ghost, and, okay, he had, and possibly I could have handled the encounter with more grace.

The option was lost though, the subway left the station with him on it, and I had work to do.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket as I headed toward the stairs and—stopped. Baby Face had brown hair that had looked a bit dull under the subway's unfavorable light. But in daylight...

"Fuck. Chocolate brown hair. The same winter jacket." I looked back, gnashed my teeth, turned my face up to the ceiling. On a controlled whisper, I said, "Fuuuuck." I should have noticed when our fingers had touched, his pale and long and soft.

Questions cascaded into the forefront of my mind, like what Baby Face had been doing close to the Gold & Sage. Just shopping? Visiting someone?

Someone? Was there...*someone* he visited?

For the time being, I had to force all of the irrational thoughts away, put them behind a too hastily erected dam so I could deal with the mess on hand. First thing I did to achieve that end was call Valentin while making for the stairs.

"Oh, you are still alive," he said by way of greeting.

“Try again,” I said, taking two stairs at a time.

He sighed. “What do my people need to mop up, and where did you put the bodies? Because I know they aren’t where we agreed they should be.”

“Sorry, they are slow runners. The subway we discussed, second to last car I think, but just a mop job, no bodies.” I realized I was still grinning, stopped. “I’m taking a cab from, ah...” I came out on the upper level, looked around for signage, spotted one past a little bakery that was probably less than an hour away from opening for the day. “Argentea’s Arrow. You got one close?”

Valentin snorted. “You think I actually monitor them every minute of every day? You think I have nothing better to do than watch the minutiae of how I run my business?”

“Yes or no, Valentin.”

A noticeable pause, then, “Head for the north exit. And take care of this mess, whatever mess it is you made.”

“I know you like my messes, Valentin.”

“I’m sure I don’t. Have a good night, Mr. Bennet.”

“Mmm-hmm.” I hung up and ran for the stairs. I wasn’t sure where all the energy was coming from, but I might as well use it.

The cab was already idling by the curb, and I got in the back, looked at the pawn. “Cross and Chapel subway stop. Make it fast.”

The drive wasn't long, not with early morning traffic. It was barely four, the in-between time during which most still slept and few had woken up yet.

Yet, that boy, Baby Face. Why had he been awake, why on the subway? "He works some kind of late-night gig," I mumbled. "Doesn't pay well. Generic winter jacket, soles on his sneakers were worn. And he wore sneakers in winter."

"Sir?" the driver asked.

"Not you." I looked outside. "One more block, then I'm getting out."

"Yes, sir."

The pawn let me out at the curb a block later, just a quick sprint away from the SUV. I pulled the fob from the hidden inside pocket I'd put it in, slid behind the wheel, and drove off, keeping it just below the speed limit.

The empty lot with DUI's car was barely two minutes away, and the car was still there. I parked across from it, but so that anyone walking onto the lot wouldn't immediately see.

"Fucking idiots," I said. "Are they really taking the subway back here?"

Then again, taking a cab with blood on your clothes wasn't better, but they could have split up. If it had been me—

Before I could mentally correct the failed criminals I was about to unalive, I saw movement in the back of their car.

"Are you fucking kidding me?"

I got out, rounded the SUV while keeping an eye on the BMW.

In the back of the SUV, under a nice, inconspicuous cover, I kept lots of useful gear, such as a handgun and a suppressor, both of which I wanted for this. I put them together, chambering a bullet. Then I let the trunk close and walked toward the BMW.

Sure enough, when I got close enough, I saw the wide eyes and the too scared, too young face of the human server who'd had her butt grabbed by Drug Possession. Fuck. I was pretty sure I should have either seen her before or should have seen this coming. Who else was going to watch the fucking bar but the half sex demon whose sister was with these assholes as an insurance policy?

I knocked on the window with a bloody knuckle. The girl's eyes widened further. I had no idea whether she recognized me, and if so, what her sibling had told her. Maybe she was just staring because I still had a good amount of blood all over me.

I never got to talk that out with her on account of very bad timing. The three idiots announced themselves with heavy footfalls on the pavement and angry mutterings.

I dashed toward the shadows, closer to where the SUV was. The time for finesse had long since passed.

My three murderers were in three very different stages of agitation. Weirdly, Aggravated Assault seemed the least happy, but he was quiet.

“Shit, cameras,” Drug Possession said.

“It’ll be fine,” DUI said, calm as you please.

I lifted my gun and lined up DUI. Tap, tap, both hits to the leg, bringing him down. One of them made a sound of surprise, but I was already squeezing the trigger again, twice more, hitting both of the two who remained standing in center mass.

That was when I started moving. I walked toward them carefully. They were all still breathing and moving around, because it took more than a single shot in a lot of cases.

Drug Possession, one hand uselessly trying to still the bleeding in his chest, saw me first, and his eyes widened. “No...” he said, coughed red.

Maybe he thought I was a demon. I aimed for his heart, and both bullets passed through his hand, turning it into an angry mess. One down.

DUI was crawling toward his BMW while Aggravated was on all fours, attempting to get up. I resisted the temptation to shoot him in the ass and instead emptied the magazine into his back. He collapsed, dead or seconds away from it. I turned to DUI, the last man crawling, as I exchanged the magazine, chambered the first round.

“You made a terrible friend in Caecilius,” I said.

“Huh?” He rolled on his back. “Who?”

I hesitated for a heartbeat, but DUI wasn’t shocked to see me in the way Drug Possession had been. In fact, DUI seemed not

at all surprised at my presence, walking among the living. It put everything in perspective.

If this were a movie, I'd have a conversation with him about what exactly Caecilius had told him about me. Except I didn't really care. He'd told DUI to expect me, which told me that Caecilius had in all likelihood sent these fuckers here for me, a misguided gesture when flowers would have been easier to throw in the trash.

He might have promised DUI that I would let him live, send the last man standing back to carry a message.

I wasn't going to play Caecilius's game. I lifted the gun and ended it with three bullets to the chest. He still moved, and I added two more. I looked up to see the girl staring, but there was nothing I could do about that now, nothing to shield her.

I went to each of the three and felt for a pulse, making especially sure with DUI. If he'd known or suspected who I was, then he'd intentionally cut my throat. It lined up with how shocked his buddies had been, lined up with how easily he'd believed—pretended to believe—my little charade.

I'd still won, but it irked me that I'd been played on the way to what was, at best, a lukewarm fuck-up of a victory.

Once I knew that everything was done, I went right back to the BMW and knocked on the window once more. The girl stared. She didn't move.

I said, "I'll get paid for them, but no one pays to see a little girl shot dead. Open up."

Her jaw worked. Her sibling, I was pretty sure, had done her eyeshadow, but it was faded as if she'd wiped her eyes. Maybe she'd cried.

She was trembling, that sort of global tremor that made it difficult to control fine motor functions precisely. It told me she'd been in fight, flight, or freeze mode for a while now.

It took her a hot second. I gave her that time. In the end, her fumbling fingers closed around the door release, and she opened it.

Once that barrier was down, she didn't really look at me, avoided direct eye contact apart from glances.

“That car you're in is going to be trashed. You'll have to get in mine.”

She bit her lip. “W-w-what are you going to do with me?”

“Ideally hand you over to your sibling. I'm assuming that was your sibling, back at Poison.”

She got out of the car, but she had to hold on to the door, her legs doing not quite what she needed them to, all normal in this situation.

“T-t-t-they—are they dead?” she asked when she finally got eyes on the three criminal masterminds, when she could look at them without the window as a means to distance herself.

“Yes. You can check yourself if you want to.”

She shook her head.

“Fair enough,” I said. “Anything you need from their car?”

She shook her head in a way that told me she never wanted to see another BMW in her life ever again. She still couldn't take her eyes off the corpses. Her hands tightened to fists, and she clenched her jaw.

“R-R-Rae said you're dangerous. I'm not getting into a car with you. I'll scream. They'll lock you up for murder.”

“Little girl, something tells me you're not naive enough to believe that the justice system is that fair. And I'm not dangerous to you.” I pointed. “I'm dangerous to the likes of them. Don't tell Rae. I like my reputation.”

She looked at me. “I-I-I'm not little.”

“Noted.”

“Your clothes are filthy.”

“Yeah. Happens. Not your problem. Enjoy the sight of them while I make a phone call.”

I stepped away from her but closer to the exit point from the lot to discourage any ideas she might have of running away. That might have been a problem off my hands, but I couldn't very well let a girl go running around aimlessly through the city at four in the morning.

I called Valentin. “I need cleanup to the lot behind the empty building on Westend Road.”

“Do you now?”

“And I need, ah...” I took a few more steps away from the girl. “I need to come for the heads later.”

“Do I want to know why?”

“You’re a micromanager, so yes, but also no.”

“Am I assuming correctly that I can have people to Poison to take care of matters there?”

“Sure, although there might still be humans there right now. I’m headed that way myself.”

Valentin paused. “And why on earth would you do that?”

“Because of that thing you don’t really want to know about but secretly do.”

Valentin sighed. “Shuck. Simeon suggested something to you earlier. Have you considered it?”

I lifted an eyebrow. The girl had gotten courage from wherever it was girls grew that and was nudging DUI’s corpse with a foot.

“Simeon doesn’t ever break privilege, not even for you, so I doubt you know what goes on in any of the conversations I have with your first lover.”

“Hmm. I talked with him, and I may have suggested that you might be a stabilizing influence on Caecilius while Caecilius might be the same for you and your moods.”

“I have no moods.”

“Of course not,” he said just a little too quickly. I’d really known these vampires for a few hundred years too long.

“Have you considered it?”

“Don’t need to,” I said. I turned my head when a louder thud echoed across the lot and watched as the girl kicked the corpse once more, harder this time. “I wouldn’t fuck Caecilius if he were the last queer snake on the planet, Valentin, and I’d appreciate you stopping to suggest it. I need to go. See you at Poison.” I hung up, turned to the girl. “If you’re done with that, let’s go see Rae.”

Five

POISON, AGAIN



There was a time when I thought there was nothing I wouldn't do if I ended up in the right wrong situation. Over and over, I learned there were many things I'll never do, no matter what.

THE GIRL DID THE sideways glance thing, but she also kept her eyes on the road, probably making sure I wasn't taking her anywhere but Poison.

“Are you like Rae?” she asked.

“No.”

“Like Rae's mom?”

“Probably not.”

“I'm not either.”

“I know.”

She nodded. “Then why are you helping me?”

“Am I?”

She tensed. “I know Rae offered to...you know. Is that why you’re taking me back to them? Because you want that? From Rae?”

“If you’re asking whether I have intentions of fucking your sibling—fucking is the word, by the way, and seeing as how you’re not a little girl, you’re allowed to say it. Well, if that’s what you’re asking, the answer is no.”

She nodded. I’d have liked for her to stay silent, but instead, she said, “They always do that, you know. Put themselves between me and whatever evil thing wants to hurt me, and then they get hurt instead. They say it’s not my fault that there’s always someone or something, but our father wanted me, not them.”

And I very much didn’t want to hear this. I said, “The mouse doesn’t blame itself for the cat’s hunger or the cat’s sharp claws.”

She pondered that. I saw her bottom lip tremble out of the corner of my eye. “Will it stop now?”

“I don’t know.”

“But you killed them.”

“Yeah, but remember what Rae said. I’m dangerous. They were right about that.” And I needed her to believe it, because the last thing I was willing to deal with was a hopeful human girl who thought I was some kind of savior.

“T-t-thank you,” she said when I slowed the SUV in front of Poison.

“Whatever.”

“I o-owe you. My life, I think.”

“You really don’t.” Maybe I could get her in front of Simeon and trigger his savior complex. Yeah, that would be good.

I opened my door and got out. The girl didn’t immediately follow, and I had to wave to her. I got that. She was still too fucking scared to act halfway normal. Maybe she’d get over it faster than I had after meeting the witch.

Thinking about that creature made me reevaluate dying earlier. It wasn’t right, that pain in my back, the way it had dominated everything, even while the blood loss and those pretty blue eyes should have been my focus.

His blue eyes, his face, haloed by light.

“Fuck,” I said and pulled the door to Poison open.

“W-what?” said the girl.

“Nothing.”

The bar itself was not even a little bit cleaner. The opposite. The fancy padlock was gone from the door. I heard noise from behind there, music to cover it up.

The sex demon saw me right away, even as I glanced to the only customer in the front, a guy at a table who had a pawn on his lap, the pawn just a boy with pupils so wide he had to be a

million miles away from feeling. The guy had his filthy hands all over the boy.

“Go to your sibling,” I said and made for the guy.

I went into moving silently mode. The guy didn't see me coming, nor did he hear me, not even on the sticky floor, but the boy looked up at me.

Forlorn. That was the word. Like a kite in a tornado.

I grabbed the child by a too-thin wrist, pulled him up. The human was about to open his mouth and complain. Before he could, I slammed his face into the filthy table, hard, so hard any and all of the fucking germs living on its surface got pushed into the newly formed cuts and bruises. I did it again, and again. One more time.

“Erm,” someone said. “Could you let him go?”

I turned to see the sex demon, Rae. They made eye contact before dropping their gaze.

“Why would I let this fucking filth go?” I asked.

“Not...I meant Laurie.” They pointed at the boy. It clicked. Laurie wasn't high at all. He was under Rae's sex demon magic, allowing him not to feel, a blessing in disguise.

“Sure.” I let go of him.

Rae took his hand. “Ella, take him and clean him up a little, please.”

Rae's sister, Ella, nodded and pulled Laurie with her through to the back where Aggravated Assault had escorted me earlier.

“How many in the back?” I asked.

“Excuse me?”

“Assholes like that. In the back. I want a headcount.”

Rae looked at me with wide eyes. “There’s still a fight happening, and there’s this guy, Gabe. He’s the creature minder and ringmaster.” They put air quotes around that.

I shrugged. “Fine. I’ll go count them myself.” I walked toward the open door.

“Wait, you’re going back there?”

“Looks like it.”

I heard them hurry across the floor, their shoes making gluey noises. “I’ll show you.”

I gave them a sideways glance. “Is this operation so complicated that I need a dedicated guide?”

They bit their lip but didn’t stop, stoically keeping pace.

This area smelled not dissimilar to the other back area, except the scent of fresh blood was much stronger. Mingling with old, dried blood, it created an atmosphere that made me want to gag, but going by how cigarette smoke was also in the mix, the people usually coming here didn’t have that issue.

To the right, against a faded poster of an old band, a human was getting head. I made a beeline for him.

“Hey, you perv—” he started before his eyes went glassy, much like Laurie’s had been.

“Handy.” I nodded to Rae, then punched the human in the neck.

The woman stumbled back. She was human too.

“We’re closing early today,” Rae told her, then said to me, “She doesn’t work here. She works for him.” They pointed at the guy on the floor.

I looked at her. “Don’t ever come back here.”

She looked freaked out, all right, the way she wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, not caring about the smudged lipstick and the spit on her chin. I decided to leave it at that. If Hawthorne wanted a word with her later, they could find her themselves.

I turned to where the music and the noises bloomed. Rae stuck to my side, stubbornly, maybe stupidly.

“Gabe has a cattle prod,” they said.

“Of course he does.”

The door I wanted was being propped open with a bag of road salt. The mundaneness of that contrasted sharply with the ugly sounds of pain and fun, games and filth. As if to set the theme, a staircase led down to a basement.

“Did you bring a gun now?” Rae asked.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“That’s good,” they said.

“If you say so.”

They were less noisy on the stairs than they had been on the dirty floor, not that sex demons were renowned for their quiet natures. And this was not an excursion that particularly required stealth either.

The basement was finished, either a former storage room or backstage area, maybe even something for private parties. The walls were painted red at the bottom, black at the top. By the stairs, hooks and holes in the wall told me that whatever this place had been before, they'd had decorations of some sort here.

Poison didn't do decorations as became very clear when the stairs ended and the event came into view. Oddly, the round, homemade cage in the middle, set on a black tile floor, reminded me of Shamhat's stage.

The commonalities ended with how the cage had been situated. Chairs sat around it, folding chairs and older ones that must've come with the place. People also stood, walked around with beers in their hands. On some of the chairs, the pawns not used for fighting entertained the audience, and I was sure the audience members had paid for the pleasure.

Some of the pawns sitting on laps or kneeling on the floor showed signs of having been inside the cage. Some were bound, the shifters probably. In the cage, one pawn had turned wolf while another with pale blond hair and the clichéd purple eyes that often went with pointy-eared pawns had one fist raised, the other arm hanging limply by his side.

Gabe stood out like a rotten tooth in a model's mouth. He was leaning against a shoddily mounted blackboard. The Bluetooth speaker blaring the music stood on an old crate next to him, and the prod he held loosely in his right hand while a cigarette was in his left.

I shot him four times in the chest, and he didn't even see because he was watching the match.

"Ah," Rae said and followed it by a low squeal before they could control themselves.

I'd stuck to the wall and the shadows, habit more than anything, and the humans didn't really notice. The wolf in the cage saw, and the elven dude looked where the wolf was looking.

I shot the speaker next, which was ineffective but fucking satisfying. It yipped, then died.

It still took people a moment to see me and put my presence together with Gabe, sliding down the wall in slow motion and leaving a patch of blood where he'd stood.

"Poison is permanently closed. Get the fuck out."

"I paid for the night," one guy said, not getting it.

"Yeah, where's Rick? We have a bet going."

I was about to solve this situation in a permanent way—there was a spare magazine in one of my hidden pockets—when I sensed more pawns coming down the stairs. I turned but relaxed when I saw the polished tips of expensive shoes.

Simeon came into view first. The pawns with him were dressed a lot like him although none quite matched his sleekness.

I put my gun away and asked, “Business trip?”

The lawyers—I had to assume they had a law degree in addition to fangs—filed past him and took over escorting people up and out, compelling here and there in lieu of using force.

Simeon looked around, his eyes narrowing, before saying to me, “I consider it charity work. Like picking up trash off the street. Everyone should do it every now and then.” He looked from me to Rae, from Rae to the cage. “Abigail, send the healers down here, please.”

He ignored me for a moment, walked past Gabe, who was still not finished with dying, and tore the door to the cage open instead of bothering with something as mundane as a key.

“This is over,” he said. “Hawthorne is shutting this operation down.”

I said, “I’ll go, get some takeout.”

“You what?” Simeon said.

“Takeout.” I headed toward the stairs and waited until a set of two healers had come down it, an older guy and a younger woman. I’d seen them around before.

“The stench down here,” the guy said.

“Peppermint oil,” the woman said.

Then they saw me and quickly looked away, very nearly ran toward the cage. One of the lawyers was talking to a pawn in a corner, but she was quietly crying, perfectly unresponsive.

Fucking Caecilius.

Rae was still with me when we got to the head of the stairs where one of the lawyers—Abigail, I was pretty sure—was texting and looking as if she'd just stepped out of some six-figure contract negotiations.

She nodded at me, looked at Rae. "I'll need your name and a few other details."

Rae, little cunning sex demon they were, said, "I'm with the Black Shuck."

"The fuck you are."

Whatever I could fault them for, lacking bravery wasn't it, because Rae, very much unprompted and discouraged if anything, put both their arms around my right one and moved in close. And they weren't even attempting to frisk me this time around.

"I'm with him," they said.

I was about to give the little demon a piece of my mind in as few words as possible when their sister dashed at them and hugged Rae close, thereby also sort of hugging me, or at least my arm.

"I...see?" Abigail the vampire lawyer said, lifting her phone as if she wanted to get back to texting.

The little demon's demon spawn sister lifted her face, the whole makeup situation now worse, and said, "Thank you. Again."

"It's fine, you can leave already," Simeon said from behind me. Fuck. I hadn't even noticed him coming up the stairs. "Enjoy the takeout."

As a grand total, the day had been a disaster, and exactly nothing had gone as it should have. I left Poison with a sex demon and their sister clinging to me like a curse, my mind occupied by a too-pale face and blue and golden eyes.



Ming's was an old place, sort of like a family restaurant in a way. Inside, it looked like a generic Chinese restaurant as imagined by an American, red and gold, round tables and chopsticks galore in decorative tins, smiling buddhas and plastic flowers, all set against a backdrop of Chinese music.

The Lung family had come here in the 1800s as far as I knew and had brought their tradition of Cantonese cuisine with them, although over the years, they'd expanded on that, had adapted with each new generation while not forgetting the old recipes.

They were also snakes, literally, though not in the way Caecilius was, thank fuck, and they knew my order and how to deliver it. I didn't usually come in for a sit-down meal, but I was not going to take two scantily dressed new adults, if one

was being generous, up to my apartment, so one of the private dining rooms of the family restaurant it was.

Back here, the décor was less flashy and more traditional, more business and fancier, if you wanted that. It was lucky they were pretty much open around the clock and prepared to serve dinner for breakfast.

“What exactly is this?” Ella asked, examining her fermented tofu with her spoon.

“Stick with the dumplings,” I said.

Ella kept at it with the spoon, so I ignored her.

“We’re grateful for the invitation,” Rae said.

“What fucking invitation?”

They poured me some of the chrysanthemum tea, doing a pretty elegant job of it. “We can be—I can be useful. To you.”

I sighed. “Are we back to you explaining to me the differences between incubi and succubi?”

Rae put the tea pot on the table without spilling anything. “If that’s what you want.”

Ella looked up from licking some of the tofu off her spoon. “What? No.” She looked at me. “You’re not like that. You saved me. And you said I wouldn’t have to worry anymore.”

“When the fuck did I say that? Let me rephrase: no, I never said that. Now shut your mouth and eat your tofu. It’s good for you.”

Her eyes, worse even than raccoon eyes with the makeup, went wide. “That’s what that is? Doesn’t taste like tofu.”

Rae reached over to their sister. Of course they’d have signals. This one made Ella go quiet and indeed eat her tofu. She also piled dumplings on her plate, focusing on her food.

“What I’m trying to say is, I can be of use. You’ve seen that,” Rae continued.

I went for spicy noodles but stopped to wipe at a spot of blood on my wrist. I had no memory of whose it was or when it had gotten there.

“I don’t need a sidekick. You’d have been better off staying at Poison with Hawthorne, let them process you. You’d be better off asking Cinnamon Roll for a gig.”

“Who?”

“Cinnamon Bun? Or just Cinnamon. Shamhat’s stripper.”

“Oh.” They looked down at their empty plate. “I wouldn’t want to be a bother.”

I snorted, bit into some of the noodles and savored the flavor, the sesame oil and chili. “But you happily bother me? Lovely.”

Rae’s shoulders tensed, their neck a rigid brush stroke, much like the calligraphy on the walls. “I’ll do anything. I’ll clean. Cook? I can cook for you. Please.” They paused, clearly trying to come up with something else they could offer. “Please.”

“Don’t need any of the above. Why though? Why not stick with Hawthorne? They’re a lot nicer than me.”

Rae looked at me again. “Ella’s underage, human, and I don’t have custody. I’m sure as fuck not letting that degenerate who calls himself her father get his hands on her.”

“Not your father?”

They lifted their eyes to me. “He doesn’t call himself that.”

I rolled my eyes. Because it stung. This was too much like the farmer, whether he insisted I call him Papa or not. “Simeon would happily figure that out for you.”

“No. I don’t trust anyone. Never should have to start with. But you found my sister and brought her back to me. That’s more than anyone has ever done, so.”

Ella was chewing on a piece of dumpling, but she glanced over at Rae. They both looked really young at that moment. But they were not even remotely my problem. If I’d stopped and taken care of every child to cross my path, I’d be running an orphanage by now. It wasn’t in my skill set. I didn’t do caring and protecting. I was good for vengeance, and exactly none of the things that needed to happen after. I’d lived long enough to accept that about myself.

I thought of the boy on the subway again. Fuck. Man. His hand had been so warm. I should stop thinking about him. If I was smart, I would.

“Excuse me. I need to make a phone call,” I said and left my noodles and the two of them at the table.

I stepped outside where I could see the corridor that led through to the back. One of the Lung servers, a man in his thirties, probably a cousin, poked his head out of the kitchen.

“Mr. Bennet?”

“Just stepping out to make a call,” I said and walked past a fat buddha, smiling his contagious smile, to the goldfish tank where even the fish floated sluggishly, dreaming their underwater dreams. I rounded it so I could keep an eye on the door behind which the sex demon and their sister were eating.

I dialed Valentin.

“You want to come pick up the heads? My people are feeling a little unsure about whether to detach and wrap them for you or whether you have a special technique and they should leave the pleasure to you.”

“Not quite yet,” I said. “But they can do the chopping and the wrapping.”

“Give me the address where you want them mailed, and we’ll do that as well,” Valentin said.

I considered it. It wouldn’t make that much of a difference, surely, if Hawthorne started watching the glover. But it would. Caecilius would know, in the way that he did with his knack for it, brought on by his curse, although the seed for it had been there when he’d been human.

It would escalate from me giving him the metaphorical finger to me involving a third party, and that would make him think he could escalate even more and do shit that would

involve Hawthorne. The thought of Elias, thwarted by a stapler and confronted with Caecilius's shit was not appealing.

"I'll mail it. I'm calling about the subway."

"We'll send you a cleaning bill."

"You won't. It was part of the job. I'm talking about the human witness."

"Ah. We're working on that. I'll have someone take care of it if necessary."

"You won't."

"No?"

I tapped the side of the fish tank, waking a sleeping angelfish. He came to inspect my finger through the glass. "No. You'll tell me who he is and everything else you find out about him. You'll tell Simeon to get one of his PIs on it."

"I will? I will. I'll also bill you for it."

"Sure."

"Why though?"

"Do you really think I'll answer that?"

Valentin sighed. "You know, when someone as good at what I do as I am knows why he is doing something, he does a better job."

"You just need to find out a name. Simeon's PI can do the rest."

"Very well. I'm intrigued though. How is the food?"

The angelfish was kissing the glass, trying to make contact from its world to mine. “If you think I’m fucking either the sex demon or the very much underaged human, the answer is no.”

“I didn’t say that, but noted. I’ll tell my people to wrap your heads and put them on ice for you.”

“Thank you, Valentin,” I said, meaning it. I hated sawing through spinal columns, absolutely hated it.

“Pleasure. I’ll call you with a name when I have it. Oh, the heads will be at the Hawthorne Morgue.”

I hung up. The fish was still interested, and I pressed the pad of my finger so it could see there was more beyond the glass than it knew.

“Stupid angelfish. You’re like a human.” I bent forward to get a better look at it, and of course, there was gold in the fish’s eyes. “Good thing I don’t believe in signs.”



When I opened the door to the private dining room, Ella had finished eating, had slid her chair to her sibling’s, who was busy holding the girl. Fuck.

“I’m sorry. She’s tired,” Rae said.

I sighed, leaned back. “Mr. Lung?”

The server hurried toward me. “Yes, sir, Mr. Bennet?”

I pointed at the table. “All of this to go, please. And some extra dumplings and fermented tofu as well.”

He gave a curt nod. “Right away.” He called for a few extra hands in Cantonese, which was about all I could make out in the language, and everything was neatly wrapped in the white and red takeout containers I was used to in under five minutes.

“Grab the food,” I told Rae, who did so and also grabbed their sister.

The girl’s eyes kept falling shut in the back of the SUV, and Rae was waning as well. The only reason I wasn’t was probably dying earlier and sleeping lots before that. Since last Christmas, more or less.

“Where are we going?” Rae asked in the elevator of Sundial Tower just before it opened to the lobby.

“You’re following me.”

They did.

The Star-Garbed baby-faced wolf was still at the lobby desk. Or maybe he was there for another shift. I had lost track by now. He really had the blue wolf eyes, but I now found that I didn’t really care for them.

He perked up, mildly shocked that I was clearly approaching him trailed by...well, not people who belonged here.

“Hi. You’re Star-Garbed, right?”

He nodded. “Yes, Mr. Bennet. How can I help you this morning?”

I pointed a thumb at Rae and Ella. “These two need a place to stay. Small apartment maybe. And clothes because what

they have is barely more than underwear. Also all the other essentials, and Rae needs a job.”

He blinked at me, and his mouth fell open. “Aah...”

“Your pack has been handling real estate in the city for generations, and you own a local deli chain.”

“W-we sure do,” he said. “I’m just thinking who to call.”

I wiped my face. “Either Lola or Atkins. Take your pick. You have their numbers?”

“Of course. For emergencies.”

I nodded. “Didn’t they tell you when I ask you to do something and you don’t know how, that constitutes one of those?”

He nodded again. “Atkins. I’ll call Atkins. He’ll handle it.”

“Awesome,” I said and walked back to the elevator.

Rae was quick though and managed to grab me by the sleeve of my coat.

“Thank you, Mr. Bennet. Really, if I can ever—”

“Save it. You’ll never.” I pointed, whistled, and the Star-Garbed looked up from the landline he had pressed to his ear. “And one enrollment in freak high.” I pointed at Ella, and he nodded and repeated the same to Atkins. “You’re getting that, and the food. See what you can do with it, and don’t ask me for help again.”

Their lips tightened, but they nodded.

“See?” Ella said. “I knew you were one of the good ones.”

“Right,” I said and turned back toward the elevators. “That’s why I’m headed to the morgue now to collect heads to mail them across the Atlantic. Sweet dreams, little girl.”

Offest day ever.

Six

MAIL



CONSIDERATE OF THE COMFORT level of others, I took a quick detour upstairs to change my shirt, wash the worst of the dried blood off my skin.

I didn't bother with the coat though. I had a spare, but I knew where things were in this, and I was also too lazy to find a clean pair of pants.

Dawn was breaking when I pulled out of the parking garage, still in the SUV. The new day came with the color of blood and faded roses, seductive lilacs subtly blending the clouds.

For February, it was unusually nice, and while I had no business or reason, I wondered whether the man from the subway was still awake, whether he was watching this sunrise like I was. What he was thinking as he watched the colors turn and fade into a new day.

"He might not be for men," I told the windshield as I accelerated after a red light. "He might be married with

children. He might have a girlfriend. Or a boyfriend? That would be a lesser problem.”

A lesser problem. The actual problem was that I had all sorts of intentions for some random human who'd held my hand while I'd died. While pain the kind of which I hadn't felt in a long time had found and taken hold of me.

After this long, I didn't think that my curse had changed. I'd tried too much to have any hope left of breaking it, had died too many deaths and spoken too many prayers to non-existent entities.

“The only thing I know is I want to do a lot more than kiss his cheek again. Fuck me.”

For about three seconds I considered calling Shamhat and telling her I was going to stop by. Thankfully, the moment passed.

I made my way to the morgue, yet another institution Valentin had built parallel to what human society had. Pawns and cursed needed these things too, but in a different way a lot of the times.

The building that housed the morgue also housed a few medical practices, not all of them taking humans, but some. Therefore, it was a respectable building, and Valentin had maintained it, meaning the facade was new, the signage out front was too, and inside, the crisp, climate-controlled air welcomed all visitors who came in through the automatic doors.

The morgue remained unmentioned on the signs, but I knew it was in the basement. The lobby was mostly just the elevators and the stairs, which I took. The cameras would pick up on me sooner that way, and I wouldn't have to wait at the door.

Sure enough, as I came down to the bottom flight, a pawn opened the solid-looking door with a keypad next to it.

“Mr. Bennet,” she said from under bangs that fell into her eyes.

I let the door fall shut behind me before I said, “You have my heads.”

“We do,” she said, gestured for me to follow.

The morgue was fancy, tiled and white-walled with individual exam rooms—specimen rooms?—and really good lighting. As far as I knew they never had as many specimens as they needed to teach healers and doctors, but they made do.

We walked past the offices when one door opened and a human came out, saw us, and froze.

I looked him over, just as a matter of course since I'd never seen him. Thin. Young. Twitchy.

“He's new,” the pawn said, waved to him.

He went back into the room, closed the door, and left us to our business.

Our goal was the general morgue, where they did intake. And whatever else you did in a morgue. There were six slabs

total, pull-out freezers at the far end as well as a walk-in freezer. On the other side, they had an equipment room, and across the corridor, the lab was situated.

Lab and morgue had window walls facing the corridor between them, meaning you had a clear line of sight from one workstation to the other, which I assumed was practical.

The hivelings were working on the bulky corpses as we came in.

Sandy-haired and brown-eyed, they looked at us as one, which they were, in a way.

I could never tell them apart and never bothered to. Six of them were on detail today, and so I numbered them, left to right.

“We took them off just above C4,” Two said.

“And cleaned them up a little. For presentation,” Four added while Three headed toward one of the pull-out freezers.

One looked up from the leg they were currently dissecting. “We put them in a box for you already, Mr. Bennet.”

Three took said box out of the freezer and walked it over to a free slab. You’d think I had ordered a piece of jewelry, and they were showing me the final product.

“Will this do?” Six asked while Three opened the box.

They had done a good job. Probably better than I would have. The heads were facing up, and they’d even vacuum sealed them in plastic and put them on a bed of Styrofoam. As

far as threats sent via mail went, this one would look professional as fuck. Not that the glover would be particularly delighted about that.

“Oh,” Five said. “Should we add something for the smell?”

They all looked at me. “Kitty litter,” they said as one. “Wait here,” Two said, peeled off his gloves, and jogged out of the room.

“You have kitty litter?” the pawn who’d accompanied me asked them.

They all nodded in creepy synchronicity. “For smells.”

“Right,” she said. “Your job is very different from my job.”

Two jogged back in with a large plastic bag. It had a feline on it who looked delighted about the odor-free business they had committed.

“Thanks much,” I said when Two and Three went about adding the small granules to the Styrofoam.

“You’ll still want express delivery,” Six said.

“Absolutely,” One agreed.

“Want a hand, Mr. Bennet?” Five asked.

“I can manage,” I said and took the box when they were done adding the litter to it.

“Very elaborate,” One said.

They nodded. “Almost like a gift,” Six said.

“Heads aren’t gifts,” Two said.

“Are they?” Three asked.

I adjusted my hold on the box. “Not in this case. But under the right circumstances, I don’t see why not. See you around, Hive.”

“Until next time, Mr. Bennet,” they said, or at least four of them did.

The pawn led me right back to the door through which I’d come, but since it was a full-service morgue, she headed up the stairs ahead of me and held the door for me.

“Have a nice day,” she said before returning to whatever it was she did.

Back in the car with my package on the passenger seat, I requested black coffee to go through the Hawthorne app and got handed that through the passenger window five blocks away.

I knew Valentin was especially proud of how the app handled orders like these, and he’d invested in it, seeing as how drinks were the one thing vampires could consume, some of them at least.

The fresh brew was good, the thought of almost being done even better. It helped me cope with the congested streets and just too many red lights on my way.

Yet, it did nothing to pull my mind from nudging at the memory of the man on the subway. I was tempted to call Valentin, ask for updates. It took most of my lacking self-control not to.

The Postman lived in an old brownstone, the same he'd lived in for the better part of a century. It wasn't close, and it took me nearly thirty minutes to get there. While Hawthorne had hired him, he had a thing about mail and privacy and integrity. I appreciated that a lot.

I parked out front, relieved that I got there at just the right time for the working class to leave for the day and free up some parking real estate.

Technically, the ground floor of the brownstone was an office, and the Postman kept the door open, even had a tiny little sign just below eye level, barely larger than two books of matches, saying that it was open.

Still, he had ancient planters out front, had allowed whatever it had been there growing inside to wilt while weeds took root. Combined with a gorgeous if wild-looking creeper that hid the building's wall, it made the house appear unkempt, uninviting, sending stay away vibes to those who might have otherwise stumbled in.

With my package in my arms, I made it up the stairs and wrangled the door open.

Inside, the hallway ended in a door. Above a cutout in the wall to the left, a sign loomed, making clear the counter at a little over waist height below it was "The Post Office." Old light fixtures added a glow, incandescent, and the place smelled of dust and old things.

I lifted my package onto the counter, hit the call bell, the kind you found in stylish hotels designed to look vintage, and

grabbed some clear tape I saw on the other side.

The sound of many scuttling feet came toward me from the other side, and the Postman appeared faster than a person would have been able to at walking speed.

“Please keep your hands on the far side of the counter,” he said.

The funny thing about the Postman was watching him move the mouth of his mimicry. It was man-shaped, and his voice sounded male. Even after all these years, the lips and words were not in sync. I had a suspicion he liked it that way.

“Sorry, but I need to close this up,” I said.

“I see,” the mimicry said. If you looked close enough—too closely, depending on comfort level—you could see the thick hairs set along the mimicry’s body. They were more like feelers though, or whatever it was spiders had.

He watched me patiently enough, although I could hear the feet moving under the counter, out of sight. They didn’t make the tapping sounds of toes or heels on the hardwood, more like the harder noises and scraping sounds of insects biding their time.

I said, “I need this sent express. To Florence.”

“Certainly. We can arrange that for you. No sender?”

“No sender.”

I pushed the package and the tape across the counter to the Postman.

“Would you care to fill out the recipient’s information, or should I, sir?”

My handwriting was distinct. I’d worked hard at it when I’d started learning, and I was too proud of it to really ever change it much. Caecilius would take me writing a name on the head box as a personal note, a sign of affection I held and wasn’t aware of, as something romantic even. I frowned at the thought.

“You do it.”

I recited the address from memory and watched as the mimicry wrote it on a label in Sharpie. Just blocky letters there, although I knew he was pretty dexterous if he needed to be.

He attached a few other labels and stamped the thing. There was a code in all of that, an art form that communicated what this was to the right people and the approximate level in society from whence the package had come and to where it was going. It was fancy. And just traceable enough. The authorities in Florence it would likely confound if the glover called them before he did Caecilius’s people.

“We have moved to live tracking since the last time you were here, sir,” the Postman said, printing and attaching one final label, this one with a QR code. “All you need to do is scan this with your Hawthorne app.”

I chuckled. “Lovely.”

“No reason to lose sight of a tasty morsel like this,” the Postman said.

“Of course not.” I pulled two hundred dollar bills out of my pocket and held them out to the mimicry.

“People don’t generally tip anymore these days.”

“What, I’m people now?”

He moved. Not like humans did, but it was the equivalent of his nostrils flaring, only his whole body did that, and the mimicry lost shape for a heartbeat, accentuating the wrongness to the eye and breaking the illusion in a way the most unsuspecting fly caught in a web wouldn’t have been able to ignore.

He gingerly took the bills with his approximation of a hand and inclined his head decoy. “You are not people, sir. May I help you with anything else?”

“Not today. Just don’t lose this.” I tapped the package.

He made a clicking, chitinous noise. Laughter maybe. “We haven’t in a good one hundred years, sir. Rest assured, we have no intention of breaking that streak.”

“Awesome. See you next time I have something to send that needs extra care and attention.”

“We strive to please, sir. Until the next time.”

When the Postman’s door fell shut behind me, I took a deep breath.

“Finally.”

It really had been a long enough day.

Seven

MOONLIGHT



*The dangers of dreams came from their tendency to stick.
And what else could you do about a sticky dream but to
chase it?*

WHEN I GOT BACK to the apartment, I took stock. Mostly of myself. For the purpose, I grabbed the idling Christmas candy and started eating some. It was a little stale, but tasted pleasantly of cinnamon, marzipan, and almonds.

I needed a shower, a change of clothes, and my nail polish was chipping, so I needed to take care of that as well.

I glanced at the winding stairs that led up to my bedroom while I bit into a chocolate Santa's head.

“Need to change the sheets. In case he wants to come home with me. Hmm.” I took out my phone and called Simeon.

“Yesterday, you hang up on me, and today your phone is charged and you can't stop calling me,” he said.

“This is the first time I’ve called you today. I assume you have a name?”

“Yes. Simeon Hawthorne. You like it?”

“Stop fucking around.”

He paused. “What is this, Shuck? What do you want from”—I heard papers being shuffled—“a waiter?”

Waiter. That made sense then. He’d come off a late shift. Had he worked a double? He’d not looked that tired, but sort of worryingly pale.

“You are free to not care about that.”

He sighed. “Fine. But completely unrelated, can I just remark that getting laid every now and then can drastically improve your mood?”

“Unrelated? Fuck off. Messenger the file over right now.”

“I’ll send someone. Do you want to have the name now?”

I considered that. “Yes.”

“Amory Philip Saintclair.”

Amory. Amory. “Send it over.”

“Will—“ I hung up on him and stuffed my face with more chocolate.

“Amory. Fancy name for a waiter. Why are you so fancy and yet work as a waiter, Amory?” I asked the remaining candy.

To distract myself, I got up and started on the sheets. On my way to take them down to the laundry room, I dropped off my

coat at the front desk, telling the house pawn I wanted it dry cleaned and ready to wear within three hours. I enjoyed giving them little challenges every now and then.



A pawn in a nice suit dropped the file into my hands at my door, accompanied by a house pawn, because they didn't just let random pawns walk in here off the street.

"Thanks," I told them and closed the door with the heel of my foot.

The first page of the file was a very basic summary consisting of full name, address, employment status, date of birth, all the boring stuff. I read that first.

Amory was twenty-seven. I'd have pegged him for younger. He was a waiter full-time, it looked like, seeing as how he'd been doing it for years. And thank fuck, no spouse or offspring.

I left the candy back on the couch and headed over to my dining table, opened up my laptop. Amory worked at a place called the Moonlight Diner. It came right up but had no website. The location was good though, and close to a subway stop, which explained that run-in.

I read through the reviews and scrolled through the photos, hoping against reason that someone had taken a picture of him. Among the nearly five hundred, there wasn't a single one of a

waiter with lovely brown hair and blue eyes with a golden corona though.

The food looked good. Cherry pie. They had cherry pie. A lot of places did, and I liked going out for some cherry pie, but the thought of Amory bringing me some, maybe topped with whipped cream, that was...I wished it were just arousing. It wasn't. I wanted that man to serve me food with a smile because...

“Because I'm clearly losing my shit.”

I closed the laptop and rubbed my eyes. Checked my phone. It was barely noon.

I navigated to the Hawthorne app. Really, the app was a nice piece of work, and while I had full access and was cleared for all requests, I didn't make as much use of it as I could have. I tapped on the “request service” button and filled out a ticket for a quick surveillance op, then reconsidered and filled out another.

I turned my phone's sound on, setting it to hoot for all incoming communication, and walked to the center of my apartment.

“Say he lets me in his pants right away, and say he comes here with me.” I spun in a three-sixty. “I need to fucking child proof the place.”

The weapons I had stored around the apartment could be quickly collected, but the walk-in armory by the door was a bit

of a hassle. Of course there was no telling how this was going to go.

“It shouldn’t go at all,” I said and walked to the spare room I used for storage to grab a few boxes. “It shouldn’t go, and I should stop here.” I picked up a few moving boxes, folded them into operational configuration. “Then again, Pandora stole hope from the gods and carried it to earth in a jar, and now we’re all stuck with it.”

And I was, for the next two hours, stuck with moving my weaponry and body armor away from where a person I really wanted to see smile might catch sight of them. And not smile.

It was weird. I hadn’t cared about anyone smiling in ages. My back itched a few times throughout, almost like feathers were brushing across it.



I finished in record time with a round of vacuuming and swiping the floor, and after all that, took a very much necessary shower.

My phone hooted while I was sitting naked at the dining table, painting my nails a perfectly sleek black.

I got to the app’s screen without smudging anything and received the double confirmations that someone—presumably the human resident—was inside the apartment in question and that no person fitting the description I’d sent was waiting tables at the Moonlight Diner currently.

The pawn who'd looked at the apartment had actually been additionally helpful, pointing out that he'd sensed and sniffed only a single occupant. I saved that pawn for potential work in the future and went back to my nails, all but whistling while I applied the final coat and let it dry.

The file, of course, was still on the table as well, and I had still not read it.

If I did but ended up close to Amory, as close as I wanted to be, I'd have to hide the fact I'd read it. Or I could not read it now but later in case it didn't go well approaching him and I had to go looking in there to make it easier to get as close to him as I wanted to be.

The latter was powerfully unappealing. "Unless he has a lover. What if he has a workplace affair with his boss? Or co-waiter? Or customer?"

Unasked for, hope raised her head, and somewhere deep inside me, a tiny, brittle voice asked, *What if he has no one and is yours, has just been waiting to be yours?*

Hope was the strongest poison I knew, and most of the known antidotes had scarcely any effect. All you could do with hope was cut out the infection, and I didn't want to do that.



The hybrid was perfect for blending into the ever-same background of a city such as ours. I was parked across the

street and watching. With the increasing darkness that eclipsed the day like a tidal wave, I could use my binoculars without being seen, and unless there was a lot of traffic in the road between where I was parked and the diner's large window, people's lips were easy to read from this vantage point.

Before Amory even got there, I'd picked out that the waiters had a certain way of greeting customers, *Welcome to the Moonlight Diner*. It was cute. No, cute was Amory doing it in my imagination. It was a nice touch, just that little bit of a special thing, much like the entire place.

Everything about it seemed understated, from the display case of pies to the Formica tables that were quickly wiped clean after each customer to the big clock with the moon on the minute hand over the kitchen passthrough. The uniforms the waiters wore almost took me back to the fifties, but not quite, and the booths looked invitingly comfortable.

When Amory finally got there, my attention was all his. Lip reading was not an exact science, and I didn't catch everything, but I caught enough to make me want to be a customer. His customer. And he was apparently doing a solo shift today, moving constantly and barely taking a break to sip some water or rest his feet.

This lasted for a while, and I didn't want to walk in there while he was serving all these other people. At around midnight, hope made me do another stupid thing, and I called Vico.

"This is *The Doge*. How may we help you today?"

“Vico, it’s me.”

“Mr. Bennet, good evening. Would you like to make a reservation and select from our special menu?”

“No. I have a request. You can reject it.”

“Go on, please?”

“I’d like a simple dinner. Well, probably more like early breakfast. For me and a plus one. Private.” I took a breath. “Romantic.”

“We are not open to the public until later in the day, so we can happily accommodate. May I inform Chef?”

“Is it going to make him stay and do the cooking?”

“Certainly, Mr. Bennet.”

“In that case, yes. Don’t tell that nosy vampire.”

“Could you specify?”

“Simeon. Or Valentin. Fuck, or the baby vampire.”

“Yes, that won’t be a problem. Would you like to request anything in advance?”

I looked through the binoculars again. There were so few customers now, and unless I was mistaken, the cook was telling Amory he was closing up the kitchen.

“No. If things go badly, this’ll fall through anyway. I hope that’s okay.”

“Ah. We’ve all been in a state of love. Or passion. You will get no judgment here, Mr. Bennet.”

“Fucking refreshing.”

“Just how we like it. Anything else I can help you with?”

“No, thanks, Vico. Hope to see you later.”

Eight

AMORY



Sometimes you run into something that you don't understand. It's like breaking through the ice over a frozen lake, your body and lungs not knowing what to do for a split second before everything starts to hurt, only good.

THE DINER CLOSED AT three in the morning, and I crossed the street while reserving a cab on my phone, timed my entrance so I would get there just before he locked the door. After all, what good was immortality if you couldn't at least manage to make an entrance every now and then.

And I did. There was a nice bell above the door. It jingled, reminding me of spring. Amory was wiping down one of the tables, looking tired, but still not slacking.

“Welcome to the—” he said before freezing, robbing me of what I'd fantasized about for hours, back there in my hybrid.

But seeing me silenced him. He was so pale already that I couldn't tell if he got any paler, but his mouth fell open and his eyebrows flew up. I really wanted to do things to that mouth, especially seeing it that way now. All open.

“Hi,” I said. “Cat got your tongue?”

That didn't work at all. He didn't speak to me, couldn't comprehend. Perhaps he had trouble knowing whether I was real or not, solid or not. I walked toward him slowly. He didn't run or back away, both of which were good signs.

Slow as fat clouds on a balmy midsummer's day, I lifted my hand to the cheek I had kissed, cupped that cheek.

Amory's skin was cool to the touch, and possibly even softer than I remembered.

“What's your name?” I asked, glancing at his name tag.

That got me what I wanted.

“Amory. What's yours?”

The words came out a little shy. Cute. And made me realize I hadn't thought about this part of a potential conversation. I'd grown used to people knowing who I was over time.

“Hmm,” I said. I couldn't tell him Bennet because everyone called me that. Black Shuck was absolutely out of the question, because it would make me sound like someone who didn't relate to reality properly, and humans tended to take issue with that. “Call me whatever you like.”

It felt right, giving him the choice. He could call me Ghost and try banishing me with a kiss, or he could call me Aiden, because everyone knew Aidens were supposed to be hot. Either way, the name he gave me I would happily take. Accept. Make it my own.

He looked at me like the words didn't make any sense at all, his mouth opening as if he was going to give me a name, then closing again. I felt a sense of loss at that. I'd been curious who he'd want me to be.

"What?" he said instead, the word coming out like an uneven spot in a cake's perfect icing.

"Pick a name you like. And call me that." I was about to add *I dare you*, just to see how that would go with him. Though truth be told, he looked a little freaked out already.

Was I the kind of person that made others freak out when they saw me? Normally yes, but that was with pawns and other cursed. I didn't really think innocent humans like him would pick up on that.

Amory deflated a little bit, looked like a puppy who'd been tossed in an ice bath. "I don't understand."

Well, maybe I had freaked him out. It was a possibility.

I decided to make this a little easier for him. After all, I had zero intention of calling Vico and telling him things had gone to shit. He'd offer to drink with me. We'd done that once, and we'd both gotten drunk. He'd accidentally poured me a glass which I'd accidentally drunk, and after dying from that on

account of his fucked-up curse, I'd been sober. He, not so much, and catching back up had seemed like too much of a bother, meaning the night had ended with me minding a very drunk murder chef.

“You read?” I asked, then felt stupid. Everyone read these days. It wasn't special anymore like it once had been.

He nodded, a smile playing around his lips that told me he enjoyed reading. Excellent. “Yes.”

“Favorite book?” I asked, aiming for a soft tone of voice.

He stopped staring at me right away and considered that. Hmm. He had a library in his head then. I wanted to know the shape of that library, wanted to explore it, pull all the books off their shelves and examine the bindings, the pages, to see which had been worn by constant or repeated touch, to find where they had bent with the moisture of tears, either laughter or sadness.

“I've read *The Last Unicorn* several times,” Amory said.

How interesting. How intriguing. Beagle wrote that one when he was just twenty-five, about Amory's age. I related to that story a lot and wasn't quite sure why. It made me remember ages past when people believed in beasts that weren't real while ignoring the ones living among them, and it made me hurt in a way only very good stories ever can.

This human, he knew me, and he didn't even know it yet.

“Not Schmendrick,” I said to tease him. “And I've been a Peter.” Briefly. I searched my memory on what I'd read about

Beagle. “Let’s go for the middle name; would Soyer work for you? Would you like to call me that?”

“Sure,” Amory said, the corners of his lips rising with amusement and relief. And wonder. Almost like no one had ever come up to him and asked to be given a name.

I decided to give him a break from what was apparently so very unusual to him and slid into one of the booths. “Wonderful. What’s good here?” I looked around like I didn’t know what food was and needed guidance on the matter.

Amory shifted his weight from one foot to the other. I really needed to get him off those feet. On his back. Maybe later. I’d buy him dinner before any of that.

“We’re about to close.”

I glanced at the clock above the counter. “It’s a minute past three. You should close up. But I came here looking for something”—I gave him another look up and down his body, one that couldn’t be construed as anything but interest—“Sweet. Would you...indulge me and serve me a slice?”

His tongue briefly darted to the corner of his mouth. Then he nodded, almost like he couldn’t make himself throw me out. He walked off, rounding the counter.

I watched his back, his legs, so long and probably muscular from all the many steps he did during a shift. My back tickled as though feathers gently brushed over the skin there.

Amory took a set of keys from the register and glanced at me before closing each of the three locks at the door and turning

the sign. The word “open” looked back at us in a glittery dark blue, all in keeping with the diner’s theme.

I guess you could say we’re meeting under moonlight, I thought and continued watching Amory make his way back behind the counter.

He came back with a blue-rimmed mug and a near-empty pot of coffee, placing the former in front of me and pouring what was probably burned sludge into it.

I considered teasing him about it, just to see what he would do. Teasing, though, was fun when the person you teased was up for it. Amory still didn’t seem to really get what was happening.

He recited the selection of pies for me, not that I couldn’t see them from where I was sitting, ending with, “And there’s one slice of cherry.”

Yes, I thought, sometimes it takes just one taste, just a single cherry’s skin breaking against your teeth and spilling its juices, just a single cherry stone weighing on your tongue.

I would have this man. The hope that had raised its ugly head inside my heart, it told me that I would have this man.

“Was last night real, or was that some kind of prank?” Amory asked out of the blue.

So direct. I liked that. “I think you know the answer to that, Amory.” I took time with his name. I wanted him to get used to hearing me say it. “I’ll take the cherry. I...always liked cherries.”

He dropped his gaze, letting it linger on my hands. I was glad I'd taken the time to get my nails cleaned up. And I was hopeful cleaning up back home had also been a wise investment of my time.

“Coming right up,” he said and picked up the towel he'd used to clean the table.

His hand tightened around it, the knuckles standing out white. Something had scared him, but not enough for him to run. That meant I'd get a chance to figure out what exactly. It was either talking to a dead man, having witnessed a murder, or having seen the faces of a bunch of murderers. Or he thought I was robbing him. Of his last slice of cherry pie.

Which he served up, calm as you please. He placed the morsel in front of me. It was just pie, objectively speaking, but the ruby red filling made me think of so many other things.

“Will you sit with me?” I asked Amory.

He looked over his shoulder. “I should—”

“You straightened the place already. I watched.” *Watched you for hours.* “Come sit with me. Please, Amory.”

Yes. He definitely picked up on that. And he still slid into the booth across from me. He wasn't calm though, and that was my fault.

I said, “I'm not here to hurt you. Those cretins from the subway won't either. I just wanted to meet you.” I watched him and ever so carefully reached for my fork. *Just the tip,* I thought and applied it to the pie.

It was good pie. Not too sweet, and there was still some tartness to the filling, a hint of lemon zest. I didn't think this was exactly the type of cherry I favored, the big, heart-shaped ones, but all the same, it was decent pie.

While I ate, Amory relaxed, though only a fraction. He was waiting for something, the butcher's blade or the boxer's fist, it looked like. I could tell him neither would come all I wanted. I would have to show him that I meant no harm to him.

I aimed to make myself look trustworthy, not that I had the first fucking idea if that ever even worked half as good as I thought it did. "This is excellent. Amory, I'd like to take you out. To...breakfast, technically." I dug through my knowledge of current terminology. "Or dark lunch if you prefer. But let's call it dinner."

His mouth fell open yet again. I liked that look on him. "You mean, like, you want to take me out, *now*?"

The way he said it sounded like he was more shocked about the time of day and had somehow missed that he'd been asked out to dinner. Hmm. Maybe he wasn't into guys after all, although going by how he'd looked at me when he didn't look scared made me think otherwise, and anyway, people his age were at least hetero-flexible these days. Unless they were backwards and set in the ways of boring people.

A nagging in my head made me wonder once again whether there was someone in his life right where I wanted to be, a long-distance thing maybe.

I pushed the heel of my right foot into the ground but remained placid otherwise. “Of course. You got off work”—I glanced at the clock—“eleven minutes ago. No time like the present.”

“But I don’t...”

“To thank you, Amory. Please, let me thank you.”

I waited, hope warming my heart.

“All right,” he said in the end, and I allowed myself a smile.

He kept eyeing me with curiosity and wonder—no, befuddlement—when I picked my fork back up and ate the slice of pie he’d brought me. I wanted to wolf it down. I didn’t. I ate with as much refinement as I could muster and hoped he would see it as appreciation of his service, his workplace. I couldn’t say for certain whether he loved working here, but according to his file, he’d done it for years. He’d also been both confident and comfortable in the space throughout his shift.

On top of that, it was a good slice of pie. When I swallowed the last bit, I was already looking forward to coming here again, ordering the same, watching Amory bring it to me and walk off so I could examine his slightly backside at my leisure.

I also finished the remainder of coffee in one go. It wasn’t as good. It was actually pretty bad. Amory watched me drink it with wide eyes, and I hoped he felt guilty for serving me stale coffee with excellent pie. I might use that against him.

I still had cash on me from earlier and dropped more than enough on the table after neatly piling my dishes.

Amory eyed the money, didn't take it, so I said, "Keep the change."

He took the money but was wary about it. Interesting. A good many people would have experienced an attitude change at this little show of lovely lucre. I'd run into someone who wasn't going to allow himself to be bought quite so easily, or potentially not at all. That made him a little like those toy boxes that unlocked only after you moved the panels on them around correctly. It made him a puzzle. The file I had grew more tempting by the minute.

I watched and listened as he finished closing up the place but remained where I was, not a threat but a constant.

He turned off the lights in this part of the diner, standing by the door to the kitchen, his hand on the light switch.

"I leave through the back. Do you...want me to let you out through the front?"

I stood. "No." I liked how he watched me walk toward him. There was fascination in those blue eyes now. Interest. I reached for the switch, rather his hand on the switch. He didn't flinch, didn't pull it away. My heart beat faster as the room around us fell into darkness. "Let's go, Amory."

I let him lead. The place smelled of oil and the warmth of a kitchen, food freshly and regularly prepared. The kitchen was on the right, three steps from the swing doors. Five steps on,

there was a closed door on the left, and five steps beyond that, a staff bathroom on the right.

The storage room he took me to—at the end of the hallway, just one step past the staff bathroom—had door hinges, but the doors themselves had been removed for practicality. Whoever bought for this place—I was going to assume the owner—was very scared of running out of essentials. Or they were stocking up for a zombie apocalypse.

Canned goods and maraschino cherry jars were normal enough. The obscene amount of napkins really wasn't. There had to be several thousand, plastic wrapped into large bricks and piled waist high.

I decided not to speculate about napkins, keep my focus on what interested me instead. Amory opened one of the lockers that lined the far wall next to the back door. Was he going to change? That would be nice. I'd have to turn my back, would have to offer it at least, but it would still be nice.

He didn't though, just pulled a jacket off a hanger. It was off-brand and just a bit too thin for the February weather still haunting the city.

I wondered whether I should ask if he ran warm when he said, "You know everything is closed this time of day, right?"

Oh, I'd get to impress him. I was immensely looking forward to that.

"Don't worry about that. I know a place."

He lifted his eyebrows but accepted this. I watched him pocket his tips separately from his wallet and got angry. He was taking the subway, fine, but this part of town was generally pretty safe.

“Who mugged you?” I asked.

He closed the locker noisily, shrugged. “Some guys.”

I narrowed my eyes. “What *guys*?” I’d happily tackle their spinal columns with my bone saw.

He looked me squarely in the face. “The kind of people who try to steal from someone who actually worked for it.”

Ookay. He wasn’t to be bought, and he wasn’t going to let me take care of something like that for him. Or at least not without making me work for it.

I said, “You didn’t press charges,” but wanted to ask whether he’d been okay. Hurt. Whether he was scared of dark corners still. Whether he’d let me take him home every night from now on.

He straightened. “It seemed like more trouble than it would have been worth.”

Hmm. Amory wore his uniform with not a button out of place, and with that outdated bow tie very straight. He looked innocent, the rule-following kind. That type, with that skin color, appreciated police authority in my experience.

Yet here he stood, suspicious about whether he’d be helped like he deserved. That made him some version of queer unless I was massively off. My hopes were confirmed.

“You might be right,” I conceded. “If you want something done, the police aren’t the kind of people you want to talk to.” I’d make sure he’d never have to again. I’d have promised him then and there but didn’t want him to get angry about it.

He closed up, looking like he was thinking about my words. Good. When he pocketed his keys, I held out my hand for him to place his own in. It was a test. It was hope testing her wings and preparing to do unspeakable things to my higher reasoning skills.

Amory, who’d held this hand as I had died, touched palm to palm once more, and I could smell the sweet scent of beginnings in the air in that small alley behind the Moonlight Diner.



Amory fascinated me. Not in the way that he was unreadable, because much as I was beginning to like him, he wasn’t. It was the novelty of being with someone who didn’t expect me to be anything. Except maybe human, but that was a bridge we’d cross when the journey took us there.

In the cab, he was mostly quiet. I thought it was a mix of both exhaustion and his natural state of being, a slight awkwardness when it came to making conversation. He wasn’t uncomfortable with it, and he wasn’t uncomfortable with me either. At the same time, I could see his jaw muscles work, could see his forehead crease with wrinkles of worry.

The cab dropped us off close to *The Doge*. It would be waiting close enough in case the night developed to the point where we'd go home together.

These arrangements had been easier years and years ago, though in the current day and age, we could walk down the street holding hands.

"Nothing will be open," Amory told me as he allowed me to walk him to our destination. His forehead was creased again.

"Worrier," I told him, then had to concede, "technically, you are correct."

He looked delightfully confused. Some brightly lit ad screen we walked past illuminated his face in golden yellow and orange. My heart thumped in my chest, the way it did for cartoon characters, distorting, but not in a painful way. *Amory*.

I continued observing the glances he stole at the shop windows and architecture around us. He took note of *The Doge*.

The front of the restaurant wasn't facing a major thoroughfare but a side street. That didn't matter, because it enjoyed an exquisite reputation among the human population and was packed more often than not. People made an effort to find it.

The kitchen entrance was even further removed from the street and required us to round the building. It was then that I realized I needed to worry about Amory. He had happily followed me here. Come to think of it, he'd gotten in a car

with me. I'd done nothing to scare him—apart from dying, maybe—but maybe his school had skipped the stranger danger. It was almost like he was a baby chick who'd never seen a fox.

What if he gets in a car with anyone else, feeds anyone else pie past closing time? I glanced at him. Doesn't look high maintenance. Deceptive.

When Vico opened the back door for us, he looked ten times too excited about working overtime and greeted me by alias. “And the plus one,” he added, taking stock of Amory.

Vico, the moment he recognized what Amory was wearing as a waiter uniform, would grow fond of him. Despite his curse stealing his culinary passion from him, he'd stayed in the hospitality industry. If anyone had respect for waitstaff, it was Vico.

Vico had set a table for two up on the mezzanine. It was cozy, lush, and I couldn't have asked for a table set more perfectly for a first date. He'd even lit candles.

I got Amory comfortably settled in the chair with the back mostly to the stairs while I was facing them, then ordered a bottle from Chef's winery.

Once Vico had left us, doubtlessly to report back to Chef, Amory said, “I don't usually have wine for breakfast.”

I wasn't sure why, but that got me hard. Right there. On a date. Inappropriate and presumptuous.

“Amory. Careful, I may have thought already that you were sweeter than your cherry pie, but you are proving it.”

Sadly, he didn't like that bait. “Why didn't you tell me what your real name was?”

It sounded accusing, maybe a little hurt. And that was good. That meant he cared.

I shrugged and straightened a knife that didn't need straightening. “Bennet isn't my name.”

Amory frowned. “Soyer isn't your name either.”

No, but it's the one you gave me. “It's good enough, Amory.”

Vico snuck up the stairs with the wine. I could only assume he'd “overheard” and was attempting to derail Amory's train of thought. For my benefit. Or because this was the best gossip anyone had had for the better part of the past fifty years.

Amory didn't want to go a la carte but ordered fancy potato dumplings, Italian style. Vico had to be ecstatic about getting a say in what to serve.

I ordered the same. It was going to be a carb-heavy day, but then I'd died a few times and deserved it.

Vico scurried off. Amory looked lost in thought as he examined the table setting. He wasn't intimidated by the assorted knives, forks, and spoons, hadn't been surprised when Vico had removed some of the glassware.

I readjusted my perception. The bow tie. The way he worked at the diner, not slacking off when others would have, his

tendency to obey authority. He'd come from another place, a place where you were taught how to behave without drawing attention and how to carry yourself at a fancy dinner. Waiting tables had come after that, and something had happened between then and now.

“Would you like to try the wine?” I asked gently, tempting him out of his silence.

He nodded and smiled faintly when he lifted his glass.

“To chance meetings,” I said.

We drank together, but not before Amory threw in, “That’s not what I would call it.”

Oh, how I liked him. Obedient, but not too obedient.

I decided to play. “Oh? Tell me.”

He opened his mouth, stopped, considered, started again. “You were—fuck. You couldn’t speak. That’s how fucking deep they cut you. You were bleeding a lot.”

Hmm. I should have offered him free dry cleaning. I’d have to owe him. This conversation was not about his clothes, and I could feel that immortality bridge up ahead, wobbly planks looming.

I said, “I tend to forget how upsetting something like that can be for someone like you. I do apologize.”

He frowned once more as if I’d offended him. “Someone like me?”

“Sweet,” I said in an attempt to narrow down what had given offense. This wasn’t it, so I went on. “Innocent.” Getting warmer, going by how he broke eye contact. “Human, through and through, untouched by any strangeness.”

Funnily enough, he reacted as though a spindle had touched him, eager for blood. Innocent, then. In more ways than I had meant it.

How the fuck is he a virgin?

Then again, maybe he’d tried things with women and just considered himself a virgin when it came to gay sex. It didn’t really matter, but I found myself wishing it was the former. Virginity held no value beyond the imagined, yet there was a thrill in imagining it would only ever be me who got to touch Amory.

He asked, “Are you not human?”

Very briefly, I considered telling him that I was, mostly, but had been cursed by a creature full of evil the likes of which he couldn’t even conceptualize.

I didn’t. “Depends on your definition of the word.”

He lifted his eyebrows. He really had nice eyebrows. “I think you know what I’m asking.” And a nice attitude if he wanted to.

“I do, Amory. It still depends on your definition.”

His eyes flicked down. “But your throat is okay.”

I decided then and there that I would tell him bits and pieces, not the whole. Not yet. Not unless he could consent to hearing it in an informed way. Informed how knowledge could change things, and how certain truths couldn't ever be unknown.

“It was when I left you on the subway last night, but you wouldn't have been able to tell, what with all the blood.”

“You got cut though.”

“You saw the blood. You smelled it. You were kneeling in it.”

“But humans don't, I mean, we don't—”

“Not normally, no. Before you start guessing, I'm not a vampire. It's everyone's first guess, always.” That was a little white lie right there. I'd really only been called a vampire, well, a *Nachzehr*, that one time. But some vampiric levity wouldn't hurt the situation, would hopefully move it from where Amory got pale and paler to where he blushed at the mention of his innocence again.

“Vampires are not real,” he said like a man who had read everything about the topic and knew that he fully understood the way the world worked.

“That depends on your definition,” I said, just barely keeping myself from grinning.

He frowned all over again. I wanted to trace each and every wrinkle on his forehead with my finger.

“Evasive much?”

I couldn't help myself. I said, "Technically, I'm just being precise."

"Distinction without difference," Amory scoffed.

My fading erection was taking interest again. "For a worrier, you are quite the firecracker, Amory. Anyone...ever told you that?" I leaned back slightly. "I just don't want to mislead you."

He very nearly pouted, which had me in a mood to beg him to come home with me. But he wasn't there yet, hadn't responded in a way that suggested such a proposition would make him comfortable.

"You are being vague instead?"

"You might prefer that, in the end. I don't think you will, necessarily, but I have been wrong before. Would you forgive me if I asked you to just enjoy dinner for now? Even if it's technically breakfast?"

He dropped his head, almost a nod. "You are making no sense."

"Please," I said. I didn't see him refusing me, not if I asked nicely.

And he bobbed his head properly now.

I reached for him, just the subtlest brush of my index finger over the back of his hand. It brought some color back to his face, a sight I feasted on until I caught movement on the stairs.

Vico moved quietly as he brought the food. I largely ignored him, but Amory twisted in his seat, breaking the moment first.

Vico placed the deep dishes in front of first Amory, then me.

“Chef decided to treat you to simple flavors as they will complement the wine. The sage has been fried in olive oil. The pumpkin sauce features hints of sweetness and mild chili, and the squash has been oven roasted. We serve it over lightly golden gnocchi. Enjoy.”

Vico headed back downstairs but glanced back over his shoulder. He was enjoying this.

Amory had withdrawn into himself. “You look too pale. Eat,” I told him.

That was all the nudging he needed. I’d almost expected him to be a picky eater, but he was anything but, devouring a good third of the plate in under two minutes. He still managed to place his napkin on his lap before that and maintained sufficient posture. It made me want to drag him to that ramen place I knew to see him slurp noodles on a rickety chair.

At some point, sadly, he realized he’d become my main entertainment.

“Are you sure you’re not a vampire?” he asked, slowing down.

“Positive.”

The rest of dinner was a quiet affair as far as words went, a loud affair as far as non-verbal cues were concerned.

Amory wanted to be touched but didn't know whether he was allowed to want that. I could tell as much by how he grew red-cheeked and wide-eyed whenever he put his hand on the table close enough for me to reach or when he sensed he'd put his foot too close to my leg and pulled back.

I could have let that frustrate me. I decided to win him over instead, no matter how long it took.

Vico had ventured up again and had swapped our empty plates for sugary dessert moments before heavier footfalls echoed on the staircase.

Chef Martin's curious eyes flicked to Amory before landing on me.

"You're finally making good decisions," the Frenchman grumbled in French. "Ask this handsome boy whether he liked the food and the company."

Amory listened, eyes on Chef's face. He had some French, then.

"Chef wants to know whether you enjoyed your food," I said.

"Very much. Thank you."

"He has good taste in wine and food then," Chef went on in French. "He can come back here whenever he wants to."

Which was basically telling me Chef and Vico had already formed an opinion, and it was that they liked Amory and would hold it against me for the next decade if I treated him badly.

I translated the approximate to Amory, and Chef, his position made known, retreated back to bossing his kitchen staff around.

I got Amory to finish most of my dessert, and we left *The Doge* at close to four-thirty. Amory looked better for the rest and the food, but his eyelids were heavy.

When we stood outside the restaurant in the pre-dawn cold, he said, “I should head to the subway.”

Despite my hoping otherwise, his reluctance to come home with me had been pretty obvious, but this underlined it. It left me with a lot to look forward to. And a good dose of yearning.

“Should you?” I asked him, holding out my hand for him to take.

Which he did. To my utter joy and relief, he did.

I led him toward the main street. “You’re better off taking a cab home, Amory,” I told him, which sounded a lot nicer than, *I’ll let you take the subway after tonight over my dead body.*

The 47 cab was still there, and I held the door open for Amory, wondering if he’d surprise me, ask me to come with him.

He didn’t, but his forehead creased.

“Worrier,” I chided. “Have a good night, Amory. Sweet dreams.”

I closed the door behind him, watched as the cab pulled away.

As soon as it was out of sight, I went to the Hawthorne app and traced it.

“Got to make sure you get home okay,” I said, and for good measure, requested the cabbie confirm that.

My own car was parked a brisk half hour walk away. I decided to head to the nearest subway stop instead. It took me back to the Moonlight Diner, which sat there like a sleeping ship on the high oceans, its window walls mirrors.

I drove back to Sundial, a spring in my step. That lasted until I wasn't greeted by an empty elevator, but by Simeon, occupying it in wait for me, a large duffel bag that didn't fit his style in one hand.

“I'll take the next one,” I told the vampire and stepped back, hitting the stop button to release the car.

“Fuck you will. I waited in your lobby for ten minutes. Get in here.”

I rolled my eyes but stepped into the elevator.

“I don't like being accosted in my home, Simeon.”

“I'm not accosting you. You took in the little girl and her older sibling.” He handed me the bag. “That's theirs. I figured since they don't have anything else, they wouldn't want to lose what's in there as well.”

I eyed the duffel. “What is in there?”

He shrugged. “Check if you want. Nothing they shouldn't have. Some cash. Clothes. Photos. You really took them in

then?”

Fuck me. “No, I didn’t. I just couldn’t get rid of them, and I didn’t have the time to hand them off to someone else.”

“Sure.”

“Oh, fuck you, Simeon. I’m not taking on anyone. You know that.”

He cocked his head just when the elevator arrived on my floor. “Then what about that boy? I mean, that’s so interesting. That you’re interested in a boy suddenly.”

“Excuse me?”

I unlocked my door, wishing that anyone had thought of cursing vampires so they couldn’t enter someone’s home, because Simeon was perfectly fine with invading my space.

“Well, you were out all night,” he said.

I dropped the duffel in the hallway just in time to see him frown at my now empty equipment room.

“Since when do I have a curfew?”

“Huh. You know what I mean. You’re still all bitey though, so I’m guessing you didn’t get laid. Did he tell you to fuck off? You have to match the current day dating etiquette if you want to succeed with someone so, you know, *young*.”

“Meaning?” I said, walking toward my kitchen, because I didn’t need a hypercritical vampire judging me for cleaning a room.

“Oh, just,” Simeon said, following me like a yappy dog, “that your intended is in the bloom of his life. Not all that far removed from when he was a babe in the cradle, some might say. And you are taking him as yours. Robbing him, as it were.”

I filled a glass with water from the tap. “You want to say something, just say it.”

Simeon looked fucking giddy. “Me? Oh no. Nothing to say. Nothing at all, Mr. Bennet.”

“Sure.”

He grinned at me. “Did you have fun? With the waiter?”

“I’m not going to dignify that with an answer.”

He tapped his chin with his index finger. “All right. You don’t want to give your lawyer all the details. I’m not hurt at all, and I’ll still try to advise you as best as I can. And my advice is to let Hawthorne make an announcement sooner rather than later.”

“Why? Don’t your cab drivers know to keep their mouths shut?”

Simeon leaned against the back of the couch while I remained in the kitchen.

“You know they do, and if not, we deal with them ourselves. But if you continue spending time with him, you’re bound to be seen.” He gestured toward the duffel. “We’ve already prepared a short notice for these two. Just let me know when you want it to go live.”

“No, thank you.”

“Sure.”

“I mean that.”

“You took their stuff, Shuck.”

“Because it seemed like the fastest way to get rid of you, yet here you are.”

He lifted his blond eyebrows. “Let me guess. You really wanted that hot night of pleasure and are feeling all pent up now. It’s a powerful sensation, isn’t it, but the wait can be so rewarding.” He lifted his finger like a fucking teacher explaining a pertinent point and said, “Dating etiquette.”

I put the water glass on the counter and began the process of herding the vampire toward the door. “It really is time to leave now.”

“Fine. One thing, Bennet. Don’t care who he is, but if you find someone you want to have time with, I’ll turn him for you. No questions asked.”

“Just get out already,” I said. I needed to be alone, to think and sleep. For a chance at dreaming. And I didn’t need the temptation of forcing immortality on anyone else.

“Don’t forget to hand over the bag,” Simeon said before I closed my door on him.

I headed upstairs, undressed, and fell into my fresh sheets.

Nine

AMORY, AGAIN



Death. As always, it was the inescapable truth against which hope looked like the pale bones in an upturned grave.

MY SLEEP SCHEDULE HAD been out of whack even before dying, but death made it no better. I was wide awake by eight in the morning, and with nothing better to do, I went to make myself some Turkish coffee, wearing nothing but my underwear.

Passing by the entrance, I decided the duffel bag needed to go because it already annoyed me. More importantly, I needed to follow up on last night, whatever current dating etiquette suggested I do.

Once I was waiting for my coffee to come to a boil, I went to the Hawthorne app and ordered a bunch of yellow tulips and daisies made into a bouquet, the tulips for the sunlight Amory was missing out on and for the smile I hoped he'd smile when

he saw me next, the daisies to show both appreciation and respect for his decision not to spend a night with anyone. I hoped he'd also read me declaring my intentions toward him into it, not that I knew he even understood flowers.

I had the option to go with either the shop making the delivery or select a pawn to do it. I used the one I'd saved when I had Amory's apartment checked and scheduled it for 4:00 pm precisely. Anything earlier might have woken Amory before he had to get up for work again. I ordered the pawn here beforehand so I could write out the card I'd selected with the flowers myself rather than letting one of the sisterly florists do it.

I poured the coffee into a mug and finished it while sitting at my dining table. Amory's file was in the laptop case that sat on the chair next to mine. I wanted to know everything in that file, but after last night, after thinking about it, the challenge of getting all the information from him was by far more enticing.

I finished the last dregs of my coffee before it was even nine o'clock. Still not wearing anything, I went to my row of clocks as I called it, the gallery hallway dominated by windows on one side that led to my office.

My Meisterstück kept time just outside the reinforced and soundproof office door, and I carefully lifted it off its hook. Designing the piece had taken me months. I had drawn the images of the stars and the figures they were in legend and myth by candlelight in the small room above Meister Gruber's shop back in Würzburg.

When I had sat down to make the gears, the face, the hands, I'd never thought that this clock would stay with me for as long as it had, nor that it would work as reliably through all these years. After all the time I put into it, all Meister Gruber had to say about it was, "Feine Arbeit für dein Meisterstück," fine work for your Meisterstück. It was the highest praise he'd ever granted me.

I took my tools from the cabinet behind my desk, set them up, although I could do this without the magnifying glass. Wearing gloves, I got to work opening the clock, cleaning and oiling it before putting it back together and setting it to the right time as well as the right alignment of the Northern sky.

Even doing this did very little to distract me, and the damn duffel bag was bothering me even more. I couldn't see it from behind my desk, but it occupied space in my mind.

"Fucking sex demon," I said as I re-hung the clock. It was time to put on clothes and deal with this.

Once I was dressed, I picked up the duffel bag and headed to the lobby. The same newbie Star-Garbed was behind the desk and grew more fidgety the closer I got to him.

"Sir?" he asked.

"Those two kids from yesterday." I dumped the duffel on his desk. "Get this to them. And no peeking inside, do you hear?"

"We would never, sir," he said and eyed the duffel. His nostrils moved in the way that told me he was subtly smelling it, an automatic thing with almost every wolf I'd ever met.

“Chop chop,” I said and walked back to the elevator.

Once my apartment was free of anything I didn’t want there—apart from the Christmas candy, and I’d get to that—I felt more at ease there. Still, it was hours until I could drive back to the Moonlight unless I was willing to sit in my car and wait for Amory’s shift to start.

“I could clean,” I told the space. At a minimum, it would keep me from pacing while I waited for nightfall and moonrise.



I was in the same spot across from the Moonlight Diner, waiting for Amory to walk in the door. I’d gotten a delivery confirmation at four-oh-two as well as the pawn’s summary: *The gentleman was confused and attempted to direct me to a neighbor, assuming the flowers had been mistakenly delivered to his door, but then accepted them. He appeared pleasantly surprised.*

I liked a pawn who made an effort. As I waited, my phone hooted again, and I looked at the screen. It was another delivery confirmation. My heads had made it to Italy in record time. I’d give it a few more hours, then I’d forward Simeon the glover’s address.

Amory, when he finally did walk into the diner through the front door, looked happy. I decided that was because of the yellow tulips. With my binoculars, I followed his interactions

with the colleague whose shift was ending. There'd been another one with her until twenty minutes ago, two people to cover the diner, but Amory was apparently doing another shift by himself. I had no idea whether that was the norm.

At around nine, I was considering whether I should really walk into the diner today. It wasn't very busy, much less so than it had been before Amory had started his shift, and while he was advising hungry people on their choice of salad dressing, he'd probably have a moment or two to think about me. On and off, when I watched him smile to himself, I hoped that he was already doing that. If I just walked in, it would stop him from thinking about me in absentia.

After ten, the place got much more empty, and I felt confident I could show restraint for a day and just watch him from the car. Maybe have him tailed on his way home, nothing too extreme.

By ten thirty-seven, I spotted a pawn outside the diner, although...I looked closer, examined the guy through my binoculars. It was often a feeling with pawns, but it came to me more distinctly when I had a good line of sight, and this one wasn't just a pawn.

I frowned. He was cursed, and I had never seen this guy before. Odd. I liked exactly nothing about the way he moved, the way his head turned left to right as if he were a vulture, looking for food. It was difficult to tell without getting closer, but my best guess was that he was some type of void creature.

“Just walk past,” I mumbled. “Keep on walking.”

The guy slowed down outside the diner, his head moving like a searchlight. He picked up on something or saw something he liked. There were currently four people in the diner, two guests, the cook, and Amory.

The cursed pulled the door open and walked inside. I watched Amory's lips move to the customary *Welcome to the Moonlight*. The guy sat down at the counter. So far so uncomfortable.

Amory placed a menu he'd just cleaned in front of the man and asked, *Can I get you some coffee while you decide?*

The man said something, and Amory nodded. *Sure, right away*, he said and poured some iced tea, no ice, but three slices of lemon.

I started growing more uncomfortable when the void creature watched Amory pour the tea, only ever when Amory wasn't looking. It was a thing with most of them, the coveting gaze. The only time they didn't bother hiding it was right before they were about to start feeding.

I sighed, put the binoculars down, and said, "Fuck."

I had knives on me, but no silver-coated ones. Those were in the trunk, and I wasn't going to get them out where some pedestrian might see me and call the police. So I crawled into the back seat and reached through to my weapons cache. It involved moving the seats out of the way, which was a bit of a workout, but I was determined.

Before crossing the street—now with three silver blades hidden in my coat—I mentally prepared myself for this going very badly. If the void creature was very hungry or just moderately hungry, it was a distinct possibility.

The bells above the diner’s door announced me, and Amory didn’t finish the greeting, his voice fraying when his eyes found mine, his ever-busy hands stopping in the middle of cleaning one of the laminated menus.

It was the most adorable thing. Since I had his attention, I slowly walked to the table I’d claimed last night and sat in the exact same spot.

I watched him collect a coffee cup and the pot of not terribly old coffee and come over to me. I kept an eye on the void creature at all times. The way he was sitting hunched over his food, body tense, he’d sensed me.

Amory put the mug down right in front of me and filled it, then said, “Hi.”

“Hello, Amory.”

He glanced at me, glanced away. Yes, daisies had been an excellent choice.

“What’ll it be?”

I licked my lips. “Cherry pie. Sweet cherries are my favorite.”

While he didn’t look as unfavorably pale, seeing color bloom in his cheeks now and knowing I’d done that was...well, it was foreplay. At least for me.

Amory headed back to get my sweet dessert while the void creature had come to the decision that these were not the best feeding grounds. Not too hungry then.

He stood, got a weathered wallet out of his inside pocket.

“Tip your waiter,” I told him, my voice vibrating with every threat of violence I knew to wrap in speech.

The void creature reconsidered, dropped another bill. Then he finally left. He looked at me but didn't meet my eyes. Creepy fuck.

Once the door's bells jingled, I relaxed a little. Amory, ever quick on his feet, brought me my pie.

“That wasn't necessary,” he said, and oh, he did not appreciate me butting in, never mind that he didn't understand the situation nor the danger he'd been in.

“Wasn't it? I didn't like the way he was staring at you when you weren't looking,” I told him.

Amory frowned, looked contrary. “He didn't.”

“I just said you weren't looking, so how would you know, Amory?” I said that bit as softly as I was able. It wasn't very soft.

Amory's eyebrows rose. “But you were looking? Were you watching me?” he asked, keeping it down though. That told me two things, one, he wasn't going to get mad about this if I didn't give him an additional reason to be, and two, he had no fucking clue about how to react when one found out someone was spying on them.

I breathed out, allowing myself to anticipate the juicy filling of the cherry pie I was about to enjoy. “Would it upset you so very much if I said yes, Amory?”

A jerk of the head. “I don’t know... Thank you for the flowers.”

Well, here they were, paying off already. “You are most welcome, Amory. I’m glad you like them.”

His jaw clenched, relaxed, clenched, relaxed. “Enjoy your pie,” he said finally before walking off again.

The void creature had been a complication, but the good thing about being here now was having a first-row seat from which I could watch Amory all I liked. I also didn’t have to bother with the lip reading.

I savored my cherry pie, then savored that I was the only customer for a while. It was weird, mostly because Amory seemed to be so very at ease here, at ease doing his chores and creating order in his workspace.

That perfect calm was interrupted by another customer who came in with one of those fancy journals and a fountain pen, of all things. He seemed startled when he saw me, then looked away and ignored me, taking a seat at the opposite end of the diner.

Amory brought him coffee much like he’d done for me, meaning he knew that customer. Jealousy spiked. It spiked even more when this guy stole covert looks at Amory.

Well, it wasn't for lack of interest that Amory was unattached then. And inexperienced. I very badly wanted to stake my claim as publicly as was feasible. I also knew that Amory wouldn't tolerate that, not yet.

Lacking an alternative, I waited. And observed.

The cook poked his head out from the kitchen, telling Amory he was leaving for the night. The two of them seemed familiar, friendly. I got protective older brother vibes from the cook, but he and Amory looked nothing alike. I made a mental note to have Simeon do some research on the rest of the staff.

For the next two or so hours, I watched a waiter clean tabletops and stack dishes from the dishwasher, clean the coffee maker and refill sugar shakers and separately packaged Stevia. I'd learned Zen meditation before it had become en vogue to do so, and Amory, while not consciously doing it, was very meditative in his tasks, especially in the way he was folding napkins.

I could tell when the calm of his mind cracked. He started frowning, and the rhythm of his movements broke, though it was a minute fracture, one I only caught because I was watching closely.

He stopped what he was doing and went on another round of coffee refills again.

"Worrier," I told him, too intrigued by that frown to stop myself.

He wasn't in the right mood for it. "Would you like anything else?" he asked.

"A lot of things. But none of them are on the menu."

He cocked his head. "You haven't even seen the menu."

Huh. Was I not doing flirting right? "Careful, Amory, careful."

He still didn't flirt back, said, "Just stating what is technically a fact."

Well, perhaps he was flirting back a tiny little bit.

I sighed. "Whatever am I going to do with you?" He had no answer for me, going right back to worrying, to thinking too much, so I told him, "I'm glad you liked the flowers. You don't even know how glad."

He acknowledged that, but whatever more we could have said to one another, the other customer chose that moment to be a little bitch and get in my way. He got noisy with his empty coffee cup, and Amory being Amory, went to attend him.

Oh, the nerve. Oh, the fury following at the heel of unquenched desire. Before doing something I would regret later on, I put some money on the table and left in a twinkling of bells. Exit stage right like the mysterious gentleman with the charm and the good looks.

Hopefully I was that in Amory's book.

Instead of crossing the street and heading back to my car, I rounded the diner and checked the back alley.

The void creature wasn't there. I pulled my phone from my inside pocket as I looked around for a spot where I could wait.

I made it across the street from the alley's entrance where a trash can offered me cover before Valentin answered.

"Are you keeping busy, Mr. Bennet?"

"I suppose I am. I just saw a void creature."

The vampire on the other end fell silent. "Is this a joke? Are you getting back at me for something Simeon did?"

"No."

"Did you dispose of it?"

Valentin was strong as vampires went. Few things hurt him. Void creatures were one such thing.

"I couldn't." I bit my nail, realizing there was no good way of explaining why I hadn't dealt with the void creature. "I'm in the process of courting a man, and the void creature came near him."

Valentin would understand. He liked rules and mores when he wasn't being a big old kinkster, and protecting someone who was dear to you ranked high for him.

"Very interesting information. I didn't believe half of the things Simeon has been telling me, but I was wrong to question his acuity it seems. Regardless, if you are willing to take the void on, I'd appreciate it."

“Sure.” I didn’t need to tell Valentin the creature had been looking at Amory, who just then opened the back door to the diner and locked it behind him.

He wore the same jacket he had yesterday, hands buried in the pockets. He had a spring in his step today, or he was just eager to get out of the cold. I gave him a moment, then followed.

I told Valentin what surveillance angles I needed in order to track the cursed, then hung up. The city never really slept, it just got quiet, and I wanted to follow Amory like a shadow, not like some amateur talking on his phone.

Amory had long legs, and he used them. He was also lost in thought. There was a moment on the subway where he might have spotted me if he’d only turned his head an inch farther to the left.

I made sure he got into his building, which was when my phone vibrated with an incoming email, the footage. I allowed myself ten more minutes to trace Amory’s movements by the illuminated windows above me.

What the apartment he called home looked like, I didn’t know. Not stuffed full of useless things I was pretty sure. But which colors he favored, what he’d put up on his walls, I didn’t know, just had my suspicions.

When my thirteen minutes of window watching were up, I walked two blocks, then flagged a cab, which happened to be one of Hawthorne’s.

While the city still rested in the half-sleep of the timeless hours of night, I had surveillance footage to watch.

Ten

VOID



Most pawns are too far removed from the curse to mind it or see it as a curse. Many have been born what they are. Certain beings cannot be born, just made, their innermost darkness too twisted for the natural laws of pregnancy and birth.

SORTING THROUGH VIDEO FOOTAGE—SOME CCTV, some not—always looks easy in movies or on TV. It’s a craft, and like any craft, learning to do it properly takes time. But what’s more, to then use what one saw on disparate feeds and building from that a theory of movement comes closer to an art, especially if there isn’t full coverage, as was the case with the area around the Moonlight Diner.

I tracked the cursed to a parking structure three blocks away. He moved toward the Moonlight on a pretty straight route, which made me frown at my laptop and tap the glass top of my dining table. Outside, the sun had long since risen, yellow

behind thick cloud cover, like a raw egg cracked into a jar of milk.

“Did you know where you were going?” I asked the void creature, wandering past shopfronts and ignoring the odd pedestrian.

I watched myself walk into the diner. I wasn't at a stage where I fast forwarded, but I had several feeds running one next to the other. One of them from a traffic camera across the street was grainy, like the thing hadn't been updated in a decade or had never been calibrated right.

While I waited for the cursed to leave, I considered my next steps. Not for the void creature. For Amory. The very obvious one was getting all the information about the people around him and then make myself the perfect fit next to him in that tapestry of connections. Only I sucked at being part of a tapestry. I sucked at being part of, period.

On my feeds, the cursed left. “Strange. Didn't you drive your own car over?” I mumbled when he didn't walk back to the parking structure he'd come from. My skin crawled when I saw how he walked by outside the Moonlight slowly, gazing inside with longing. No, with hunger.

It took me the better part of two hours and another request for footage to Valentin to see him head into an antique store I knew, Foster's. Everyone in the area or who had lived in the city long enough would have known Foster's. It was one of the access points to the secret underground, albeit a smaller one.

Going there went on my list of errands, but I called Valentin again, this time for footage from the garage, going back two hours before the time I'd seen the cursed exit. This was a long shot, but I made a spreadsheet of the cars. There was no angle from which I could have gotten an exact license plate, but I documented brand and color, the latter also somewhat fraud on account of the low light.

With all that done, I closed the laptop. A dull sleepiness was settling into my bones, and on my way up the spiraling staircase, I called Simeon.

“What an early bird you have become,” the vampire said.

“I need more research done. Employees at the Moonlight Diner, excluding Amory of course.”

A pause. “Of course.” Another pause. “Do you like him?”

I got to the top of the stairs, pulled the phone away from my ear, and just stared at it, then put it back in position. “What the fuck am I supposed to do with that question, Simeon?”

I heard his breath as he let it out slowly, probably counting as he went. “Elias...you know how we met him was all kinds of different, but I knew, and Valentin did too, in his way. That we liked him, you know. It's such tiny things, but when I look back, I could tell I needed to have him when he was being a good little boy, even when he just met us at a social event. He'd not keep up eye contact, not with Valentin and me, almost like he knew we'd like that.” He huffed. “Or maybe I'm misremembering, because these days, I think the little shit

controls us more than we control him. Anyway, what were we talking about?”

I frowned at my phone again before telling him, “How you’d get me the full background of everyone working at the Moonlight Diner.”

“Right. Love. We were talking about love. You have a weird way of showing it.”

“Are you fucking high, Simeon? Stop acting like I’m one of your pro bono social cases. I pay you too damn well for it, so just get it done.”

I hung up on him, but it wasn’t even all that satisfying.



It felt good to have something to do, a place to be. Amory would be back for another shift—at least I thought he would—in the evening, and I’d be there to make sure it went smoothly. And to make sure he didn’t forget me. I couldn’t have him forget about me.

That meant errands had to come before that and after just a few hours of sleep.

Foster’s hadn’t changed much over the last eighty years. Well, they had replaced the lettering every few decades, and the old things, the used things they displayed in the shop window changed as seasons passed, but other than that, the place felt as if it existed outside of time.

I parked a few blocks away and walked toward it, my steps unhurried. I didn't think the void creature was necessarily still around, but keeping my eyes open couldn't hurt.

Funnily enough, Foster's had one of those electronic doorbells, and the metallic, staticky sound announced my entrance. *I like the Moonlight's better*, I thought before looking around.

There were three showrooms total, the front room with the tall shelves that sliced it into neat sections and made it look small due to how overfull everything was with smaller odds and ends that collected on the end points of the long lives of regular humans and at the interval points of our kind. The two back rooms focused more on furniture. The entire place smelled of wood polish and cedar.

Foster herself rarely sat behind the counter that doubled as a glass cabinet for some of the more expensive jewelry. She left that customer service experience to humans. The Black woman behind the counter looked up from her faded paperback when she saw me enter and popped her bubblegum.

"You had someone come through here last night," I said. "Taller than me. Stocky. Wore a down jacket and denim shirt, greasy hair."

"When exactly last night?" she asked, sounding irreverent in a way that reminded me of the taste of contrariness I'd gotten from Amory.

"Around ten."

She folded in the corner of the novel as if that were a way to treat books and pulled a phone from under her counter with a sigh. It was an actual rotary phone, the kind you could bludgeon someone with.

“I wasn’t working then, sorry. Gotta ask the boss,” she said while dialing the number from memory. It took her long enough she had time to add, “I’d text her, but she always takes ages to reply to them.”

“Sure. Go with the classics, I guess.”

I could hear the phone ringing from where I stood but looked around. On the shelf closest to me, thimbles were lined up next to bottled galleons. An ivory and ebony chess set shimmered faintly in the thin light. Behind that, I spotted an old Breguet wristwatch and a rose gold Omega pocket watch. I picked up both of them, held each to my ear. I’d have to open them up for a clean and a check, but they ticked away, sounding like healthy clockwork.

“Foster wants to know who’s asking?”

“Bennet,” I said without turning, weighing the watches in my hand.

“She says, guy came in, just wanted the underground, according to the logs.”

“That log you keep under the counter?” I asked and turned.

The woman shrugged. “Sorry. Got to check with the boss when people want to know stuff about people. Boss, he looks

like he wants to buy a bunch of watches. Yeah, will do.” She hung up the phone.

“Do I take this to mean you were working here last night after all?”

She shrugged again. “Sure. But like I said, guy came in, said he wanted the underground. I let him go through.”

I put the watches on the counter. “Charge these to my account. Did he come back out?”

She shook her head, stored the rotary back under the counter and brought up a ledger, not the event ledger but the one for the customer accounts.

“He didn’t.” She filled in the purchase details for me, then turned the ledger so I could sign. “Do you want these delivered?”

“Yes, actually. I’ll be visiting the underground as well. And one more thing. Two. Have you ever seen him before?”

She shook her head. “And before you ask, absolutely positive. He wasn’t the type of person you forget. I mean, no offense, but some of the clientele have this”—She gestured—“Like you. Like there’s a cloud around you or something. He had that, but he also gave me fucking serial killer vibes. Totally know that some of the very carnivorous kind can’t help it and don’t necessarily mean to eat you, but it’s no fun when you’re sitting here all by your lonesome, reading *Cujo*, if you know what I’m saying.”

“As a matter of fact, I do. Which leads me to thing number two: if that guy comes back, you call Hawthorne. Tell the operator Bennet told you to call.”

She nodded. “You’re that big a bigwig?”

“I have a reputation,” I said, watching her wrap the watches in white tissue paper and put them in a padded envelope on which she wrote my customer ID number. “Enjoy the rest of your book,” I said and headed for the staff door.

“Thanks. See you around,” she said.

She didn’t bother stopping me or asking if I knew where I was going.



I couldn’t really see much of the back room of the store, but I wasn’t interested. The elevator to the underground was through the small broom closet on the left. The elevator was pretty new, up to safety standards. It only had two buttons, an arrow up, and an arrow down. I pushed the latter.

Without any elevator music, the ride felt longer than it was. It spit me out on what people called Abandoned Asymptote. That name was even a little bit funny. They had built the platform at the same time they had built the subway route that was supposed to lead there, but while the tunnel existed, the project had been abandoned before they had put down the tracks. That graph of rails never had reached this point.

The Asymptote was one of the places down here that was still mostly deserted, its green tile floor and walls cleaned, but not nearly as often as a lot of the rest of the underground. The boardwalk didn't connect to here either, truly driving home that Asymptote name.

My footfalls made echoes, and a set of two failed lights on the platform's wall created a shadow that spilled out behind me as I descended to the gravelly ground that was covered by the boardwalk in most other places. It was just about thirty steps to the set of wooden stairs that led up to the boardwalk.

I had no real plan beyond sticking to the less populated areas and seeing if anything stuck out as unusual or if anyone had seen the cursed, so I strolled onward, passing one of Hawthorne's automatic bike rental stations and a rat scurrying in the opposite direction, mostly ignoring me.

The first few rental apartments came into view five minutes after the rat. They were the older models, taking up half of the boardwalk. It made them about five feet deep, though with their two low stories and twice to three times the length, it really wasn't that bad a place to live.

Illumination got better here too, starting with a single lamppost that doubled as a street sign, letting those who passed know this was Silver Line.

I knocked on the door of the first building although it looked uninhabited. No one answered, and I didn't hear anything from inside. In addition, Valentin was usually good about having people put their name on the door, and this one had nothing.

So I went to the next one. A black-haired pawn opened. He looked human enough to have found a place up top, which told me living here was a choice.

His eyes went wide when he realized who I was, and he paled. A group of two identical-looking men appeared behind him. Hivelings then.

“Did you see someone come past this point last night? After ten, around eleven.”

Each of the three grew uncomfortable, and in chorus, they said, “No.” The first one added, “But we were asleep or out.”

“Anything unusual in general?”

One of them in the back glanced at me. “Not really. Just folks who are on their way up or down. The end of Silver Line’s pretty quiet.”

“I bet,” I said. “How about neighbors? You got any?”

“The first unit has been empty for about two months now, and the serpentines in the other one moved, uhm...”

“Last week,” another one of them finished.

“I see. Nice and quiet,” I said and left.

Their door shut a few moments later. I saw a curtain move out of the corner of my eye. The lot of them certainly didn’t have the air of criminal masterminds, and if they’d harbored a void creature, I’d have been able to tell at this distance.

The unit on the other side of theirs did indeed look as empty as the first, and after that point, it was just the boardwalk again

as it curved right.

I heard something up ahead and could see some five steps later that there was activity on the boardwalk beyond that rat going about its day.

On the wall to the left, two people in Hawthorne overalls were busy painting over some poorly made graffiti, and standing on the boardwalk watching them was a black widow.

The widow didn't react, though she must've seen me through her black veil. One of the painters did, dropping her paint roll on the cover they'd laid out on the boardwalk and saying a squeaky, "Oh."

Her colleague stopped to look at me. I looked at the graffiti. Two words, one atop the other, painted in red. The top word had the -an left, the bottom the -ay.

"What did this say?" I asked the pawns.

"Uhm, said 'human pray,' sir." the woman said, picking her paint roll back up.

"They misspelled the second word."

I turned toward the black widow. Hearing one of them speak in their girl voices never ceased to surprise me.

"High schoolers getting drunk and being stupid?" I asked the widow since she seemed inclined to talk.

She shrugged. Her entire, ankle-length black dress moved. "Perhaps St. Auguste has stopped teaching spelling."

That was a no then. “Madam, if you don’t mind my asking, but I’m looking for a void creature”—The woman dropped her paint roll again—“who came through here.”

“Jeez, get a grip,” the other pawn said to his colleague as she picked up the roll once more.

The widow tilted her head. I got the sense that she was amused. “I don’t live here,” she said in that girly voice. “I just came to look at this. It’s always the little things, isn’t it, a bruise before the skin breaks. I live further south. So many new people there. Although, not one of the kind you are looking for, Black Shuck.”

“I see. Well, thank you anyway. Have a good day.”

I walked on, but not far from this bend, the first intersection in the boardwalk meant this was getting to the needle in the haystack territory. Unless I had a clue where to go next, I could spend days down here looking without going up to see the sun once.

I turned around, walking past the widow watching the painters. This time around she ignored me.



I called Valentin when I drove back to Sundial.

“Did you find it?” he asked.

“Nope. Checked the underground as far as it made sense and established that he went down there but didn’t come up through the same entrance.”

“Fuck,” Valentin said.

“He’ll feed at some point.”

“Do you think I want him to feed on the people in the underground? Have you any idea the effort we had to go through to make it as safe as it is? Fucking void suckers.”

I said, “They are creatures of habit more than most. That’s helpful. What really bothers me is that I have no idea where he came from.”

A drizzle started up, creating a pattern on my windshield before I turned on the wipers.

“What do you mean? He must have gotten bitten and corrupted by another.”

I drummed my thumb on the wheel. “Not this one. He’s a cursed, not a pawn.”

Valentin clucked his tongue. “You really shouldn’t run around calling people that, you know. It dates you. Are you sure?”

“I’m sure. When I get him, do you want me to save some blood for—” I was about to say *that child you keep*, but then thought better of it. “For Young Hawthorne? So he can confirm it?”

Valentin made a hissing noise. “Absolutely not. I don’t want anything like that near him. And I’m pushing back his enrollment for good measure. He’ll be pissed about that, but he’s not leaving the house alone if one of those things is loose.”

I rolled my eyes. Valentin was still missing the point.

“Have you had any reports of a witch in the region?”

The rain was picking up. Ah, February, the perfect month to reflect my mood back at me in the amount of inclement weather it produced.

“None. There doesn’t have to be one in the city for a void creature to be here.”

“No, there doesn’t. But smoke and fire, you know.”

“Just when everything runs smoothly, shit like this comes up,” Valentin said. “Let me announce you’re seeing that human. It’ll distract the public.”

“No,” I said, frowning like Amory.

“Fine. Then let me announce you’ve taken that mouthy succubus into service.”

“No, and they’re not a succubus.”

Valentin chuckled. “If you say so, Bennet, I won’t call them a succubus. I’ll happily call them your vassal.”

“Valentin, I’m hanging up on you now.”

“Before you go, that glover called the police when he got your package. Thanks for sending us the address after the fact.” He said that half sarcastically, half actually meaning it.

“Caecilius wouldn’t have missed the police attention,” I said, more to myself than to Valentin. “Right. I have to go. I’ll call you if I have anything.”

I hung up, and my mood lifted when I drove into the garage, turned off the engine, and headed for the elevators. A shower and getting changed held unknown appeal all of a sudden. Because I'd see Amory soon.



When I walked into the Moonlight Diner sometime after midnight, the cook had already left. Amory wasn't alone today. A waitress was busy cleaning another table at the opposite end of the place.

"Welcome to the Moonlight," Amory told me.

The waitress looked at me over her shoulder, her eyes narrowing. It was like she knew I was armed.

"Thank you for the warm greeting," I told Amory.

The waitress was paying attention now. Huh. I'd been watching them for hours, and she wasn't interested in Amory. *Protective instincts to the max though.*

Amory missed her concern and instead brought me a cup. I'd seen him make a fresh pot a half hour ago and couldn't help but think that he'd done it for my benefit, seeing as how the place was not that crowded.

"The kitchen's already closed," he told me.

I leaned back in my seat. "But you still have pie."

He nodded. "We do."

“You know which one I like, Amory. Would you bring me a slice, please?”

I’d even said “please,” yet the waitress was giving me the evil eye. I considered whether I should care while I watched Amory transfer a slice of cherry pie to a plate.

He brought that to me, along with one of the napkins I knew he had folded with such deep, meditative care just an hour ago.

“Anything else?” he asked me.

I smiled up at him. “Yes.”

He gave me an expectant look. I remained silent, forcing him to ask, “What else?”

“Well,” I said, picking up my fork and trying just the tip of the slice, letting the flavor explode on my tongue. “Something sweet. Something that’s not cake or pie or coffee.”

It went over Amory’s head. “I can make you a milkshake? Or ice cream.”

I put my head on my hand, looked up at him. “Hmm. None of these sound like what I want. But it’s really sweet of you, Amory. So sweet of you to offer.”

He got *that*, finally. Maybe a little. He either always got my flirting and was intentionally making me work for it, or not. If not, maybe he wasn’t wired for flirting like I was wired for flirting. Either way, I clearly needed to work for it. High-fucking-maintenance.

He fidgeted for a bit before saying, “Enjoy your pie then.”

He walked off, once more giving me the sight of his receding back and handsome butt to fantasize over, which I absolutely did. My capacity to imagine Amory in a state of sweaty, desperate lust did surprise me. I wanted him bent over this table I was sitting at, easy enough to imagine after I'd watched him wipe down tables all night. He'd have his pants around his ankles, his bow tie in place, a few strategic buttons on his shirt open.

"Please," he'd say. *"Fuck me."*

He smiled at the other waitress just as I was imagining that, his lips standing out in that lovely pink color that was less common in really pale people than one would think, all the more precious for its rarity.

That made my imagination shift to me sitting in a nice chair and him looking up at me, his mouth busy, his pink lips stretching around my cock.

Both fantasies combined to give me an absolutely firm erection. I knew I'd have to bear that while watching the center of my desire move and smile and pour coffee.

"It's okay. You can head home. I can take care of the rest," Amory was telling the waitress.

She wasn't even being very subtle, her eyes meeting mine and holding them before she said, "Are you sure? I don't mind, especially after you covered for me."

"Nah, it's okay. You head home. I'll see you tomorrow."

She hesitated, but in the end nodded, grabbing a stack of dishes and taking them to the back with her. Amory turned my way as well, saw me watching, smiled back a teeny tiny bit, and returned to plating another piece of pie for someone else.

The waitress was out the door not ten minutes later. At around that time, I finally cleared my plate, prompting another visit from Amory.

“That was good pie,” I told him.

“Glad you enjoyed it,” he said, checking the state of my coffee cup and refilling it. “Anything else?”

The question was automatic. The way his cheeks heated after he’d asked it was an early sign of successful conditioning.

“You asked me that already, and I answered it. I have such a weak spot for sweet things, Amory.”

He nodded, jaw working. “Okay. Uhm. Let me know...”

He was flustered, insecure, didn’t know what to say. It was cute, but I didn’t want him uncomfortable.

In a calm tone, I said, “I will, Amory. I’m fine for now. May I just sit here a little longer?”

Ah. That put him at ease right away, and seeing his shoulders relax made me relax as well, though not necessarily every body part.

“Of course,” he said. And he smiled. It was almost better than the cherry pie. “You don’t need my permission, you know.”

“Hmm. No, I don’t need it, but I cherish you giving it.”

I could see him consider that as he picked up my empty plate and used napkin and walked away, back through the swing doors to drop the dishes off. When he came back out, he met my eyes right away, shy yet pleased.

As I finished my coffee, I considered whether Amory was really the only one being conditioned here. The door opening with twinkling bells interrupted my thoughts. The regular from last night came in, once more startled when he saw me sitting at this table.

He didn’t complain and went to find himself another spot.

I finished my coffee and put a bill under the empty cup while Amory was greeting the other regular much like he had me—with a coffee cup and freshly brewed coffee.

I was out the door before he had recited all the pie options to that other guy.

Eleven

MARCH



In a human's life, change and death are inevitable. I die, but it never sticks. When it comes to changing, I'm not so sure.

OVER THE NEXT TWO days, I developed a well-structured routine. I had the pawn who'd done an excellent job with the flower delivery trail Amory when I couldn't, like when he went to work.

Amory seemed to favor the night shifts, which he showed up for between half past six and seven, so I was in one of my cars parked opposite the diner by six.

I decided I would make a point of coming in every night, have him bring me coffee and pie. That other regular got the message by Wednesday when he stopped even glancing at my table.

When Thursday came, I was in my SUV, savoring the rare experience of seeing Amory use his phone. I couldn't be sure

at this distance, but I thought his phone case was a Virgin of the Rocks artsy type of deal.

See? You should do it, his colleague, the waitress with the evil eye, told him, looking over his shoulder.

Amory was still bent over the screen, and I couldn't read his lips. I only caught, *Won't make me a better cook. And we have Dwayne.*

That got the cook to appear at the passthrough and look out, which had Amory banish his phone to a pocket in his apron, and say a quick, *Sorry*, which the cook accepted with a shrug.

A tapping from the passenger window interrupted my entertainment, and I turned to see fucking Simeon bent over and looking in through the lightly tinted windows.

“Fucking vampire,” I said, facing him, then unlocked the car.

He grinned and slid into the seat next to me.

“Don't you own a television set?” he asked.

“Don't you own a baby vampire who needs spanking?”

He chuckled. “A baby vampire. Mmmh. Do you mean that he is young for a vampire? He's over a century old, you know.” He fake-gasped. “Or—Shuck, you don't mean to criticize age difference when our kind is looking to date a human?” He looked over my left shoulder in a not very subtle way.

I sighed. “The void creature came here, and I'm lying in wait in case he shows again. Why are you here?”

Simeon's eyebrows rose. "Sure. You're here for...the void creature." He pulled a bunch of files from his bag. "I come bearing gifts." He pointed toward the diner. "Owner and employee files, although the former is a bit thinner than I think it should be."

Of all the things, that really wasn't what I wanted to hear. "What does that mean?"

Simeon handed me the whole bunch. "His is on the top. Dwayne McArthur." He looked out the window again. "I believe he's in the kitchen presently. He was discharged from the military a few years ago and then started the diner. I can tell you that he began his service as a Navy SEAL, but when he was discharged, he wasn't a part of that program anymore."

"Dishonorable discharge?"

Simeon shook his head. "No. With full honors. And we couldn't find out anything about anything he did while he was there, for well over ten years I might add. It looks like a special assignment type thing. I couldn't even tell you where they sent him. All I can say is that he has a flawless credit history, not even a parking ticket that we could find, and a dog. Rescue puppy from the shelter he regularly donates to. Oh, and he co-signed your intended's lease."

I'd already skimmed that bit in his not very voluminous file. "That's odd. For an employer to do, I mean."

"Huh? Didn't you read Amory's file?"

I looked up at him. "No."

I went through the waitresses' files and picked out the one of my nemesis, Lady Evil Eye. Her real name was Jennifer, and she was a single mom. Well, that explained the instincts.

“Shuck!” Simeon said. “Are you—don't tell me you are respecting someone's privacy? If we disregard the stalking you are doing—which I should warn you as your lawyer is a punishable offense—that shows so much restraint on your part. I wouldn't have thought you had it in you.”

“I'm not stalking anyone. I'm watching.”

“Bennet, you are stalking that man. You have a pawn following him from his apartment to his place of work. For all I know, you hacked into his email and cloned his phone.”

I snorted. “That would be a breach of trust.”

He pretended to gape. “A breach of trust? What happened to trust is good, visual confirmation is better?”

I sighed and turned another page. “That only applies to when you throw someone off a building. You need to make sure they're dead and their brains are all over the sidewalk.”

“Huh.”

The waitress had a mean ex who'd dragged her in front of a judge to get custody of their kid. I skimmed the court transcripts an overeager investigator had included and wondered whether she'd like me better if I went out and broke her ex's kneecaps.

I turned another page. “Stalking suggests that I have a desire to make Amory the centerpiece of an elaborate fantasy,

whether he wants to or not. I'm not interested in living in a fantasy, and I want him to want whatever comes next."

I said that without thinking. I was skimming, was distracted by the second cook's former Silicon Valley job she'd apparently left behind after burning out on it. Or maybe, like my fucking whimsical staircase, I'd just experienced another Freudian slip.

Simeon, fuck him very much, certainly thought it was the latter, because he went into *just lie on my couch* mode, that old armchair shrink.

"He seems to be a nice guy. Maybe he'd like to hear you say that to him. Have you considered spending time with him, you know, in the same room? Instead of across the street? You could ask him out on a date. Or ask him for his phone number so he knows you are interested in him, then text him every day."

I frowned. "He knows I'm interested in him."

Simeon's fingers tapped against his bag. "Maybe. But dating etiquette changes. You can't expect to send a man flowers and have him realize you're moving toward courting him."

"I sent him flowers because I felt like sending him flowers, Simeon. Also, don't call me a stalker after pulling my Hawthorne service history."

He chuckled. "I may have glanced at it. I do apologize. You can't blame me for being excited for you, Bennet."

“No, but I can blame you for not leaving me alone when I am busy.” I pointed at the diner.

“All right, fine,” Simeon said. “But please consider what I said. Get his number, ask him out. Take him on dates and see how you two *vibe*.”

“How we *vibe*. Sure, I’ll investigate that. By myself. Alone. Starting now.”

He kept chuckling as if his brain were broken. “You do that. And remember, I’ll get a notice out within a minute of you giving me the green light. Knowing the Black Shuck has taken someone into his bed is certainly better news than a void creature.”

“Bye, Simeon,” I said, but he was leaving of his own free will. That was something.

Left to myself, I perused the rest of the files now on my lap while watching Amory find smiles for all those people who walked into the diner. He made it all look easy. I doubted that it was. What about this man made me want him, this man and not someone else, someone more forgettable, I couldn’t really say.

All I knew for certain was that since I had met him, I’d thought of not much else, not of a past I wished I didn’t remember, not of an annoying snake man I wished I’d never met.

“What will I think about if you kiss me. If you want me, Amory?” I asked the silent car. “I shall not be able to form

another thought that doesn't contain you, that's not made of you like all pie is made from flour and sugar and delicate fruit.”

Amory was human, normal. There was no way he could have sensed me, and when he looked up from serving someone a plate with fries, looked straight into my eyes, it was coincidence. There was no way he could see me or even know I was there, and still, our eyes met.

That night, I walked into the Moonlight early and bore the brunt of the co-waitress's evil stare. And I didn't even care.



The void, instead of killing one of our kind, took a human life. We had a meeting about it in the morgue, the human one, which was bigger than Hawthorne's, less security conscious, and not nearly as generously funded. I didn't like the minty green tile or the way it smelled of rot here even though disinfectant and other cleaning products hung in the air to overpower it.

“Uh,” said a human pathologist, who was kindly giving us access. She looked like she was on a double shift, going by the bags under her eyes.

“We've got it from here, Dr. Scott,” Valentin told her, looking at the dead man on the stainless-steel slab.

“Okay,” she said and turned toward the swing doors, her shoes clicking softly on the tiles.

Valentin's team of hivelings joined us before Dr. Scott could leave, and she made big eyes at the five of them, then looked back at Valentin, who said, "They are highly qualified, I assure you. Please feel free to take the night off. We'll leave everything spotless for you in the morning."

"Okay," she said again and finally left.

"I had no idea the city morgue was working its pathologists to the bone," I said because I was in a good mood and felt like making conversation. It was a quarter to four, and I'd been the last person in the Moonlight, apart from Amory.

Valentin shook his head. "It's not her employer. She had a child about six months ago."

"Humans really learn to value a hiveling spouse when it comes to raising their young," Three said.

"They call them babies," Valentin said. "Not that I'm an expert."

He was abso-fucking-lutely baiting me with this, because it was Valentin, only with the bait, he wanted to test how soft I'd gone.

"I hear when you add a baby to your family, it makes you see the world in a whole new light. Anything like that ever happened to you, Valentin?" I asked.

The hivelings had moved an instrument table over and had already started unpacking the bag they'd brought. When it came to the tools of the trade, theirs were top-notch.

"I'm not sure," Valentin said. "You, Bennet?"

“Should we begin?” Two said, his brown eyes on us.

“And do you want the running commentary?” Five added, his gaze turned to the deceased.

“Yes and yes,” Valentin said, and he and I got as close to the slab as we could without disturbing the people who were actually going to work on the body.

The body in question was still dressed, desiccated like a raisin, his skin gone a purplish gray, and underneath the hoodie he was wearing, the jagged edges of a darkened bite mark showed through.

“Skin appears bruised and the entire body has been drained of fluid,” One said.

Four added, “No other apparent cause of death. Makes a void creature highly likely.”

Five, Three, and One moved in with scissors, removing the clothing, then searching the pockets.

“Ticket stub for a movie theater and gum wrapper,” Three said after going through the pants pockets.

“And clothing’s wet,” One added, feeling the hoodie through gloved hands.

Valentin nodded. “He was found on the ground on the stairs leading to a basement.”

“No jacket?” I asked.

Two looked at me. “If he was pronounced dead at the scene—and he would have been, looking like this—they wouldn’t

have taken it off him.”

I walked over to have a look at the ticket stub Three had put on a tray. “Where did they find him, Valentin?”

“Near Cornell and Tenth.”

I waved Valentin over. “Come here. Look at this.”

The stub had just part of the title, *Gone With the Wind*, and the playtime on it, but the font looked familiar.

“It’s from the Vintage Moving Picture Club,” Valentin said.

“Oh. We’ve been meaning to go there,” Two said while Four was photographing the bite mark.

“It’s close to where he was found.”

Valentin fumbled one of his cuff links, rare, because he wasn’t one to fidget. “You’re thinking the void creature saw him there and lured him outside.”

“Yeah. They are good at that. Explains why he was out in the rain without a jacket in fucking March.”

“The blood is congealed. Definitely a void creature feeding,” Two said. They’d cut open the dead guy’s chest and were looking around inside. I saw what looked like gelatin. Raspberry jelly. Wasn’t.

“That settles that,” I said.

Valentin walked back to the slab. “Did you know, the Vintage Moving Picture’s founder was one of Elias’s film school buddies? Elias asked me to invest in the place on his behalf.”

“Huh. That’s why they haven’t gone under.” I looked over Three’s shoulder. Void creature killings always were odd to look at, the skin rubbery and the blood looking like Jell-O, sort of unreal, but just not unreal enough. This one was exactly like that.

Valentin crossed his arms. “This will really upset him. I don’t like seeing Elias upset.” To the hiveling, he said, “Can you finish this up and leave all the paperwork on Dr. Scott’s desk, please?”

“Sure,” the five of them said in unison. I really couldn’t imagine having a relationship with them, no matter how efficient ten hands working in perfect synchrony could be.

Valentin beckoned me to follow, and I did, leaving the slightly uncomfortable smell of the dissection room behind when we went through the swing doors and down the hallway to a vending machine that sold coffee, chips, and chocolate.

“I think you were right about the witch,” he told me.

“Where?” I asked, considering the chocolate selection.

Valentin went for coffee, feeding the machine some coins and watching it pour the brew into a small paper cup. I got myself a KitKat.

“I have a few people looking into that. For now, what they have is a string of murders. Not here. Brixon area. All smaller counties. Signs of cannibalism, and some of the people who discovered the bodies needed to be hospitalized for mental distress afterward. I should also mention that no one has yet

come to the conclusion that these crimes are related despite the similarities our analysts found.”

“Yeah.” I tore the wrapper and took a bite out of the chocolate bar. “That sounds about right. If the witch is involved enough and doesn’t want to be found out, they could create that sort of confusion easily enough.”

“That’s what I thought, but you are the expert, of course.”

I looked at the chocolate bar. I could barely taste it because thinking about witches usually made me lose my appetite. I tossed the whole thing while Valentin took a sip from his coffee and watched me.

“Get a timeline. Send someone there who can confirm this is the real deal and not just some serial killer going after easy victims who the police simply don’t care about. I’ll take over from there.”

He nodded. “Sounds good. And anything you need to handle the void creature, you let me know.”

He tossed his coffee like I had my chocolate and headed toward the exit, but I said, “That graffiti. What was up with that?”

Valentin turned. “What graffiti?”

“Sacred underground, near the Asymptote. Still on Silver Line. That *Human Pray* thing your guys were painting over the other day. Had a typo in it.”

Valentin shrugged. “Not anything that made it all the way to my desk. Misspelled graffiti usually doesn’t. I do delegate, you

know. But if it didn't make its way to me, then it was probably just a lone idiot doing idiotic things."

"Right," I said and headed toward the exit with him.

I was inclined to agree with Valentin about the graffiti. Then again, black widows, as a general rule, rarely cared for idiots or the idiotic things they were doing, so there was that. I decided to file it away as an unsolved mystery for the time being. It wasn't anything that concerned me or that I needed to concern myself with.

Twelve

AMUSEMENT



Humor and fear come to us through the same pathways of our hearts, but the flavors are diametrically opposed. I always thought that was as good an explanation for gallows humor as any.

I HADN'T GOTTEN AMORY'S number—not that I couldn't have. Anyone could text a man and build a meaningful connection using emojis. I didn't want to be like any other gay dude Amory could've met at a bar or on any of the many apps designed for that purpose.

I decided what exactly to do to impress him early on a Thursday morning, technically still Wednesday for him. I was just about to head into the diner. The cook had left before midnight, as had Evil Eye Jenny, and there was no other customer there, so it would have been nice to have him all to myself. But just before I got out of the car, I caught him stopping in his napkin folding meditation.

He took one of the thin napkins from the small pile in front of him, and instead of turning it into a neat triangle, he folded the corners in, turned it over. I had to use my binoculars to figure out what he was doing.

“Are you making a crane, Amory?”

And he was. The napkin was shit for the purpose, but he managed to create a droopy-tailed, droopy-necked winged chicken at best, and it was ridiculous how adorable the attempt was.

“Do you ever have fun, Amory?” I asked, binoculars trained on his smile as he made the droopy napkin chicken fly, moving it so its wings flapped.



It took me a few days to get all my ducks lined up—or all my napkin chickens. So prepared, I walked into the diner while the Sunday shift was still ongoing. Evil Eye Jenny was also there. I didn't have a fuck to give.

The bells sounded my arrival, and Amory smiled at me. A good sign. He was taking the little plates for the baked goods that had sold out of the display case but stopped for me.

I walked the six steps toward his spot at the counter, where he'd played with the napkin bird, and climbed on the bar stool there.

“Welcome to the Moonlight Diner,” he told me, leaning on the counter.

Fucking hell, but him leaning on furniture like that got me hard in a Pavlovian reaction that had taken root over the past week. I had no idea what I would do if he rejected me.

“And what a warm welcome it is, Amory,” I said, exuding all the calm and confident airs any man with a boner and an agenda could. Evil Eye Jenny glared as if she could smell my bullshit. She was pretending to be wiping down the coffee maker. “Lukewarm,” I corrected myself. I leaned toward Amory. “A mother’s protective instincts are hardly ever wrong, you know.”

He gave me a wide-eyed look. This was the perfect angle to take in that golden corona around his pupils. “How do you—”

“I just watch and pay attention. You know that.”

Amory, my worrier, mulled that over. “Fine. Whatever. Coffee and cherry pie?”

He looked over to the display. There wasn’t much cherry pie left. Only the one slice in fact. I wondered whether he’d saved it for me.

“You know me so well, Amory.”

He huffed but plated up my pie for me. He didn’t say anything though.

Asking him to come home with me was on the very tip of my tongue. I could tell that I wasn’t thinking clearly, and years of dying for random stuff I’d said had taught me that I could indeed control myself if I wanted to. So I said, “You disagree?” making it part question, part statement.

“What skill of deduction you have, Sherlock.” He punctuated that by putting my sweet, sweet treat in front of me, then turned to get me my coffee.

“Wait,” I said, and he did. In this moment, more than I had in years, I struggled for calm. “You’ll let me take you on a second date. So that you can get to know me better.”

“You want to—a second date?”

He looked like he had seen a ghost. Again.

“Yes.”

And then this man who had somehow known that dying alone could be scary, who had held my hand to make it less so, said, “So that before, that was a date?”

I wanted to slam him into a wall, gently, in the way these things were done, wanted to tell him, *Yes*, and then, I wanted to kiss him sloppily and until his lips and mouth were flushed with friction.

Instead, I forced myself to remain placid, like a well-behaved gentleman caller, and said, “It was a date, Amory. And I’d like to go on another one with you.”

A smile bloomed on his face, and my heart beat faster. He said, “Yes.” Just that, no conditions.

Relief slid off my mind like an avalanche. “Excellent. I’ll pick you up for a breakfast date tomorrow, technically an afternoon excursion. Three p.m.”

Interestingly, this was when he asked, “You know where I live?”

Really, I had no idea what I was going to do with him. If an actual stalker ever decided to follow him around, Amory might invite them for tea. Simeon and his judgmental vampire ass could fuck right off. At this point, out-stalking potential stalkers was a no-brainer.

I managed a smile for Amory. “I had flowers delivered to your place. You liked them.”

He grinned back sheepishly. “Oh, right.”

I sighed, resigned to be his safety net. Since I couldn’t tell him I’d watch out for him, and since he was about to think and frown again, I said, “Worrier.”

I watched him as he went to get my coffee. Evil Eye Jenny was good about keeping her voice down, but I barely needed to try to read her lips. She was warning Amory off. I couldn’t fault her, not entirely. She also offered to come pick him up whenever, wherever, and I decided then and there that I liked her and would break the kneecaps of any person she pointed me at.

I told Amory as much when he arrived with my coffee, though I omitted the bit about the kneecaps.

He slid the coffee toward me and said, “The feeling is not mutual.”

“Yeah. That’s why I like her.”

I watched as Amory's jaw worked, his eyes intent on mine as the gears in his head turned, working through whatever thought my words had shaken loose.

"What if...I did like you? Following your logic, does that mean you don't like me?"

"You're different, Amory," I said, and filed that indirect confession away among the few cherished memories I had.

"I...thank you," he said and blushed, the pink standing out all the brighter in the Moonlight's baby blue.

I ate the first bite of my pie, watching him as he watched me chew. "That's nothing you have to thank me for."

"Okay. Sorry."

"Worrier."

"Sorry."

"Amory?"

"Yeah?"

"I'm looking forward to our second date."

Heavens, his smile. It was straight out of a love poem. "Me too," he said.

Before we could chat more, the door jingled and that other regular came in. I watched Amory work, ignored Jenny's mean looks suggesting she would claw my eyes out if I hurt him, and stayed where I was until the clock struck three and the Moonlight closed.



The next day, around noon, I decided I should redo my nails. I sat at the dining table with shower-wet hair, finishing off my right hand. Once I was done with both, I held them up, examining the smooth sheen and evenness of the obsidian black licks of paint.

“Not like anyone’s going to be impressed by how well I can paint my own damn nails,” I said, waving my hands so they’d dry faster.

I went over all the spots in which I’d hidden weapons before, double-checking I’d really moved all of them upstairs. I looked from the freezer to the little table by the couch, the couch itself, and the few other spots in sight. Not that I was hoping Amory would skip work and come home with me. Maybe he’d want to after his shift.

Whenever he decided to join me here, I didn’t want him to find anything dangerous once he went snooping around. A pitifully needy part of me wanted to ask him how he’d feel about canceling the date and just coming home with me, and really, that was such a pathetic thought. Not to mention Amory deserved to know that I was more than some rando who bled a lot when you cut his throat open. In fact, I didn’t want him to see me as that, the supernatural that you never thought existed until you knew it did.

It was scary to think that for many reasons, the first being that once you saw what all was out there, you couldn’t easily

turn back, the second, more personal reason, it had been a long time since I'd wanted to be anyone other than the Black Shuck for anyone.

For Amory, without the slightest doubt, I wanted to be Soyer.

I got dressed in nothing too fancy, although I picked clothes that I'd never bled on, nor anyone else as far as I remembered. While I was busy picking clothes like a schoolgirl in a rom-com, I also tossed dated underwear and ordered new ones on the Internet. I couldn't have a potential sleepover end in Amory being confronted with ratty socks and saggy boxers. It would make me look so old.

Then I paced for ten more minutes. I thought about the cursed, the void creature. The possible witch. About the black widow watching a random wall in the underground being repainted. Something irked me, but I couldn't put my finger on it. Likely as not, it was just Caecilius appearing on my radar again.



For today, I'd gotten a vetted driver, which meant he had no ties worth noting other than to Hawthorne, no complaints, no debt, nothing that would have raised any sort of red flag whatsoever. It also meant he had a perfect record of not seeing, saying, or hearing anything he wasn't supposed to. A perfect pawn, in other words.

I made him drive around Amory's block three times, keeping my eye on the clock as well as on the surroundings, memorizing the layout of this neighborhood from the fenced property to the traffic lights to the pharmacy at one of the intersections.

"Stop now," I told the driver just when we were about to go for round four.

"Yes, sir," he said and put the cab in park by the curb.

It was ten to three. Plenty of time, in other words, so I decided to use it. I headed across the sidewalk and toward the front door, which looked not all that sturdy. One of the opaque glass panes set into the top of it had a hairline fracture as if someone had been slammed against it. And no one had bothered to fix it.

I frowned, tried the door. It opened because it was one of the types you needed to properly shut behind yourself. You'd think people everywhere had learned about the importance of good doors.

Before I went inside to surprise Amory right outside his apartment door, I memorized the names of residents on the plates by the door, a good third of which were faded. Once I made my way into a hallway that smelled like curry and onions and needed a thorough cleaning, I stopped by the mailboxes, which were labeled a little better.

"Still coming up two units short though," I mumbled, wondering how Amory would react if I gifted him a little condo somewhere nice.

The stairs were fine, going up in a zig zag from northeast to southwest, eleven stairs each. Amory's floor was the second, and he shared it with three other units.

I checked my phone. I had three minutes. I used them to sneak to right outside his door and listen.

The saving grace of the place was apparently half-decent soundproofing. Or Amory was just quiet. Was he ready yet? Maybe he was already waiting, but in that moment, I couldn't remember whether knocking early was a cultural faux pas or not, and I wasn't going to be that idiot and Google it.

Two minutes. Two minutes for me to worry about whether he'd like where I was taking him. Two minutes to remind myself this was about getting him to like me first, to fuck me second.

Then one minute to ask myself why I'd been fine not seeing anyone for so long and had become thirsty beyond measure after laying eyes on him.

Three o'clock. I didn't wait when the numbers changed on my phone and knocked thrice, hoping for charm.

Amory opened the door after a few seconds. He wore black jeans and a sweater that was baggy on him. He looked fucking delicious like this, out of his uniform. Though also paler in the daylight.

"Hi," he said. And smiled. Then frowned.

"Hello, Amory. You're worrying already. Normally it takes you some time to get started."

Instead of him shying away from that, he said, “Well, maybe you are worrying.”

Oh, he was good. Seducing me and not even knowing it. Or no. There was no seduction here, on no level. More than anything, I had a feeling when I looked at Amory: homesickness. He was like a place I’d never known existed, a place that could be mine. At the same time, he was no place, was a person, fully, with quirks and habits and tics that made him *him*. And I wanted to know all of him.

I said, “I most certainly am. Are you ready to go?”

He reached for his jacket, which hung on a simple hook on the wall. “Ready.”

Once he’d slid that on and zipped it closed, I offered him my hand to take, which he did with blooming cheeks. Ah.

He followed me willingly, then on the street he looked around, almost tugging his hand out of mine. I didn’t comment so as not to make him any more self-conscious, just made a mental note to shut down anyone who made him feel uncomfortable about being out and in public with another man.

I opened the cab door for him.

“Thanks,” he said and slid in the back.

“Always.” I followed pretty quickly, so I got close to him before he’d managed to move fully to behind the driver’s seat, then leaned over and reached for his seat belt. “Let’s make

sure to fasten this, all right? It's a drive, and I can't have you get hurt."

The driver meanwhile pulled away from the curb and made himself easily ignored.

"Oh, okay. Thank you." I took his hand once more and turned so that I had an easier time looking at him. "Uhm, what about you? Seat belt?"

"Oh, I don't need it, Amory. What's the worst that could happen?"

"Well, you could di—."

He actually turned paler, which wasn't exactly what I'd wanted.

"Shh. Nothing's going to happen. We're going on a date, having fun."

He nodded and squeezed my hand. "Okay. No knives."

The places his mind went. "Of course not. You look different, out of your uniform. Different in the best of ways."

That brought color back to his cheeks. "Thanks. I...I'm bad at buying clothes. I mean, not at the actual buying stuff thing. Making time for it, I'm not good at that."

I tilted my head and let my knee touch his. He didn't move his leg. I was beginning to think Amory was touch starved, or that he had been waiting to be touched like this for a long time and now couldn't get enough of it. I'd still have to be careful not to overdose and scare him off.

“Amory, were you just apologizing to me after I paid you a compliment? Are you trying to tell me I’m bad at paying compliments? You look good. There, is that better?”

His jaw worked, and he couldn’t hold my gaze. “You don’t have to say that.”

“Exactly, but I did.”

He considered that in silence as the driver took us first through the city, then out of it.

“Where are we going?” Amory asked. He was frowning.

I said, “Don’t worry. I’ll have you back at work in time. Can’t have anyone else serve me my cherry pie, after all.”

His fingers squeezed mine. “I think I just decided that I don’t like surprises.”

Liar. He looked like he couldn’t wait to be surprised, all wide-eyed and sweet. “Too bad. Chef Martin was so looking forward to making you another surprise dish.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

Oh, he was eager to find out where I was taking him indeed, couldn’t quite decide between worry and a smile of anticipation.

I stroked the back of his hand with my thumb. “I know. Guess.”

He hesitated just for a second before he said, “The woods? Are you going to bury me in the woods?”

My Amory. He was a bit of a morbid soul. Lovely. “Burying someone when the sun is out isn’t generally advised, so no,” I told him, although it was just common sense. “Also, I’d never bury you.” Also common sense.

“Would you chop me up?” he asked, clearly enjoying this game of asking me ridiculous and bloody questions.

“This took a very dark turn very fast, Amory,” I said. “And no. No one is chopping you up. If anyone tries, they’ll have to answer to me.”

I could see from his eyes that this got him only more curious. And maybe he liked the thought of having me protect him, although ideally, I’d never have to. I didn’t want it to get to that point.

“Did you ever chop anyone up?” he asked with genuine curiosity, not the kind of fake he used when he asked what people would like to order.

I didn’t want to talk about this, but the question was too direct to evade. “I have.”

Amory, the darling, looked at the driver, who had his eyes on the road. Good pawn.

“He won’t say anything of whatever happens in this car. Which will not be murder or bloodletting of any kind, just to be clear.”

He worried his bottom lip like a kid caught eyeing the cookie jar a bit too closely. “Oh...okay, I guess. You’re something like a vampire then.”

“Here we are again, you suspecting me of vampirism.” I slid just a fraction closer to him, and he wasn’t bothered at all, accepted the increased proximity. “You wanted to know where we are going a minute ago. How did we get from there to vampirism, Amory?”

He turned up his nose in that contrary way he had. “You wouldn’t tell me where we are going.”

“Sweet and feisty only makes you more attractive.”

He blushed, and we could have been done with him thinking too hard. We almost were, almost made it across the border to just-having-fun land, but then, the subtlest wrinkles bloomed on his forehead, and he asked, “Is magic real?”

That question, of all things. I was very tempted to lie to him and tell him no. That particular lie would have to become a fire demanding constant fuel to maintain. In turn, that would be distracting. On a more pertinent point, while I wanted to make choices for Amory, control him, I had no right. I had been controlled myself, bound and stripped of everything that made me a person, and I would never do that to him.

If I had the power to decide a single thing when it came to Amory, I would make sure that he’d get to interact with the world of pawns, cursed, and witches on his terms. I’d ensure that, and everything else that came with it.

So I gave him a grain of truth. “Yes. But I doubt what magic *is* lines up with what you think it to be.”

He looked happy. Not quite ready to jump on a magical unicorn, but happy. He had no idea what depravity was to be found when one went looking for magic.

“What does that mean?” he prodded.

“It’s no sparkles and sense of wonder, no happily ever after. Magic makes no Cinderellas in the real world. In the real world, when magic touches you, it makes you a beast.”

He considered that. “Is that what you are? A beast?”

“Depending on your definition, yes.”

The driver, when I said this, tensed. I saw it out of the corner of my eye. It wasn’t alarming, no intent for harm that I could sense. He was just growing uneasy. Scared maybe that Amory would demand I prove the beast thing by taking my beastliness out on someone.

But Amory, ever happy to surprise me, said, “You didn’t look like a beast when you had your throat cut.”

He spoke in not much more than a whisper and didn’t hold my gaze, though his fingers kept holding on to me tightly. There was no other option but lying to him now, because telling him I’d been feeling sorry for myself and angry at the world was not an option. Least of all, I could tell him that I’d started that day with dying in the shower. I was never going to burden him with that kind of ugly truth.

“I suppose not. I was just killing time, if you’ll excuse the pun. You don’t need to know anything about those cretins, but what they were doing annoyed me. Their mere existence

annoyed me even more. I was being dramatic, I suppose you could say.”

He sucked on his bottom lip, almost a pout. “You...died.”

I found a smile for him and said, “Amory. That depends on your definition of death, wouldn’t you say?”

He nodded. “I guess. Just glad you’re not. Dead, I mean.”

While I had him near me, I was willing to agree. I mumbled a thank you, wanting to lean in and kiss his cheek, but not quite daring.

I settled for watching him instead, his attention turning to the outside world passing us by as the cab sped toward our destination. I could see the exact moment when he realized where that was by how his eyes lit up and his mouth fell open in bubbly anticipation.

He didn’t say anything though. Probably because he was scared this was a bait and switch of some sort, that the cab would not turn down the road toward the park and take us to some dive bar instead. As if I would.

When we did turn down the correct road though, he looked at me, and said, “Are we going to Lake Eureka?”

“Yes.”

“Really?” His voice rose at the end. He was happy. Thank fuck.

“Yes.”

He went back to watching from the window as we approached. The attractions reached skyward above the tree line, shiny loops and the peaks of rides, brightly colored carousels and slow-moving boats floating in a moat around the entire park.

He looked at me. “I haven’t been since—I haven’t been in ages. Thank you.”

Seeing him that happy made me not want to go. It made me want to tell the driver to take a walk while Amory and I made out in the back of the cab. Except I couldn’t use my own horniness to steal this amount of fun from him.

“Thank me only once we’re done. If you start out with thanks, what incentive do I have to ensure you are properly entertained?”

“I’m ignoring that. I’m just glad you brought me here. Huh?” He pointed outside at the ticket booths we were unceremoniously passing through without stopping.

“I paid in advance,” I told my worrier, who easily accepted that. “Where did you think I was going to take you, Amory?”

He kept looking toward the entrance as the driver approached it, slowly passing by the few people who were here on a Monday.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe food and a movie? Or coffee?”

“Coffee. I see. As for food, I’m sure we can find you something fried in oil and doused in sugar inside.”

He cast his eyes to his lap. “That’s okay. Just being here is nice.”

“Ah. Do you prefer your deep-fried delicacies doused in chocolate? I’m sure that too can be arranged, Amory.”

“No, that’s not—”

The driver stopped, and I fled his outburst of self-consciousness. I released his hand, just long enough to open the door and get out, then held out my hand for him to take once more.

He didn’t right away, checking first to see it was okay. No, to see it was safe.

“Come on, lest all the chocolate-covered delicacies sell out.”

He took my hand, exited the cab. I let the door fall shut behind him, and the driver pulled away, presumably to relax for a few hours.

“I don’t need any chocolate,” Amory said.

He walked with me, looking up at the arching lettering above the entrance announcing that we were crossing into Lake Eureka Amusement Park in colorful, bold letters on the backdrop of a winding roller coaster.

Amory definitely had a spring in his step. His eyes went right to the signs at the very first intersection that sliced the pretty landscaping into hills of unseasonably early spring growth. Trash bins with clown heads added to the creepy factor, and someone had brought a yappy dog whose aggressive barks reminded me of a certain vampire lawyer.

I focused on Amory instead, who stopped, his eyes lingering on the sign that pointed toward the Mirror Carousel.

“Where do you want to go first?” he asked.

“Hmm. Not sure, but how about the carousel? That Mirrored Carousel thing?” I pointed.

“Let’s do it!”

He all but ran there, and in that moment, it was all worth it: facing dogs who’d attack your ankle and clown-topped trash cans, moms who’d put a dash of vodka in their bottled breakfast smoothie. It was worth it, and I had no regrets.

The carousel, blessedly, wasn’t very crowded. Understandable, given that it wasn’t as glitzy as many other attractions here, something that held more of a vintage appeal. I noticed a pawn in the operator booth, semi-bored, but perking all the way up to straight-backed when he saw us.

“Which one do you want?” Amory asked while the oddly colored wooden animals still went in their eternal circle.

“Oh. Do I have to pick in advance? Doesn’t the carousel choose my steed for me?”

“How do you figure?”

I shrugged. “I was going to hop onto the nearest beast. You?”

He grinned. “Let’s do it your way.”

The popcorn and cotton candy music stopped, and the few occupants got off. The carousel had selected a purple horse for

me, or rather, Amory jumped on, hopping on the white swan with blue and pink wing tips, leaving only the horse for me.

“I’ve never ridden a purple horse,” I said, taking Amory’s hand and watching as his other circled the swan’s oversized neck. I liked his fingers, even his pale wrists. I wanted to kiss both.

“I’ve never ridden a swan either.”

“Yes. They are difficult to tame. Very aggressive. Second only to geese, who will tear you apart.”

“Geese defended Rome,” he said.

I nodded. “You wouldn’t want to lay eggs for the Gauls either. Although, Amory sounds like a Gaulish name. Best stick with swans.”

His face fell a little when the music started up again and we began moving in circles. “My mom went to France after graduating. She always said she had the best time there.”

He caught himself right after the words were out of his mouth, looking away. But this was the Mirror Carousel, and I could see his face reflected in the mirrors at the center column.

Yes, there was a hurt in his heart where family lived. We had that in common. His hurt was still raw, no wonder, given how young he was.

I’ll protect you, I thought. Didn’t say it. It wasn’t something I could have told him this early, but in time, I would.



We rode our unusual steeds for three go-rounds total. Amory enjoyed himself, although his fingers slipped from mine every now and again when we stopped, when parents came close to the carousel to drop their kids on a winged horse or an oversized chicken, taking care not to get their young ones too close to us.

When you're mine, you will no longer worry about what others think of you or us, I thought as I watched Amory watch a man in clown get-up make a balloon animal for him, using one of those string balloons that made those horrific noises when you worked with them.

Not that it mattered because Amory seemed to be enjoying it, and if it was going to relax him, then it was fine.

“Here you go, young man,” said the clown, and it took everything I had not to threaten him with bodily harm for speaking with Amory. Fucking clowns.

Just a man in a costume, I reminded myself. And he wasn't even a pawn.

“Thank you so much,” Amory said, bright eyes wide as he took the thing. “Do you like my giraffe?”

Huh. He had some imagination. “It's nice. I like you more.”

That had him smile contentedly, and he actually stroked the neck of the rubber giraffe, all of which made me want to say something suggestive.

Only, this was Amory. Amory, who wasn't fumbling the elongated neck of a rubber animal to be suggestive, but because it calmed him. That made him unlike everyone I knew, unlike a lot of people I had met in the world of pawns and cursed.

Though, does it really? I might just be seeing things when it comes to Amory.

As the damn clown man was still sort of looking at us even though he'd taken a few steps over toward a young child and their parents, I put a hand on the small of Amory's back and gave him a little push.

"Where to next?" I asked.

"Wherever you like is fine."

Before I could shake my head, I spotted a row of food stalls, smelled sugar on the air.

"Fine." I pointed toward the stalls. "You pick one."

"You don't have to feed me," he said, head bowing until he was looking at the balloon animal.

"Amory. I have to. What if you collapse before you can serve me my pie later, hmm? That would make me very unhappy. Do you want to make me unhappy, Amory?"

He looked at me. "No, but I mean—"

"Okay then." I hooked my arm under his and started walking. "That's crêpes, fries, giant pretzels, waffles on a stick, and candied apples. What'll it be?"

This area also had a few picnic tables, more of the demon clown trash cans, and, hidden by a little artificial hill topped with cartoon chickens and bunnies dancing, there was a playground, nothing there that could compete with the faster attractions, but a good place to park your toddlers while you talked to other parents about how being a parent was hard.

“If you really want to, the waffle pops,” Amory said.

“Good choice.”

The booth in question was the one on the right, topped with a golden plastic waffle that had been lathered in sparkling syrup. A pawn was responsible for this one, and her eyes widened when she saw me, so much so that the iris reflected light in an unnatural way. I glanced to my left, but Amory hadn’t noticed.

“You’re going to have one too, right?”

“No. I’ll have pie later.” While the park didn’t strike me as a place to hire shady characters, I had announced myself, and you never knew. I wasn’t taking the chance of being poisoned while I had Amory with me. Dying in front of him probably wasn’t a good way to end this date.

He got a little pouty, which was adorable. “Oh.”

“What can I get you?” the pawn asked, focusing on Amory, realizing she shouldn’t focus too much, then looking to her waffle iron and stirring the batter.

“I’ll have”—Amory perused the menu fastened to the wall behind the pawn—“Oh, dark chocolate and candied sesame,” he said, then glanced my way. “Is that okay?”

“I have no idea. You’re going to try it and then tell me if it was okay.”

Amory smiled, and the pawn got busy. I watched her, she noticed. Good.

The pawn still managed to get the waffle perfectly golden, lathered it with a heaping of molten chocolate, and then sprinkled the sesame on it. She carefully handed it to him, even pulled the napkins out of the dispenser for him.

“Keep the change,” I said, handing her a fifty.

“Thank you, sir.” She dipped her head in a submissive bow.

“Do you always do that?” Amory asked when we’d walked a few steps away from the smell of waffle batter and a pawn’s fear of giving offense.

“Do what?”

“Overtip.”

“Not always. Shouldn’t I?”

“No, no. I mean, it’s nice. And thank you.”

“What for?”

He shrugged, smiled shyly. “Overtipping when all you ever have is coffee and cherry pie.”

I chuckled. “Amory, that’s not what I come to the Moonlight for. Now eat your chocolate waffle before it gets cold.”

He did, daintily biting the crispy treat while holding his giraffe in one arm.

“Let’s sit,” I said, pointing to a bench that stood to the side of a narrower, less traveled path.

“Oh, no. Let’s go that way,” Amory said, sounding excited.

I let him lead the way along winding paths where grass still struggled, locked in a battle with moss. The paths took us to a mushroom garden, the colorful mushrooms oversized, tall as people, and weathered. The paint had chipped off one of them, showing rotting wood underneath.

“Not exactly an enchanted garden,” I said.

“I remember it looking better,” Amory said between bites. He pointed at a sign that had been bleached by the sun to near illegibility. “Shrunken world.”

We sat on a bench across from the dying display, just a slab balanced on two mushrooms. Amory, to my frustration, was a neat eater. He left no traces of chocolate on his lips that I could have wiped away like the hero in a movie.

“What’s your verdict then? Is dark chocolate and candied sesame seeds okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, folding his used napkins around the small wooden stick. It brought me right back to all those nights I’d watched him, had imagined other things he might do with those hands. “Should we go to the next thing?” He pointed behind my back. “That one’s close.”

“The roller coaster? Sure.”

On the way there, he fed his used napkin to the clown-faced trash cans, not bothered in the least.

I wasn't sure why the roller coaster was called the Dandelion Ride, but that's what it was. Since there were mostly small children here along with bored adults, the line was negligible, and we got in close to the front, the balloon giraffe between us.

"Do you like roller coasters?" Amory asked. "I mean, is this okay?"

"Of course it's okay. Any ride you'll take with me is okay."

He just nodded as the lap bar got lowered, not even considering I could have meant it as an innuendo.

"This is going to be so much fun!" he said on the slow way up to the first peak.

I chuckled, placed my hand over his where it grabbed the lap bar. "Agreed."

Amory screamed with joy on our way into the first, twisty loop. The giraffe popped during it when he got pushed against me.

"Hey there," I whispered in his ear when we cleared the loop.

"You killed the giraffe," he said with a bright smile.

I decided to push my luck and put my arm around his shoulders. "I did. Sorry."

There were three loops total. I didn't care about those so much, but Amory, all bright excitement next to me, that was the best thing. I didn't understand how he was like this,

enjoying the thrill of the ride with me today, and on every other day, showing up to work with his bow tie perfectly straight and a service smile on his face. He deserved more days like today. He deserved to smile more, because smiling would produce better wrinkles than his worrying ever could.

“That was fun,” he said when the roller coaster had finished its go-around and the lap bar got lifted.

“It was. Should we have another go?”

“Oh,” he said, looking at the attendant and the people waiting in line. “Is that okay?”

“It is,” I said, and the park employee didn’t argue.

We stayed in our seats until I thought I’d have to carry Amory if we went again.

I was out of the car as soon as the bar lifted and held out my hand to him. “Let’s go find another ride,” I said, pulling him to his feet.

“That was so much fun!” He walked down the ride’s ramp on shaky feet. “Except for when my giraffe died.”

I snorted. “Right. Come on. You liked that giraffe more than I thought you would.”

We made it to the old arcade, which had been built in the eighties. Back then, Lake Eureka was a place to take meetings and socialize, at least for cursed and pawns, but the arcade had been just for fun, just like any other arcade at the time, although the Lake Eureka one had been among the fancier ones.

It looked abandoned now, smelled abandoned, even the traces of old cigarette smoke replaced by dust. The machines inside still sang their luring siren songs of entertainment, meaning there was someone here who took care of this place, maybe one of the older pawns.

It only mattered in so far as I hoped to find what I wanted at the back of the arcade. And I did.

“Ah, here we go.”

“You can just buy me another balloon. These’re all rigged to eat your coins,” Amory said when he saw what I’d come here for: the claw machines, which looked to be filled with relatively new plushies.

I said, “Allow me at least three attempts before you dismiss me in favor of a machine.” Then I grinned. I was good at these.

Amory sighed, crossed his arms. “Fine.” He leaned against the glass behind which his giraffe was hiding in a pool of plushie bodies and gave me a feisty look. He’d thawed since we’d come here, had gotten more playful. That side of him, I wondered why he kept it buried all the time.

I found a coin in one of my outer coat pockets and tossed it in that effortless move, catching it without looking. I’d practiced doing this, but I’d never have guessed it would come in so handy. And seeing Amory’s eyes widen when I didn’t drop the coin was incredibly satisfying.

“Wish me luck,” I said, feeding the coin to the slot in a smooth move.

Over time, I’d learned that some skills were easier retained than others. I had no idea about operating a claw machine, but I managed to get Amory his giraffe on the first try.

“No way,” he said when I pulled it from the chute for him.

“What can I say, I was determined. This is for you, Amory. I hope you will find it in you to forgive me for making the other one explode. I hope you will like me again quite soon.”

He took the toy from me, staring at it as if I’d given him a pot of gold. “I think this is one of the sweetest things anyone has ever done for me. And I do like you.”

I watched as he brushed the artificial fur with his long fingers, once more hoping he’d soon run them over a few select parts of me like that.

I took a deep breath, closed the distance between us. “Good.”

I’d hoped for a kiss, maybe more. There was no one here, and we could’ve made out, could’ve done more.

But while Amory was giving me every sign that he was enjoying himself and my company, he flinched. He didn’t try to put distance between us, but his grip on the plushie tightened and he looked away.

I could and would respect any sign of discomfort I got from him and stayed where I was, not making a move while he decided the next one.

After a moment, he said, "Let's go to the water slide."

I chose to give it another try, the last one for today, and said, "Water slide or water ride?"

He looked at me again, curious. "What's the difference?"

I kept my distance and didn't move, said, "One's for screaming and getting wet, and the other is for making out."

There. If the problem was a lack of being clear about my intentions, that should solve it.

He flushed, but he was getting less tense. "They both sound dirty when you say it like that, Soyer."

There it was. My name from his mouth, turning it from just a name to really, truly *my* name. For Amory. For whom we would be in each other's lives. In my chest, darkness moved and let in light.

"Ah. Finally calling me by the name you picked for me."

I offered him my hand, and when he placed his in mine, palm against palm, it was as if something between us was sealed, a connection that had been drawn in pencil to be marked into the skin with ink.

"As I recall, you picked it for yourself," Amory said.

"Only because you were too shocked and unable to make a decision." *And because I wanted a name you'd know came from something you love, so that when you call me, you think of a loved thing.* "Someone had to take charge. So. Water slide

or water ride, Amory?" *Say you will follow me into the dark, Amory.*

The color bloomed from his cheeks all the way to his neck. "Which one's for making out again?"

I was so relieved, relieved to be given this chance. "I'll show you."



I had planned for a few possibilities, but really, the *Grotto of Poseidon* had been the one I was most looking forward to. It was one of the quaint rides, one of the older ones, although it had been completely updated about ten years ago.

Back where I'd grown up, there had been a woman who lived alone at the fringes of our village. Outcast, people would think today, but then, not so much. Wise women were still cherished in those days, and what they did for the community, be it take care of the dead or the living, it was important work. Holy, even.

Sometimes when my face was swollen and I'd earned yet another split lip over nothing, I ended up near her house, and when she saw me, she would take me inside like any other stray.

"All the important things in our lives happen near water," she'd told me once.

It was an old superstition, and none I held any stock in, but still, I'd wanted Amory to come to the grotto with me. The

wise woman had passed before the witch arrived in our village. I don't think I ever thanked her.

The grotto was close, the manmade hills to our left and right lying under struggling greenery and flowers brought there from greenhouses. I thought about the wise woman on our way. *You really deserved a thank-you for letting a crying, bloody boy sleep on your cot*, I thought, glanced at Amory. *Better to speak when you can.*

“How did you know I'd like it here?” he asked before I could blurt out what was on my mind.

It was a good start, and I said, “I told you. I pay attention. And you don't get half as much fun as you should be getting.”

He giggled. “Like you're the king of fun.”

I stopped and spun around to face him. “I do have fun.” *I don't, not really, and if so, it doesn't even feel real anymore.* Picking my words with care, I went on, “You are worse than sugar, Amory. More addictive. Why aren't you seeing anyone?”

That made him deflate, as if it were a criticism aimed at his heart, at a failure in how it beat in his chest. “I go on dates. In fact, I'm on one right now.”

I decided to press, but carefully. Above his head, I could see large birds in the afternoon sky, maybe cranes. “But you're not *seeing* anyone. Why not go from dating to a relationship?”

It was too much maybe, a question that landed too close to a wound he didn't even know he had. I saw the muscles in his

jaw tense. I couldn't help myself. I placed my hand against his cheek, the need to soothe this man as strong as the planet's gravity under my feet. Against my back, I felt a tingling as if from feathers.

Without forcing him to answer, I said what I needed him to hear. "I don't mean to pry. I'm asking because I have every intention of not fucking this up."

He gave me an uncertain smile. "Oh." His hold on the plushie he'd been pressing to his chest eased.

I went on but treading carefully. "Yeah, oh. So why? Don't tell me you only found assholes on whatever shitty dating app you've been using." *Or tell me but give me their names so I can find them and teach them regret.*

He glanced off to the side. "How do you know I use an app?"

"Because you do, and don't change the fucking subject on me," I said as softly as was humanly possible. "Answer the question."

He reacted like I'd seen werewolves or crows react in response to a stronger member of their family looking out for them: he gave in.

"I have fun on the dates. Well, not on all, but some. Most guys want to move things along, you know. I don't. It's like they're just strangers, and I'm simply not looking for a night of fun. I don't know how anyone does that. I'm not judging or anything, it's just not for me."

That lined up with my experiences with him. Also explained why I'd had to hold back, no matter how much I wanted to do every filthy and fun thing to him I could think of, and I had lifetimes' worth of filthy and fun filed away in my brain.

But this was fine. I could work with this, and I needed him to know I wanted to work with this.

I traced his orbital bone with my thumb. "Ah. That's why you didn't want me to come back to your place on our first date."

His jaw dropped. "Are you a mind reader or something? I never said that."

"Not a mind reader." Although I wanted to know every piece of his mind, wanted to understand it. "I pay attention. You didn't want me to come over and spend the night, so I didn't. For the record, I would have. And also, for the record, not every person who sleeps with you on a first date will ghost you after."

He got briefly distracted by the regular, uninteresting people who also shared the space with us on this significant day, then repeated, "It's just not for me."

I waited until I had his full attention again before I said, "You don't have to justify yourself. If you're ace or demi, that's fine. If you just want to take it slow, that's fine." I hesitated, considered if I should leave it there, but that wouldn't be wise. "If you have a problem with blood, I'm not going to lie, it might be an issue."

The gears were turning, I could tell. He was relaxing more as well, meaning they were turning the right way. “Well. Well. Are you going to drink my blood?”

Fucking hell, I thought. Curse of the fucking vampires. Should have risked eating a damned waffle to prove my humanity once and for all, but seriously, he’s been feeding me pie. Does he think I’m some fruit vampire?

“How many times?” I asked, though not harshly. “I’m not a vampire. Now let’s get to those fucking boats. You’re not missing work and then resenting me for it later.”

A shy smile bloomed on his face. “You’re bossy.”

You need a bossy man in your life, sweet Amory. “Some of the time.”

“I’m not sure that’s true.”

Smart boy. “Feisty and sweet. Makes me look right past all the worrying.” *Although I’ll boss you all the way away from acquiring wrinkles if I get to have my way.*

He followed me to the grotto, which lay waiting for just Amory and me. They had put up a sign as well as a flimsy chain we went right over.

Once we were on the other side, Amory said, “You knew we’d come here.”

“I hoped.” *Because you made hope grow inside my chest like a festering thing, like an illness I cannot cut out of me but have to live with. Until something bad happens, and hope births grief.*

I pushed that thought aside. I needed to be in the present with Amory for as long as I could, especially today.

“What if I’d opted for wet and screaming?” he asked when we entered the grotto’s darkness.

“I might have made a lewd joke before getting onto the water slide with you.”

He looked as if that held some appeal, almost like he was about to tell me he’d rather do that. But then he took a look around at all the fake interior, fake marble, fake gold, fake fabrics that shimmered under artificial light. This was a very different experience from a red-carpet movie event, but it reminded me of the one I had attended once.

The gondola that we’d be taking had been cleaned. I’d specified as much. A pawn stood next to it, older, nothing in his posture suggesting even a hint of defiance.

The little boat itself was neither a Venetian gondola nor a Greek barge. For some reason, it had a little Horus head mounted on the fore. Supposedly, it looked exotic to people who’d never seen much past their own fenced yards. Despite the wild blend of foreign things about the boat, I was happy to accept it as a romantic setting for today.

At the same time, Amory heaved a heavy breath next to me, his hand growing a little bit sweaty. I stopped.

“It’s just a ride, Amory.” *Just a place for us to be alone with the other, unseen.* “We can just sit in the boat and hold hands.

Or not. Nothing is required of you here.” Hope roared inside me, scattering her venom.

Amory blinked at me from under his lashes. His hair looked especially beautiful in the muted light, shimmered brighter than all the fake gold. “Are you sure you’re not a mind reader?”

“Positive. Do you want to get in?”

He looked at the gondola, licked his bottom lip. I signaled to the park employee to move away when he extended his hand to help us on board, and he quickly went into the control booth.

Amory was either still a little unsure on his feet after all the loops in the roller coaster or had been born without a hint of sea legs. I helped him on board, then followed. The boat would flow with the current, but I shifted my weight slightly to see how much it moved just in case anything unforeseen happened.

I sat next to Amory, who had placed his giraffe on his other side this time around, not between us. It was an improvement. I kept his hand in mine as the pawn released the barrier that had kept the gondola in place. It floated, first slowly, then pacing itself to match the current.

The cave was so clearly not real. The smell of it was wrong, even the temperature was. That was all fine though. You couldn’t always have the real thing, sometimes you had to work with what you had. That was kitchen wisdom, but it applied here as well, and while Amory didn’t seem to notice or

to care, I wasn't here for the cave. I was here for him, and he was real, gorgeous, warm next to me.

I lifted the hand I was still holding to my lips, kissing his knuckles. I meant it to show respect, adoration. Those two things, I could easily give him.

He breathed in, a heavy breath, the kind of breath people often took in the darkness.

I looked at his shadowed features, not lowering his hand. "May I kiss your lips?"

I felt the tremor run through his body before I saw his head bob, granting me permission.

What I really wanted was to pounce, devour, have him, here and now. It wasn't the way I'd ever treat him. I reined in my desires, let our lips brush together in a chaste way, almost a kiss of friendship, a way to get acquainted with one another.

I reached for him though, placing my other hand on the back of his head, making clear this was more than friendship. Amory didn't move to meet me, maybe couldn't, though he didn't pull away or give any indication he didn't like this. When he reached out to embrace me, I knew the experience was overwhelming to him, so I took my time, carefully savoring his lips and the pathways to his jaw, which was slack, grew slacker when I gently ran the tip of my tongue over it.

It didn't take long for him to grant me more, give me trust, and open himself up to me. When he did that, it was a whole other trial of control on my end.

Not a trial. It's a test, I thought, kissing him deeply. He tasted of cocoa and candied sesame, sweet, but with a hint of bitterness in there.

His fingers curled against my side, and I groaned. Yes, this was frustrating, but I knew it would be worth it. He'd smile for me again, just like he had earlier, would make me weather clown trash cans and annoying parents again, and I would welcome it. I'd also not quite given up on getting him to share his full dating history with me so that I could chase down a few people, but that was for another time.

Amory did not take what we were doing any further. I could feel the current shift before the boat stopped and we were rattled with it connecting to the production line that would move it back to the start. Technically, we could have gone for another round, but I really did want to get him back to the city in time.

I got off first. We walked in that easy, synchronous way people always did when they snuck back from the place they'd snuck away to. The artificial cave wound left and right, and then dying daylight met us, the evening approaching on spring-quick feet.

Now, that we were walking hand in hand didn't bother Amory. He was lost in that sweet high, exactly where I wanted him.

Just when I thought the date had gone almost better than I had hoped, a flaw appeared, much like dog poop on a pristine lawn. And these were two turds, fucking Caecilius's no less.

I'd seen them at a place he'd held one of his speakeasies a few years back. At the time, I'd done the smart thing and left before he had seen me.

“Black Shuck,” Beard-man said. He almost sounded respectful, almost.

I stared him right in the eyes. “Get out of my way.”

The other one was the dumb one, clearly, because he took one look at Amory and said, “Did you get candy?”

Under normal circumstances, I would not have let that stand. As it was, I told Dumb-N-Ugly, “I'll warn you once, pawn. You look at him like that again, one of your eyes is mine.”

Amory took a step back, not a smart move when facing down stupid. I clasped his hand tightly.

“Our boss wants to see you,” Beard-man said.

“I have no dealings with your boss, and I definitely don't want to see him.” I really didn't, no doubt, no what-ifs in my head. Not anymore. I knew what I wanted, and it wasn't fucking Caecilius. “Now, out of my way, or else.”

He moved out of my way, standing next to one of the creepy fucking trash cans, making me want to shove him inside face-first. I walked Amory down the path and toward the exit in measured steps.

When we were out of earshot, I said, “They are not stupid enough to jump us here.”

He was scared. “What does that mean?”

I smiled at him. Fuck, but his chocolate brown hair looked lovely in the evening light, the golden corona bright against the blue of his irises.

“That they are just about in the lowest percentile for average intelligence,” I told him, aiming for a light tone.

Once more, Amory didn’t appreciate that. “Hilarious.” He glanced over his shoulder. “Did you see them? They look fucking vicious.”

“And I don’t?”

“Not really, no,” he said, frowning again.

“Well, that’s a shame.”

We walked through the side exit that led directly to the car park. I spotted the cab where I’d told the driver to wait and steered us that way.

“What now?” Amory asked when I had him back in the cab. He was craning his head, trying to see if the two idiots were brave enough to pursue us.

I took him in my arms. “Now I take you home so you can change, and then I take you to work so you can save me a slice of cherry pie for when I come by later.”

He leaned into me, really only confirming all over again that he needed touch, gentle and loving touch.

“I mean with those guys.”

“You forget they ever interrupted us.”

“What did they call you?” he asked in the growing darkness of the car.

“Black Shuck. It’s like a big black ghost dog that shows up, kind of like an omen.” *Of death, my Amory, but I don’t need to tell you that.*

Amory, though, became interested. “Are you a werewolf?”

The driver very nearly took that as a joke he was permitted to laugh about. I ignored him.

“No, Amory,” I said, speaking slowly so I could be sure he got it. “I don’t turn into a dog, and I don’t hunt nubile young men through the forest at night. Unless they ask for it.” Yeah, I wanted him to hear the suggestion in my voice.

Color came back to his cheeks, and he said, “Noted,” not put off by the idea at all.

Noted indeed.

Thirteen

MINE



Dying didn't scare me. Pain is something one can grow accustomed to. But grief, grief is like a curse, only it doesn't live on the skin but in the heart.

AMORY DIDN'T SEEM TO be used to that much excitement. He fell asleep in my arms, soon leaning against my chest. I stroked the back of his head, watched his relaxed form. I wanted to commit this moment to memory in case I never got another. I hated myself for thinking that way, and yet I couldn't make myself stop from thinking that way.

Amory's sleep was even. I wondered what his dreams were. I could always hire the Sandman to tell me, but the thought of allowing anyone else that close to Amory...no. I'd never unless a pressing need demanded it.

He gave me twenty, twenty-five minutes of this, the blink of an eye in my whole existence up until today, but also an

eternity. Even after, he remained soft, seeking my nearness.

I didn't want this to end yet, wanted to stretch the minutes, and so I suggested coffee. He decided to test me with a slightly ridiculous order.

I pulled out my phone, ignoring the notifications from Hawthorne, and ordered his soy hazelnut mocha, easy on the sugar.

"You're kidding, right?" he asked, leaning closer so he could look at my screen.

"Amory. Why would I kid when I'm on a second date with you? My goal is to impress you."

He was still in my arms, which meant he had to look up at me. I was beginning to fall in love with seeing him like this, even with his pasty skin. Porcelain. That was more flattering, even if the truth was he lived the vampiric lifestyle, not me.

"Do you have henchmen?" he pressed, still not satisfied with what he knew about me. "Is that it? Are you an evil supervillain? Don't answer that. I bet it all depends on my definition of supervillain."

He was correct, but also either intentionally going pouty to get his way or genuinely hurt by me being evasive. It didn't matter which because at this point, I was powerless against him.

I said, "There's a network, and some of their members specialize in providing certain services. I do offer mine, on occasion." And if the price showed I was respected.

“Therefore, I’m a valued member and afforded certain amenities.”

The driver was paying close attention again, glancing at us in the rearview, mindful of secrets leaked to a human who wasn’t yet trusted or attached to our world. It didn’t matter. Wouldn’t in twelve hours.

“You’re kidding.”

I turned my attention back to Amory. “No, Amory. I’m not.”

The driver had timed everything perfectly and pulled over. I spotted the coffee pawn right away and let my window down, checking behind us as well as ahead, just in case, then took the fancy coffee my fancy date had requested.

I closed the window, and the cab sped away when I turned back to Amory. He gaped.

“There you go,” I said and handed him the warm paper cup.

Amory stared at it, sniffed it, and looked like a puppy faced with a new and squishy toy.

“You weren’t kidding,” he informed me.

I scratched his neck like I would any puppy, and he relaxed, enjoyed his drink.



Amory closed down once we stopped outside his apartment, going back to his worrying self. I’d have preferred taking him to work, but he refused, and I wasn’t going to press him.

“Wait until he’s inside,” I told the driver when Amory walked away from the cab.

He turned around while he was fishing his keys from the pocket of his jacket. Apparently, the front door sometimes worked like advertised. I waved, he waved back, walked inside with a smile softening his features.

“Sir?” the driver looked back at me, but I waited until the building’s door fell closed.

“You can leave now. That flower shop near the Old Cemetery.”

“Soeurs de Coeur?”

“That’s the one.”

While the driver pulled away, I found a locksmith to take care of that damn front door on Hawthorne and explained what I needed them to do in a concise message. They double-checked I didn’t want an extra key. I hesitated for longer than I probably should have.

Then I contacted that capable pawn to follow Amory from his place to the diner and watch him from outside until I got there.

After I had that taken care of, I texted Simeon.

Get the notice about Amory out, but only after three-thirty in the morning. I want him to have one more normal shift at work.

Scheduling it now, the vampire returned. Anything special you want me to add?

You disrespect him, you disrespect me.

It took Simeon a moment to return, *What a romantic you are, Shuck. I cannot wait to meet this man.*

I rolled my eyes, but in truth, I was looking forward to Simeon meeting Amory. I didn't necessarily need them to talk or for Simeon to say anything stupid, but despite how annoying he was, Simeon took care of people. He had a selfless streak that had often gotten him stabbed and drowned and thrown in a pigsty.

I opened a chat with Valentin to tell him about the two Caecilius goons.

Did they break any rules? he asked.

None. But they might.

They can travel through the city and stay here, but I'll task someone with finding and tailing them, just in case. Congratulations on your upcoming announcement, he texted.

Thanks.

Did you make contact with the investigator I sent to Brixon?

I checked my notifications. *They emailed. Haven't had a chance to get in touch yet.*

Good. I told her to do what you tell her to and to stay there in case you need support on the ground.

I ran a hand through my hair, texted back, *Awesome.*

The investigator, Olivia Warren, had sent over a shared document of the timeline, and she was in the process of confirming each item on there and filling in details. So far, she had checked the coroner's report on the second body they had found but had added that the handwriting on the original was really erratic, and the recording of it had gone missing as well as all of the samples that should have existed.

"Here we are," the driver said, double parking right in front of the flower shop.

"That'll be everything for today," I told him and got out.

What the investigator had found—even though it wasn't all that much yet—sounded a lot like a witch to me. Under normal circumstances, I would have geared up and joined her right away, but there was still a void creature who had found Amory to its liking.

"More importantly, he's to *my* liking," I mumbled.

Soeurs de Coeur sat opposite the cemetery walls, an old flower shop run by a three-generation team. Even at this time of year, they kept flowers outside, wreathed and still on their stem, some potted, some dried.

I entered the shop. The warmth in there was for the flowers as was the humidity. And they were thriving, even those cut and in water, glass vases varying in size to hold them. The floor was cream tile, easy to clean off the water spots. Behind the wooden counter, a large bonsai sat on its own little shelf, impressive in the way giant land turtles are.

The youngest of this generation stopped her arranging of long-stemmed roses and dahlias in their vases when I entered.

She looked up at me, hair like ripe grain, eyes like a summer sky.

“Black Shuck,” said the maiden, a cursed like me, her voice so many farm songs for sowing, for making the seeds take root in the soil. She looked to be about sixteen or seventeen, but in truth, she was ancient.

“I need another bouquet,” I told her.

She brightened, all innocence. “Do you? Black Shuck, the heartless man. I’ve known you for so many years, and you don’t send flowers much. This one like the last we did for you?”

Her older sister came out from the back, the matron, followed by the oldest, the crone. They were all similar. The matron had darker hair, the crone thinning curls that burned a deep, fiery red when she was the maiden. With her death one of these winters, they would all change roles, and the next spring after that, she’d be reborn again as the maiden, her hair once more aflame.

“He’s here for more flowers,” the matron said, incredulous.

The crone chuckled in a way that made her bones rattle. “All hearts melt when they find the right kindling. What’ll it be for your lover, Black Shuck?”

“Tulips, yellow. And irises, yellow and blue.”

“No purple ones?” the maiden asked.

“What am I, a fucking prince to send purple flowers?”

“You have acted like one before,” said the matron but waved to her younger sister.

The crone stepped forward when the girl began selecting irises, said, “Not those. Give him the long ones. A long stem imitates deep roots.” She eyed me with cloudy eyes. “Unless it’s not that kind of thing?”

“Long stems,” I agreed with her, watching as the matron got her cutting tools out.

They used old blades here, blades with meaning. All had at some point been used in childbirth, some in preparing the dead for burial.

“If you want to add a card, pick it out,” the matron said, pointing to a carousel display next to her counter.

I turned the colorful cards, some bigger, some smaller, some handmade by the sisters with pressed flowers glued to paper.

I found one with a colorful clown face embossed on it. It was gaudy. The clown didn’t help, no matter the rainbow colors, but he would like it.

“I’ll bring you a pen,” the crone said. “I have my good fountain pen somewhere in the back.”

The maiden heaved her armful of flowers onto the counter, and the matron got to work.

“Thank you,” I told her and watched as she cut the flowers to an even length and arranged them for presentation.

The maiden stood next to me and looked just like a regular child demanding attention.

“I always dreamed about kissing you, just one time,” she said when I finally met her eyes.

“You don’t say.”

“Sister,” the matron warned, cutting the irises so they’d tower over the tulips, creating a bright explosion of yellows and blues.

The maiden tsked. “When I was older, obviously. Unless—”

“No,” I told her.

“I’m teasing.” She smiled at me in a way they only ever managed when they were maidens. “Besides, considering how often I have given birth to my sister, do you really think me young?”

The sister in question, the crone, came out with her fountain pen. “Here. Black ink. That should do for you.”

“It certainly will.”

The crone was swiping the cut stems that had fallen to the floor while the matron was already binding up the flowers. She waved and mimed for her younger sister to get back to work. The girl obeyed, and the matron politely moved to the other end of the counter, giving me space to write out my message.

I knew exactly what I wanted to say. With Amory, I always did.

Amory,

The water ride with you was one of a kind. Will you join me for some cherry pie tonight?

I signed my new name and sealed the card, slid it across the counter so the matron could securely tuck it away in the stems.

“Delivery?” she asked.

“I have a pawn who I want to hand them over. Can you get these to him?”

“Sure,” she said. “Right away, or later?”

“Right away.”

After I’d given her the address and the pawn’s details, I left the sisters. With my hand on the door, I stopped. There was a bucket with white carnations right next to it. They hadn’t been put in their vase yet, waited for their final place.

“Add this to my account,” I told them, pulling a single flower from the water.

“That one’s free for you,” I heard the crone say. Then, she launched into a dirty joke she told in Middle English.

I didn’t stay for the punchline.



What I wanted was to head straight for the Moonlight. I wanted to go in and watch Amory from my table all night. He deserved a few hours to himself though, and maybe, just maybe, I wanted Evil Eye Jenny to have the chance to talk to him.

I crossed the street from the flower shop and walked through the gate that took me to the old cemetery. Love wasn't enough to blind me to the possibilities for danger and disappointment I was lining Amory up for. Passion did that. But love, love made me want him and Evil Eye Jenny to talk it all out. It made me want him aware and willing despite that. I'd stay away for a few hours to give them an opportunity for conversation. To give her time to warn him off.

The cemetery hadn't much changed since I'd last been there. The grass was being maintained as always, and flowers for the dead came and wilted and went. Trees and greenery stood mostly bare, though the first stirrings of spring could be seen in the long green leaves of crocuses poking up from the ground.

I had been in the city for so long. Too long. I stopped by a familiar tombstone. The Star-Garbed had a long memory, and sometimes there were already flowers here, but not today.

I squatted in front of the grave and placed the carnation by the headstone. "You're still an asshole, you know that? You made me stay in this city. That boy would've never met me. I could be in Brazil by now or somewhere else. I could be having cocktails at some beach, but you had to make sure I'd stay in that fucking tower." I took a few deep breaths, in, out, repeat. "Asshole." Not that the dead could hear me.

The cemetery was a park where the dead grew like flowers, and I walked through the rows of them, not sure if I felt their judgment or my own.



Even after the cemetery, I was still filled with restless energy. I checked the Hawthorne app where the capable pawn had messaged me.

Delivery made. This time, no confusion about them being for him. The gentleman's colleague, Jenny, saw and sounded outraged. Cook was excited for the gentleman, he'd written. Very competent, and paying attention to details, such as name tags. I texted him a thumbs-up back as a reward.

I found a 47 cab and told the driver to take me to Lorenzo's bodega. Something about what the black widow had said about new people in the underground combined with Caecilius's two idiot pawns from Lake Eureka earlier rubbed me entirely the wrong way. If they were there, I'd make them leave, I decided, and if not, I might just as well look around for that void creature. Its last feeding had been a couple of days ago, but they could go for one or two weeks between meals. The question was if the man had been recently cursed or not. That would have an impact on his control.

In the back of the cab, I tried not to think about Amory, about how he felt, how he tasted. About how badly I wanted to corrupt him, break that innocent shell and build something glorious from the shards.

I sighed. Getting turned on wasn't going to do me any favors. I had nothing else to do though, and after checking all my messages, those ten minutes in the car made my skin itch,

made me jumpy. I had self-control enough not to bare myself to the pawn behind the wheel like that, but I felt pathetic for it all the same.

The cab had barely stopped in front of the bodega when I'd opened the door and was halfway out of it. Inside Lorenzo's, the hum of the refrigerators and some swing music he had playing in the background greeted me.

"Black Shuck," said the man himself. And man was generous, given that it was just the spawn form he'd currently taken.

"Going through the back," I said.

He nodded, but his eyes landed on another customer, a regular human unless my senses were lying. The woman was looking at ice cream, balancing one in each hand, apparently stuck with the difficult choice between vanilla and chocolate.

She didn't really take note of me as I walked past the well-stocked shelves that had candy and canned goods from no less than three continents. *Ice cream is for breakups and feeling like shit, isn't it? Maybe I should keep some of that stocked,* I thought wryly. *But he won't break up with me, not now, not yet. He's enchanted.* I hated that, and I loved it.

I opened the back door that led to the underground and walked down the escalators even as they started moving. The ads on the walls changed every few years, although the Hawthorne ones were very consistent and constant.

Above anything, Valentin had ensured that the underground had a brightness to it that you'd not expect from such a sunless place. He'd used color and Elias's art school connections, and lots of money. Above my head, an abstract sky had been painted against the stone, the mosaic of what functioned as an assembly hall coming up ahead.

Unlike the Asymptote, Mosaic Lane was clean, the boardwalk aged but in a good way, the wooden planks smooth and shiny by all the many feet and paws and other appendages that passed over them on a daily basis.

Mosaic had a reputation as a good place to go if you wanted a fun time and to try the local cuisine. In between the unfriendly elven fortune teller and a tiny movie theater that specialized in the classics and old Chinese kung fu movies, Mosaic had several restaurants, three cafés I knew of, and further down, its very first food truck as I found out on my casual stroll.

Two triglavs served people rye bread sandwiches and Bohemian dumplings. They were subtle about keeping one of each of their tree faces watching me, and I almost walked past. Then didn't.

The line was a good ten people long. A fox woman was on her phone and hadn't noticed her kit walking toward me as I approached the back door of the food truck.

"Are you a dog?" the little girl asked, fox ears twitching.

"Do I look like a dog?"

The people in the line had quieted, though the fox woman hadn't noticed yet. After all, the underground was the only place in the city where you could let your children run freely without fear. Valentin had made sure of that.

The girl rose to her tippy toes to get a better look. "Maybe you can change. Our neighbor is a nice lady, and she can change. We live in a very narrow house, and so does she."

"I can't," I told her.

Her ears twitched again. "But my brother said you are the black dog."

"It's Black Shuck, but I don't change," I told her.

That got the fox woman's attention. She looked up from her phone, eyes growing wide. She walked toward me with her head lowered.

"I'm so sorry! She's just a kit," the woman said and took the little girl's hand.

"Mommy, he says he's not a dog. Aaron lied."

"She doesn't know what she's saying. My sincere apologies, Black Shuck. Honey, we're leaving."

"But I want dumplings!" the kit said.

"We're leav—"

I sighed. "It's fine. Don't lose your spot in the line."

I left the woman to it and went up the truck's stairs, starting with a friendly knock.

The door opened, and I found myself looking up into the three visages of a triglav decidedly bigger and taller than me.

“We have a permit to be here,” he said from three mouths.

“Not here for that.” I glanced over to the line. Everyone was looking and trying very hard not to get noticed in their curiosity. “A word.”

I crooked my finger and walked a few paces away. The triglav’s heavy footfalls followed me.

“We are doing nothing wrong,” he told me, voices a tad out of sync.

“Don’t care. I care about what you see all day. People who are just passing through. People who might’ve stuck out to you as the trouble-making kind.”

Three brows furrowed while the triglav’s defensive stance deflated. “They just come to our truck to order food, you know. And we get all kinds. You know how the underground is, people coming from all over looking for work or trying to settle here or moving through while they find where they want to be.” He shrugged. “We also don’t offer much in the raw department. Might not get the types you are looking for ordering apricot-filled dumplings.”

Which made me want to order some, share them with Amory. I pushed the thought aside. Whether Caecilius’s pawns fell into the raw meat eater department, I wasn’t sure.

“Seen anyone on the boardwalk who seemed like they didn’t belong? Homeless types?” I asked. Caecilius’s pawns weren’t

homeless, but there was something unkempt about them that would have stuck out in the underground.

He gave me a confused look. “Weird thing about this city? They don’t really let anyone go homeless, Hawthorne won’t. Well, some over-indulgers go to sleep on the benches or on the boardwalk and then come to our truck for a breakfast burrito Sunday morning. It’s the only reason we offer burritos.” He crossed his arms. “You should look to the above-ground, if you don’t mind me saying. The human city has more darkness even if they get sunlight and we don’t.”

“Fair point. You been in the food truck business on the human side?”

Another shrug. “Tried, me and my brother. We wore wigs and scarves, and it sucked. Used to give him fucking eye infections. They also tried to rob us once, but the worst thing? No one appreciates Bohemian cuisine up there. We’re happy to compromise on the damn burritos so long as people keep coming back for bramboráky.”

“Hmm. Understandable sentiment. You serve those with applesauce?”

“We do.”

I nodded. “How about void creatures? Seen any of those around?”

His three sets of eyes widened. “Would’ve called Hawthorne if.” He jerked his head. “We get kids coming here. Also the odd, fragile human in the know. Can’t have those eaten.”

“No, we can’t,” I agreed and fished a bill from an inside pocket. “Get me some of those potato pancakes. Extra applesauce.”

Having three faces meant he could look at both the money and me as if I were the one who’d spawned additional faces on my head. He then took the bill and walked back to his food truck.

Ten minutes later, I was making my way to the end of Mosaic, finishing the last of the gloriously crunchy potato pancakes.

Mosaic was long and gently curved. In the underground, that translated to more habitable spaces, more room for businesses. It was close to where the black widow had pointed me. My working theory was that she had noticed Caecilius’s people, disagreed with their opinions, wanted them gone while not getting involved directly, and then I’d stumbled by, and she’d told me, though in their normal, cryptical way.

I knew I had time, and a distraction from thinking about Amory and what I wanted to do to him was more than welcome. Yet the most interesting thing in the underground remained the damn triglavs and their food truck. None of the people I came across, whether they were shifted to a beast form or looking human enough to live above ground, stood out as suspicious, and Beard-man and Dumb-N-Ugly were nowhere in sight.

I was walking back down the boardwalk along Mosaic when the back of my head prickled with unseen eyes. Instead of

stopping and turning, I rounded the fortune teller's little train car, remodeled to be her office and place of work.

Doubling back to catch whoever had been following and watching brought me face to face with...nothing. It was just the boardwalk again, busier now with the evening crowd, but none of the people walking or running were following me.

I frowned like Amory did. My instincts were sharp after years of use and relying on them. Beard-man and Dumb-N-Ugly had not struck me as competent enough to follow me and know they'd gotten noticed.

I watched the passing strangers for long minutes, hoping to spot something that was odd, someone who didn't belong and tried to hide it.

None like that walked my way. It was frustrating, but it told me Caecilius had sent more people here as if his human dummies and the two from earlier hadn't been enough.

It was almost like he wanted to force my hand. Or Valentin's.



Technically, there was enough time for me to stop by my place, shower, change. I couldn't bring myself to do that, not when I knew Amory had been on his feet all evening.

Instead, I hailed a 47 cab. It dropped me a block away, allowing me to take in the crisp night air, my breath fogging as winter clung to the world.

The pawn was across the street, walking, stopping, pulling out his phone, walking again. He blended in nicely for a man of his size.

He looked at me like a guard dog expecting orders when I was close, though I had no doubt he'd sensed me long before that.

“Sir,” he said.

“Anything unusual?”

He shook his head. “Saw the gentleman look at the flowers on and off. In a kind of dreamy way. I think he really likes them. Since he started fiddling with the pepper shakers, he’s been pulling something from his pocket to glance at it. The card you sent along with the flowers, I think, sir.”

“And?”

“Smiled in a very swoony way, sir.”

“Good. That’ll be all for tonight.” I hesitated, then said, “I’ll be requesting your services again tomorrow.”

He brightened. “Of course, sir. I’m available. Thank you very much.”

He bid me a quick good night and headed toward the subway.

It was about half past two, and inside the Moonlight Diner, Amory was alone with that guy pretending to scribble in his notebook or write when he was actually looking at very different stuff on his computer.

I didn't give a damn. Mr. Laptop in there could covet all he wanted. He hadn't been the one on whose shoulder Amory had fallen asleep.

And so, full of swagger and confidence, I chose to wait the night out just a little bit longer. It should have been boring, being out here and watching Amory do nothing more than cleaning and readying things for the morning shift, but it fascinated me. He was oddly confident, doing what he did, felt oddly at home there.

On and off he frowned his familiar frown and looked at the clock on the wall. This was good. It told me he was waiting for me. It told me he wanted me to walk in through the door tonight, told me he wasn't afraid of seeing me again.

Mr. Laptop left about ten minutes before closing. I waited until he was gone from sight before pulling out my phone and requesting a cab to pick us up before crossing the street, the chilly air doing little to help me keep my excitement contained.

Well, more lust than excitement at this point.

The jingling of the bells above the door very nearly made me want to skip right toward Amory and take him in my arms. I didn't do that. Calm as you please, I said, "Hello, Amory."

His smile welcomed me, more so than the prescribed greeting could have, and the worry lines on his face cracked, flaked away. "Hi," he said, looking tired but also stunning.

“Worrier. Close up before you serve the pie,” I told him, taking my seat and waiting for him to do so.

Amory was a bit jittery, the energy of the newly in love wanting to impress their date. It was endearing though unnecessary. I wanted him to feel at ease with me in the same room, with me touching him, with him touching me.

He locked the door, and before plating up pie and coffee, he killed half the diner’s lights, bathing the two of us in intimate half-light. I watched him get two slices of pie ready. He brought those over, along with coffee as well as a large glass of lemonade, placed them carefully, and put his tray back behind the counter.

“You’re having pie with me.”

He smiled, and finally, he began relaxing, something he apparently had to do in stages. “To thank you for the flowers. Quite a way to ask someone to have pie with you.”

“Mmm. Was that what I was asking?”

He leaned on his elbow and gave me the most innocent grin. “I could also go load the dishwasher.”

Ah, his kindness made me love him, but his cheekiness would break me. I reached out to cover his hand with mine, said, “Stay, Amory.”

He did, and I let seconds pass to simply admire the fact, feel his hand warm under mine, examine him in close-up like a painter might their muse, committing everything about them to memory.

“Thank you for the date,” he said, interrupting me and taking a sip of his lemonade.

“I’ll take you on another.” *Or on ten. Or a thousand. However many you demand.* “It gives me an excuse to send you flowers.” *And ask for your time, your unguarded smiles.*

Amory shifted slightly in his seat, though he didn’t pull his hand away from me. “You don’t strike me as someone who needs an excuse to do what he wants.”

I didn’t move, tried to project calm. “Generally correct, but I do make exceptions.”

He looked over at the counter, at the flowers, blue and yellow, the colors fitting into the diner in a way I hadn’t planned at all. “I’ll have to carry them home, you know.”

“I didn’t send them to you here so you’d bring them home.” *Didn’t Evil Eye Jenny see them and attempt to talk you out of bringing anything related to me but especially me home? Did you tell her it didn’t matter?*

“Why did you send them here?”

“So that everyone”—*but especially Jenny and Mr. Laptop*—“knows you have an admirer who is sending you flowers.”

“That’s old-fashioned I guess,” he said, though not like he was criticizing me. It sounded as if he appreciated this old-fashioned tradition, possibly more the sending of flowers than the need to make it visible to those around him.

It was also possibly him preparing to ask about my age, so I said, “Would you rather I send you dick pics?”

His cheeks reddened. Huh. “Jeez, no. I’ll take the flowers.”

I licked my lips. “Interesting.”

And of course, the dick pics hadn’t been enough of a distraction, because the next thing out of his mouth wasn’t a demand to be shown my dick for inspection, but rather, “Are you a demon?”

“I wasn’t aware we were playing a guessing game,” I said, keeping my tone mild.

Amory, on the other hand, looked taken aback, gaze dropping first, followed by his head. “You just don’t tell me things.”

Because you’ll think it exciting, and you’ll keep asking me for more and demanding to be shown more, until you get hurt and scared. Until you run away from me.

“I selectively dole out information so a balloon animal rather than some Xanax will suffice to keep you from freaking out. There’s a difference.”

My brain conjured an image of Amory staring at the triglavs in their food truck. I knew then I didn’t want his world to mix with mine, blend into seductive shapes that hid darkness from him and made him stumble blindly into things he didn’t understand. The world didn’t need another Caecilius.

“Without distinction,” he said, contrary. Then, “Jenny really doesn’t like you.”

“Jenny doesn’t need to like me.”

“Dwayne does like you.”

“Ah.” That was good to know, but Amory wasn’t simply saying this. He was building up to telling me something, and I leaned forward to let him know I was listening.

“Dwayne helped me out when no one would.”

“He’s important to you.”

Amory nodded. “He doesn’t care that, you know, you’re gay.”

That I hadn’t expected, and it took me by surprise. “You said you dated other men. What difference does it make who you date?”

Amory didn’t immediately answer. He ate some of his pie, barely looked at me. Instead, I got the sense he was seeing memories flash in front of his mental eye, that, or working out a way to tell me what he wanted to tell me.

I waited.

When he was ready, he said, “I got kicked out of my home because I’m gay.”

And there, in that single sentence, was the hurt of a lifetime. There was the scar I could have found in Simeon’s research, the knowledge which would have made accepting this gift of trust I was being given disingenuous.

On top of that, who was I kidding? I would have followed up with whoever had felt the need to kick out this man—my man

—for a non-reason. Better not to have anything to hide from him now.

“How old were you?” I asked, doing my best to keep the barbs that weren’t for Amory out of my voice.

“Seventeen.”

Seventeen. A child by today’s standards, a boy reliant on family. My anger bloomed. I said, “Decent people don’t disown their children for just being, Amory. You lost nothing that you should cry over that day.” I wondered whether I shouldn’t follow up with his family after all.

His stupid family stopped mattering when his eyes filled with tears. In that moment, I wanted to wrap him in my arms, in comfort, wanted to give him my word I would take care of him, of everything. But that was what I wanted, needed. And it mattered not.

I didn’t move, sensing he wasn’t quite done sharing, the hurt having been left alone long enough to fester and finally needing to be drained in slow, painful stages.

He said, “I lost my sister, I think. I told her. She asked me if that was really the kind of lifestyle I’d choose for myself, and later...I saw her again, and she asked if I would maybe consider about that therapy thing because then maybe I’d be allowed to come home. I told her no.”

Conversion therapy? Oh, fuck them. I couldn’t follow up with them because I knew I’d do something I’d never be able

to tell Amory. Why was there always enough stupid in the world to allow for the existence of assholes?

And Amory didn't need to hear that either, so as calmly as I could, I said, "I feel inclined to make a derisive comment, but I'll refrain for the sake of fraternal fondness."

A tear rolled down Amory's cheek when he made a humorless little noise. "That's grand of you."

He had no idea what it would cost me to uphold this restraint.

I followed his thoughts to what he'd said about Dwayne and me being gay. "You thought Dwayne would kick you out like your former family did?" I said, reasonably certain that wasn't it.

Amory shook his head as if the very idea were science fiction. "Dwayne serves free rainbow cupcakes during the Pride Parade each year," he said, shrugged. "But I thought he'd look at me different."

"Like someone finally going on a second date, you mean," I said, giving him a smile I wasn't feeling, not looking at his red eyes and that...rawness on his face.

"This really isn't funny," he said, though he didn't sound hurt. He then ate most of his pie, and I was glad he was putting some sugar into his system. Just watching him I could tell his mood was easing.

"I suppose it's not funny, and I'm not dismissing your experiences. Do you want to talk about it more?"

He looked at the lemonade, examining the glass and the small bubbles inside, the condensation on the outside through which he ran his index finger.

“Maybe not today.” He stared at his drink a while longer before focusing his attention on me. “Was it never something that bothered you? Being gay, I mean.”

As if that had even ranked before I met the witch, as if I’d really given it much thought after. “Bothered me? Certainly not.” I considered my experiences and what his expectations might be, decided to qualify. He deserved that much honesty out of me. “Other people like to be bothered by the smallest of things, but those people ceased to matter to me early on; I just have a different vantage point.”

“And what vantage point is that?”

I shouldn't tell him, I thought, yet said, “I occasionally murder people, Amory. It drastically changes how you see the world.”

Amory blinked and wiped at his once more dry eyes. “Are you some kind of assassin?”

I shrugged. Assassin was better than vampire. “I do do it for the money on occasion, so yes, that would make me an assassin.”

He followed that with a big swig of his lemonade and leaned forward, looked me in the eyes.

“Are you some kind of serial killer? Do you like it?”

I liked assassin a lot better than serial killer. “Amory. I have killed my share. More than my share. I don’t get pleasure from the act, and I don’t seek out opportunities for no better reason than that I have the means to end a life. It is something I do, and something that needs doing, simple as that.” Unless I was given the opportunity of ending some scumbags permanently, this was even true.

Amory’s brow creased. “So that’s why you warned me about the blood, huh?”

Oh, that man. As if he’d sensed where my own armor was thin, had aimed for it and hit that spot.

He had me dumbstruck for a solid minute, an insistent need inside of me wanting to tell him that the blood was my problem, my failure for being weak when it came to getting through the day sometimes. But fuck, I couldn’t tell him that, not ever.

“No, that’s not why. When we met in the subway, I had my throat cut. It’s something that happens on occasion.”

Amory’s eyes went wide, and his jaw dropped. “You get your fucking throat cut *on occasion?*” he asked, apparently... angry for my sake? That was new. “What the fuck, Soyer?”

My hand closed around his, holding on before I consciously noticed. Before I could grasp him like a drowning man a life raft, I shifted, trying to make it appear like the aborted gesture was me just squeezing his hand.

Amory stared down, hopefully admiring my nails, then said, “Did you think I’d pull away from you?”

Shit. “I gave you every reason to.”

He cocked his head. “Yeah. Why? I could go to the cops with this, you know. Why tell me all of this?”

He looked fierce now. Had since I’d mentioned occasionally dying. To be...cherished like that. To have someone who cared about my deaths, it...it had been a very long time.

“You don’t even want to do that, Amory. I told you because you’ve been so concerned with what I am. Now you know.”
After a fashion.

“But that’s not all you are.”

“Well, I’m not a demon.”

He had nothing to say to that. I watched his beautiful eyes, but in the half-light, it was difficult to tell whether his pupils dilated for the darkness or for me. My entire body resonated with anticipation, lust.

The conversation paused while he went back to eating, measured bites now, the way he used his fork as elegant as those lips. Lips I wanted to kiss, lips I wanted to taste.

When he was done, he placed his fork at five o’clock and asked, “What happens now?”

He was back to being his insecure, curious self, and it was cute. “Now you finish your pie,” I said and switched our plates.

His forehead wrinkled. “You’re spoiling me.”

“Hardly.” Although...would it be spoiling to feed him my cock? Taking care of him with my mouth, that was something I’d do to spoil him. And maybe it’d also be spoiling myself a little.

Amory picked up the other fork. “Seriously though. What now?” He put a piece of pie in his mouth, and yeah. My cock twitched at the sight of that pink softness. I could be so bad, especially when I was trying to be good.

I tapped my left foot, weighing risk and the possibility of rejection.

“I’d like to take you home.”

When Amory stopped, the pie still half eaten in his mouth, his cheeks rosy, I knew I’d won him, at least for tonight.

“To...your place?”

Was his tone hopeful? It sounded hopeful.

“Doesn’t matter to me.”

He put his fork down, almost noisily, picked it right back up. “But you do mean, uhm...”

“I’d like to sleep with you,” I told him.

He swallowed. “Oh.”

Yeah, I’d have to be careful with him. Gentle.

“Just sleep. If you want more, that’s fine. I liked you napping on my lap earlier, and I want more of that.”

The color of embarrassment rose to his pale face. “I was not napping on your lap!”

I flashed him a grin. “Mmhmm.”

“I was not!”

“No, of course you weren’t, Amory. Finish your pie.”

He did so, scowling at me for the first half before offering up a shy, subtle smile as he ate his way toward the crust.

“I thought about you. Earlier. Before you came in,” he admitted.

“You didn’t worry, did you?”

He shrugged.

“Don’t worry about me, Amory. The truth is, I thought about you as well. I didn’t want to wait for you to have to finish work before sitting down with me.”

“Ah, okay.” He ate two more bites of his pie. “This really isn’t like the dates I’ve been on before.”

“In a good way?”

“Yes. In a good way. Most people wouldn’t keep to my schedule just for some cherry pie they end up not even eating.” He finished the pie, looking downright kissable.

“Is that so? I have it on good authority the pie you serve is to-die-for, and the waitstaff is even sweeter still.”

He snorted. “That’s a nice thing to say.”

“Oh, it’s quite true.” I reached for my coffee cup, finishing half of it.

“Those two people before, at the amusement park—”

“Don’t think about them, Amory,” I said, the anger rising again, not so much against two idiot pawns but more so against their master. “I’d prefer you remember the roller coaster.”

His eyebrows went up as he was finishing his own lemonade. “Not the water ride?”

“Yes. And the water ride.”

“You had that entire ride closed down for the other people in the park, right?”

I shrugged. “It’s a big park, and I wanted something special for you.”

“It...it really felt special. Thank you.”

Fucking hell, this man simply was too much. I had the basest animal desire to work him over, use him until he blacked out from pleasure. I could imagine all of it, the scent, the feel of lust-wet skin...apparently, him opening his mouth was all it took for the pleasure center in my brain to go into overdrive.

“Something special for a special person. You are very welcome, Amory. And I hope you will allow me to take you again.”

“I’d like that,” he said, three of my most favorite words out of his mouth.

I finished the rest of my coffee, and he did the same.

“I...should we go? To my place? Or yours?” he asked.

I wanted him in my space, but I didn't trust myself with him there yet. I'd not want to let him leave. Also didn't want the door pawn to lay eyes on him, not yet. This was one more night I got to have him all to myself. On top of that, he might be more comfortable in his own home, more likely to give himself to me.

“Either is fine, but your house is closer.”

He nodded and stood, collecting the dishes. “Let's go there then. I'll just put these in the dishwasher and turn it on.” He looked over at his flowers, smiled.

I walked with him, thirteen steps from my table to the back, fourteen from the kitchen to the back room full of napkins.

Outside, I held the cab door for Amory. Once we were inside, I sat right next to him so that we touched, so that I felt his warmth. He leaned against me.

The cab driver looked back through the rearview. “214 Chandler Drive,” I told him.

“You memorized my address,” Amory whispered.

“Hmm. You're right. Anything else about you I should memorize?”

“I'm probably not that interesting,” he said, voice small as a mouse.

“And like that, my interest is piqued, Amory.”

I let him be quiet after that and put an arm around his shoulders, much like I had on the water ride. Amory leaned into the touch. In holding a lover, I'd always managed to find...not exactly calm, but a sort of pause in movement. Less worries, less concern with the outside world. It was second only to the height of pleasure that could be found during sex.

Yet holding Amory gave me none of that. If anything, I was hyperaware. Of him, to a degree of the driver, of where we were. Being with Amory, it wasn't like the reprieve my flings usually were. Having him was hyperfocus on the present, and I should have hated that. Didn't. Loved it. So much.

We arrived at his building after a drive that was both too long and too short. He needed his key to open the door, the lock now fixed. The smell of food still lingered in the hallway. Amory didn't stop to check his mail, went right up the stairs.

There was a moment he smiled back at me over his shoulder, the dull hallway lighting bringing out his eyes, so much brighter than my own. I smiled back at him as if he were a sun and I the planet who couldn't help but follow.

He led me to his apartment door without hesitation, though I could see his nerves in the slightly imprecise way in which he fumbled the key into the lock.

"This is me," he said and stepped inside ahead of me.

I closed the door, not impressed by how flimsy it felt under my hand.

The apartment itself was small yet tidy with the kitchen and bathroom on the right, the bedroom on the left. There was almost no clutter, which wasn't an oddity in and of itself, but not common either. The carpet was old, looking as if it had been there for a good two decades, and the furniture, while modest, came together in a tasteful way, the single chair at the table by the window set up so he'd be able to look outside from there, to people-watch maybe, or to daydream.

He had a few paperbacks on a wall shelf too. I recognized one fucking vampire book on there, and who knew what books about bloodsuckers he kept on his phone or e-reader. That was where most readers filed away all their guilty pleasures these days.

I slid my coat off my shoulders and hung it on the leftmost of his DIY coat hangers.

"I'm reasonably certain you like art," I said, counting two steps toward his loveseat and sitting to inspire him to do the same.

"I like art. How do you know?" he asked, standing there, unsure about next steps.

I crossed my legs, leaned back, got comfy. "Your phone case. No one who doesn't like art gets a Virgin of the Rocks phone case. You have no art on your walls."

Amory looked from left to right, focusing on the bare walls as if he'd never seen them before.

“I guess I just never...it’s a luxury, you know. And I’m impressed you picked up on that. Would you like something to drink?”

My Amory. Ever one to serve me.

“No. And I pick up on a lot of things. Especially when I’m interested in someone, And I’m very interested in you, Amory.”

He had no response to that, standing there like a performer caught with a very bad case of stage fright. Amory covered it better than most, taking off his jacket and hanging that up.

His cool failed him totally then, and he turned back, looking at me, his entire body tense, but his eyes dark with want.

Very lightly, I said, “You could stop fretting and sit.”

He almost moved, swayed left to right, paused, then, finally, sat next to me.

“I just have a twin bed,” he blurted out.

With most other people, I’d have laughed, but with him, I didn’t. “What does that have to do with anything, Amory?”

“Well, I thought if you wanted to...stay. My bed is small. I’m sorry. I should have told you sooner.”

I placed a hand on his cheek, warming the cool skin under my palm. “It’s fine. Small is good. I want to be close to you.”

He fell into me then, our lips meeting. I had no idea which single thing prompted it. Amory was just suddenly there, kissing me, tense and tight but also supple, and I reached for

him, dipping my tongue into his mouth. He tasted like cherries.

Amory, innocent but curious, explored at his own pace, touch at first. He kept it above the belt, feeling along my arms and back while he allowed me to set the pace for our kiss.

I did, but I kept holding back. I took my time. I let him relax, adjust, get comfortable. The moment his body yielded all the tension of fear and uncertainty, I planted kisses along his cheek and dropped my mouth to his neck where I could smell his warm, clean sweat, and the lingering scent of food he'd collected at work.

I used my tongue, but he wasn't very ticklish. He gasped when I nipped his skin, and I loved that.

"Sure you're not a wolfman?" he asked while lifting his chin to give me even more access.

I huffed, nipped the skin above his Adam's apple. "Positive."

His hand tightened against my ribs, and I knew I needed to get the shirt off. It would make me bare. I could sell him my curse for a tattoo of course. Caecilius had believed that. Still did.

But Amory had gifted me his greatest pain. Such a thing was the power to destroy another's heart. I wasn't going to tell him that the magic on my skin was cheap ink and artistic intent. I pulled away, peeled the fabric off me.

He gaped, his eyes bright with desire. It took him a second to see the phoenix.

“You’re inked,” he said, sounding both awed and intimidated.

“It’s not a tattoo,” I told him, looking at a feather that had coiled around my left biceps. “You wanted to know what I am—I’m cursed, Amory, and this is my curse.”

I took his hands, pulling him up to standing with me, then turned around for him so he could see all of it, the bird’s head, its eyes, its beak. Objectively, I could appreciate the beauty of it, the lines organic and natural because the curse was a living thing, keeping me alive with its power.

Amory touched it. I felt his fingers against my back, following the lines of whip marks he couldn’t possibly know still existed in my mind, even after all those years.

I felt his breath flow between my shoulders. “It’s a phoenix.”

“That’s right.”

“But you didn’t burn.”

“Fire isn’t part of it. Living and dying is. Or dying and living again if you prefer.”

“And that’s a curse?”

“It can be,” I said as calmly as I could and turning back around to face him. “Too much life isn’t as fun as the stories make it out to be.” He didn’t need to know more than that, he really didn’t.

“I’m sorry,” Amory said, his voice pained.

“You’re not allowed to feel sorry for me,” I told him, caressing his cheek. “I lived a long time and died many deaths to find you, but I have. All my regrets seem to have become weightless as of approximately two weeks ago.”

And that was true. I’d known it in my heart, in my bones, but saying the words made it a reality between Amory and me.

He scoffed. “What a pick-up line.”

I couldn’t help it this time; real laughter broke out of me, the kind that brought tears and shaking legs, something that seized the whole body and had to pass through it. I left Amory standing, collapsed back on the couch. He looked at me, the gears in his head turning. I wasn’t exactly sure he fully grasped the weight of my curse, what it meant, how it would end between us.

But that was something I did, thinking of endings I couldn’t participate in, endings that would forever exclude me, force me to carry single carnations to spring-cold homes in the earth where only worms and bugs were still alive.

Amory figured out he wanted to straddle me, which was what he did, and I thought, *Let him be a beginning for as long as possible.*

He was uncertain, doing this, stiff and hesitant. I ran my palms up his thighs to get to that glorious butt, then back. I kept both eyes on his face so I could slow down or stop when he needed it, but he didn’t.

“Let’s go to bed, Amory,” I said. “You’ll be more comfortable there.”

He nodded and scrambled back up. I followed him to the bedroom. The streetlights were broken into slivers of dull illumination by the open blinds, revealing a small bed just like he’d said. He’d taken the time to make it before heading out with me earlier.

The lights remained off. A shame, but there was nothing to do about unnecessary modesty when one was focused on getting his man naked and aroused, I supposed. Plus, even if he’d snuck out of the light that was coming through the half-open door from the living room, I could see enough: shaky fingers, awkwardness as he undressed with me watching.

But undress he did. Or tried to. He kept missing the buttons on his shirt after the bow tie had come off. He was also watching me unbutton my pants with some interest. All good, but him talking would have been better.

“Oh, fuck,” he said, eyes on my cock. Not what I’d hoped for, but a start.

“Exclamation or consent given?”

He swallowed. “I...yes. Consent given, definitely,” he said to my relief. “And exclamation.”

Poor thing. I’d handled bigger. He was still looking.

“It *is* a nice cock, but you look about ready to drool, Amory. Need help with that shirt of yours?”

I didn't wait for him, took a small step and worked the buttons that had been so difficult for him. He was creamy and soft underneath even in the dark, like raw milk just poured into the butter churn. Hmm. Maybe not the right image to keep holding in my mind, but oh how I wanted to churn him.

I slid his shirt off his shoulders, letting it fall to the floor. I took a moment, stopping to look at him, not yet touching to give him a chance to pull back if he needed to.

He didn't, and I gave him a small nudge to get him to sit on the bed, kept working his pants open, always taking my time, never groping or mixing undressing him with the gratification I wanted for myself. I hoped he felt at least a little pampered.

Once I had him all naked—and he was hard too, not that I allowed myself to stare—I slid into a kneeling position on the bed between his legs, forcing him to bend his head back to look up at me.

I took his mouth, let my lust lead me to go from there to his neck, that delicious path that led me to his chest. Some men had been gifted hypersensitivity in their nipples, even going so far as to boast they could come from having them stimulated. Not something I'd experienced, but there was always a chance, and I thought it was better to make sure.

I licked the taut skin before closing my teeth around it. Amory liked that, spine bending back in a curve that pressed him against me. Spurred on by this, I reached down between his legs. I would have jacked him, but maybe spitting in my hand wasn't exactly conducive to the mood, so I kept it to the

smallest attentions. He was uncut after all, and a thumb on such a sensitive tip had to make him feel good.

He froze up though, so I stopped.

I looked down at him, but his face didn't show me much. "Why did I just stop?" I asked him.

He looked off to the side. "I should probably mention I'm a virgin."

Good of him to confirm it. "I'm not. Let me take care of you?"

"Okay," he said after a few heartbeats.

I sealed that with a slow kiss. "It'll be good, Amory. I'll make sure it feels so good for you."

He cleared his throat. "I do have lube."

I looked at the drawer in his nightstand he was pointing at. "Now you sound like an ingenue."

I showered him with kisses. It was easy, and he liked that, unwound with every shared breath. When I ground into him, groin to groin, he didn't flinch. He blinked his eyes open though, his moans drying over another worry.

"Let me take care of you," I said, punctuating the words with generous kisses.

Amory leaned into me. "I still think you can read minds."

"Should let you think that."

I pushed him back until he was lying under me and gave myself over to exploring him through touch and taste, to

learning the scent of his skin and the sound he made when I sucked on his nipple or palmed his tight balls. The excitement was addictive, the temptation to keep going until he was aching with need very real.

My own cock was as hard as Amory's, and my hole quivered at the thought of taking him. I'd do that, but not today. I wanted inside him today, and unless he told me otherwise, I'd give him that first, and I'd make it as good as all my experience allowed me.

Amory didn't manage to endure as long as I wanted. I could tell he'd gotten overly sensitized when goosebumps broke out at the lightest touch, when his legs twitched, heels digging grooves into the bed. The breathy noises out of his mouth spoke of something that was so good it made you itch all over.

And yet, I might have kept going if he hadn't tried to cut this short by getting himself off.

I caught his wandering hand by the wrist before he could touch his cock, and he mewled with frustration as I made him hold on to the metal bars of the bed frame instead of his own cock.

"Fuck, touch me please," he said, hips bucking, eyes shimmering in the ambient light.

"Mmm."

I considered drawing it out but didn't. I slid my hand down over his cock, using the generous amount of precum he'd produced to make it pleasurable. Good things are said to cum

in threes, and so I stopped jacking him after two pumps of my hand.

His spine bent, and he moaned in unmet need, thigh muscles trembling with the strain.

“Please,” he said, head turned into the pillow.

Fuck, but he was adorable.

“Don’t be so impatient, Amory. All good things come to those who wait.”

He shook his head. “You’re just—this is too much.”

Sweat had beaded in the divot that marked out his breastbone. It made him shimmer in the dark room, like a precious mineral found deep under the earth.

“Not enough.”

I let go of his wrist, certain he’d be good and hold on, if for no better reason than his coordination was suffering from pleasure-induced fog. Scooting down, I ran my fingers over his hot skin, enjoying all the little tremors that caused. He was like dry timber, waiting for the spark. I kissed a spot just underneath his belly button, tasting salt.

He moaned, a drawn-out sound, sweet like aged wine. I reached between his legs, gave passing attention to his balls before moving lower. I made it slow, keeping the pressure noticeable for him so he could tell where this was going. He pushed against my fingers when I slid them into his crack, skimming the puckered hole.

“S-Soyer...”

“I do like you calling me that.”

I went for the drawer with its treasure of lube. At least it wasn't hidden against the back but right there. I spread some between my palms while pausing to look at the man close to coming undone underneath me. He looked not quite as much of a mess as I wanted him to look in my heart of hearts, but for me to get him there, he'd have to build stamina. And trust, so much more trust.

I turned my attention back to the issue at hand: deflowering this virgin, anal and otherwise. He opened his legs wider for me with the slightest nudge, presenting himself. I started at his balls again, and from there I went down until I found his ring.

He was tight because it was his first time. And because he was thinking about it, the tension in his body once more changing in quality. Another lover might have ignored this, might have...pushed through, quite literally.

I chose a different approach and bit his chest, making sure to get the sensitive, nipple.

He screamed, not loud enough to let his neighbors know he was having a good time, but close.

In a firm tone, I said, “You are worrying, and I can practically hear it. Stop.”

The tension I didn't want in him drained, and in his pouty voice, he said, “Mind reader.”

“I still just pay attention, and I’m very much looking forward to fucking you through the first orgasm you’ll ever have with a cock up your ass. Stop distracting me.”

My worrier being a worrier, he couldn’t just obey. “I wasn’t,” he started saying, and I wasn’t going to have it. I pushed a finger past his ring, slow and steady.

The sensation was new and strange enough to shut him right up. I hooked his right leg over my shoulder to keep him from accidentally kicking me in the face and started the slow process of opening him and thereby allowing him to appreciate all those nerve endings he’d never known he had down there.

I praised and encouraged him as I went, matching my pace to his reactions and all the while ignoring my own cock, hard and aching with the need for release.

It took a while to get him ready, and I enjoyed every moment of it. When I finally pulled free, he moaned, having gotten used to the pleasure of that strange fullness.

“Almost. You’re doing so good, Amory,” I told him while making sure I was all lubed up. He was going to feel the burn when I filled him though. And after too.

I lined up, and he clenched against the intrusion. “Relax, bear down. It’ll make it easier.”

I felt him do as I said, and I pushed into him, going slow. Nothing had ever been more difficult than holding back then.

Amory fisted the sheets. I eased back, pushed forward, back and forth, until he sheathed me fully.

“You feel so good, Amory,” I told him. All of a sudden, the need to fuck him into the mattress as hard as I could eased. Just with this, something inside of me had already been sated, and all that mattered now was the tenderness between us.

I pulled back and slammed home once more, and that was what made Amory come undone underneath me. He screamed, but not all that loud, voice spent during foreplay it seemed. I seized the moment to thrust in a steady rhythm even as I felt him contract around me.

The cum that had marked out a pattern on his skin and mine drew me in. I had to touch, to spread it across his belly as if that would mark this first orgasm he’d had with another as mine, my work. So selfish. So necessary.

He was still clenching and unclenching around me when I came, much like the tide filling the harbor, skin hitting skin until I moaned in glorious release. It was good, so good, and over too quickly.

Beneath me, Amory’s chest rose and fell. I shifted a little so I could lie on top of him without it putting too much stress on his lungs, then kissed him, not caring that it was messy, caring very much that I had done this, made him boneless, soft underneath me. It felt fucking amazing to have that, to know that, to feel how he was still loose and slick around my softening cock.

If I had been more caring in my role as older lover, I might have gotten out of bed to get him cleaned up a little, except I

was shit at that. I also didn't care. I cared about having this man next to me, soft and warm and exhausted after tonight.

The bed was small enough that maneuvering the covers over us was done easily enough. Maneuvering Amory into my arms was easier still, especially since he smoothed himself against me, his limbs already sluggish with sleep.

I held him, basking in the moment and learning the rhythm of his breath as it crossed the border to sleep, then slipped into oblivion.

Moments turned to minutes turned to at least an hour, going by the light growing, well, not bright exactly. Dawn wasn't here yet, but it was getting ready to drain the darkness from the world as if the night were an abscess and needed to be lanced with sunlight.

I'd ended up between Amory and the wall and carefully extracted myself. Being nocturnal, he had blinds and blackout curtains. I closed the former first, snuck into the living room, just two and a half steps from the last window, three from his bed.

There, I switched off the light before heading to the windows and looking out. I didn't expect anything unusual, but some habits had the staying power of a corpse's smell in your trunk.

I got my phone from my coat pocket. Hawthorne had sent out the announcement about Amory. The notification had the full wording.

The Black Shuck, Mr. Bennet in mixed company, has taken a human lover as his own. Amory Saintclair, human male, works night shifts at the Moonlight Diner on Sixth and Second. Mr. Saintclair is and shall remain Unaware. What is done to him will be returned threefold by the Black Shuck.

It was standard as these announcements went, not a reason to be grinning at the screen like I was doing. Both Valentin and the investigator who was going after the witch, Olivia, had sent updates. Neither were marked urgent, so I took the liberty of ignoring them for the time being. The phone went back into my pocket, and I returned to the bedroom, moving as quietly as possible, though Amory hadn't stirred.

Once the curtains were drawn and I was back in bed with him, my arms around him, he sighed as if he'd missed me. I smiled in the darkness. Happiness was intoxicating, and I had overindulged.

Fourteen

CHERRY BLOSSOMS



I hadn't styled myself the Black Shuck, but the name fit. Best not to see the red-eyed dog of dark omens, best for people to stay away from it. People didn't always keep their distance like they should.

I'D DOZED WHILE AMORY had slept. I blamed the stupid flimsy door, I blamed his scent, salt and lust, yesterday's candy floss and happiness. Sometime around noon, he'd started stirring, ending up on my chest, head resting where my heartbeat had to chase him into his dreams. His breaths, warm and measured, had become a hypnotic metronome, which was why I noticed immediately when he fell out of deep sleep.

"Good morning, Amory," I said when he started moving, when his eyelashes feathered over my chest as he blinked.

"Morning. Sorry I used you as a pillow there." His voice was a little rough with sleep. Or with overuse from yesterday's noises of pleasure. He managed to lie next to me, the bed so

small he had to stay touching close. I kept my arm around him in case he moved too close to the edge.

“I don’t mind. How are you feeling?”

He shrugged. “Okay, I guess.”

“The soreness will pass. I don’t think you bled, but small amounts of blood are nothing to worry about.”

That made him immediately tense. I tried to recall when people had lost the ability to openly talk about sex and had to conclude that I despised both the puritans and the patriarchy. Thank fuck for queer people dedicated to bringing sex education to the masses on YouTube.

“You’re an assassin telling me not to worry about blood. Hilarious,” Amory said to cover his embarrassment. He froze. “Shit. We didn’t use protection, and I’m not on PrEP. I never thought—”

I reeled him in, bringing the outline of his mouth and lips level with mine so I could kiss the thinking out of him. Truth be told, I was glad he’d ended up with me and not any stupid fuck he might have hooked up with on the next best dating app.

I said, “I just died the other day, Amory. I didn’t acquire any transmissible disease since then. You’ll be fine. I’d never have done this if I had reason to think you wouldn’t be.”

He relaxed. Tensed again. “You’re saying you hit the reset button when you, erm...” He patted my chest, just above where my heart was beating.

The reset button. I'd never thought about it that way, but he wasn't wrong.

“Yes. I caught dysentery at some point and didn't want to have to endure that,” I said instead of telling him about that one time I got bitten by a fox and died through rabies. That had been a wild ride. “I decided dying was the better option.” And I should have done the same that one time with the rabies, but sort of missed the opportunity. Ugh. “Death, in my case, is a cure-all.”

I could see him frown his worry lines even in the mostly dark room and tugged him back against my chest. “Did you enjoy last night, Amory?” I asked in an attempt to change the topic. I also wanted him to confirm what his reactions had told me.

“Yeah. It was not what I thought.”

“In what way?”

His fingers curled into a loose fist on my abdomen. “I thought it would hurt more, and I thought it would be, I don't know...dirtier. Sorry. I know none of what we did is dirty. I just—I know I was bombarded with a lot of bullshit growing up, and I'm still unlearning a lot of that.”

I was seconds away from asking him to give me permission to follow up with his fucking birth family, but managed to hum and swallow the words, instead saying, “Don't worry on my account. Dirty can be fun. And it's not supposed to hurt, you know. Not unless you ask for it.”

He let those words sink in, not recoiling from them. Ah, there were possibilities there.

“Good to know.”

“Would you like to do it again?”

“What, right now?”

Yes, please yes. “Not that soon. Not while you’re still sore,” I said as if I were a proper grown-up with the capacity for fucks to give about other people. “I meant eventually. With me.”

“Oh, yeah. I definitely want to do that again. Sex. With you.”

“Excellent,” I said, smiling my best villainous smile at the darkness surrounding us.

There was another fifteen minutes or so before we got up and Amory went to take a shower after some coaxing. I opted to forego such rituals of cleanliness, because the scent of him and sex was something I wanted to hold on to for a little bit longer.

When he was up and the bathroom door closed behind him, I left the comfort of the love-warmed sheets and walked back to the living room to get my phone. I texted the capable pawn to pick up breakfast from The Little French Bakery, telling him to get a bag of beignets, black coffee for me, and Amory’s fancy coffee order from yesterday. Capable Pawn confirmed this in under six seconds.

I stretched and started pulling my clothes back on while opening the investigator’s email. She’d written,

Mr. Bennet;

I spoke to the man who found the first victim. I'm attaching the transcript of the recording for your perusal. He was not coherent and medicated, though the doctors couldn't tell me what was wrong with him. He mentions dreams and being haunted, and he kept repeating, "She is watching me."

While at the hospital, I found out that the neighboring county's outgoing sheriff (she was about to retire) had been placed under three-day observation following what was described as a traffic accident. I managed to get inside her room, and while heavily sedated, the woman also mumbled something about watching. It was either "watching them" or "watching me." I couldn't quite make out which.

I'm heading out to investigate the traffic incident now.

She'd signed her name. Before too long, I'd have to head out there and take care of what undoubtedly was a witch.

Valentin's email was similarly disconcerting.

I know you are busy, but this just happened. Man walked into the Red Cross ER, said he'd been attacked. He collapsed. I only heard about it because one of the hivelings moonlights as an ER nurse. The victim was anemic, low blood pressure, iron deficient. My hiveling is keeping an eye on him for when you're ready to talk to him.

I frowned. Seriously, what was it with him sending his hiveling henchmen all over the city?

Once I'm done here, I replied. Are you tracing Caecilius's pawns?

Valentin was quick to respond. *Still working on that. They are slippery.*

I ground my teeth. Fuck Caecilius, fuck his pawns. *Keep me informed,* I typed out.

I walked from the bedroom to the living room, five steps to plant myself on the couch and listen to the running water. While I sat there, last night replayed in my head over and over. Really, the way I fantasized about a repeat of the events felt absolutely like a druggie craving the next hit. Amory wasn't a drug. He was a person. It was good to keep that in mind, because instinct was telling me to bundle him up and take him home, then lock the door so no one else could have him and he was all mine.

As if to drive that lesson of personhood home, my phone dinged with an incoming message. I didn't know the number, but it had come through the Hawthorne app.

This is Rae. Thank you for the bag. My sister says thank you too. Congratulations from the both of us.

I'd almost forgotten about those children, possibly because I'd hoped the Star-Garbed Wolves would take them in. My finger hovered over the delete button. Then the water turned off, and confronted with the fact I'd have to look Amory in the face in a few minutes, I sent the annoying sex demon siblings a thumbs-up. Capable Pawn sent me an ETA of 2 mins.

Amory came out of the bathroom a few moments later. He wore a bathrobe, something off-gray that had seen much use from the looks of it. It had once been the very fluffy kind, which didn't fit in with the rest of this place which he had kept so minimal. I knew his coffee order and that he liked a bathrobe he could snuggle up in. Was that up to standard for a second date?

His smile faltered when he saw me. He looked like a puppy who was scared he'd be left home alone.

I said, "Worrier. I'm not about to run out on you, Amory. I just prefer wearing pants when I receive a delivery." The pawn picked that exact moment to knock, his timing incidental but still excellent.

"Huh?"

I headed for the door while Amory stood by and watched. Maybe I was showing off, and maybe it wasn't necessary, but I liked to see his blue eyes go wide until the golden crown at their center shimmered.

I opened the door, and the pawn lowered his gaze, handing me an environmentally conscious recycled paper bag.

"Thank you."

He inclined his head as was proper, avoiding eye contact. "Have a nice day, sir." Then, the cheeky wolf made eye contact with Amory, who'd taken a step closer. "And you too, sir."

Fucking werewolves always were too damn concerned with rank and pleasing the right people. This was the Christmas candy situation all over again, especially after the announcement, which Capable Pawn had undoubtedly read.

I closed the door in the pawn's face and turned back to Amory. "As promised, breakfast. And excuse the pawn. He's a forward one, but capable." He was also probably still close enough to hear me say as much. "Couch or table?"

Amory pointed. "Couch. You ordered breakfast?"

"Mmhm. It may not be the most important meal of the day, but cornflakes simply wouldn't have felt right," I said. He'd mentioned that was what he had in his tiny kitchen. The beignets probably weren't much better, nutritionally speaking, but I'd start feeding him balanced meals once this turned into a more regular event.

I was hoping for tomorrow.

While Amory got comfortable on the couch, I pulled up the chair from the table to improvise a coffee table. I sat next to him. He smelled of citrusy shower gel and mint toothpaste.

I found his coffee in the bag and presented it. "Hazelnut mocha with soy milk, easy on the sugar."

He reached for the paper cup with both hands and an adorable smile. "You know I only asked you to get me that to see if you could do it, right?"

Well, two could play at this. "Amory, if you ask for something, I will always give it to you." I pulled my own

coffee from the bag, just black arabica with a shot of espresso.

My words backfired to some degree, because they turned on Amory's empathic thinking mood, the one that often ended with him frowning.

He was watching me closely and asked, "And what do you want? What can I give you?"

"Don't tempt me by asking that. I'll get greedy. I might keep you all to myself."

"That's quite a line."

This boy, he knew nothing of the world, didn't understand the depth of my want. "It's not a line."

He took that in. Or maybe he really thought it was a line. After all, he allowed me to cradle his legs. For all he knew, I might have been measuring for shackles, and because I was just as depraved as that, I found myself thinking that it wasn't the worst fantasy to entertain. A nice little castle somewhere, a pretty young man, kept in a dark dungeon where the sun never put color in his skin. A dungeon furnished with satin and silk and all the comforts he could ever want.

Sitting there and watching him sip his coffee, I decided I wanted him to live with me. I'd already Amory-proofed the apartment anyway, plus with him there, the pawns would be distracted and have someone other than me to focus on. More importantly, I'd get to share a bed with him.

The obvious issues were that I didn't think he'd jump at the suggestion, and I could see why after he'd been kicked out of

his home that young. People like that either learned that you held on to every bit of security and control you could, or they didn't. I knew because I had learned the same, but only after failing several times.

Manipulating him into cohabitation didn't strike me as an unachievable goal. The obvious downside there was the moral one. Not a downside big enough for me to dismiss the idea outright.

Amory interrupted my plotting by saying, "You can shower. If you want. Obviously."

"Later. I like smelling like you."

He blushed and looked away. His cheeks looked pretty in that shade, the color of cherry blossoms. Once he lived with me, I'd get to tease him however much I wanted to enjoy this. Hmm. There was probably nothing wrong with mild manipulation. Maybe I should find a politician and talk it through with them, get their approval.

Once again, Amory betrayed his shy demeanor by asking, "What's a pawn?"

We were doing that, apparently. "There are varieties, but the most standard of them have been affected by a curse in the second or third degree or further down." All accurate and sounding a lot better than *they're all the werewolves and vampires you're so obsessed with*. "They are often in service positions, and they sometimes shift loyalties, I suppose you'd call it."

Caecilius liked to call it shadow courts. Disturbingly, so did Valentin and a few other influential people. Valentin had also told me that I was a prince without a court, but he'd been feeling melancholic at the time.

Amory accepted what I told him, but I could tell he was putting things together, or trying to.

“The waiter at the restaurant you took me to—”

“Vico. Very much not a pawn.”

Amory cocked his head. “Are you going to make me guess what he is?”

Two could also play at derailing a conversation. I dug the oven-warm beignets from the recycled bag. They came wrapped in their own bag, this one with the bakery's logo, just the simple lettering and a croissant above it, almost like a moon. I handed Amory the sweet delicacies, hoping he was hungry after his first time sharing his bed and himself.

He eyed it suspiciously, but he wanted the food all right, putting his coffee on the floor to get to the fluffy deliciousness.

“Beignets?” he asked, licking his lips.

“Good. I got it right.” I took a deep breath, put my coffee on the floor as well, and adjusted the position of his legs. “And no. We are not turning this into a guessing game, but you can choose. In fact, you always had the choice. I want to keep seeing you. And so much more, but there is no rush. What you need to decide is: do you want me to keep my world separate from you, or do you want to know everything? And before you

tell me you want option number two, I need you to understand that you cannot unknow all the things you'll learn.”

My real fear was that once he saw this world that had been hiding from him, he would enjoy it, find something in it to enchant him more than I could. Someone more enchanting than me. That triglav for instance, or a hiveling. Well, you never only got *one* hiveling, but that was the appeal.

And I, I only wanted this one man, no other.

Amory didn't answer right away. He stuffed his face with a beignet, managing the fine line between a small bite and getting filling all over himself. Watching him eat had an unusually seductive appeal.

“I...I never dated anyone,” he informed me, sounding apologetic.

I didn't think the puritans were to blame for this one. “You make it sound as if that were a blemish when it isn't. And I have.”

That got his attention quickly. “You have exes?”

Fuck me, but Amory jealous was even better than Amory speared on my cock. Well, no, it wasn't, but it was nice.

Here I thought about lying, about not opening the door to that thought, the idea of *outliving*, of staying young while the other didn't. I said, “They died.”

He collapsed like pastry from the oven. “Oh. I'm sorry. If that's something you want to hear.”

“It was a long time ago, Amory. Even if it weren’t, I want no other; I want you.”

“When you say you’d keep your world separate, how would that even work? I mean, if we were in a relationship?”

And just when I thought I understood how much or little time he needed to adapt to a new situation, he chose to prove me wrong. “Is the subjunctive necessary?”

Cherry blossoms in his cheeks. “I...not on my account.”

“Good. And since we *are* in a relationship, I’d make it work. By compartmentalizing. And, of course, you’d have to accept certain things.”

“Like?”

“Absences, and I’d never be able to tell you where I went. Encountering pawns like the one who brought us breakfast.” Reason reared its head, and I quickly added, “I’d want you to have your phone on you at all times. I’d ask a few other things. Nothing outrageous, but I’d not tell you why. And you’d have to accept that there might be blood. It will be my own in most cases, though not always.”

He mulled that over. That was good, meant he was mature enough not to run into something he’d regret later on. That being said, this was Amory.

“And if I’d want to know?” he asked finally.

“I’d tell you. Not everything at once.” Some things, hopefully never. I pointed at the toy giraffe he’d placed on his

table last night. “This will only go so far in calming you, and it can be a lot.”

He nodded, finished his beignet, and let go of the bag to turn his attention back to his coffee.

“I got kicked out because I searched for pictures of guys on the Internet. I mean, I got off on them, but it wasn’t like I was caught at that. I don’t know exactly what my dad said to my school—a private school, fancy—but they wouldn’t let me back on the grounds. I was homeless. Then I see this sign, handwritten, and it says *Help wanted!* and the point of the exclamation point is a cute little heart, and for some reason, that made me walk into the Moonlight, and Dwayne hired me.”

Oh, I badly wanted to follow up with that piece of crap father. Also with Dwayne McArthur. He’d saved Amory before I’d had any idea how dear he’d one day be to me, any idea he existed. That earned him my gratitude and respect.

At a loss for what to say and do with my own emotions, I asked the first random thing that came to mind. “Did you break a lot of dishes when you started out?”

“So many,” he said, smiling. “I never told anyone. *Why*. I guess I was ashamed, and so scared. But then, yesterday...” He gestured but didn’t elaborate. “I’m not that scared anymore.”

“I see. Thank you for trusting me enough to tell me. Do you want to talk more now?” I asked. Simeon would be so proud.

“My different vantage point notwithstanding, I still make an excellent listener.”

Amory shook his head.

“How about a hug?” I offered.

He paused, then nodded.

Instead of holding him awkwardly in my arms, I simply changed places, snuggled in behind him so he could lean against me while I held him. I splayed my hand on his chest, feeling that breath I’d listened to all night.

I let him settle, gave him time until the rhythm of that breath let me know he was calm once more. And once he was, I said, “You want to know everything.”

He nodded. “It would feel weird. Like secrets, or like I don’t really know you. Like you have to hide who you are the same way I had to hide. And failed to.”

“Had to give you the option. The basics of the cursed and the pawns aren’t that difficult to wrap your head around. You get some powerful beings walking around among humans as if they belonged. They don’t. It feels like there used to be more, but in all honesty, that could be subjective. We call them witches, warlocks, sorcerers, or some variation thereof.” While learning the difference between a pawn and a cursed wasn’t that hard, really understanding how magic worked—how witches acted—was a whole different can of awful. Yet, he needed to know, so I decided I’d tell him a fairy tale. “Are you familiar with Rapunzel?”

“That fairy tale? With the girl locked in the tower who let her hair down for her prince?”

I rolled my eyes, glad he couldn't see it. “That's the sanitized version, and the truly unimportant bit. Did you know the girl in the tower was pregnant when she was cast out and cursed? And the sorceress who locked her in the tower to begin with blinded her prince, but eventually Rapunzel and her prince found one another, and the girl from the tower healed him with her tears.”

I paused. That sorceress was dead now because I had cut her head off. It had been one of the first hunts for me, difficult.

The witch had still kept a tower when I came for her, and it had still been in use. I freed three girls the day I killed the sorceress. The fourth jumped out a tower window. She'd been raven-haired, wearing a shift. Her hair fanned out around her like black wings when she jumped. Even the others...the witch had twisted their minds, and I didn't have the skill to help them.

I pushed the memory aside and went on. “That's where the unsanitized version ends. In reality, healing tears were her curse. She could heal anyone but herself with them. Her so-called prince sought to make a fortune for himself by selling her tears, and he devised ways to make the former girl in the tower cry, onions at first, but her eyes got used to them. Next, he used needles, but as her skin grew thick with scars, needles wouldn't do. But that prince needed her to cry, you see.”

Amory glanced back at me. “Shit, did that really happen?”

“Yes, a very long time ago. She did not survive, but she died by the hands of her own daughter as an act of mercy. The twins, her children, they were pawns, and Rapunzel’s curse lived in them.”

I’d met the twins when I’d been hunting for the witch. They’d not known where the castle and the tower were exactly, but they’d helped. The sister, the elder, had told me she thought some of the sorceress’s power had touched her father too. I never asked the two what had become of him. Their eyes told me everything I needed to know.

I said, “Theirs is a bloodline curse, probably because the girl was pregnant with the twins at the time, and it remains relatively strong within the bloodline.” It was an unsavory story, and maybe not the best to prepare him. Capable Pawn, that good little werewolf, was still on my mind, and I asked, “Does the name Lycaon mean anything to you?”

Amory shook his head, his now dry hair tickling my nose. “Sounds Greek though.”

“Correct. He tried to entice a wizard into cannibalism, and the wizard cursed him to become a beast for all the rest of time. The pawns he makes can shift at will, apart from the rare exception. They are your werewolves, your lycanthropes.”

Amory vibrated with excitement. “Are you saying there *are* werewolves?”

“There are all kinds of things. I’m explaining how they came into existence so that you know what magic really does and

don't think it's something cute and pretty we should make musicals about.”

Amory shifted into his pouty mood. Well, he either frowned too much, pouted at me, or was being too sweet for me to handle. The little scoundrel was training me. He'd have me eat out of his hand in no time and getting him to move in with me was only fair.

“You're not explaining to me how you came into existence,” he pouted.

“Feisty. How will I ever manage to let you out of my sight? Have another beignet, Amory.”

“If you tell me how you got cursed.”

I knew I couldn't tell him everything, knew I had to tell him something after his earlier issue with keeping parts of oneself secret in a relationship. He'd backed me into that corner nicely, and I hadn't even seen it coming. High-fucking-maintenance.

“Ah, bargaining already? Let's see. Have a beignet and have dinner with me tonight, and I'll tell you.”

Amory glanced back, eyes atwinkle. “And you'll tell me what Vico is if he's not a pawn?”

What I wanted to do when he started like that was peel that bathrobe off him, throw him on his bed, and add a little spice to this negotiation of his. My cock eagerly agreed with that course of action. I leaned in until the tips of his hair tickled my nose.

“Do you have any idea what you are doing to me? This is getting me mildly jealous and painfully hard, Amory. Eat your fucking beignet and say you’ll have dinner with me.”

I saw the color of cherry blossoms rise to his neck.

“Okay.”

He commenced eating his food in that sexy way of his. Locking him into my apartment was beginning to seem like the responsible thing to do.

When he was just about to take another bite, he froze. “Wait. How old are you?”

Well. That shoe had dropped. “Mmm. Come here.”

I pulled him close so I could get to the sugar on his lips, the tart taste of raspberries and currants on his tongue. Fuck, but the way he let me sink into him, the way he made himself soft for me...

I stopped, said, “If you really want to hear it, just let me tell you.”

He was nicely shaken, his eyes dark with arousal, but he wanted my story. Those parts that I could tell him. She had done worse, but I could tell him about the lashes that had been such a constant part of my captivity.

I didn’t begin where the story did. I began at the end of it. “I just wanted cherries,” I said. “From an orchard. It was walled, and everyone knew not to go there, that it was forbidden, that the lady of the estate would punish trespassers by seeing them flogged.” While wearing a blood dark coat lined with ermine

and a wicked smile. “I still went there. I don’t even remember why I wanted those cherries so badly, but I did. One night when I was about the same age you were when you got tossed out of your home, I climbed the wall.”

I’d scraped my palm on the rocks she’d used to build her wall. That should have been my warning, but I hadn’t heeded it. I’d dropped down on the orchard side, and the wind had picked up before calming to nothing again. As I walked, my palm grew slick, and thick drops of blood fell to the ground before I got to the tree and reached for a branch, dying the green leaves red too.

To Amory, I said, “It was spring, too early in the season for cherries, but that didn’t matter. The trees in that orchard were laden with fruit the likes of which I’d never seen. The cherries were a deep, dark red, and they shimmered like hog’s blood under the full moon, which was unusual, because most cherry trees in that region had yellow cherries with just a blush of red in their cheeks. The cherries in the orchard made my mouth water. A lot like you, incidentally. I was stuffing my face with them before I knew what I was doing.”

The orchard had been too quiet. Not the slightest movement of the air. The witch had walked right up to me without me noticing. When I did, it was that oldest part of my brain pushing me to run. I turned around, and our eyes met. Hers were filled with hunger, an ancient need to hunt and kill, to abase the prey until the prey surrendered pain and terror. From that moment forward, my body wouldn’t properly obey me anymore, and I was hers. Until I wasn’t.

“The witch was the scariest fucking thing I’d ever seen until that point. She wasn’t inhuman just to look at her, but there was something about her. Something wrong with her eyes, her voice, with how she moved. I could just tell.” Even sitting here, guarding my lover, I could feel her fingers grip my hair, the neatly filed tips drawing grooves into my scalp like a falcon might. “She cursed me to never be able to stay dead so that I would experience as many deaths as I deserved until she was done with me. Then she flogged me. That was the first time I died and didn’t stay dead.”

She’d casually started dragging me along with her, clumps of hair yielding to her force. My own screams had seemed very faint, but the pain that had shot through me might have well messed with my recollection.

Amory’s hand on mine pulled me out of the memory. “Soyer.”

I looked down. My knuckles were white where I had dug my fingers into his fluffy bathrobe, my hold on him tight. I breathed, eased that hold.

“Remembering that time isn’t pleasant, but it was long ago.” I folded my fingers against his, making a lover’s weave to ward off evil. “It’s a sad little tale, and I don’t want it to suck all the happiness out of you.”

“I just...that’s fucking terrible. Did you—how long ago was this?”

Ah, his fresh anger over my ancient pain. “Long.”

He turned his mood again, much to my relief. His pity would have smothered me. “Maybe I’m not free for dinner after all.”

“And maybe I’ll simply kidnap you and force-feed you. Keep pushing me, and you’ll only have yourself to blame.”

I noted that he was not taking issue with the kidnapping. Was there a three-second rule for new relationships that made stuff like this okay unless the other person objected? That had to be a thing in the dating scene of this day and age. It would explain so much.

Amory huffed. “Tell me, please?”

I considered fudging the numbers, but one or two hundred years weren’t really going to make much of a difference. Hopefully. “A little over a millennium. It’s one of the reasons everyone thinks I’m a fucking vampire.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

“Over a millennium? One thousand years?”

I looked off to the side. “I was born around 800. Charlemagne was on the throne.”

“Oh, my...fuck. How...I mean...all the stuff you’ve seen...”

“Really nothing quite as interesting as you, Amory.” I went for the beignet he’d dropped back into the paper bag, half eaten, sweet as he was. “You want to finish it?”

Amory shook his head, so I grabbed the treat for myself. His mouth had tasted much better.

Meanwhile, Amory was back to frowning, exhaling as if he was dissatisfied with something.

“Worrier.” I chewed down on the last piece, then went for his lips again. Yes, they tasted so much better. “You had some sugar there.”

Before he could ask me another bothersome question, I kissed him again, and didn’t stop there. His body followed my nudges, and before long, I was back on top of him, hard and aching to be inside of him, to make him cum.

I pushed him for neither. His little pleasure noises told me this was fine. More might not be. More might be too soon, might scare him away. I grumbled, my frustration tangible. Getting to this and collaring my greed felt like drinking an ocean one drop at a time. Yet I knew that in the end, it would be worth it. In the end, I’d have an entire ocean, all the salt, the tides the hidden treasure.

“You are enjoying this,” I said to distract myself from his left thigh where the bathrobe had slightly parted.

He nodded, looking so damn fuckable, eyes glassy, lips swollen.

I said, “I do too, but if we keep this up, you’ll end up very sore in more places than one, and I don’t want that.”

He nodded again. Fuck. He needed to stop doing that, and he could never ever stop.

I got off him, telling myself it was a temporary retreat only. Fuck, I knew he needed time. It was only fair I gave him time,

and I wanted to do right by him, but I'd gotten a taste of what was under that bathrobe and—

I decided not to think about that. We managed easy companionship while we finished breakfast. I took him to work when he had to leave. I watched him walk into the Moonlight Diner.

“Red Cross Hospital,” I told the driver as soon as Amory had gotten inside safely.

Then I pulled out my phone to order flowers and Capable Pawn to watch him.

Fifteen

VOID, AGAIN



Sometimes I thought back to the boy I used to meet in the barn behind his father's house, way before the curse. We'd been boys together, had been each other's firsts. He'd looked nothing like Amory. Then again, I'd been the one receiving back then. Had I been anything like Amory, all those years ago? Innocent? The thought unsettled me.

THE EVENING HAD DARKENED quickly, but spring was showing its colors, its desire to turn into summer. Yellow streaks of brightness clung to the horizon, thinning clouds and making the Red Cross Hospital building stand out against the sky.

I'd texted Valentin on the way and wasn't surprised to find one of the hivelings outside, standing next to a trash can and huddled in a fur-lined winter coat. He was glancing at his screen, scrolling. He looked up at me when I got out of the cab.

“Mr. Bennet,” he said, meeting me on the sidewalk. “Valentin said he’d come by later but to go ahead and give you what you need. He said he was taking Simeon and Elias out for milkshakes at the Moonlight.”

“Of course he is. I need a chat with the guy who came in. Is he conscious?”

The hiveling shoved his hands into his coat pockets and shrugged. “On and off now. My brother got off work earlier, but I took over to sit with him. The patient is improving now that he’s been getting fluids, but still drowsy and exhausted as you would expect.”

I nodded. “Lead the way.”

He didn’t turn to the front door, which would have taken us to the admission desk, instead walked around the building toward where they restocked and cleaned the ambulances.

“Our congratulations on your lover, by the way.”

“Hmm.”

The hiveling opened his mouth as if he wanted to make small talk, looked at me, closed his mouth. He led me the rest of the way in silence, past a parked ambulance and two EMTs standing in the wide doorway, each with a paper cup of steaming coffee in their hand. They greeted the hiveling by name, looked at me with a question in their eyes but didn’t move to interfere.

Inside the building, it was much warmer. The sterile smell wasn’t as prevalent, overshadowed by dinner trays being

delivered, all bland, overcooked food. I'd only ever been a patient as an act of pretense in one of these, but the food had to be the worst part of it. Of being sick.

Well, you were an asshole, but making me get you proper food I really can't fault you for, I thought, thinking back to the carnation I'd left on a cold grave.

"We're going up," the hiveling said, pointing at an elevator. He pushed the call button, looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. "We don't say that too often, come to think of it. Isn't it strange that the morgues are always downstairs?"

"It's colder, and the dead don't give a fuck about a view," I said incidentally just as the elevator doors opened and a young-looking woman with a stethoscope stuffed into the pocket of her scrubs stepped out.

She eyed us, but the bags under her eyes had sucked up all the energy to do more than that.

The hiveling sighed. "I like a view."

I didn't care, so I ignored him. We got off on the second floor. The hallways were faintly blue with nondescript prints on them, and the floors were the squeaky, noisy kind.

The room was 211, and the hiveling knocked once long, twice short, then opened the door. Unsurprisingly, another one of him, Two for now, was sitting on a chair next to the prone man in the bed.

"He's been asleep for a good two hours now," Two said, voice low. "His name's Marvin Gale, PhD student."

“Of what?”

“Microbiology,” One said.

I nodded. The university wasn't exactly within walking distance, but there were a few bars that were close to the hospital and three stops by subway from the main campus. Lots of students always hung out there, which was why I didn't.

I walked closer to the bed. Like all hospital beds, it seemed too big for the person. Marvin had a needle in the back of his hand as well as a blood pressure cuff around his arm. The corner of a bandage poked out from the collar of his thin hospital gown.

I pointed. “Let me see that.”

Two cleared his throat. “We took pictures. You know, if that's okay rather than causing him discomfort while taking that off.” He brought them up on his phone, held it out to me.

“Has he said anything useful?”

Both shrugged in creepy synchrony. “Just ‘he hurt me.’ And he asked me to call his mom,” Two said.

“She's actually dead,” One whispered.

I nodded, zoomed in on the picture. The bite looked cleaner, as if the void creature was getting used to feeding. And, looking at Marvin, he had a type: younger guys but not too young, tall, slender. That meant he was feeding enough to keep to that pattern. A void creature in a frenzy usually didn't care,

was too volatile for that. Still, two in such a short time told me he enjoyed the process.

I handed the phone back to Two and sat on the bed, taking Marvin's hand. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw One step back toward the door, keeping watch.

"Marvin," I said and gently shook him by the shoulder. "Marvin, wake up."

He groaned but opened his eyes. They were plain blue, the pupils a little bit enlarged. It was a thing that happened if a person was lucky enough to survive a void creature, same as the confusion. I didn't actually know if it was due to the blood loss, some sort of toxin from the void creature's bite, or just their mind-dulling influence.

"Hey, Marvin. I'm Detective Bennet. I'd like to talk about what happened to you."

Marvin looked around. "I'm in...the hospital?" His face fell when he looked at Two. "Did I tell you to call my mother earlier? I'm sorry. She's dead. Cancer. I think...I think I sort of forgot about that."

Two smiled. "That's okay. And I've been checking on you. You're doing much better, Marvin. Do you think you can help the detective?"

Marvin looked back at me and licked his dry lips. "I'll try. It's...everything is a bit fuzzy."

With his other hand, the one with the needle in it, he reached up to his neck where the bite was. He noticed the infusion line,

put his hand back down with a frown.

“Just start at the beginning,” I prompted.

He nodded. “I had a long day at the office, but I’ve been—oh fuck.” He looked around. “I had a Grindr date. Where’s my phone?”

Two opened a drawer in the little rolling bedside table and pulled it out, handing it to Marvin.

“Thanks. The guy was hot.”

“Can I see?” I said. I didn’t think a void creature would have the focus or the restraint to find its prey on Grindr, but you never knew. Times were constantly changing, unlike human nature. And void creature’s nature was all the darkness of human nature, and then some.

Marvin navigated to the app and handed the phone to me. The hookup was plainly that, up to and including a dismissive message for having been stood up.

“Hmm. He really is hot,” I said, typing, *Thank you, charmer, but I found better*, hit send, and went to the phone’s location data.

“Yeah...” Marvin said. He barely managed to keep his eyes open as I shared the location data to one of my accounts.

“Marvin,” I said, handing the phone back to Two. “Tell me about what happened. You had a long day?”

“I...yeah. First of all, it was Monday, and Mondays always suck, but this one just...well. My cell culture got

contaminated, and two of the lab assistants were out sick. And the coffee maker broke. We only got it three months ago, and you know how it is in the lab without coffee.”

“Sure.” Both hivelings nodded sagely in sync.

Marvin turned to Two. “Could you get me some coffee, please? Do they have that here?”

“Maybe later,” Two said.

“Keep telling me about your hard day and what you did after,” I said.

Marvin tensed. “So I decided I needed a hookup. And coffee. I stopped at a coffee shop on the way there.” He lifted his other hand. “The guy behind the counter forgot to give me one of those paper sleeves, and I only noticed outside. Spilled some coffee on me, and I...I guess I stopped?” He bit his lips and tears came to his eyes. “Someone pushed me, and I fell. I —“

He shifted under the thin blanket, and Two squeezed his shoulder. “It’s okay, Marvin. You’re safe here. We have really good security at the hospital.”

Marvin nodded, but he was shaking with sobs now. “I don’t —remember. Much. He bit me. Fucking hurt, but—I saw the sky. There were birds, and someone turned on the lights in their room. Guess I was on my back, huh.”

Two opened the drawer next to him again, this time pulling out a tissue. Hivelings. Typical.

Marvin wiped at his face, cleared his throat. “I’m sorry, detective. I know that’s not really helpful.”

I suppressed a sigh. “You’re doing fine.”

He nodded. “The first thing I remember after that is thinking about getting to a hospital. I think I asked people for help? I was so out of it. And then, it was bright, and a nurse was asking me questions.”

“Thank you, Marvin. That’s all I need from you.” I stood.

“You...you’re going to get him, right? Before he does this again. Or does worse. Right?” Marvin asked before I could turn away and head out the door with One. In a voice so low I might’ve missed it, he added, “I think he wanted to do worse.”

“I will get him.”

One opened the door for me, and we went back outside.

“We’re chipping in to get him a coffee machine,” the hiveling said.

And seriously, fucking hivelings. They were worse than the church begging for coins at the end of pointless sermons.

“Tell Valentin. He’ll buy him something fancy.”

If that irritated the hiveling, he didn’t show it. “You really are going to get the void creature, right? These things scare us, they really do.”

I snorted, walking along windows all down the side of the building, showing darkness broken by car light, streetlights, windows across from the street.

“Void creatures scare everyone.”

One jogged to keep up with me. “But not you.”

I locked eyes with him. For all I knew, he’d happily severed a spinal cord at C4 and wrapped the head nicely for me.

“No, not me.”



I decided to walk for a block. What the area Marvin had been in shared with where the first victim had been found, and with the Moonlight Diner where the void creature had looked at Amory was subway stations, and not just any. The S3 ran along that route.

I opened Hawthorne. Capable Pawn had texted, *Gentleman received flower delivery and looked very happy with them. Co-waitress Jenny did not. Cook was interested and seemed to approve. Watching the gentleman now as per your request. Several supernaturals. Keeping a list. Lords Hawthorne arrived as well. The young Sir Hawthorne keeps looking at me, but the gentleman hasn't noticed.*

I was aware I'd developed more and more prejudices, all of them proportional to the amount of Christmas candy gift baskets I'd received from the house pawns, but I'd not told Capable Pawn to keep a list. He was the right kind of proactive.

As a reward, I sent him, *Okay*, and a thumbs-up.

I then messaged Valentin.

Void creature feeds along the S3 line. I wrote. Get technicians to cover camera blind spots. And those human police people you have on payroll, get them to do some plainclothes surveillance with the description we have. Follow, not engage. Oh, your hiveling is feeling bad for the victim. They want you to buy him a coffee machine.

The vampire's response came fast. Excellent. I put in the work request. Elias loves shopping for kitchen appliances. He also likes your lover. What a charming young man.

I stopped in front of a convenience store to grin at my screen. I didn't even care whether he was trying to insinuate I was joining the club of cradle robbers.

He is, I typed.

I'm assuming the werewolf out front who watches him was hired by you?

I spotted a 47 cab, waved it over. *Yes.*

Good. Elias was getting concerned, but I'll let him know. By the way, beautiful establishment your man works at.

The cab pulled up to the curb, and I got in before typing, *No, you are not allowed to buy it.*

Valentin sent a sighing emoji. *Shame.*

I left it at that. "Soeurs de Coeur, then *The Doge*," I told the driver.

Some twenty minutes later, my flower order placed and the flowers for the table waiting in the back of the cab, I was

knocking on *The Doge*'s back door. Some underling opened. She wore a neat skirt, a neat blouse, and was entirely human. The accountant probably.

“Yes?”

“Chef or Vico.”

She frowned. Then again, people didn't call Vico *Vico*, and if she'd worked here for any length of time, she knew that.

“Please wait here.” She closed the door in my face quickly, and I sighed.

A little under two minutes later, the grumpy Frenchman opened the door wide. “Oui?”

I said, “I'm making lasagna and tiramisu. Also some fruit salad.”

He rolled his eyes and mumbled something in French, a small litany about how he was surrounded by idiots.

“You have the best ingredients on short notice, and you know it,” I said, following him inside after pulling the door closed behind me.

Vico rounded the corner from the front in that moment, followed by the human. He grinned at me like a man who always packed a backup garrote and finally had a chance to use it.

“You're cooking? For your new lover?” He looked at Chef. “He brought him here first.”

Chef snorted. “C’est une drôle d’expression d’amour, ça, l’inviter au resto où le serveur est un empoisonneur.”

“Ignore him,” Vico said, excitedly fussing with the cuff links of his maître d’ uniform while the human scurried past him and closed her office door behind her. “Or actually, don’t. What are you making?”

“Lasagna, tiramisu, and fruit salad.”

Vico nodded. “One of the sous chefs has been making pasta sheets. Come, I’ll show you. Chef will collect the rest for you.”

“Vraiment?”

“Yes, really,” Vico said.

Chef could have stomped away, but for a human, he was really good at sneaking. Of course, the susurrations of his creative swearing announced him even if his footfalls didn’t.

Vico leaned in and smirked in a friendly way. “He’s happy for you.”

“Yeah. Could tell.”

He lifted his eyebrows. “Really. He is.” He grinned. “You took your time announcing it.” He narrowed his eyes. “I might have done the same. Might have hired the man beforehand and wrestled a promise from him to move to the States with me.”

“Uh-huh. You sure that’s what happened there?”

Vico shrugged. “What can I say?” He looked after Chef, gaze darkening. “He braises like I’ve never seen anyone

braise, and you should see him handle a knife. Makes you long for smelling salts.”

“Are you telling me people always shit themselves when Chef comes to night work with you, like the pawn that one time we ran into each other?”

Vico waved that off. “Not all that often. Now then, the pasta?”

“Yes, please.”



By half past nine, the lasagna was ready to be put in the oven once I brought Amory home and the desserts were resting in the fridge. My dinner table was set for two, and the bottle Chef had put in the basket next to the ingredients waited on the counter to be opened. For the fruit salad, Chef had even found some dark heart cherries. Fifteen minutes later, I was out of the shower and getting dressed.

I finished reapplying my eyeliner and gave the bathroom a quick tidy, leaving a spare toothbrush on the counter and fresh towels on the fancy heated shelf I barely used for myself.

“Let’s see, bathrobe to get you comfy,” I said, walking into my wardrobe room.

There, I didn’t find what I thought Amory would enjoy wearing as a bathrobe, but I found him some very soft pajamas, all in the hopes he’d feel welcomed or even better,

right at home. On my way down the staircase, I ordered a nice, fluffy bathrobe for when Amory was going to stay over next.

My phone vibrated just before I could open my apartment door. Olivia had sent me an email.

Found some things I think you should look at. Sent them over via courier. More detailed report to follow.

I frowned at the screen, then put my phone away. Dealing with that witch situation was important, but to me, Amory mattered more. And he was probably very busy at the moment, dealing with a full diner and with lots of eyes trying to get a good look at him, maybe strike up a casual conversation. He deserved a break, and some four hours was the maximum amount of time I wanted anyone other than me to stare at him.

Sixteen

DINNER



What I should have learned the night I went to raid the witch's orchard: getting a thing means nothing. The sweetest flavors can fade and turn to bile in your belly, because keeping a thing is magic all its own. I'd never learned that magic but continued to act as if I had.

CAPABLE PAWN WAS WALKING up and down the street across from the Moonlight, stopping in the shadows every few paces, looking around, sniffing the air. I was feeling some showing off was in order, and so I snuck up on him. He noticed me when I was two car lengths away from him, by the look in his eyes much closer than he was comfortable with.

“Sir,” he said, lowering his gaze.

“Anything worth noting, other than the overly excited community?”

He shook his head. “No, sir. Well, he really seemed very happy about receiving more flowers.”

I nodded and looked across the street. The cherry blossoms had opened, a white variety, and the dark green ivy tied it together nicely. It was meant to show my gratitude and humility in the face of the trust he'd gifted me.

“Good. This will be all for tonight.”

He nodded, tapped his ballcap. “Thank you, sir. Have a nice evening.” He headed in the direction of the subway.

I said, “I'll need you again tomorrow.”

The pawn lifted his head and stared at me, his mouth slightly open in surprise and happiness.

“Absolutely, sir. Anytime.” He paused, added, “My congratulations, again, sir.”

“Thank you,” I told him, then crossed the street. I couldn't wait to see Amory again, watch him smile when he saw me.



He did smile, his face lighting up, his eyes sparkling.

Yet, the Moonlight was crowded. The Marys were having coffee at the counter, a group of werewolves discussed the possibility of more dessert, and a pair of elves with really good wigs to hide their ears were sharing a basket of fries.

I really did consider not interfering. Roland and one other Cassandrian had decided to sit at my table. I told them all to fuck off when there was an opening while Evil Eye Jenny was in the kitchen and out of earshot. It left the diner empty, all of

Amory's attention mine again. The first thing I did was give him my phone number in case he ever found himself besieged like that again.

I settled in for hours of waiting and Evil Eye Jenny's attention, watching Amory in his routine. The gapers had left all their dishes as well as what I hoped were nice tips. Both he and Jenny cleared the tables efficiently, going one by one.

Amory took care of the counter as well. He had a thing about order, arranging the salt, pepper, and sugar in the same configuration along the space. It wasn't dissimilar at all to how I liked to spread weapons around my house. Or used to, before I expected to have him spread out all around my house.

Amory made Jenny go home well before the end of their shift. He did that a lot, offering her free time while picking up the slack. I appreciated his kindness, but I'd have preferred it be directed at me. I'd prefer it entirely if he took off more time so he could spend it with me.

Jenny's departure left me at my table with the pie Amory had saved for me while on the other end of the diner, Mr. Laptop had come in.

Tonight he wore a hoodie like he did most nights, but this one was newer as if he'd been out shopping. On top of that, he was wearing a button-down shirt underneath it, clearly going for geek but sexy. Huh.

Amory was oblivious, but Mr. Laptop kept going for staring contests and failed to hold my gaze for any length of time. The man annoyed me, and I regretted not marking Amory up

properly, not leaving kisses blushing against the skin of his throat.

Unlike Amory, McArthur did know what was going on in his diner, at least going by the surreptitious looks he'd cast from his little kitchen window. I'd barely finished my pie when he got Amory's attention to tell him he was closing the kitchen early.

"And feel free to clock out early today," he told Amory. He glanced at Mr. Laptop. "Tell that one we're closing for inventory if he's still here at half past midnight."

He spoke quietly, but not quietly enough for me. I smiled. He liked me, and probably not just because I came in here on the reg. I wondered if Amory was simply happier at work or whether he'd said something to McArthur.

Either way, I'd get to take Amory home earlier than I'd hoped tonight. If he let me.

While the last hour clicked away, Mr. Laptop kept trying to cow me and failed badly each time. McArthur, after leaving, walked past the diner's front windows, something he didn't usually do. He made sure to stop right by my table, made sure I saw him.

I inclined my head. He held my gaze for four long seconds before returning the gesture.

Yeah, he was looking out for Amory all right. In their own ways, all his coworkers were. That was funny, considering Amory wasn't the social type from what I could tell. I frowned

at my coffee cup and wondered whether it would do him good to be more social.

A little while later, I watched as Amory finally pulled the card out of his apron, the one I'd sent along with the cherry blossoms.

The card was the cheesiest thing.

The notion may be as silly as this card, I'd written, but I know I have been waiting for you all this time. That was true. It felt true. Putting it in writing was a tightrope act of honesty and acceptance. *We're having dinner at my place; will you stay over after?* was how I'd ended the short message, that, and a hopeful signature.

Amory blushed and smiled, and in that, I had my answer. He also started frowning of course, my worrier.

The card went back into his apron—that put it right above his crotch, which I liked, go my rampant libido—and got ready for another obligatory coffee refill.

He did fucking Mr. Laptop first.

When he filled my cup, I said, "Thank you, Amory."

He looked at me like a debutante uncertain of what to do with a flirting man.

He decided on retreat, heading back behind the counter. Not fifteen minutes later, he was telling Mr. Laptop to get the fuck out. Well, he was respectfully informing the man they were closing early and then delivering the check. So very customer service oriented of him.

Ten minutes later, Amory closed the door and flipped the sign. It was just the two of us, and he sat across from me finally, faintly smiling.

“You emptied out the entire place in under three minutes,” he said.

I grinned. “I’m better than a fire alarm.”

“And you got them all to basically empty their wallets.”

“They’re not hurting for it, and if they choose to be here so they can look at you and collect gossip, they may as well pay you for the pleasure, and pay you well.”

“You said something like that to that creepy dude at the amusement park as well. Don’t you like people looking at me?”

Damn, but he was good. Noticing a bit too much maybe. It pissed me off that he’d been creeped out by Caecilius’s hench-asses.

I said, “You cannot know this, and how could you, but a lot of people you will encounter in my world will look at you and size you up. They will ask themselves what you could do for them, what you could be for them. How they could use you. After that pawn at the park saw you, it made sense to let the network know you’re mine.”

Honestly, I thought he’d be most interested in learning more about Hawthorne, but of course, the little devil asked, “I’m yours?” voice on the cusp of pleased outrage.

“It’s not what you think. It’s more a status than a statement of fact. It lets everyone else know that they risk my wrath if they touch you. Or offend you. Or upset you. Some of the stories about me make me out to be a very short-tempered man.”

His mouth fell open. “Seriously, your wrath? And short-tempered?”

“Yes. A good reputation is worth its weight in gold.” I looked around. “I do like this place, but do you want to get going? I’d like to spoil you a bit tonight. And you haven’t had lunch, technically dinner, yet, have you?”

“Busy all night,” he said, shaking his head. “You know, with the crowd. Can we...stop at my place? So I can grab an overnight bag?”

“We can. Or I can loan you everything you need.”

A smile sparked across his lips. “That means we’re in that kind of relationship.”

I scoffed. “Worrier. We are in whatever kind of relationship we want to be in. If it’s too much, if you want to sleep in your own bed, I’ll order takeout now, and it’ll be there when we get to your place.”

I meant that. And then later, I might mention I’d already cooked and everything to trigger a small flood of guilt, all for his own good and the end goal of getting him to move in with me.

“No, I want to see where you live. But is it okay if I decide whether I want to spend the night later?”

“Of course. And just to be clear, I’ll never expect sex from you unless you want it. It’s not a transaction or an expectation. I enjoy being near you. Your company.”

He cocked his head. “And your rampant libido?”

Was he trying to be cute? He looked edible, and we were still sitting at a table over which I’d happily bend him.

“My problem.” And it was, though I wouldn’t hide from him how much I wanted him.

We left the diner after that. Having him in my arms in the back of the cab was nice but getting him out of the cab was... exciting.

“Whoa,” he mumbled, staring up at Sundial Tower.

Me, I’d lived here so long, I’d forgotten the impression it made on others. Sure, tourists came through this part of town sometimes to admire the architecture. But Amory’s surprised delight at the objectively beautiful building I felt. It mattered to me how he craned his neck to see the building’s tip reach heavenward, how he took note of the elaborate facade. His eyes lingered on one of the little suns carved into the side of the building, a good way above eye level.

I had to take him by the arm and physically move him inside.

“You live here?” he asked, eyes wide.

“Yes.”

The house pawn in the foyer was already straightening.

“I’ve never even been in one of these buildings,” Amory said and looked around in the foyer. The paintings here hadn’t been changed for decades. If anyone ever tried, I’d put a stop to it.

I nudged Amory onward. He ran his hands over his jacket self-consciously, likely worried about looking like he had no business being here. That was something I’d never understood about people, just accepting that outward markers of your “status” were treated as entrance tokens. In this case, I’d show Amory it really didn’t matter what he wore when he was mine.

We neared the pawn, and the Star-Garbed actually stood. My face fell when I saw why: a small parcel he put on the counter in front of him. “Good evening. This arrived for you, Mr. Bennet.”

“Shit timing,” I said and collected the package. It had Olivia’s name on it and every Hawthorne courier who’d handled it, but that wasn’t everything. I *felt* something from it, something magic, the power of it filling me with unease. I wanted it away from Amory.

Luckily, he was still busy taking everything in, even the old elevator dial and the carpet, which they had renewed not that long ago.

I took him up to the nineteenth floor, which was mine along with the floor above.

“You seem stunned into speechlessness,” I said when the elevator started moving.

Amory nodded. “This place was built to render a visitor speechless.”

“True enough. You can come here, by the way. Whenever you want to. They know you have permission to be on the premises, and they’ll let you into my apartment in case I’m not here.”

Amory’s eyebrows flew up. “That’s as good as giving me a key.”

“I have a spare. Be sure to grab it on your way out.” I said it lightly so he could choose to think I was joking.

He stared at me as if he couldn’t figure that one out. It was fucking adorable.

The elevator arriving saved him from finding his tongue again, although he did say “Shit” when I held the door to my place for him.

Yeah, I’d dazzled him. “You like it.”

I closed the distance between us and unzipped his jacket because he wasn’t doing that, keeping the foul package out of sight as best as I was able.

Amory being Amory, he said, “I’m sorry.”

“Please tell me you are not apologizing for what I think you are apologizing for.”

He gestured. “I made you come to my place last night, and compared to this—”

I held his arms in place to get the jacket off him. When I had it, I used the excuse to stash it in my empty armory along with the package and my own coat.

That done, I held out my hand for Amory, offering, inviting. He accepted.

I said, “I like your home. Apart from the instant coffee.”

“I can always make you tea,” he fired back.

“What a tease you are, Amory.”

He looked back at the armory and pointed. “Your package.”

“Ignore that. It’s a problem for tomorrow.”

The next several minutes, after putting the food in the oven, I showed him the rest of the space and got him to accept the clothes I’d put out for him. He agreed to take a shower and get comfortable, which was most certainly a good first step.

Meanwhile, I went downstairs, regulated the oven’s temperature as it cooked the lasagna to perfectly delicious.

Chef’s wine was a nice Grenache. I might have gone with a Tempranillo or a Pinot myself but decided to trust the Frenchman. I poured two glasses and carried them over to the coffee table so I could sit on the couch and wait for Amory to come down the stairs.

He took a long shower. That left me in a suspended state, too much happiness still buzzing in my breast, but a new joy growing there as well: Amory here, upstairs in a space I didn’t normally share with people. Hadn’t, before him, not like this.

That asshole of a neighbor from 19B who had saddled me with caring for all his damn plants on top of everything else while taking carnations to him even now didn't count. For once, living didn't hurt so much.

I considered whether to peek at the package Olivia had sent now or do that in the morning when the oven's alarm went off. The lasagna was perfect. Then again, it was lasagna, and difficult to get wrong. Ideally, it was the first small step to getting Amory to never leave here again.

I brought it over, put it on the table. The smell was divine, garlic, herbs, and spices, fresh veggies and my variation of an Alsatian sauce. I lit the soy wax candles, satisfied with the entire display.

I very nearly hummed with happiness and went back to waiting, quite literally like a suitor craning his neck to see a glowing love interest emerge and descend.

And he did emerge, did descend. Wearing my clothes. Yeah, that was sexy. So sexy I wanted it all day, every day.

My carnal needs aside, he also looked more relaxed while at the same time, his eyes darted all over the place in mild anxiety. Or no. With determination. He walked toward me and the wine I was holding out to him.

“You're spending the night.”

Our fingers touched as he took the glass from me, a temptation, something to tease. “You definitely are a mind reader.”

“Not a thing,” I said, deciding I didn’t need to tell him about the two Cassandrians who’d come to the diner earlier. “But from here on out, I’ll let you think it. Come.”

He sat, staring at the food, clearly hungry.

“Lift your plate for me,” I said and served him a piece.

“This looks delicious.”

“You be the judge of that.” I served myself.

The combination of carbs and the flavorful sauce would hardly not leave him satisfied. I watched as he took the first bite, which, predictably, got him to groan with delight.

“Wow, this is good. The pasta is really good.”

“Thank you. I’m glad you’re enjoying it.” I tried a bite myself, and yes, the albino sous chef had done a nice job with the noodles. “Do you eat at the diner normally?”

He shrugged between bites. “Well, more like, Dwayne makes me take food home when we have leftovers, but we’re allowed a snack break, as he likes to remind us.”

I nodded. “That’s good of him.”

“Dwayne’s good people, as the saying goes.” He stopped eating, clearly thinking about something. “Hey, do you know Plato?”

“Amory. He lived in the fifth century BCE. I’m old, but not that old.”

“No, I mean, yeah, I know that, but have you read Plato?” he asked, sounding tentatively hopeful.

This was not something I got asked a lot, and I was intrigued. “Some of the dialogues. Are we about to discuss piety?”

He smiled at me, looking much like he’d found a single flower left blooming in a wilted field. “No. It’s just...Jenny said I should be dating someone who read Plato and can discuss the writing too.”

“Ah. She meant to tell you you want someone cultured and didn’t think I’d fit that particular bill.”

He shrugged. “She just doesn’t know you. But funnily enough, she’s seeing someone herself. Or going on a date with someone. They met via shopping cart collision.”

I lifted an eyebrow. “How old-fashioned.”

“I guess. But cute too. I really hope it works out for her.”

I did too, if for no other reason than that she’d have less time to get involved in my business if she had her own to take care of. Which was an opinion I held right alongside the one where I liked her for warning Amory off potential dangers.

Amory fell silent while he finished the rest of his food with the single-minded concentration of the hungry. I was about to ask him whether he wanted a second helping when he went back to his curious ways.

“Can you tell me how to know whether a person is, you know, a pawn?”

I shook my head no. “You are wondering about the people at the diner earlier. There isn’t a way that works for all of them. I

could tell because I know most of them, although there is an instinct to it. I didn't have it at first, but it grew gradually."

I thought he was going to keep asking me about types of pawns, but of course he veered the conversation elsewhere. To the three human pieces of shit who'd made him bear witness to one of my deaths back that day we first met.

I didn't want to talk about them. I didn't want to tell him what they had been doing, so I told him they were traffickers. And retired.

Amory being himself asked, "Did you just tell me this so I'd ask about what you did to them?" He was bright-eyed and ate the last piece of his lasagna while he waited for my answer. Seeing him like that made me realize that he and Elias would probably, disastrously, make really good friends. They'd vibe, as Simeon had said, rub off on each other, and possibly plot world domination, using us, their lovers, as their tools. And then they'd paint the place pink and blue and add sparkles. I could see it, and I dreaded it.

I sighed. "Yes."

Amory helped himself to more lasagna before asking, "And would you kindly tell me *why* you want me to ask about what you did to them?"

That was all very much following the path of philosophical questions indeed. I said, "I have two reasons. The first is, you need to understand that my reputation doesn't come from nothing. I have done very violent things, and I will do violent

things again. I can tell you that I always thought what I did was justified, but that doesn't change the actions.

“And secondly, if this is not something you can have in your life, I want you to realize it sooner rather than later. Before you give me something you didn't mean to give.”

I forced myself to say the last bit. However much I entertained the fantasy of keeping him under lock and key, all to myself and no one else, I'd never do that to someone who had just the one life. Never. I'd given him the way in, but he deserved the way out if he wanted it, whenever he wanted it.

“And what would that be?” Amory asked, not in a coquettish way, but really not knowing.

I reached over to him to cup his cheek in my right palm, navigating the candles and the chrysanthemums. “Your heart, Amory. I never want you to regret giving me your heart. If you choose to do so.”

He went quiet, turning his attention to the food while the gears in his head worked through all of that. It should have made me more impatient, but this attitude of his to think things over, I liked it. There were very few things about Amory that I didn't like so far, and I wondered what habit of his would break this bond that was forming between us.

He was almost done with his lasagna when he said, “You know, you sound like a vigilante. Killing human traffickers.”

“What can I say? All vigilantism was incidental,” I said, confirming his assumption. “Dying does break the monotony

sometimes, and it was before you. You are much better at breaking my monotony.”

He smiled up at me from his plate, quite possibly thinking I was joking. “Thanks.”

“What else do you want to know?”

“How come all those pawns came to the Moonlight today? And Vico. You never said what he is. Oh, wait. Is Vico a vampire? Vico the vampire?” he fired right back.

“I’ll tell him you said that. He’ll take it as a compliment. But he isn’t. Vico’s curse helps him with what he does when he isn’t serving food, which is assassin work, more so than even I do.” And luring Parisian bad boys across the Atlantic after seducing them, apparently.

Amory gasped, clearly excited. “He’s an assassin?”

Well, I was glad Vico had that Parisian.

I smiled across the flickering flames and blood red chrysanthemums. “Him being an assassin surprises you, and with me you just accept it? Amory, should I be offended?”

Cherries bloomed in Amory’s cheeks. “I just mean, he seemed not the type?”

Teasing him—much like getting him naked again—was a physical need. “There is an assassin type?”

“Everyone who’s not at least a little bit intimidated by you,” Amory fired back, and pretty much hit the nail on the head with that too. Smart cookie. Smart, cream-filled cookie.

“Ah. Moving to flattery, are you?”

Amory, undeterred, asked, “What is his curse?”

“He used to be a cook. His curse is that everything he prepares kills those who eat it. He cannot so much as drizzle oil over a plate without producing a table full of corpses. He’s also one of the examples of people whose life has been extended after having been cursed even if that wasn’t a specific part of the curse.”

“Wait. When you get cursed, you stop aging?”

This scared me. He was so close to asking, *Oh, by the way, what happens when I get old and gray? Or when I get sick and have to spend time in the hospital?* We’d just started what we had, and he was young. I wanted his innocence to remain intact for as long as possible when it came to that.

“It’s a side effect that happens sometimes, not always. No one really knows why. You get the odd sorcerer or witch who will tell you something about how curses work, but with them, you never know whether you’re getting the truth or whether they’re just fucking with you.” Hopefully that would steer his thoughts back to the witches, the evil they represented.

This time, that worked, and he asked, “Do they really only curse people? That can’t be the only thing those witches do.”

“It’s not. Everyone has theories about it. All I know is that I don’t have a definitive answer for you, so I’d rather not speculate.” Or talk about all the dark shit I’d seen them do

over the years, not to mention what they could do to a human mind. “Ask Elias next time you see him.”

Amory cocked his head. “You were going to tell me about those three.”

I’d have to remember that Amory wouldn’t ever forget if I promised him anything. Working as a waiter had probably trained his memory and ability to keep count until it was above the average human of the day.

I braced myself and said, “Well, they were your first vampires, Amory.”

His eyes nearly came popping out of his skull. “You’re kidding! They had milkshakes!”

“Vampire species are a dime a dozen. Depends on which curse exactly they sprang from. Some live off blood alone, some can’t stand the sunlight, some can turn into smoke and are allergic to wild rose. Every myth you’ve heard is probably real in some of them. You, apparently got the type that lives off nothing but blood and milkshakes.”

That information settled to steep in his brain. I got up to whisk our plates away to the kitchen, and the damn sweetheart almost wanted to get up and help me. I pushed on his shoulder before he could, not too hard, but firm.

“No. You did this all day. I have fruit salad and tiramisu in the fridge. Preferences?”

The golden circlet around his pupils nearly drowned in them when he said, “Both?”

I lifted my hand off his shoulder and brushed an errant strand of hair out of his forehead.

“Thought so.” With the dishes piled on one hand, I asked, “What else do you want to know?”

My lover, he wanted to know everything, to understand the world he had walked into. I managed to keep it to a few details. They included admitting I’d known a bunch of pawns had taken over the diner earlier to get a good look at him, which got him to call me a show-off, which was correct.

I watched him eat the desserts I had prepared—fruit and cream, cocoa powder and chocolate shavings—and decided this was about as close to bliss as things ever got.

It made the package back in the armory loom much taller, though it could loom all it wanted for tonight. Tonight, I was enjoying talking to my lover who wore my clothes and ate the food I had prepared for him.

After dessert, Amory followed me to bed. The spiral staircase wasn’t so bad with him behind me. On the top floor I turned to watch him take the final step, his body undoubtedly reacting, wanting.

I asked, “Can I touch you?”

He nodded, Adam’s apple bobbing.

Take care with him, go slow, I reminded myself, and instead of crushing my lips against his, I opened my arms to him, an offer.

He accepted, came to me, and when I closed him in a light embrace, the skin on my back burned and itched as if feathers ran across it. It wasn't uncomfortable, not really, just strange. So much better than those memories of lashes that had escaped me ever since I'd found him.

“Soyer,” Amory said, voice thick with lust.

“Yes.” I steadied his neck and gave in.

I'd have thought that passion like this needed to be rough, two bodies pressed against each other so hard it hurt, mouths crushing breath, bruising lips, biting tongues. So often, it had been like that for me.

With Amory, tonight, it wasn't anything like that. We kissed deeply, but it was a dance, a tender exploration—not shy, not uncertain in where the desire was headed—just soft, like whispers in the darkness.

Whenever I pushed, Amory yielded, and whenever he leaned toward me, I lavished him with touch and warmth. In the end, it was him, fingers digging into my clothes, crotch rubbing against me, yearning for more. He seemed lost in the moment, mind too focused on desire.

I put a hand on his sternum to put some distance between us, and he whimpered, actually whimpered, his eyes going glassy. I felt his heartbeat under my palm, and whatever deep yearning had settled into his eyes, I could almost sense that, much like I could sense a pawn. It was...new.

“Something’s different,” I said, not sure if I should stop and figure out what was happening.

But I couldn’t if I’d wanted to. Amory sighed again, sounding so sad, and I knew he wanted me, demanded my attention. I couldn’t have stopped. Whatever was happening had happened.

Love, I thought, not knowing any other name for it.

I touched Amory all over, not exclusively sexual, simply admiring his existence in the same time and space I occupied. It was magic, the poetic kind.

I was about to ask him for consent, when he said, “Yes.”

I nodded. “Good.”

I got his chest bare, walked him backwards toward my bed. His skin felt so warm under my fingers, but I knew he wasn’t sick, wasn’t running a fever. I’d have noticed that. This was something else.

Before I got him naked all the way, I gave him a moment. Gave myself a moment.

“Still yes?” I asked.

His eyes brightened when he locked gazes with me. “Yes.” It was a command.

If he commanded, I had to obey. I started into a tender handjob, leaving the waistband of his sweats somewhere low on his butt to get to what I wanted.

I nearly moaned when the ball of my hand brushed across his tip, collecting the precum. He did too, trembled, leaned against me to keep his failing balance. That was good, it was right. I'd always hold him, steady him, catch him. He was mine.

“Soyer,” he mumbled.

My name. The name he'd given me. The name I'd waited to take for hundreds of years. The name I wouldn't change for the world.

He whimpered and said, “I...might cum.”

I grinned at him. “You will most definitely cum, Amory. Maybe more than once.”

“I can't...I don't...”

I squeezed his balls with my other hand. “Shh. I told you I would spoil you. Sit on the bed,” I said, pulling his pants down before he could actually cum in them. “Yes, feet up.”

And like that, I had him naked, could finally see all of him. He was pale all over, but possibly palest just above the downy hair at the base of his cock. There was a softness to him too, though the definition in his biceps told me that he was used to carrying dishes and whatever someone had to carry at a diner. He had the cutest birthmark on his left side, a hand's length under his armpit. I longed to examine every inch of him to find any other marks time and genetics had given him, learn them like a map of the stars.

I got rid of my own clothes too, shirt, pants, underwear, stripping while he watched and admired. I tried to remember if

anyone had ever had that much admiration in their eyes before. I didn't think so. His eyes, unfailingly, alighted on my cock. Good.

Before I moved an inch further, he stilled, stiffened, eyes clearing of some of the lust.

"You want to stop?" I asked, not sure what had unsettled him, hating that I didn't know.

Amory shook his head. "No. I want to keep going. It's just that the lights are on. And, um, I'm still kind of sore."

Fucking puritanism. "Amory, my sweet Amory. What am I going to do with you, hmm?" I let my fingers trace a path from his shoulders and down, settled on the bed with him, straddling him and cupping his cheeks as his gaze turned up to meet mine. "There are so many things we can do that don't involve penetration. Or at least that way around. You want the light off because you don't like seeing me?" I asked in a hopeful attempt to get him past his own shame.

He flushed, blinked rapidly. "That's not what I meant. It's just that I don't know what to do, and it's embarrassing."

Instinct roared. *Protect him, shield him, from himself and the world. From all that useless shame.*

"It isn't. And I know exactly what to do. Will you let me? Do it to you?"

"Yes, please."

I was overcome with gratitude. Knowing no better way to express it, I leaned forward, pressing lips to lips, and Amory

relented until he was lying on my bed, soft and willing, warm and ready. Although, his warmth was scorching. Every time I touched his skin, it was nearly feverish, though it lacked the sickly sweatiness. None of it was uncomfortable, all of it unusual.

Not that I could have stopped to investigate, to consider what this was, this new thing between us. Beneath me, Amory was yielding, taking each soft kiss and caress I offered, happy to follow my nudges until I had him moved into a better position on the bed.

With each touch, intimacy grew—not the kind you share with anyone new, but the kind you have with someone you know well. His body felt familiar. Having him touch me and doing the same, there was rightness to that as if the universe fell into balance between our hands.

As nice as the softness was, it gave way to a more eager play of touch and kisses soon: cocks brushing almost incidentally, lips parting so that teeth could mark skin, fingers no longer skimming but reaching with intent.

By all the dead and non-existent gods, I loved the way he moaned and felt, the way I knew I could make him yowl and whimper if I kept at this.

And yet, stiffness snuck into Amory's limbs. His often closed and unfocused eyes looked and focused. He was thinking, and when I saw his forehead marked with worry lines, I could guess what.

“You are thinking way too much, Amory,” I informed him before casually pinching his nipple.

I drank his gasp, lips to lips, squished his body’s squirming by grinding against him. He relented. It was beautiful.

“Better,” I praised.

I shifted so I could teach him the pleasures of rutting against your partner until you came, taking both our cocks into one hand. Fuck knew there was enough slickness there, between his eagerness and my own.

Amory was a joy, responding with his eyes going wide as saucers, his mouth falling open as if he wanted to scream, as if ghosts of delight had stolen his voice.

“Yes, that’s better.” I wasn’t sure he could even hear the praise, although there was no doubt whatsoever that this moment belonged to him and me, that nothing else existed.

I felt him tremble, getting close. Before he could come and bring this to an end, I let go of him. He whimpered. He’d be within his rights to call me a bastard for it, but I just couldn’t *not* torture him, at least a little. I wanted so much more, wanted to turn him into a soft, pleading mess.

This was compromise. I suckled his nipples, pretending to go easy for maybe ten seconds, right up until I didn’t.

His breath stuttered and his hips jerked. He moved his legs, digging the heels into the mattress in an impossible attempt to get away. As if I would allow that. He dug his fingers into my

hair, fisted my curls. Maybe he wanted to pull me off, but he didn't, just waited, endured, as best as he was able.

Oh, he was perfect in his shy daring, in his trust. I rewarded him by rolling his tight balls in my hand. He whimpered, wanting friction elsewhere and not being allowed it. I kept doing what I was doing for a little bit longer, then stopped until he was looking at me.

My Amory. What a treat he was, skin glistening from my torture, bottom lip trembling with fear that there would be more.

There would be, and he saw it in the smile I shot him.

I moved down on the bed, keeping his eyes locked on mine. Yeah, he knew what I was going for. What man didn't dream of that giving partner who'd long since lost any traces of a gag reflex? Amory had that, only he didn't know it yet.

I opened my mouth. He screamed. I flicked my tongue over his swollen tip. He jerked as if he wanted to jump off the bed.

Laughter rumbled in my belly. I opened my mouth, relaxed my throat, and...simply took him inside in one neat glide. It wasn't always this easy, and it wasn't always this good, but Amory was perfect for me. It felt perfect, giving him my mouth and being rewarded with the involuntary quivers of his every muscle, with his musk on my lips.

And since I liked being just a little bit filthy and depraved, I lifted my head out of his crotch, wiped my chin, and said, "Mmm. Dessert."

Amory was stunned into speechlessness. Fucking hell, it was the most endearing thing ever. On the other hand, he was sweating and trembling, his chin quivering as if he were moments away from breaking out in sobs because he couldn't process all the things he was feeling.

I didn't want that. "It's a lot, isn't it?" I said, shifted until I could cup his cheek, let him know I was there for him with that simple, non-sexual touch.

He nodded. "Yeah."

"Yeah."

I stroked his temple, and there were those tears. I caught one, licked it off my thumb. It tasted like fire and salt.

I let go of all the unformed plans of sweet torture that had been flashing in front of my mind's eye and reached up toward my beside table to get out some lube.

Amory observed, face tender, body like something ethereal that shouldn't exist in this world. He looked from me to the windows that had once been a wall. They still were, in a way, but right now, they showed the night and the city dreaming below.

"It's mirrored," I said, guessing his worry. "Smart glass in fact, all of it. I could fuck you right up against the glass"—I would, eventually—"and no one but me and you would be able to enjoy it."

His eyes flicked back to me, the desire in them still alive and well. I straddled him all over again and let him watch while I

stretched myself.

His jaw dropped, realization setting in.

“Yes, that’s right. You’re going to cum inside me, Amory.”

He stared, looking from the movement of my hand to my own straining cock to my curse bird and back to my face. His lips were puffy from our kisses, and he licked them, making me want to bruise them even more.

I didn’t spend too much time on preparation, just giving myself the minimum treatment. And when I slicked him up too. He was too close to the edge already, and if he came in my hand now, well, that would be a funny story he’d never want me to tell anyone else.

I moved slowly enough to give him a good show, but once more, taking him was better than just good. He was fire, yes, literally hot, and there was the physical burn, but this felt right. Like color illuminating the dark and painting rainbows, like summer’s flowers overpowering winter’s cold earth smell.

He was too incredulous to properly enjoy this moment, which pulled me back, made me smile.

I said, “Happy the lights are on after all?”

“I—yeah.”

“Me too.”

“Oh, fuck yes,” he said when I was just about filled to the brim.

“Feels so damn good to have you inside,” I told him. Then I rode him. He was very good for it, not trying to buck or get more than I gave. Until his body spasmed with the elation of orgasm, at which point he turned sublime, his screams a little rough, mostly sweet, and his face—there was a softness there, soft as the feathers of a new-hatched baby chick. It was a short moment, right before he shook all over with the cascading effects of cumming.

I loved the feeling of it. I stilled so the jerking of his hips ran through me. It was good, but even better was the thought of his cum inside me, deep and hot, scorching me from the inside out. There was victory in that moment when he calmed, when I’d taken everything he had to give.

I knew no better way to reciprocate than to cum all over him. It didn’t take much—fuck, he’d gotten me almost there already. I painted his chest with my release. He blinked surprised eyes at me, but there was more to it, admiration, bliss—no. Happiness? Maybe. The poison that bound the both of us together.

“Mein Allerliebster, mein Herzgeliebter,” I mumbled before I could catch myself, still high on my release.

As a distraction—no, there was a need, I was just lying to myself—I smeared some of my cum where it almost vanished against Amory’s pale chest, collected some on my finger.

“Open your mouth, Amory.”

I let him lick the cum off my finger, which he did, obedient, savoring a taste that was as new to him as all of this, not for

long if I had my way.

“Soyer,” he said, eyes fluttering. He’d fall asleep the moment I had him settled next to me, no doubt.

“Right here, Amory.” I kissed him, overcome with tender affection, the need to hold him against me and keep him safe. “Ready to sleep?”

“Yeah.”

It wasn’t long before we found a perfect place in each other’s arms. I took a moment to fuss with the sheet and comforter, wanting to make sure it was perfect for him, then hit the remote on the bedside table to darken the entire apartment.

“I have you, Amory.”

“I know,” he said, and those words were my comfort, the surety of affection I could surrender to.

What a fool I was, thinking that I’d be the one doing the protecting.

Seventeen

HUNT I



Between sleep and waking or in fever dreams, a liminal space exists in which I can trick myself into believing I am everything I'm not: mortal, anonymous, whole. Holding him, that moment stretched into reality.

I NEVER SLIPPED INTO deep sleep, not like Amory did. At around seven, I left him, sneaking out of bed and closing the blackout sliding screens that surrounded my bed. I felt the wrongness of leaving him in my bones, but there was too much here that needed taking care of, the witch, the void creature, and of course that package in the armory.

I forewent excessive cleanup and found another set of sweats. With the downstairs remote, I turned the lower half of the windows back to transparent, allowing the sunrise in.

Coffee and breakfast would have to wait until later. I went toward the kitchen first, because all my combat knives were

currently locked away, and I was too lazy to get them. An old peeling knife would have to do.

With every step I took toward the armory, I grew more alert. Danger waited for me there, I knew that as I knew my own reflection.

The package still looked like just a package. No black ichor had oozed from it, and it wasn't glowing or shaking, nothing so dramatic. I moved it to my ammo shelf which was reinforced and easy to clean. Easy to replace too, if the need arose.

I took a photo of the package as it was, documenting everyone who'd handled it, just in case. Going by its weight, Olivia had taken precautions, but. Where witches were concerned, "but" had to come as your first thought, and every plan needed multiple fail-safes.

Knife in a tight but not too tight grip, I peeled the packaging paper off at its seams, then peeled the tape off the cardboard package beneath. It was laborious, but as I moved the package, salt sprinkled out.

Well done, Olivia.

At last I lifted the flaps of the cardboard and peered inside. A thorn branch peeked out, wrapped in its own plastic bag that was filled with salt just like the whole package was. Go, Olivia. The branch was green and alive-looking, as if it had been plucked and made into magic not a day ago. I pulled the bag out, placed it on the shelf. When the salt moved, I saw that one end of it had been burned. Interesting.

“Fucking witches,” I said and pulled another plastic bag from its bed of salt.

This one was a wristband, much like those made from candy and sold to children. Except this was made from finger bones, and going by the size, the first knuckles of pinky fingers. I counted ten little bones. Knowing how witches enjoyed taking from the living more than taking from the dead, I had an idea of what that meant.

Another bag contained a little handheld voice recorder and a note on hotel stationery: *Play me.*

Well. Witches could place curses in a variety of ways, and I wasn't going let one hit me because I was in a hurry. I sighed, put everything back in the box, and with it and the knife in hand, I went up my staircase. I stopped at the sliding doors. All was silent within, so I walked through to the back.

The door behind which I kept everything that was best kept behind a lock was made after my own specifications. The locking mechanism was also my design. It was all mechanical, and the door had iron bolts. Both combined would frustrate any witch, drive them into a rage. Everyone else would simply have a hard time cracking it.

The door swung open on well-oiled hinges. Behind it lay the mirror of the hallway outside my apartment door. There had been two units here on the twentieth floor, and about half had become this work area. Here, I made my own bullets so I could control iron content, sharpened my knives and other weapons.

The outline of the space was a bit odd, the thin hallway portion to the right ending where the elevator door had been closed off, then to the left, a bigger room with only two pillars the architect had been adamant needed to stay.

On rows of shelves, I kept some of the magical items I'd found over the years. Oftentimes, they could be turned against the witches themselves, but there was no handbook for that. There was also no one I could have asked for advice. I had met witch killers, and each of them had gotten lucky. None I knew had done what I had done: pursued it ruthlessly, driven on by the phantom pain marking my unmarred back.

I also had several new tech gadgets here, kept where the elevator doors would have been, including laptops and phones still in their boxes. I pulled out a cheaper laptop and unboxed it on one end of my workbench.

Not long after, I had removed the speakers from the machine. I set it up quickly, downloading my go-to dictation software. Better safe than sorry.

I opened the Ziplock bag that held the recorder with nitrile gloves I pulled from a wall-mounted dispenser and fed the audio file to the software. I let that process, got my iron tongs, and got everything out of the salt: the thorn branch and the knuckle bracelet, something that looked like jerky but wasn't, a box of matchsticks from what I recognized as a local Mexican food chain.

I lined the items up on the workbench, then turned the box over so the salt poured out. There wasn't too much of it but

enough that something mean could have hidden inside to annoy me later on.

The recording then. I turned the screen and opened the file. It started innocently enough.

Mr. Bennet, I apologize for simply dumping this in the mail along with what I found today, but I thought it safer. I think I'm being watched. It feels like that, a prickling at the back of my neck. If that really is the case, if I wasn't as cautious as I thought, I hope that these direct observations and personal impressions are more helpful to you than the more objective reports I have compiled.

I began with the timeline and worked my way from the evidence and case files to the coroner's office, using my federal credentials. I started with the first victim in Arlon, a small town south of Brixon. The deputy I spoke to was helpful but dismissive. Not of me, of my reason for investigating. He said the victim was a girl known to be out late, to drink, to never worry who she got in a car with. In actual fact, the victim in question was Nancy Sheffield, a mother of two and an active volunteer in the community.

I made no effort to correct the deputy and let him show me the files. I told him to bring me everything they had on the case. He set me up in an interview room with a cup of lukewarm coffee and an uncomfortable chair. All the while, everyone was really nice. Something felt off, and I cannot tell you what precisely, didn't know what to put in my reports about this.

The evidence box contained a purse, empty and not in an evidence bag. The file was three pieces of paper. I emailed those to you. There was no information there apart from everything that was missing. Absence as proof of something.

I don't know if this is important. When I left, I overheard the deputy who I'd talked to tell his colleague about black-eyed kids. He said his girlfriend had been about to pull out of the Costco lot in Arlborough, the next town over, late one night when a little kid had knocked on her window, asked to be let in.

"Bit creepy," I remember him saying.

The colleague asked what happened next. The deputy laughed. That was the point at which I came up to their desks and told them I was done for the time being.

The coroner's office, as it happens, is in Arlborough. That town itself had two victims as well as the hospital I planned to visit since the man who found Nancy Sheffield was there as well.

Beforehand, I went to the police station. The sheriff talked to me before I got a look at the files, and it was one of the weirder conversations I've had the dubious pleasure of having with humans. It was very circular, sort of like he had this story he wanted to tell me, but he couldn't give it to me straight. I still don't understand what the purpose of it was.

The facts are, one, his father served in the army, shot people there. Then, on base, he was lured into the desert by what I would guess was a djinni. The sheriff said: "A beautiful man

begged my daddy to come with him, and daddy was always kind like that. He followed that pretty man into the sand.”

Second fact, the father came back to base some 48 to 72 hours later, dehydrated. He was sent home not long after with PTSD. According to the sheriff, he'd freeze up if he so much as aimed a gun at anyone.

Three: the Sheriff said that was why he'd never gone hunting even if the opportunity presented itself, and it was why his philosophy in law enforcement was to talk sense into people rather than shoot bullets into them.

Lastly, four: He pointed at the wall in his office where a deer's head had been mounted. I'd been smelling it since I'd entered the sheriff's office. It was fresh. The sheriff said he'd "killed that deer." He added it was the first innocent life he'd taken. He followed that up with, five, his father had shot himself in the head with his service gun.

How any of this relates to the case, I can't say. I had a colleague check on these facts, and they are genuine. Again, none of that is in my reports. I didn't see a connection. It was just weird and unsettling.

The Arlborough case files were thin, though not as thin as the Arlon one. The victims were Patrick Wilde and Elena Jones-Garcia. In terms of information, neither of the files have much more than the Arlon one apart from the operator's handwritten notes. What both had were photos. None were of the entire scene. One showed a knee, bruised and with broken skin, another Elena's face, discolored but whole. The two

photographs of her hand show the pinky of each missing. Patrick's file was worse. He had no more fingers, and if you've ever seen what's left after the butcher has taken the nice cuts off a hog...that was Patrick.

Look, I don't know...just, the coroner was this weird old guy who kept saying he knew his job. Every other sentence was about how his vision was fading. The handwritten files were a mess, illegible apart from some of the details and the manner: murder.

The hospital felt normal. It's odd calling a hospital normal, isn't it? What I mean is, only David Burns, the man who found the first victim, behaved strange, which was precisely why he was there.

The attending told me she had no idea what the issue was. She said he woke up screaming during the night at first, and now they sedate him. And then what he kept saying: she is watching me. You will have seen all of that in my transcripts.

The attending, over the course of my conversation with her, mentioned Sheriff Ostrowski, the outgoing sheriff from Colton I mentioned in my email. She had been brought in a day ago, kicking and screaming.

And because the "She is watching me" came up again, I went to get a closer look at that traffic accident. With that having happened only a day ago, I figured I'd have a better chance of finding whatever there was to be found.

The next just... I'll just tell you. The deputy sheriff is Ostrowski's son. He said Ostrowski had been in her car when

the report of a fender bender came in, so she went there.

This is where I can't make sense of anything anymore. The deputy sheriff said Ostrowski walked back to the station, walked, carrying under her arm an old-fashioned lunchbox. He said she wasn't making sense, saying something along the lines of, "She needed my car, because those co-eds bumped into hers, and her back seat was only big enough for one doll." Also, "She had to go meet a friend for lunch. She had the lunch meat in a cooler, you know."

He let me have a look at her office, said he hadn't yet because his mother had always been particular about that. What I mailed you was what I found in the lunchbox, a kid's lunchbox. It had a pink elephant sticker on one side. I left it there. That probably wasn't smart, but...I wanted to get out of that office, and I'm sorry if I messed up.

I bagged those things, and I left as fast as I could, thanking the deputy sheriff. In the parking lot is where it started, that feeling of being watched. I'm at my hotel now, and the courier should be here soon, knock on my door, any moment now.

Please come soon.

I had maybe overreacted with the whole transcribing business, but I really needed to get going and check on Olivia. If the shit splatter had happened, she had a witch on her heels. I was hoping for a case of thorn branch curse, but when had hope ever done anyone any good?



I took the time to get ready, because being ready meant I'd be prepared. I took both my pocket watch and the backup wristwatch, put on my tailored body armor and weapons as well as all the add-ons I kept in a duffel, not the duffel I'd packed for Caecilius's traffickers but the size-bigger one.

Back in the apartment proper, I stopped at the sliding doors to the bedroom in which Amory slept. In the end, I pulled them open, entered, left just a slit of light to fall inside.

Amory lay on his side. Sleeping. I stepped over our clothes that lay on the floor in messy heaps and knelt so that I could see his face, relaxed, serene.

"I won't be gone long," I whispered. "I'm so sorry, but you'll be fine. I love you, my heart."

I counted to one hundred, and then I made myself get up. On the way, I collected his clothes. Fuck, they smelled of him. How I wanted to climb back into that bed and bury my nose in his hair.

I didn't. I left my bathrobe on the bed for him. I went downstairs. I made coffee, put it in a thermos, and got out my nice Japanese paper and the fancy French fountain pen. This sucked so much. I shouldn't be leaving, but I had to. I wrote the note slowly, maybe hoping Amory would wake. That wasn't likely. It was barely even nine o'clock, and he was deeply asleep. The note said,

Amory,

Forgive me, but something came up, and I had to leave. I wanted to kiss you good-bye, but you were sound asleep. I made you coffee, and you are welcome to anything in the fridge. If you want anything else, dial 0 on the landline, and the pawn at the door will arrange it for you.

Text me when you read this, please.

What a cliché, to leave your lover alone, to leave them nothing but a note and the fading scent of cheap cologne. I got the receiver of the landline from the armory, because who on earth still knew where to find a landline these days, and left it next to the coffee.

I closed the apartment door behind me as quietly as I could and made my way to the lobby. The blue-eyed door pawn watched me approach. Going by how he avoided my eyes, I was really pissed, and it was showing.

I put Amory's clothes on his counter. "These need dry cleaning. Take them upstairs, but don't knock on the door before 4 pm. Check if he needs anything. He'll be leaving at around seven, and you are to call him a cab—a 47 cab—to take him there. You are to visually confirm he got into that cab, do you understand?"

The pawn nodded. "Yes, sir."

"And if he ever shows up here, you know what to do?"

Another nod. "Let him into your apartment, sir."

"And?"

He glanced up like a child called on by a teacher. “Make sure he has everything he wants or needs?”

“Correct.”

I turned and headed back to the elevators, stopped halfway and turned back around.

“Sir?”

“You have special permission to put some groceries in my kitchen. Soy milk and hazelnut syrup. And I’m expecting a delivery, a bathrobe. Have it laundered and brought up. With the food.”

The pawn nodded. This had to be a step up from leaving a basket filled with cinnamon-flavored candy in front of my door. “Absolutely. Brand preferences for the groceries?”

“Not yet. Use your best judgment.”

He nodded. “We can do that,” he said with a smile. Huh. The house pawns didn’t smile a lot.

I left it at that and finally headed downstairs, using the elevator ride to order some breakfast for Amory for tomorrow, the delivery location to be dependent on whether he chose to return to my place after work.

I sighed as the doors opened to the garage and the metallic smell of oil and exhaust. Hope had to wait until after this. It was time to get on the road.

Eighteen

HUNT II



Witches knew to pick the place and the prey. They were bad at accounting for outside influences.

THE EARLY RUSH HOUR traffic had died down for the most part, and I cleared the city's borders relatively quickly. Once it was just the Interstate, I kept it just under the speed limit as the landscape passed me by. The clouds overhead were breaking apart, blue sky trickling out. Spring was working hard to turn into summer.

I called Valentin over the car's system.

"Isn't it very early for you these days?" said Simeon.

"Hand the phone over, Simeon."

The vampire sighed. "Fine, but he's in the middle of something. Here, it's the Shuck."

I didn't pick up the exchange that followed between them.

“Yes?” Valentin said, sounding neutral.

“I’m on my way to meet with your investigator in Arlborough. If she’s lucky, she had contact with a thorn branch.”

The silence on the other end was followed by a less neutral, “And if she’s unlucky?”

“Witch.”

He sighed. “Well, fuck. Do I move cleanup closer to the area?”

“Hard to tell but might not be a bad idea. I’ll be there in a little under two hours. Do you have any updates on the void creature?”

“Well, one of the human police mistook a homeless person for him. We have the cameras up, and I have people watching. At this point, I’d say it’s a matter of time. We’ll manage to handle it with all the people we have close, in case the hunt takes you longer.”

“Good.”

Another beat of silence followed. “There is a witch then. And this close.”

“If it’s not a witch, someone went through a lot of trouble to fake it.”

“You’re thinking Caecilius? To lure you out of the city? A lot of trouble to go to.”

In honesty, I hadn't even considered that option. It was one, but it wouldn't work for Caecilius. He wanted to win, always, and he'd summoned me through his pawns. Having to lure me to him, he'd count that as a loss.

"I think it really is a witch. I meant it would be too much work to make it look like one if it was something else like a serial killer or one of our kind turned wild."

"Ah," Valentin said. "Just regular crime. I for one would love this to be regular crime. Either way, glad to have you heading out there. Miss Warren is good at this. She's used to running solo. She's yet to fail me."

I grimaced at the rearview mirror. "You're telling me you care about her."

"I care about everyone who works for me."

"I'll do what I can."

"Thank you. And know she has siren blood. It's weak, but it has saved her more than once."

"Noted. Don't keep Young Hawthorne waiting."

He chuckled. "He looks best that way. Kill that witch, Bennet."

"Always," I told him.

And I would.



The hotel in Arlborough had three stars. Allegedly. I could see a sign telling me so through my windshield. The lot out front was generous, but Arlborough, it seemed, had yet to come into its own as far as tourism was concerned. The hotel advertised their conference room on their website. It came equipped with “all your multimedia needs.” The townie businesses in the area probably held their retreats there, which was the only reason I could come up with for a hotel existing in this place at all.

The lot came equipped with weeds and faded white marks around individual spots. A Dunkin’ Donuts coffee cup sat defiantly on the curb, facing a crack in the concrete on one side and a patch of dirt on the other. Three stars probably didn’t include landscaping.

Olivia’s car had to be the only one with the West Coast plates, which also explained why I’d never seen her around before.

All those thrilling sights were not enough to keep me seated behind the wheel. The real centerpiece of the display was an antique Ford parked across the street with one very incompetent tail looking over at my SUV.

“Tinted windows don’t mean I can’t see you, asshat,” I said. I checked my watch. “One minute.” Time I used to memorize his license plate.

The guy, Mr. I’m Invisible, was young with a head of either dirty brown or reddish hair falling into his face in messy waves. He appeared unacquainted with combs, brushes, and

shampoo. He was also very clearly not a witch, so there was that.

After one minute and six seconds, he still hadn't gotten out of his car. Chicken.

"Ready or not," I said.

I opened my door, crossed the patch of dirt between the lot and the sidewalk. Invisible Guy hid. He fucking hid. Because that was super helpful in a situation like this.

I made sure I wasn't going to get run over, then crossed the street, making a beeline for the Ford. "Children these days."

Without further ado, I opened his door—fuck, but it didn't even have electric window openers—and pulled the guy out of the car by his lapel. He was a pawn, shifterish probably. He met the asphalt with little grace, a squeal, and an incredulous look.

"Please don't take my car. I have about twenty bucks on me."

"I'm not robbing you."

"No?"

"The fuck is wrong with your head?"

My skin prickled and I spun. An older man—end twenties, early thirties—had walked up behind me. Pawn too and sharing some facial features and the red hair with the guy on the ground. He also had two Dunkin' Donuts paper cups in his hands.

“Excuse me, but that’s my brother you are talking down to.”

“Excuse you, but your brother was watching me none too subtle.”

“No! I mean, yes,” Invisible said. “It’s that fancy car, like the agent’s, so I just watched to see what was going to happen.”

He got summarily ignored. The brother, ginger, washed and styled, hadn’t moved much, but I’d seen him sniff the air. If he had a good nose, he’d be able to pick out the weapons oil.

“They say the Black Shuck lives in Newstaten and never leaves town,” he said.

“*They* are fucking idiots.”

His eyes widened, proving he was the brains of the sibling pair. “Ellery, get up off the ground and apologize.”

He said that with plenty of command, voice frosty. He gripped the sludge pretending to be coffee just that much tighter.

Ellery scrambled to his feet, moving a little closer to his brother and from my blind spot to where I could keep an eye on him. “I...I’m sorry?” he said.

“Why is your brother in his car, watching the hotel my colleague is staying at?”

Ellery’s eyes went wide. “You’re a fed? You don’t look like a fed with that black coat and with how you pulled me out of the car. You almost look like...you look like the Black...” It dawned, and he looked at his brother for confirmation.

“Ellery’s harmless,” his brother said. “A friend of his was hospitalized after discovering a dead woman in a ditch in Arlon. I’m assuming you are here for that. Ellery just wanted to know what was happening, and the idiot’s been talking about asking your colleague if she knew how to help his friend. It’s childish hope and well-meaning, nothing more.”

“And you do coffee runs for him? While he’s sitting in his car, meaning well?”

He shrugged. “I came to tell him to get his ass home.”

I asked, “You two live in town?”

The brother shook his head. “Arlon, technically. Our property is just off the last dirt road. Red Tail Lodges. You can look it up. We rent them to hikers, the odd yoga retreat.”

“To witches?”

Ellery flinched. The brother grimaced but was better at controlling his expressions.

“No, but something weird has been going on around the area. Are you—are you here to fix that? That’s what you do, isn’t it?”

I shrugged. “I cut off the heads of people who annoy me. Most of those simply tend to be witches.” Ellery’s jaw dropped, and he paled. “I’m not done talking with you two.”

“But we—it was all me,” Ellery said, now stepping in front of his brother. “Quinn had nothing to do with anything. He just works at the Dunkin’ place and really just brings me coffee when he’s on break, so if you’re going to hurt anyone—”

“Ellery, shut the fuck up.” Quinn put one cup on top of the other and twisted his brother’s ear, which had him squirm out of the way. “He truly means well,” he said once more. “And that makes him look like an idiot sometimes.”

“Yeah, that’s a tough one. Hand me some IDs.”

I took photos of both their driver’s licenses. When I handed his back, Ellery opened his mouth to speak.

“Don’t.” I looked at Quinn. “You work there?” I gestured at the coffee.

“Yeah. Not that many hikers these days, if you need to know.”

These days? I needed to know when “these days” had started.

“I need to check on my colleague. I want you to take your brother to work and make him park his ass in that donut café.”

Quinn nodded. “Happily, but we can help.”

“You can’t right now. If that changes, I will tell you.”

I walked off, back across the street and to the front door of the three-star hotel. I heard the two of them behind me talk quietly and move. It had to be tough, supernatural and out here where you didn’t have the benefit of a community.

The automatic glass doors that led inside the hotel stuttered. I checked my watch, compared it to my phone. They were still in sync, so the hotel doors were simply old.

Old appeared to be the theme. The carpet—charming in a horror kind of way—reminded me of that movie with the creepy twins and the torrent of blood. The AC was on and turned up to keep the place as frigid as the morgue. I checked again, but once more, this was simply what three stars meant in Arlborough.

The reception counter was mostly just a desk with an aged PC and a friendly-looking lady with an overbite who shot me a genuine smile.

“Do you have a reservation?” she asked.

I pulled out my fake federal badge. “I don’t. Special Agent Bennet. I know my colleague, Agent Warren, is staying with you, and I’ll need a key card to her room.”

“Oh.” She looked at me, uncertain about what to do.

I glanced at her name tag. “Margaret, I need to check on my colleague, because she was supposed to report in and didn’t.”

“Oh, yes. Of course. It’s not that, it’s just, uh, we only have the one key.” She stood as if inspiration had struck. “I can get you the master the cleaning team uses.”

I forced myself not to roll my eyes. “Actual, physical keys?”

Margaret nodded. “Yes, that’s right. Not as fancy as what you city folk are used to, I know, but it works for us.”

“Give me Agent Warren’s room number, please. I’ll try knocking first and will come back down here if I do need the master key.”

Margaret nodded. "205."

That she knew that by heart told me the approximate number of guests they were handling at the moment.

I gave her my thanks and walked up the stairs. I wasn't going to risk the elevator if I could avoid it.

The creepy carpet theme continued on the second floor. The once white ceiling had taken on that yellowish tinge you'd get with cigarette smoke, and the wallpaper had fallen out of fashion some four decades ago.

I didn't bother knocking. The lock took me less than a minute to beat with the set of picks I always kept in my pocket. Card readers were never that fast.

The room was dark, short hallway, the foot of an unmade bed, a suitcase on a bench pushed against the wall opposite. I pulled out my gun and stepped inside.

As I approached the bed, I felt something crunch under my soles, and when I squatted to check under the bed and in the slim wardrobe, I saw salt. Olivia had sprinkled salt around her bed, but not enough to be useful. She had spilled it then, maybe while putting together that package for me.

I made my way to the bathroom, which was brighter than the rest of the room, thanks to the lack of curtains and a small square window across the tub.

Inside that tub, Olivia was sitting in a bath she had drawn for herself who knew when, dressed in nothing more than a tank top and panties.

“Olivia,” I said, holstering my gun and walking toward her.

She had to be in hypothermia. Her lips were blue, and she was sickly pale. On the edge of the tub, there was a whole can of salt. I picked it up, shook it, but there was nothing more than a few grains in there.

“Salt bath. Smart. Not smart to stay in there,” I told her and reached into the water to unplug the tub.

“She’s...watching me,” Olivia said, looking at me with eyes she barely managed to keep open.

I followed her gaze to the small window, the opaque glass allowing in light and nothing more.

“More likely, your skin got snagged on a thorn branch, and you never even noticed. Come on. Siren blood is all good and well, but it’ll only help you for so long.”

“Salt is...” she started, then went silent.

“Olivia, stay with me,” I told her and lifted her out of the tub.

It was about as easy as deadlifting a body, only more difficult, given that Olivia could still bruise. But I had moved my share of bodies, and I got her onto her bed.

“Okay, this is going to be uncomfortable,” I told her and pulled out one of my thin iron blades as well as a zippo lighter. “I need to look for where the thorns broke skin. Thanks for getting undressed already, I guess.”

I started at the soles of her feet and worked my way up all over her front. She'd stopped shivering, which was either not good or her siren blood stabilizing her. I worked as fast as I could, turned her over, found nothing.

“Shit,” I said. “I have a suspicion.”

She had brown hair, shoulder length, so I had to go by touch. I ran my fingers over her scalp, feeling for something that didn't belong. Olivia's eyes fell open once, and she said, “Are you really here?”

“I really am.” A second later, I found what felt like a scab, maybe something hard underneath the skin, and when I touched that spot, Olivia hissed in pain. “Found it.”

I could have used another pair of hands as I tried to get the hair out of the way for long enough to heat my blade to cherry red. She was trying to get away from me, and that didn't help either. I ended up having to get on the bed and press down on her left shoulder with my knee.

Her hair hid most of it, but where I had parted it, on her right side, I saw something dark sticking out. Most people might have pulled this. I had too, when I'd dealt with these the first few times, but by chance, I'd found out that burning them straight was much easier on the one having been stung. And when my little knife was heated to the gleam of torture tools, I pressed it against the thorn.

Olivia screamed, but she didn't have much energy left. I'd expected some siren to leak into the cry, but not even that. She

was in bad shape then. I kept holding the blade in place until I could see it lose its glow. It felt too long. It never was.

The mark left on her was ugly, but it was better than the slow road to insanity and death she'd been on.

“Olivia,” I said, shaking her by the shoulder.

She groaned, eyelids trembling but remaining shut.

I pulled out my phone and called Valentin.

“Have you found her?”

“Yeah. She's smart. Dunked herself in a bath full of salt. She had the actual thorn still in her. How close are your hivelings? Actually, just give me their number.” I covered her with the comforter, but she'd need a little more than that. Her wound needed dressing.

He paused, and my phone dinged. “Why do you need them? Are there bodies?”

“So far just the ones we know about. I need someone to watch her, and it occurs to me your corpse disposal team also are nurses.”

“That's...I see. The witch?”

“Working on that. Faster if you stop interrogating me.”

He sighed. “Build a loop and keep me in it.”

After he hung up, I called the hivelings. “Hello?” one of them said.

“This is Bennet. I need you in Arlborough at the Oak Leaf Hotel now. Room 205. I have Warren with me, and she needs

someone to watch her and heat her up from sitting in a cold bath for who knows how long.”

“Shit,” the hiveling said. “Ten minutes.”

I hung up with them and started rubbing Olivia’s arms and legs. Sirens were tough, but they had their limits. Everyone did.



Two hivelings came up, carrying a large red emergency bag that looked as if it came with inbuilt clout.

“The receptionist was staring, but we told her we are with you,” One said.

“What happened?” Two asked, putting the bag on the floor and unwrapping Olivia.

I gave them the rundown, told them to wait here while they gave her the first aid they could.

With that worry taken care of, I walked back down to the lobby and smiled at Margaret. “Hi. My colleagues are taking over for the time being. Would you mind pointing me to the Dunkin’ Donuts?”

“The Dunkin’—you walk across the street and head left. It’s the second street on your right. Is everything okay up there? If the Oak Leaf can do anything to help—”

I shook my head. “It’s PTSD. Our people know the case. Agent Warren will be fine.”

“Oh,” she said, looking relieved in that way some people did when you told them an acquaintance had cancer. Cancer wasn’t catching, and they were safe, and you didn’t really talk about it. Anything psychological still came with the same stigma.

“Thanks all the same,” I told her and walked out.

In the lot, one spot over from my SUV, the hiving minivan was parked, two of them sitting in the front, one wearing a ballcap and hoodie. There was something comical about that. I couldn’t put my finger on what exactly at first.

After crossing the street, I smirked. “Clown car.”



Margaret’s description brought me up to the temple of commercialized pastries and drinks. The space looked large enough to have been something else before the chain had taken it over.

Now, I could smell fat and sweet multi-colored glaze the moment I walked inside, and to my surprise, there were people in there, a line of two at the counter, choosing from the tastefully arranged doughnuts, three other people sitting at tables.

And of course Ellery. He’d picked a table off to the left, close enough to the counter for Quinn to keep an eye on him. Ellery was joined by an older woman, also redhaired and with familiar facial features.

I walked toward them and pulled out a chair. The mother straightened. Ellery shrank. Wolves would do that too. It was asking for the stronger pack mate's protection.

"My name is Parker Wise. You met my boys," she said. She had very bright, very reflective eyes, and her features were androgynous. I hadn't noticed on her sons, but from her looks, she was a fox shifter.

"Bennet," I said. "I'm here for the witch."

She nodded. "I'd hoped. Ellery told me he got in trouble with you. I want to apologize for that."

She kept her head up, her back straight. A lot of other shifters wouldn't, not with an apology. Parker Wise clearly wasn't taking shit from anyone, and she'd fight to protect her family.

"I suggest for a career, he picks anything but PI. Now, your other son mentioned there were fewer hikers coming to stay at your lodges. Would you say that's an unusual dip?"

She nodded. "For this time of year, yes. Humans aren't all stupid though," she said low enough so none of the other customers could overhear. "They can sense evil. Not all trust their senses, but many do."

"We've had someone show up in Newstaten, male, older, straight black hair, on the heavy side, wide face. Does that ring a bell as someone who's missing or someone who passed through the area?"

“It’s not much to go on, but I don’t know of anyone missing. And it doesn’t describe any of our hikers. Ellery?”

He shook his head and Parker looked over her other shoulder at Quinn. He was behind the register, waiting for more customers, but clearly had sensitive enough hearing to follow our low conversation. He shook his head as well.

That didn’t tell me with absolute certainty that the void creature wasn’t from here though. The witch could have cursed him elsewhere.

“We can keep our ears open for anyone missing.”

“That would be helpful. You three know there is a witch in the area?”

Parker exhaled heavily. “Yes. When I was out one night in January, I smelled blood, thought it was a deer. I went to check if it needed to be put down.” She paused and fidgeted but stopped when Ellery took her hand. “I smelled her, but there wasn’t much wind that day, and I’d already gotten very close. I don’t think she saw me, but I caught the scent of foul magic. Caught a glimpse of her through the trees.”

“Doing what?”

Parker shook her head. “Didn’t stick around to find that out. I ran, ran as fast as I could, and since then, we don’t go out that far anymore, and we don’t go there.”

Well, thank fuck for Ellery’s poor sleuthing, because that was one of the better leads, two months old or not.

I said, “You’ll have to show me that place.”

Parker's eyes narrowed, and she paled, then nodded. "I know."

"The sooner the better. And am I right in assuming you have one or two lodges we can rent?"

"We?"

"The investigator your son was watching got bitten by a thorn branch, and I have a team who's going to look after her as she recovers. I think I caught it early enough."

Ellery perked up. "Is she—was she sick with the same thing David was? He's still in the hospital. Can you help him?"

I shook my head. "If it's the same, no. You have to catch that type of thing within the first twenty-four hours in humans or else the curse turns permanent." I shrugged. "Like Snow White."

Ellery's eyes widened with hope. "You're saying...only a kiss of love can help him?"

"No. The real story of Snow White had her in a coffin because she was dead. The hivelings she'd been living with raised their daughter, who was eventually cursed by the witch to live forever without a mirror image. And the girl managed to drive that witch out with the iron shoes, though that didn't kill her."

Ellery was speechless while that processed. Hope crushed between love and reality. I fought the urge to check my phone. Amory was safe in Sundial Tower with the house pawns watching, probably still asleep.

“C-can I wait in the car?” Ellery asked.

“Sure,” I said, and his mother nodded.

Parker cleared her throat. “We can put you in two cabins, the ones closest to the road, if that suits. When are you going to get there?”

“We’re leaving right now.”



I’d checked Olivia out while the hivelings got her into their minivan. One of them switched to take her car, and we got to the lodges quickly.

To get there, we had to go through Arlon. It was a tiny place, something that would have made a good setting for a cozy, small-town romance. It lacked the charm though. Something about Arlon felt stale, and that just from taking a look through my windshield. It could have been flaking paint on some of the buildings, a pickup getting rusty with age parked in front of a permanently closed boutique, or the witch’s presence in the area.

The road leading to the Red Tail Lodges was well-maintained as were all the signs. Each had one or two foxes as mascots, confirming my hunch.

Close to the road, I spotted holly and hawthorn, then birches, ash trees, and pines. Birds, startled by the car noises, fluttered in the underbrush. The scenery gave me a bout of nostalgia.

The road ended in a lot where I spotted Ellery's old Ford and a Jeep, reddish-brown pine needles covering the ground. I let the hivelings park closest to the path leading to the lodges. A nice fence of halved trunks lined the gravel, and more sunlight shooting down from above cast patterns there. It looked a little bit like the gateway to an enchanted forest.

I got out to retrieve my duffel and the go-bag I kept in the car, just clothes and necessities. The smell was different than the city here, earth and pine, nature.

I waited long enough to count the passengers of the hivelings clown car: six, two of them carrying Olivia, whom they'd wrapped in a crinkling shock blanket, and one more who'd driven her car here.

After forty steps, the slate shingles atop the first timber lodge came into view. Parker came out of the door, a set of keys in her hand. A wooden sign marked this out as the reception, but it was a bigger structure, the family home probably. Ellery followed at Parker's heels. He had added red eyes swollen from crying to the general look of disheveledness.

Parker took a look at our group and said, "Well, fuck me. That's why you told him that Snow White story?"

I looked at the seven hivelings. "Hadn't counted them then."

Two, Four, and Seven puckered their lips but remained quiet. One frowned at Ellery, who was visibly counting them.

Parker motioned to Five and Six. "Come on. I'll show you where to put her. We have some first aid stuff, if you need it."

“Actually, tea would be good,” Two said.

“Ellery? Show the man what we have,” Parker said.

Ellery and Two split off. I kept out of the hivelings’ way while they got Olivia settled but took one of them aside as they carried her up the stairs to the lodge.

“I’ll need her files and laptop and other devices,” I told him, moving to a firepit surrounded by stones and large logs serving as benches.

Four nodded. “We packed a phone, laptop, and tablet. Oh, and a smart watch.” He frowned. “Weirdest thing? We didn’t find any shoes.”

I cocked my head. “She had no shoes? Did you look in the trash? She would have been out of it.”

Four nodded. “We did. We’re used to looking for body parts, you know, and squishy things can end up anywhere. We actually looked under her windows as well in case she threw them out, but she just didn’t have shoes. Also not in her car, though her glove compartment is stuffed with chocolate bars.”

I said, “Give some of those to the kid to cheer him up.” The shoes were strange. I’d examined her feet, searching for that thorn bite. Her soles definitely didn’t look as if she’d been out barefoot.

Four nodded. “Also, thank you for helping with getting Marvin that coffee maker. Valentin threw in a yearly supply of some fancy Italian roast he swears by.”

“I bet he did.”

Four frowned. “Mr. Bennet, not to criticize, but is it wise for us to be here?”

“Us in, you lot, or us as in Olivia, you, and myself?”

“The latter, and Ellery and his mom and brother. If there’s a witch in these woods, shouldn’t we be elsewhere? Ellery mentioned his mom was talking about selling the land and moving out of town.”

Yup, Parker was smart. If she didn’t have any connections to bring this to my attention, packing up your life and moving was the correct call. “Humans are a witch’s preferred prey. They’re more likely to kill a pawn than do anything worse to them.”

Four paled. “Uh, that’s—my point?”

I sighed. “Witches are predators, and you don’t split up when you’re hunting one. Makes it easier for them to pick out the weaker links. Horror movies generally get that right.”

Four nodded. “Just, so many horror movies start with a cabin in the woods, you know.”

I grinned at him. “What? None of you is the virgin that will save us all?”

I wondered whether that made all seven of them frown all at once. “Perhaps you should have asked us out. We might have surprised you.”

Huh. Was cutting off heads them flirting with me? “Seven angry exes isn’t and was never what I need in my life.”

Four snorted. “We were joking. I’ll get the things while Parker shows you to the other cabin.”

He walked off, and Parker walked out and down the stairs. “Are you sure the poor woman doesn’t need a doctor?”

“Seven nurses will have to do for now. The other cabin?”

She nodded and walked past the firepit, following the gravel path that ran from one cabin to the other. It was only a short walk getting there, but the birdsong was nice, even though it was only spring. I looked left and right. The snowdrops had found spaces here to colonize, and so had the crocuses, not the richly colored royal purple ones, but those pale blue variations. I could imagine bringing Amory to a place like this, making sure he was well entertained in a nice cozy lodge with a fire burning, pottage cooking over it, and maybe a glass of wine.

As if our thoughts were connected, my phone buzzed in my pocket, prompting a glance from Parker, but I didn’t pay her any mind when I saw his name on the screen.

Miss you. Two words, but they were enough to make me want to leave this place to the witch and return to him.

I miss you too, Amory. How are you? Did you sleep okay?

He might feel that was a bit nosy, but I’d sent it before I could reconsider.

Yes, he texted, about to raid the fridge.

Parker unlocked the door to the lodge and stood there, waiting for me.

I shot Amory a smiley and, *Anything you want. I had your uniform dry cleaned. The doorman will bring it up soon.*

Micromanage much? My little firecracker, my little worrier, responded, and how that made me want to tease him more. Made me want to kiss him, fuck him while I bent him over... anything, really. A specific fantasy, that.

I shot him another smiley, the hush one to be playful.

He just about tore my heart out with, *When can I see you again?* Yeah, just leaving had been a bad idea. I'd make up for that when I was back with him in person.

Now, I told him it'd be maybe three days, though I was hoping for less, asking that he text me.

Or you could text me, plus wink and stuck-out tongue was his response.

A breeze hushed through the woods, bringing with it the scent of leaves, pine needles, and moss.

I plan on it, Amory, but I have to go now.

I told him to go and raid that fridge, put the phone back in my pocket, and returned to the fucked-up situation I found myself in.

"It's pretty self-explanatory," Parker said when I headed into the cabin. "Fireplace, kitchenette, bathroom and shower." She pointed up. "The bed is in the loft, but the couch pulls out too if you prefer that."

“Cool. Wi-Fi?” I’d spotted one power outlet on the wall by the kitchenette, so that was something.

“We have that. Password’s back at our cabin. And it might be slow.”

I might have to reconsider dragging my lover off to a vacation in the woods after all. This might work for him, but I didn’t love it.

“And the place you saw the witch, how far is that from here?”

She cleared her throat. “I’ve always wondered, everyone knows you as the Black Shuck. Do you turn skin to fur?”

I shook my head. “Nah. Refers more to the death omen bit than the scary black dog bit.”

“Then it might be a two-hour hike, depending on how good you are at hiking.”

I hated that witch, hated her. Who the fuck forced you to *hike* in order to attempt decapitation? Fucking witches.

“I can get around in rough terrain.” I checked my watch and phone again, habit. “We should go now so we can get back before nightfall.”

Parker stiffened. “Quinn won’t be back for another hour at least.”

“The hivelings will watch Ellery.”

“I also overheard what you said about not splitting up.”

I shrugged. “Can’t be helped.”

For a long moment, she looked as if she wanted to resist, but then she said, “Fine. Let’s get you a headlamp, just in case, and I’ll change. Easier for me to find it that way.”

“All right,” I said, but fuck it if we got caught in the woods at night. So very much not my idea of a good time.

Nineteen

HUNT III



Sadly, in reality, witches never left any fucking breadcrumbs around. Just corpses and cursed knucklebones.

COUNTLESS FORESTS I HAD traversed, some I'd lived in. And I'd hunted witches in whatever place they ensconced themselves in, bogs, caves, marshes, the basement of a building in a lively merchant town.

It was just that sometime during the past century, I'd realized I liked a big city and the benefits of civilization. Some bug was crawling down the back of my neck, and I slapped at the thing, hissing under my breath.

The large fox with smooth red fur and eyes the color of pewter looked at me, stopping in front of some ferns.

“Just a spider. Lead on.”

And she did, going the pace I set, her paws easily accommodating me. I adjusted the small backpack I'd taken

with me and followed.

When we'd set out, I'd seen the hiking path, but we'd long since left that. I had to scramble over such debris as you found where trees stood and were allowed to grow and die in their own time. It was lucky this was spring, not summer, or I'd have been assaulted by mosquitoes.

Despite the years between now and the last time I'd had to keep my way in a forest, I found the instinct came back easily. Noting where my feet left a mark on the ground or in a patch of moss, keeping track of mushrooms and saplings so I could use them as landmarks later if I needed to, and always watching out for traces of other living things.

After the ferns, we passed a deer rub, the pine's bark worn away where the deer had used it. I'd not seen tracks though, and while an owl sang in the distance, in our immediate surroundings, the forest had grown quiet.

Parker stayed near me, stopped by a birch just about to begin the process of growing summer leaves.

"We're close," I whispered and checked my watches. My phone was lagging behind five minutes. "Very close. There's active magic here."

Parker shifted. It wasn't pleasant to watch, the fox looking like an alive version of a marshmallow held too close to the flame only to explode into a human shape. The shift made no gory mess, but it sounded squishy, and moments later she stood on the leaves naked, unashamed of the fox-typical ambiguousness that didn't end with her face.

“I saw her there.” Parker pointed.

I squinted, and yeah, there was something behind those trees. Spring’s bare trunks couldn’t hide what looked like cleared ground and rocks, something too bright for the woods just peeking out, not visible from where we stood.

“I’ll go check. Shift back and wait for me here.”

“But if—if she—”

“You run. Trust your instincts. Don’t worry about me.”

Parker’s eyes went wide, but she didn’t argue. I headed down the slight slope ahead of us instead of watching her reconfigure her body back to fox-shape, but I still heard it.

We still had light, so that was good. A witch would hunt at any time of day, but they enjoyed it when it was dark out. Because their prey was easier to drive into a state of terror.

I’m not prey, I told myself as I navigated the ground, squishing some *Laccaria* mushrooms on my way. An old memory of who I’d been right after the lashes and those first deaths stirred, roaring inside of me at the wastefulness of such plentiful food.

“Fucking nostalgia.”

The forest was very quiet here, not silent, and the fact that mushrooms grew and that I saw ants feasting on a dead centipede told me the witch wasn’t dedicated to messing with her environment too much. Pine needles stirred in a breeze.

The slope dipped into a deer path that hadn't seen traffic in a long time. I avoided fallen branches, weaving my way through lichen-streaked trunks until the smell of decay hit me.

It wasn't strong, not enough to make me gag or retch. Ahead, the cleared ground came into view.

I took my time looking around in case I was heading toward an ambush. I checked my watch, which kept the time while my phone told me it had just been a minute since I last checked. Looking at a proper clock could break that small spell for me, though not for Parker.

The witch, if she was here, did not show herself. She had used the cleared ground as a spot to cast whatever fucked-up spell she had been working on: in the center, on what looked like a miniature millstone, there were seven fingers pointing outward, like seven markings on an oddly divided clock face.

Bone ash surrounded the stone, and around the ash, fabric cut to ribbons had been braided to make another circle. The millstone, the ash from her hearth's fire, the clothes off the backs of her prey. It was such things that gave these creatures power, not eye of newt or toe of frog.

Outside the circle, sprouting from seven points lined up with the rotting fingers, thorn branches grew from the ground. One was making its way toward me, hiding under the leaves like a cunning snake.

I stepped aside, drew an iron blade, and cut the thorn branch off. It didn't like that, squirmed like a living thing, and the corresponding finger wiggled as well, the kind of thing that

belonged in zombie movies. Ooze dripped from where I'd parted the branch, reddish-black and ichor-thick.

I moved quickly. Three jumps carried me between the thorn branches and to the millstone, leaving the circles undisturbed. I kept moving, plunging one of my small throwing knives into each finger. There was enough iron in the blades to cause them to wiggle, and the fucking thorn branches wiggled in turn. It was freaky. The branches moved like whips, and there was a moment where I froze and stared, fascinated, anticipating the pain across my back.

It didn't come, not even the imagined one. I felt *his* touch instead, soft as wing tips running along my spine, and I moved, spun, pulled the small flask of alcohol from a hidden pocket. I doused the fingers and went for my lighter.

“Burn, fuckers.”

The fingers caught the flame, and it was beautiful to watch. Also creepy and smelly, but it killed the root of this working, if not the fruits of the working itself.

The branches writhed, and where they had once been green and alive, they now darkened, charred. They'd stop growing, but the foul magic in them needed to be burned to the ash used in their making in order to fully nullify it.

I waited for my little, filthy fire to burn out, all the while watching the forest around me. Most witches I had hunted used to be able to tell when someone messed with their magic. I had no idea how they did that. There was a danger of her

coming here for quick revenge. I'd have welcomed that, and my hand rested on the handle of my gun.

But no, she wasn't going to make it that easy for me. I pulled a tarp-sized sheet of plastic from my bag when the fire had burned through the curse and began gathering everything on it: the bones, the braided clothes. I dug the thorn branches up. Their roots were shallow and already dead. They cut me, pierced my skin, still trying to pass a curse to me.

“Doesn't work on me, but I should salt you since I've someone waiting at home who might not like me scratched up like that.”

I decided to focus on that someone as I worked and gathered all the foulness that was magic. Was he still at my place? I hoped so. The pawn might have brought him his uniform by now. Amory probably wouldn't feel comfortable at first just hanging out at my place, but the house pawn was bound to radiate even more anxiousness if Amory suggested he wanted to leave.

I could see it in front of my mind's eye, the pawn, barely a month into his front desk job, with clear instructions from me. And then, when he knocked at my door, that human, saying he was going to go home.

The pawn would have reason to panic, because if Amory stubbed his toe outside the building, mercurial me might just blame the newest werewolf in building management.

Amory would sense that and likely convince himself it was better to stay until he had to go to work, on the pawn's behalf.

One more step in my plan to make him never leave again.

The fingers disintegrated into charred knuckles, and the branches made the makeshift satchel I folded the tarp into bulky, but there was nothing to be done. I gave the area one last look. It was still quiet, but the heaviness that had sat here like hot air in an oven had lifted. I didn't see the witch, but she had to be here, somewhere in these woods, children in her basement who were missing fingers.

I made my way back up the slope, past the mushrooms and the abandoned deer trail, past the centipede carcass. Parker came out when she heard me. She'd hidden in the underbrush, and she was shaking, panting, her pewter eyes wide.

"She had a spell going. I stopped that. It wouldn't hurt to salt the ground though."

Parker made a whimpering, huffing noise.

"Yeah, we're heading back, just give me a sec."

I put the tarp on the ground and pulled out my phone. It had caught up with my watch, a good sign.

Just before I could put it away, Amory sent a message. *You look bored*, followed by that photo, the one a certain asshole had taken.

He'd handed me the fucking thing, framed. *Put this up on the wall. You look like you're just waiting for life to happen, but that's not how life works*, he'd said. And he'd forced me to add photographs to it, had forced me to tell him where I'd felt alive. How I'd hated his guts that day, but his hair had fallen

out in clumps that same week, and he'd thrown up most of his meals, and I wasn't going to tell him to shut up and leave me alone. The asshole had known it and used it against me.

I rubbed my eyes, flinched. My fingers were filthy.

I was. Boring company, I sent to Amory.

Parker huffed.

“Just a sec.”

And now?

I snorted. “Bag of bones and cursed thorns and a woman wearing fox skin,” I mumbled.

Parker did one of those fox barks, looked around.

“Yeah, nasty curse remnants in a bag.”

I lied to Amory, because I couldn't tell him about the bones or the thorns or the fox. *I'm by myself. But I could get used to my significant other being slightly jealous.*

He kept typing and failing. I kept one eye on the underbrush around us.

Well, you already told people I was yours.

That's right. I hesitated, then went on, *But seeing as how I still had your cum in me when I woke up this morning, I'd say that's mutual, wouldn't you agree, Amory?* I imagined him blushing. What I'd give to kiss those blushing cherries in his cheeks right this moment.

Yes, came the near immediate reply.

Good. That was good. The thing I needed to warm my heart and remember that the present existed, that the present was important. That living waited for me.

I told Amory to get snooping, hoping that he would. Fearing that he would but wanting it more.

Parker was eager to get gone, and so was I. I followed the fox, and while it had me sweating and lose my footing once or twice, I matched her speed this time, both of us eager to leave this place behind.

Twenty

HUNT IV



Salt, fire, and iron work well against witches. Overkill works even better.

I SALTED THE FIREPIT outside the cabins and dumped the entire tarp bundle in the middle.

“Where do you keep the logs, Ellery?”

The kid jumped, nearly fell over a pinecone.

“How...how long have you known I was watching you?”

I turned around, wiping my hands on the back of my coat, but really feeling the knives hidden in the folds there. “Since you snuck out the reception door and made your way here through the woods.” Darkness was close to falling, and I’d seen the light from inside their cabin.

His eyebrows crept up his forehead. Someone had forced a comb on him. “Really?”

“Yeah.”

He started gnawing on his bottom lip and shifted from one leg to the other.

“Am I going to have to get the axe from my trunk so I can cut down one of these trees for firewood?”

One of the hivelings came out of the cabin they’d put Olivia in and started down the stairs. He stopped when he saw the tarp, cocked his head.

“I—we keep the firewood behind the house.” Ellery pointed to where he and his mom and brother lived. “Does that mean the magic is gone now? Is David going to get better?”

I looked at the hiving. “Keep an eye on the tarp.”

He nodded. I walked away.

Ellery caught up. “If the magic is gone then—”

“It won’t help. Again, humans are different from us. They don’t mix well with magic.”

“But when you left—I mean, you said about those fairy tales. I read a bunch. There has to be something we can do, right, something I can do?”

Nettles grew close to Parker’s house, and next to them, yarrow, marigold, and lemon balm, among others. I wondered if they were Parker’s, Quinn’s, or Ellery’s or if it was something they all shared, healing through forest knowledge.

I rounded the cabin. A chopping block, well-used and sturdy, sat behind the house, and under a tarp, pine and ash logs, some

birch as well. I grabbed ash logs, started piling them into Ellery's arms.

“You can't do anything. No one can. With this particular thorn branch curse, he'll waste away, and maybe that happens quickly. It would be a mercy.”

“But—”

“There's nothing.”

I loaded Ellery's arms, took only a handful myself. He followed me back, though I stopped to pull up some nettles for the fire.

“I just don't...” Ellery started on the gentle incline to the firepit but fell silent.

I thought of Amory, at home and safe, warm and sleeping in my bed. Fifty or sixty years of that, no more. And I would give everything to make those years happy, to make them worthwhile. Never would I force Simeon's stupid offer on him, never.

In a witch's poison thorns, there was so much terror.

I held the nettles up so Ellery could see. “You can brew him a strong tea of this. It's not a cure, but it'll clear his mind. Not for very long, twenty minutes, half an hour. You could say good-bye.”

Ellery nodded. He almost dropped a log but managed not to. He had a shifter's grace all right, hidden somewhere under his awkward appearance.

“It’s not really like that, you know? I mean. I—he’s a year older. And he tutored me, and then he said he liked me. Like, *like* like. You get it?”

“Gay tutor who had a crush on you.”

“Oh, he’s bi. But, uhm, he wasn’t my type, but I think he came out to me just to get rejected, and now I feel bad, but also I like him and he’s a friend, and he got me through pre-calculus.”

I chuckled. We got back to the firepit around which three hivelings had gathered, all of them watching the tarp. Well, they were thorough. And used to nasty stuff wrapped in tarps probably.

“You want to save his life because he helped you with math.”

“I want to save his life because he deserves to live, and the fucking witch doesn’t.”

Well, well. That one really was Parker’s kid.

“Once we are done with the witch, I’ll stop by the hospital and bring him some tea.”

One through Three looked at me. They had been cleaning for Valentin for a long time now.

“You’d do that?” Ellery frowned. “If there’s anything you can do, you’ll do it, right?”

“Yes.”

“We’ll take these,” One and Three said in hivelings synchrony, and Two walked up to Ellery. “How about we make some more tea for everyone?”

The two remaining hivelings piled up the logs around the tarp, and I lifted it so they could toss some under there too. I spread the nettles up all around, not caring that my hands were already hurting from them.

“You’re going to kill his friend, aren’t you?” One asked.

“It’s a mercy.”

“But you’re going to ask him first if he wants you to kill him. Hence the tea,” Three said.

“So?”

The two of them shrugged as one. “You don’t always ask. Valentin says they spotted the void creature, and he’s forming a hunting party to corner it. Your lover is safe, he wants you to know.”

“First you suggest you want to date me, then you judge me.” I pulled my lighter out. “Hot and cold, are you?”

“Not really. More an observation. But we will give you a syringe with something that’s painless.”

Three and One both watched as I groped for kindling on the ground to feed the tiny flame.

“Works for me.”

“And you won’t tell Ellery about it.”

The flames caught the dry wood, rolled over the logs as if the fire were alive. Something in me stirred, familiar, echoing inside me, a feeling so close and yet so different to what I had felt with Amory, that already familiar intimacy, that more-than-lovers feeling. That strange thing between us.

“Fine.”

The two of them kept watch over the cleansing fire with me. Two and Ellery joined us, and we stood upwind, away from the smell, sipping mint and lemon balm tea. Away from the foulness that tried tainting the flames but lost.

Twenty-One

NIGHT HUNT



*Witches are good hunters, but they will always draw it out.
They enjoy their prey's fear too much.*

WHEN THE FLAMES HAD burned to filthy embers, I left and scrubbed clean in the second cabin's tiny bathroom until all the hot water was gone. By that time, night had fallen. Quinn, Ellery's brother, had come back from his job, and I'd split the hivelings up, two with the family, two with me, three with Olivia.

I got changed in the bathroom too, pulling on the spare long-sleeve over still damp skin and running my fingers through my hair before wiping steam off the mirror. Some of this morning's eyeliner still lingered. I wiped the black from the corners of my eyes with a cotton pad the foxes provided, along with tiny bottles of soap and shampoo.

How badly I wanted to be home. I checked the watch I'd left at the sink as I fastened it back on my wrist. No, not home. At the diner. Watching him, maybe tease him until he squirmed for me, just a little bit.

I pulled on my pants as well but walked out of the bathroom on bare feet. One and Two sat on the couch side by side, One's head leaned back while he rested his eyes, Two's glued to his phone.

"One of you can take the loft," I told them as I sat back down at the breakfast bar where Olivia's tech stuff was.

I grabbed my phone. I'd read through Capable Pawn's summary—the day had been uneventful other than Young Hawthorne coming to the Moonlight—before heading to the shower. Amory's last message was him telling me he was taking some of my Tupperware. That he was taking the food I'd cooked for him was a relief, that he didn't want to stay at my place when I wasn't there, something I'd have to work on.

How's work going? I texted.

One roused. "I'll go sleep."

He headed up the ladder to the loft as Two said, "Miss Warren woke up, by the way. She's groggy, but she's clear-headed."

"Did you ask her about the shoes?"

Two cocked his head. "Hold on. Huh. She says she had shoes, one pair, black. She doesn't exactly remember taking

them off, but after she handed over the package to be sent to you, things got really fuzzy.”

“Don’t blame her.”

“She’s really upset about the shoes. She’s upset someone might have been in her room.”

“Are you telling her it’s going to be fine?”

“Of course. But...is that a lie?”

Her notes were good, detailed. She’d even taken photographs of the ones she’d found in the file at the police station, the ones displaying the corpses as if they were models of a carnage.

Two looked over at me. “It is a lie, isn’t it?”

“I don’t know yet.”

He fiddled with his phone some more, then said, “Ellery now thinks you are cool.”

“Children these days. Idiots, the lot of them.” Just like the half sex demon I needed to detach still.

Two narrowed his eyes at me but didn’t say anything. And so I went back to the work Olivia had started.

I read through everything, but instead of focusing on any single event or body, I focused on the places where things and corpses had been found. Where Olivia had been, according to her smartwatch. One thing most witches enjoyed was staying on the outskirts where their influence could creep into the minds of those around them like a cold snap’s chill. Too close

to too many people, witches tended to stand out, and that way, they risked exposure. If the crowd coming for them was too big, not even their foul magic could guarantee them a way out.

My phone's screen lit up with an incoming message from Amory.

The writer just came in. He's still frustrated with his story.

Shit. Was that code for something freaky? Was it sex code? Were we sexting?

I realized I'd never sexted with anyone. Oops.

??? I typed, hopefully a safe enough route.

The writer, Amory repeated. Who sat at table three before you barged in and made him pick table seventeen instead.

Ah. My shoulders relaxed. Amory had no idea his secret admirer admired him. How I loved my worrier.

Oh, that one. It's a quiet night then?

Pretty much. Elias came in.

I still wasn't sure I liked those two hanging out together, but I was sure it wasn't my place to forbid it. *He can get chatty. But you see how I'm nothing like a vampire,* I typed, deeply curious to know what they had talked about.

He just called you Black Shuck. Don't you at least give people a fake name?

Elias and co. have been around long enough to know all the fake names change, but Black Shuck stays pretty constant, I told him.

Do you still remember your real name? he texted back.

The words just hung there on the screen, innocuous. He had a right to ask me this. Then maybe he'd want to call me by that name in an attempt to be kind. And then I'd have to explain to him why I didn't want that. And that would be worse than telling him about what the witch had done to me.

I typed, *I do, but I'm not that person anymore.*

I hoped he'd accept that, wouldn't dig his heels in on this stupid fucking point. If he did...I'd lie, tell him Islo. It was what the wise woman had called me once or twice when she'd put a soothing poultice on my black and swollen eyes.

Still there? I typed after a while.

I just miss you. Sorry, that sounded needy.

I knew I was smiling with relief. I checked to see Two wasn't looking, but he'd settled into a corner of the couch, reading something on his phone.

Worrier. I miss you too. And I am extremely needy.

LOL, I doubt that.

You won't doubt it when I get to kiss you next. Or when I get to have you in my bed again, Amory, I sent, then began, *I know exactly what I'll do with you,* thinking that maybe it was time to try sexting, or at least a mild form of it.

Before I could send it, Two perked up and I heard something from upstairs.

“Olivia just woke up,” Two said. “She's upset.”

From above, One said, “She’s saying someone is watching her.”

“Fuck.” *I’m sorry. I need to go. Text me the moment you get home please,* I sent Amory instead. “Wake Parker and her kids.”

“Doing that,” Two said and stood.

One was coming down the ladder, looking ruffled. “You know we are no good in a fight, right?”

“Sure,” I said, checking my watch and phone, both still in sync. “I need you watching the windows.” I pointed at Two. “You’re coming with me.”

I grabbed my coat off the back of the bar stool next to me and headed to the door where my boots stood. I didn’t bother with socks.

Two’s jaw dropped. “With you? Out there?”

“Yeah.”

“But—”

“You can have eyes all over the place, and it’ll be no good to me for getting that witch unless I have one of you with me.” I grabbed a sword from my bag, the sheath hiding a short blade, double-edged and sturdy. It was good for getting the head off. “Move it. Now.”

Two looked freaked. One did too, so it didn’t matter if I picked one over the other here.

I drew the blade, catching the light on the polished surface so it caught Two in the face. “Chop, chop.”

“Fine. Fine. But under protest.”

“Sure, whatever.”

It took the hiveling till the count of forty-seven to get dressed. One said, “Ellery wants to come outside and help you.”

“You keep that idiot inside. Tell Parker to sit on him or something.”

“Quinn just offered,” Two mumbled next to me.

“Eyes out the windows. Cover all directions as best you can,” I told him and opened the cabin’s door.

Cold night air hit me in the face, then flooded my lungs. I looked left and right before taking a step. The light sources out here were mostly the light from the cabin windows and some solar lights strung up in the trees closest to Parker’s house. They were dying from lack of sunlight hours. But it was fine. I saw relatively well in the dark.

The moment I got down the stairs, Olivia’s scream cut through the other cabin’s wall dully and filled the void of silence that should have been brimming with insect noise.

“Is anyone in that cabin?” I asked Two.

“No. She’s just screaming. Parker is worried.”

I was worried too. There were too many people here. Too many people always meant the potential for any one of them

doing something stupid went up.

“Is Olivia in danger of hurting herself? Trying to get out?”

Two shook his head. “No.”

“Leave her to it. It’s the witch, trying to get us to panic.”

“You burned her head to make that stop, didn’t you?” Two whispered as I headed right, aiming to circle Olivia’s cabin first.

“Yes, but it’ll take a little longer to fully heal. The witch knows that. And she has Olivia’s fucking shoes.”

“How’s that important?” Two asked just when the screaming stopped. “Oh, shit.”

The next scream wasn’t the normal human one from before. It was a siren scream, and that was a problem.

Two buckled. I flinched, pressing one hand to my right ear. The sound of a window breaking filled the void after the siren scream, and to my right, Olivia hit the ground with a roll. She wore shorts and a tee, and barefoot, she took off running away from the house and into the night, into the forest.

“Fucking hell,” I said and ran after her.



I fell over something. Not sure what, but at least not a corpse. I managed to roll and luckily didn’t lose sight of Olivia. She wasn’t running like I was, wasn’t paying attention to branches

that might get her in the face or in the eye. She was running as if something was pulling her through the darkness.

I lost sight of her for a second, just a second, because some bird flew at me from my left, scared or angry, and when I looked back ahead, she was gone.

I didn't stop, didn't have to, because moments later, fire spouting from the forest ground like a newborn volcano illuminated a clearing. Standing there, drawn in licking flames, were two Olivias.

I stopped. I didn't have to pant, but for the moment, pretended to. That gave me time to look around; nothing else here, just that fire, freaky like the tale of Rumpelstiltskin. My grip on the blade remained firm.

“Fuck, do I have to kill the both of you?”

“She's the witch,” one of them said and pointed.

“No, *she* is the witch,” said the other and pointed as well.

I said, “Olivia sent me your jerky. The stuff you kept in your lunch box. Want that back?” I stepped further into the light. They stood on opposite ends of the fire, one forced to be here and play this part, the other orchestrating it.

“I didn't do that,” they both said. “Please help me.”

“Witch!” the one to my left shouted and ran at the other without warning.

The first tackled the second Olivia. The ground met them with a hard thump. They broke out into a fist fight fast,

scratching and pulling hair, rolling in the dirt, too close to the flames for comfort.

Fucking hell, but I hated witches. I rammed my blade into the ground, then moved.

I kept two flasks in my coat, and for this, I pulled out the second, bigger than the first, undid the lid, and sprinkled it over both Olivias like one of those priests in a movie about exorcism.

One of them screamed before the second could join in, the one currently on the ground. I emptied my flask on her. She screamed more, which the other Olivia echoed again, but this was almost all I needed. I reached into their still ongoing fight, grabbed the first screamer by the hair.

The other Olivia kept holding on. I kicked her. Not in the face but in the side. I tried to be gentle, but there weren't all that many ways to kick a person gently, and she'd be sore.

But I had the witch, what I was pretty sure was the witch.

“No! Nooo! I'm Olivia!” she screamed as I started pulling her by the hair and away, then up, then grabbed a wrist to twist it behind her back and into a lever to hold her.

“Oh, yeah?” I moved my other arm, the one with the watch, and held that up to her face. “Then tell me what the fucking time is.”

She hissed. I smelled the stale foul breath of a beast that fed off the living.

“No, no!” screamed the other Olivia. She broke out into yet another siren scream, louder than the first. This one was stronger, but not strong enough to be more than a nuisance to me.

And besides, my blood was singing with the thrill of this. This was either the witch or me, one false move, and she'd tear out my throat, and when I lived again, there was no telling what I'd open my eyes to.

I grabbed her wrist tighter to move her, spun myself, steps I'd practiced across the tatami of Okinawa hundreds, thousands of times, and as I spun, I pulled my short sword from the ground.

The witch stopped in her involuntary move across the ground, her stolen profile twisting as she stared back at me. She bared her teeth.

I ran her through before she could say a single word. Olivia's scream ran out, and she dropped to the ground.

The fire went out, forced out of existence by the same magic that had created it. I pulled my sword back as the witch began to twist, fighting for her life now with all she had.

The camouflage spell was failing her, but fragments of it still stuck. She looked like a mask of Olivia was melting on her own face. I couldn't tell where one ended and the other began, not in the almost perfect darkness, and it didn't matter.

I twisted the knife to a scream from the witch, then pulled it out. She struggled. I waited for the right moment, the perfect

marriage of momentum and tension, and when I sensed it running through my fingers and up my wrist and arm, I let her go, adding just the slightest push.

As the witch spun to attack me in turn, I pulled my arm back. My blade's arc met her neck before surprise could even register on her face. I moved quickly, pulled back and hacked again. She gargled, twisted fingers grasping the air. She went to her knees. It took three strikes total to get her head off.

It dropped to the ground, then her body did, both noises barely registering. This time when I panted, it was real. Decapitation was work.

I needed a moment to catch my breath, to come out of the mental tunnel that hunting one of these was. In this case, I heard people calling out, turned and saw flashlights like arrows in the darkness.

"Idiots," I said. Around me, the air stank of blood, not the fresh kind, sour and turned, blood left in the heat for flies to feast on; the witch's blood, still rich with the magic she had practiced in life.

"I can smell them. There," Quinn said.

In the moments before they swarmed me and the once more unconscious Olivia, I collected my thoughts, calmed down. I twisted my arm to shake the blood off my blade, and in one of the hivelings' flashlight beams, I saw the feet of the beheaded corpse.

"Guess what, I found Olivia's shoes."

Twenty-Two

RECKONING



Every creature has some measure of pretending in them: the tiger has fur to hide in the underbrush, the anglerfish its lure. Witches pretend they make friends sometimes, and toward those friends, they will pretend that magic is a wonderful thing. And people believe it because they want to.

THERE WAS ANOTHER FIRE in the firepit, and Parker brought out some hard liquor for all those watching, everyone except One, Two, and Olivia at first, but when she came back to, she stumbled outside with one of the hivelings on either side, holding her upright.

Through bloodshot eyes, she took in the situation, saw the bottle of rye, and proclaimed, “I want some of that.”

“You shouldn’t,” Two said.

“I had a witch in my head. I fucking should.”

Parker handed her the bottle.

I checked my watch, habit, and went for my phone.

“Ach, fuck me.” The thing was broken, the screen cracked to the point where pieces had come off.

“Do you need to borrow one of ours?” Six asked.

“Not really. I have a burner in the car.”

Ellery giggled. “Burned.” He pointed at the fire.

Quinn looked at his brother before putting an arm around his shoulders. “I’m cutting you off.”

“Mr. Bennet,” Olivia said. The two hivelings helped her sit on the log bench. She moved like a human woman twice her age.

“Sorry I kicked you.”

She snorted. “Not that. We’re not done. I’ve been thinking. She might still have people. Alive or dead. We should go look.”

“No.”

“No?” Olivia stared at me, despondent, ready to argue. The siren burned in her eyes, that innermost part of her riled by everything that had happened tonight.

“I’ll go look. The hivelings will take you back to Newstaten.”

“It’s fine. We’ll help you,” Ellery said.

Well, maybe I should try cutting him off. “You fucking won’t. You’ll stay right here and do exactly what your mother

tells you. If I see you watching me from your car again, this time around, you can look forward to a proper thrashing.”

“But—”

“You listen to the Black Shuck,” Parker said. Then, quieter, “Don’t argue with dark omens. It never ends well.”



I left early the next morning, thought I’d get out before anyone could notice, but I wasn’t as sneaky as I thought I was.

A hiveling stood at their minivan, digging for something in the back seat. He slid the car door shut as I walked toward my SUV, making his way across the gravel toward me.

“Here,” he said, holding out two syringes to me. “Also, this.” He passed me a small thermos. “Looked like you forgot.”

“Guess I did. These’re two syringes.”

He shrugged. “We figured you’d go visit the sheriff. Parker mentioned her.”

I hadn’t planned on that. Easing the suffering of one person I would risk, two might get unwanted attention. I’d planned on leaving that to whichever vampire suited for the job I could get Valentin to send.

The hivelings would have guessed as much. Apparently, they disagreed with leaving too many people in the deadly grasp of a curse for too long. Everyone and their fucking opinion.

“It’s the fucking coffee machine all over again.”

“We’re sure we don’t know what you mean.”

“What is it, you see me kill a witch once and now all the mystique is gone, the respect with it?”

He shrugged and looked away. “No, sir. We saw you being nice to people. Also, Olivia spoke a little bit about what it felt like. The thorn branch curse. Please.”

This was it, the half sex demon forcing me to buy them Chinese food all over again. “I’ll stop by the sheriff’s room if I have the time.”

“Thank you.”

“If.”

“We heard. Thank you.”



The hospital was my first stop, and I went into the room of Ellery’s former tutor as well as the sheriff’s room. The tea bought each of them a little under twenty minutes. Twenty minutes was not fucking enough to understand that your life was over. Twenty minutes. When the asshole had died, he’d had the grace to do it in his sleep. The sheriff was awake, watching me, the effects of the tea still making her mind clear.

I left two corpses in the hospital that morning, their forgiveness ringing in my ears louder than any siren scream ever could.



When I drove onto the lot of the three-star Oak Leaf Hotel, the empty coffee cup still sat on the curb as if nothing in the world had changed. I looked at it as I made my way across the lot, near empty still.

Margaret sat at her desk, a fake smile kicking into motion the moment she saw me cross the creepy carpet toward her.

“Welcome back, Agent—”

“Cut the crap.”

“Excuse me?”

I could do subtle, but not today. Today, after emptying two syringes into two innocent people’s bloodstreams, subtle was about as far away from me as the sky from Emperor penguins. I pulled my gun from its holster and cocked it. I didn’t aim it at her, but she got real pale real fast.

“I’ll make this easy. I doubt you did anything more than grab the cleaning crew’s key and sneak into my colleague’s room. Yeah, you called the cops that one time as well when your witch friend had that fender bender. Maybe you had barbecue that tasted funny. My first impression of you wasn’t murderer, and I’ll give you the benefit of the doubt. If you tell me where the witch’s house is.”

Her lips pressed tightly. She said, “And if not?”

Well, at least she was smart enough not to deny it.

“Tick, tock, Margaret. There’s still earth sticking to my shovel. I’ll dig you a grave right next to hers.”

Anger broke out all over her face like a rash, then despair, incredulity. It was possible that Margaret had just been very lonely, and the witch had taken advantage of that. That didn’t mean I felt sorry for her.

“You’re lying.” She sounded uncertain.

I said nothing, just stared at her. Right until she caved.

“There’s a logging route—”

“Pull it up on your screen.”

Her nostrils flared, but she did.

I walked out of there five minutes later, calling Valentin.

“Hello?”

“It’s me. Burner phone.”

“Bennet, the hivelings called me and filled me in as far as the events go.”

“Yeah. Send a vampire with compulsion skills to the Oak Leaf Hotel. The front desk employee they want is Margaret. She’s been helping the witch. I suggest just making her forget and leave this place, but that’s your call.”

He only answered when I opened my car door and slid back inside.

“As you say. What else?”

“That fox shifter family will need compensation, but the hivelings will have told you that.”

“And a window repair. Yes, they told me.”

“I have intel on the witch’s lair. I’m headed there now.”

“Wait, where—”

I hung up on him. I wasn’t in a mood for talking, not after this shitty morning. The thermos with the remnants of nettle tea rolled on the passenger seat as I reversed.

I froze, stared at it. I put the car in park, grabbed the thermos, got out of the car and walked over to the curb. I picked up the old coffee cup and put the thermos in its place, then walked all the way back to the entrance where a trash can stood, seventeen fucking steps to put the fucking coffee cup in the trash.

Just seventeen steps to do the fucking right thing. It shouldn’t have been too much to ask.



The witch’s home was a trailer, just where Margaret had said. The sheriff’s car was parked out front. The entire place radiated dread, and the windchime made from bones that hung from the little awning above the trailer’s door didn’t help.

I circled the thing once. It had a propane tank, which was good. I wouldn’t be staging an explosion, not without backup around that could ensure it wouldn’t spread to the trees, but it was an option for Valentin.

The trailer's windows were covered from the inside, the fabric mismatched, geometric and animal prints as well as a bold red. Eclectic.

The door, when I tried it, wasn't even locked, because no one with their survival instinct intact would do this, walk into a witch's den. It wasn't pleasant being here, not by a long shot, but my watch and burner phone were synced, and the witch was no longer here to ambush me.

The smell though. After the jerky that wasn't beef, it shouldn't have surprised me. This witch, she'd been the Hänsel and Gretel kind, and she loved cooking. Still had a nice pot of stew on the stove, meaty stew.

I walked into the trailer, leaving the door open. I didn't want to look at the pot on the stove too closely, didn't want to touch that filthy wooden spoon sticking out of it, but there was a sick fascination there. *Is it as bad as my imagination makes it?* I wondered.

I didn't stir the stew. I crossed the floor with all its stains, passed the humming mini fridge without opening it and ignored the electric cooler on the ground next to the kitchen.

In the back, there was a bathroom and a bedroom. Both were empty of the living, although she had used the bathroom to dry her jerky.

At that point, the only reason I kept my breakfast down was that I hadn't had any. I knew sure as fuck it wasn't this place that made me sick, but the hospital. Not that my upset stomach mattered.

I closed the bathroom door firmly and spent a minute or two composing myself. The cooler, the lunchbox, the witch trying to get somewhere and stealing the sheriff's car. There was something else here.

“And where are those co-eds who got in a fender bender with her?” I asked the filthy, smelly place.

Luckily, the trailer wasn't huge and searching it went quickly. The witch was rather boring, apart from the cannibalism. She kept ash in a bucket, probably collected from the small barbecue she'd stored inside, near the front of the trailer. There was a rocking chair, bones collected in a wooden box, and craft tools right next to the bones. Rhinestones and bones and beads. All the prettiest things in this witch's eyes.

The flip phone was an oddity. It peeked out from under the back cushion on the rocking chair, and when I picked it up, it still held a charge. The thing was years out of date. I went through the call log, and there was just a single number on there, an area code I didn't recognize.

My finger hovered above the green call button. I hit it, put it to speaker because no way was I going to place this against my ear.

The call connected, but on the other side, I only heard breathing and some background noise that was too dull and monotone to properly make out.

“Hello?” I said.

The person on the other side hung up. I called again, but they didn't pick up. The third time, the call didn't even connect. I pocketed the phone and finally left the filthy trailer.



I sat in my SUV outside the trailer to wait for Valentin's disposal team. Not that I wanted to, but there was a chance whoever was on the other line would show here, and if they did, I'd want a word with them.

They didn't, and by the time Valentin's people arrived, it was late afternoon.

I filled them in. They went with the explosion, and I stayed to watch that from a distance. A part of me needed to see the witch's place go up in smoke.

When the sky above the tree line was bright with fire, and the sound of sirens rang through the air from a distance, I told the head of Valentin's team I was leaving.

Once I sat behind the wheel, I took a fucking minute. I checked my watch. I was out in the middle of nowhere, but if I made good time, I could stop by my place for a shower and then pick Amory up from work.

The drive itself was long enough to file the witch hunt away in my mind. If I didn't, there was a chance—a good chance—that Amory would sense something off. And this? It was not something I'd bring home to him.

“This is the plan, now execute it,” I told myself in the rearview mirror and hit the car’s ignition.

As I drove through the night, nothing else existed, just the road and my headlights in the dark. It was almost like flying.

The closer I got to the city, the stronger the urgency to see Amory. I didn’t normally break the speed limit to keep attentive traffic cops at bay, but this night, I did.

Twenty-Three

FAILURE



I was often called a failure growing up, useless, and worse. I drank that poison like water, not knowing the wrongness of its taste. Sometimes though, I wonder if they weren't right about me all along.

I SHOWERED, CHANGED INTO a duplicate of my coat that was clean and didn't smell of fire and death, and practically ran from the elevator to the curb.

Timewise, everything would work out, but I was feeling as if I'd had too much coffee, the anticipation of seeing Amory making me antsy.

"Can you hurry?" I asked the driver. She was kind enough to speed after that, just a little bit.

The sense of urgency didn't even leave me when I jumped out of the car and headed along the sidewalk to where Capable Pawn usually kept watch. I glanced across the street. The

lights were on in the Moonlight, but even Mr. Laptop was already gone, the writer as Amory thought of him. I didn't spot Amory, but he was probably in the back, starting the dishwasher.

I turned back when I heard a groan come from ahead, a set of stairs leading to a basement. I jogged over, peered down.

A chill ran through me. Capable Pawn was on the stairs, still in a half sprawl but struggling back to his feet.

“What happened?”

He looked up, eyes clearing with the healing stamina of his werewolf nature. “Mr. Bennet. There were two of them—”

Caecilius's people. I didn't need to hear more than that. I ran, crossing the street in seconds and pushing the door open. The measured steps from there to the back meant nothing, not as I pushed myself.

Amory, I thought, *Amory.*

I burst through the swing door, and as I did, a scream rang through the air, Amory's voice. Kitchen. I went right.

Amory was on the floor, and Caecilius's pawn, Dumb-N-Ugly, had his hand on him. He'd hit him. Amory was bleeding, crying, on the ground, *my fault, my love on the floor, my fucking faul—*

He saw me then. Our eyes met, and everything went calm. My anger took direction, turned from wild energy to strategic force.

I went for the one holding Amory first. Two steps carried me close enough to break the arm he had forfeit to me. His scream was not loud enough, would never be loud enough to make me unhear Amory's pain.

The other one, Beard-man, proved to be dumber than Dumb-N-Ugly. He pulled a fucking knife on me. I let go of the still whimpering pawn *who had touched Amory* and stepped out of the reach of the other's knife. When its arc was done, I stepped back in to close my hand around the pawn's wrist, a see-saw dance that was about to end.

The lever to loosen the knife brought it right into my other hand, and all I did was accept the momentum Beard-man had hurled at me, add my own, and let the blade of his knife plunge into his throat.

He'd taken good care of this knife, and it was sharp. His blood sprayed, and he went to the ground to die in a pool of it.

That one taken care of, I turned. Dumb-N-Ugly was crawling toward Amory. He would suffer for this. Amory was trembling and bleeding and—

He would suffer for this.

I kicked the pawn hard as I could. He wailed, tried curling in on himself. I put a foot on his back, pushing down on his spine. He passed out then and stopped moving. I'd take care of him in a moment.

I looked at Amory, on the ground, afraid, and knew without a doubt that I had done this, that this was my fault.

“Amory, my heart, come here.”

I went to my knees in front of him. To block out the sight, but he'd seen what had happened. And he'd felt the violence committed on him. No one just shook that off.

He whimpered, the sound broken, and from the slackness in his jaw, the massive bruise and swelling, I was sure something was broken there.

“Soyer,” he said, managing my name with some difficulty. “You're okay. Didn't text.”

His jaw was most definitely broken. I hoped his teeth were okay. He was still bleeding from his nose, and his eyes were wide, fear and flight making them so.

I pulled him against me, but carefully, every movement slow. He was tense and trembling but didn't resist me. He was sluggish and stiff, but he let me pull him to his feet.

I kept my arm around him, led him back to the diner, empty and normal and bright. I realized what he'd said, the first fucking words out of his broken mouth concern for me, worry that he hadn't heard from me.

Although everything he suffered was my fault.

“My phone broke, my fucking phone broke.” I spoke calmly, wasn't even sure he heard. He either would take in everything in too great detail, or it would all blur together later on.

He whimpered, and blood dripped from his chin and nose, onto his uniform and the floor. That would upset him on both counts, that he was bleeding and it got on the floor, that his

uniform was probably beyond saving, especially as that creature waiting for me in the kitchen had torn his lapel.

Just before I helped Amory sit at the table, things connected. Why you'd break someone's jaw, the way Dumb-N-Ugly had looked at Amory back at the amusement park.

In my chest, something roared and squirmed, fighting to get out. It was wing-shaped and bright, and it had a beak and talons to tear and rend. It called. It cried. Hurt had been committed against it, and it wanted revenge.

Soon, I told it. *Soon*.

I propped Amory against the backrest of the booth.

"Can you look at me, Amory?" I asked.

He lifted his head, one bloodshot eye, and the swelling darkening under the skin. His nose was most likely broken. I saw no broken teeth at least, so that was something.

I reached into the pocket where I kept my phone usually, but it wasn't there, the burner still in my other coat. Not only was I guilty of his hurts, I was incompetent as well to help him now.

"Shirt's torn," he managed.

My worrier.

I squeezed his hand. "Yes, a little. It's going to be fine. I'll need to borrow your phone, okay?"

He nodded, his eyes growing wet. The pain had to be fucking excruciating.

I took his phone out of the apron he kept it in and squeezed in next to him. I wanted to pace and rage but touching him was an even deeper need. Even that wild thing inside of me seemed to agree, the urge to protect running just a smudge deeper than the urge to destroy.

Amory's fingers closed around my coat tightly as I typed in the Hawthorne number. He was looking at me, no, examining me. For injuries?

"How may I help you today, Mr. Saintclair?" Valentin asked on the other end, showing me just how much interest he'd already taken in what was mine.

I pushed that irrational possessiveness down. "I need cleanup in about thirty, medical stat."

"Bennet? Your lover is hurt? Do you need me to—"

"Yeah, what do you think. Come with."

"Of course. Dispatching our best healers now. They should be there shortly."

A low groan echoed from the kitchen. "I want a delivery too."

"We'll happily arrange that," Valentin said without missing a beat. "Oh, by the way, the pawn you retained texted to say he's just outside the door but wasn't sure whether to disturb you. I can only imagine he saw your face through the window."

He was probably also afraid I'd have his head for not watching what was mine closely enough. But this wasn't the pawn's fault. It was mine.

“Awesome, send him right in.”

I ended the call and put the phone back. Amory liked a sense of order, and order meant control. He needed as much of that right now as he could get.

He was still clinging to me, to my coat. With his other hand, he reached up, maybe to wipe at some of the blood that was coming slower now, but still coming.

I took his wrist. “Don’t. Your nose is broken, Amory.”

He shivered, wailed low, all the sounds broken by how broken his face was. I wasn’t sure what upset him most, the pain or the fear this would harm his looks.

I’d address that later. Right now, the door chimed with the pawn’s entrance. The werewolf came toward us with his shoulders rolled forward to make himself small, his head bowed, his entire posture one big apology.

Amory flinched at the chimes. “That’s just the pawn. Name?” I asked the werewolf.

“Benjamin, sir. Ben is fine.”

“You have headphones, Ben?”

“Uhm, yeah. I mean, yes, sir. Earbuds.”

I beckoned him closer, giving Amory another look. He wouldn’t like me to leave again, but I heard movement in the kitchen. There’d be more sounds coming from there soon. The winged beast inside of me vibrated with eagerness.

“Amory.” I carefully cupped the back of his head, my touch light. “Look at me.” He did, but he also sensed I was getting ready to leave him once more. His knuckles where he held on to my coat stood out white, but he was focusing on me now, as alert as he was going to get. “Good, that’s it. Ben here is going to sit with you for a little while. I have to deal with the two men back in the kitchen.”

He whined. It hurt me, down to my bones. Something clattered behind the swing doors.

“Not for long, I swear to you, Amory.” I stroked the hand that clung to me, then carefully pried his fingers loose. He accepted that, but he didn’t make it easy.

When I was done, I stood and crooked a finger toward the pawn, who was still a respectful distance away. “Come here. Give me the earbuds. Put a news podcast on. No music.”

I hoped that was enough for Amory to not link this trauma to the smallest of triggers. It was bad enough to think he might fear this place now, fear being alone here. I knew it had been a haven for him for so long.

I kissed both Amory’s hands. They smelled of his own blood and my ineptitude. *I’ll never fail you again, I swear it on this eternal life I suffer*, I thought, but oaths, once spoken, were a burden for two people to carry. I would keep this one to myself.

To Amory, I said, “You will be fine, my heart.”

I placed the earbuds for him, careful when that made him flinch and then turned to the pawn.

“I’ll be in the kitchen. Under no circumstances is he to come there, do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If it gets too loud, turn the volume up.”

“Yes, sir.”

“Healers should be coming, then more Hawthorne people. You will let only the healers touch him, understand?”

“Yes, sir, and I am so sorry—”

“Don’t care. Don’t fucking let him in the kitchen.”

The pawn nodded. I took a deep breath. I wanted to look at Amory, but if I did, I might not leave him, and this needed to be done.

So I went into the kitchen, head light and blood boiling.

Twenty-Four

AFTER



My biggest failing was, as it had always been—my biggest failing was leaving him.

I WOULD LEAVE THE pawn with his life. In other ways, he would be left with less, only he didn't know that yet.

“Hey, man, please. Lord Caecilius respects you. There's no need for this,” he said as I walked into the kitchen. He backed himself against a counter, ass first, his broken arm cradled in the crook of the healthy one. “All Lord Caecilius wants is that you come to him and stop wasting your time with cheap useless humans and this useless place.”

“I can't tell if you are indeed a shit-for-brains case or if you have actually convinced yourself that anyone would heel just because a huge dick of a snake-man says so,” I said, surveying the kitchen and all the tools in it. So many untold possibilities between the apple corer and the kitchen shears. “Either way,

you should be more concerned, don't you think, seeing as how I killed your friend?"

The other pawn was a smelly blotch of filth on the floor.

This pawn glanced at the mess and shook his head, nostrils flaring. "Wasn't my friend, and we were told not to fuck with you. He pulled that knife. His fault. Lord Caecilius would tell you the same."

"Ah. So you do understand the concept of consequences."

I rushed forward and kicked him between the legs, following that quickly with a hard punch to his solar plexus. The combination made it so he couldn't cry out in pain, but he sure as fuck buckled over and went to his knees.

"P-p-please..."

"What were your orders? What had you been told to do when you came here tonight?"

The pawn's lips trembled. I hoped he had enough loyalty to make me ask again, but he didn't. "He—Lord Caecilius didn't like that we told him you were strolling around with a human fuck toy—"

He never saw the backhanded blow coming, just yelped, a cut opening on his lip.

"He's my lover," I explained, calm as a volcano about to erupt. "You will refer to him as such."

The pawn struggled to catch his breath. Anger creased his brow, deep-rooted entitlement.

“Was just supposed to be a little fun,” he whispered.

“Fun you didn’t want him to be able to bite down for? Should I pull all your teeth, see what fun you’ll be having then?”

“No, I—”

“Answer my fucking question. What were your orders?”

The pawn sat up on his knees, chin raised, defiant and proud. “Lord—Caecilius said...to...that we should make your lover into an example.” He spit on the kitchen floor, leaving a bloody glob three inches from my foot. “He s-s-said to teach you...when Lord Caecilius summons you, you answer his call. He said to show you humans aren’t worth your time because they break. Because they can’t handle the sublime creatures we are.”

“Are you telling me Caecilius is sublime?”

He cobbled together a smile. “He will show you. This—everything that happened tonight—it won’t matter to you much longer once you come to him. You’ll see that your path has always b-b-been clear. We’re powerful. We’re all brothers.”

“You disgust me. Caecilius disgusts me for working with the likes of you, and we are no brothers.” I grabbed the wrist of his broken arm, and he screamed. “Do you remember what I told you would happen if you look at what’s mine? What did you think I would do if you touched him?”

The pawn shot me a look of anger. “He’s just a fucking human, so why—”

I couldn’t listen to another word out of the pawn’s mouth, and so I made sure there wouldn’t ever be one.

Taking the price for what he’d done and planned on doing including interest. It was hard work, but the tools in the Moonlight’s kitchen were sharp and sturdy. My bottomless anger pulled me along, and along, like a hot blade through ice cold butter. It went until I was good and done and he wouldn’t see another day without knowing the cost of such a magnificent, fucked-up mistake.

Just when I was about ready to walk out of the kitchen and check on Amory, the werewolf pawn walked in. He froze in the doorway, and his mouth fell open.

“Good. You’ll be telling cleanup. This one’s head”—I pointed at the dead pawn— “and this one’s tongue are to be sent to Caecilius.”

“Is...is he dead?” Ben, the pawn, stammered.

“No, just unconscious. Can’t you smell that?”

“There—it’s a lot of blood. Sir.”

“Right. These”—I pointed to the other cuts—“Tell them to incinerate them.”

“Y-yes.” Ben’s eyes were wide, and his shoulders shook.

He took a step aside when I headed out the kitchen, but said, “Sir. Your face. There’s blood.”

Fuck. “Right.”

I washed over the sink, hands and face, ears as well. The dish towel I dried off with didn't smear, and in the small mirror next to the sink, probably where they checked their hair nets, I looked okay.

The pawn had been waiting for me and followed me outside. He looked uneasy.

“Healers?”

“Outside, sir.”

I nodded and headed that way, Capable Pawn—well, Ben—followed.

The healers tending to Amory were the same two who'd come to Poison to pick up after the mess Caecilius had made there. I helped them with Amory, tried calming him, but really, I couldn't do shit for him.

The healers had to realign his nose of course, his jaw as well. They thought he might have a concussion. He clung to me until they were done with him, making me only more aware of how redundant I was.

When they were done, they'd put the potion he'd need to take in a little paper bag which went into my coat.

“I need you to move now, just to the car,” I told him as the healers gathered their things.

Amory glanced around. He looked feverish, blinked at the light that was now too bright for him. “I need to close up.”

“The cleanup team will take care of all that.” I caught the pawn’s eye. “Ben, help me with him.”

Amory looked up at the mention of the pawn’s name. “He needs his earbuds back. Or he needs new ones. It’s unhygienic.”

He was slurring, words running into one another. That made me hopeful he’d be out cold as soon as I got him into bed.

I huffed. “I promise to replace Ben’s earbuds, Amory. Now, will you let go of me and let yourself be moved? Just a little. We’ll go where it’s less bright, yes?”

He hummed in agreement, but it was good to have a werewolf on his other side. If he tried moving his feet, he didn’t succeed. He lifted his head once to look into the kitchen through the passthrough, then again to look at the flowers I had gifted him.

The cleaning team wasn’t going to let anything get seen, but the flowers, those stung. Back then, everything had been fine, and he’d been excited. About love or adventure or both.

Valentin arrived and held the door for us, not saying a single word. He looked at Amory, and his face darkened. The vampire knew what it was to be in my shoes, in this particular situation.

A cab was waiting—Valentin had likely called it—and with the pawn’s help, I moved Amory inside and sat next to him.

He began crying almost as soon as the car moved. I hugged him, cooed at him. This moment, it was the last possible

moment for me to choose. I could be with him, or I could abandon him, push him away and end this.

At the thought, I shivered. I ached. I ignored both and thought it through.

I looked at the situation from Amory's perspective. His feelings for me, I could only guess. I could deduce by how he sought out my nearness now, by how he had been worried for me.

He didn't hate me, and my answer grew from there: unless he hated me or told me to leave him, I would become the best thing for him. I would give and love as much as I was able, I would protect him and use my every skill to make it known just what exactly I would do for him.

"It will be fine, Amory. You are safe now. I am here," I told him as he cried, and two minutes later, "We're here. Just a little bit of walking now, hmm? You can do that. I'll help you."

I got him out of the car, one arm slung over my shoulder. The house pawn saw us coming and rushed to the building's front door to hold it for us and called the elevator.

Amory had trouble keeping upright by then. "A few more steps, one foot, then the other," I coaxed as the elevator got to my floor. "You know, I should probably carry you. You're the wrong size to be carried though, and I'm not a werewolf."

"Are we...home?" he asked as I stopped at the door. "I have your plastic container."

"We're home. Yeah, you stole my Tupperware."

“Tupperware.”

“You stole it.”

“What?”

“Nothing, my heart,” I kicked the door closed behind us.
“What did you do? Yesterday, when you were here.”

He coughed, looked around. “This is your place?”

“Yeah.”

He looked sad. “It’s so nice.”

“I’m glad you like it.”

He sobbed again. “My uniform...”

“It’ll be fine. I’ll make sure you get a new one.”

“Dwayne just gave it to me; and I didn’t close up. Soyer, I didn’t close up.”

We’d gotten to the staircase, which really was the most ridiculous thing to have right about now. I ended up mostly lifting Amory while keeping the balance for the both of us.

“I closed up,” I told him.

“You did?”

“Yeah.”

That drew a smile. Fuck, but he was out of it.

At the top of the stairs, he sagged, exhausted from speaking and getting healed and getting beaten. Once I had him lying on the bed, it was a lot easier to get him comfortable. I undressed him, making sure to keep his phone next to the bed and

throwing everything else down into the living room. The uniform was trash, and his apron I'd have returned to the Moonlight so it waited there for him. If he wanted to return.

I got him under the covers. He'd made the bed before leaving yesterday, which hurt me for reasons I didn't quite understand.

I settled next to him with my laptop. The healers had said he needed watching and another dose of their potion to be administered four hours after the first.

Amory turned and grew uneasy when I scooted away in order to not have my laptop screen disturb him, but he calmed when I was touching him. I settled for dimming the screen.

Valentin had sent several messages, the oldest being a video along with the words, *You want to watch this.*

I sighed. "Amory, my heart. I need to go downstairs and get my headphones. Some water for you as well." I stroked his hair. "I'm close. You keep resting."

I very nearly ran down the stairs and back up them. He was shifting when I got back, of course he was.

"I'm back, I'm here," I whispered in his ear. I wiggled out of my pants after getting under the covers with him, wanting to feel him as well.

With him once more settling against me, I hit play on the video. It showed the subway, a subway tunnel, and several people dressed in dark clothes. Not military or police style clothes, because those would have stood out too much, but

thick jackets and pants that allowed for enough movement to fight in, heavy boots.

Flashlights cut through the darkness, then a scream. The camera, either a phone or a body cam, spun to focus on what I recognized as the void creature.

“I’ll feast on you! I’ll kill you!” he roared. His eyes had gone dark, the skin corpse pale.

“Not at this stage.” That was Valentin’s voice, his old voice that rang with the hint of an accent he normally hid away. He walked into the frame, Simeon at his side.

“What brings you to this city?” Simeon asked, polite as you please. He wasn’t wearing his lawyer clothes though, and I saw chain mail poke through under his jacket, his hands hidden in black gloves. Both the chain mail and the gloves likely contained silver. Smart.

“Food,” the void creature said, leering.

“And feed you did,” Valentin said.

Amory turned, one hand coming to rest on my knee. I stroked his neck, feeling the calming rhythm of his breath.

“I’ll eat you too,” the void creature said and tried to lunge and twist free from the group of pawns holding him manacled.

Simeon stepped forward and gut punched the void. That worked like a charm to calm the creature down.

“It has been suggested you were cursed by a witch,” Valentin continued.

“I’ve been given power!”

“The power to feast, yes.”

The void creature cackled. “No. To dominate. To stop people laughing at me. To make them pay.”

“Ah,” Valentin said and looked at Simeon. “What do you make of that?”

Simeon shrugged. “Pathetic. Probably had a really small dick before, none now.”

The void creature hissed and spluttered. Simeon hit him again, and said, “Who cursed you?”

The void chuckled.

“We are just asking, you see,” Valentin said, “because an associate of ours killed a witch the other day. We thought you might like to know she’s gone and won’t be coming along to save you.”

The void creature’s face shifted, first to a grimace, then to a wicked laugh.

“Oh, he’ll get you! He’ll get you all for this!”

The laughter, manic and too loud, echoed until Simeon, with a sigh, drew a gun and shot the void creature.

“Well, that’ll do for now,” Valentin said after Simeon had emptied the magazine into the thing. “Cut out its heart and put it in salt. Cremate the corpse first, then the heart separately.”

The video cut off. I frowned. The flip phone. This. It made sense. There was another witch. And then, Caecilius’s people,

coming into the city at pretty much the same time the creature had. I didn't want to imagine that he was working with a witch, but the possibility seemed real enough, too real at least to not consider it.

I spent some time trying to find out more about the phone number on the dead witch's old-timey flip phone, but once a burner was shut down, there was really only so much to be gleaned. In this case, the area code was from the West Coast. Either that was true, in which case Caecilius or an underling was my best bet, or it was really just a burner, and the caller could be anywhere now.

Then there was the cooler, and the things the witch had said about meeting someone. Again, it was perfectly possible that this had been just Margaret or someone else. It might have been another witch. They played well sometimes, although they were territorial.

The rest of Valentin's correspondence was just telling me about how his hivelings were unhappy about having been drawn into the hunt, how they felt the foxes needed proper compensation, how the hivelings wanted some vacation time. How Olivia wanted to thank me for saving her life. There was also a note about the remaining witnesses who had been hospitalized. *Taken care of*, it read.

I thought of that fucking coffee cup, the empty thermos, and looked at the sleeping form next to me, just a dream away from the hurt that would be there the moment he woke up.

“I’ll be there for you, always,” I whispered into the darkness and closed my laptop.

I frowned, opened it again, and brought up the Hawthorne Network.

Get yourself new earbuds. Go for some expensive ones, I told the pawn in a message, then closed the laptop finally.

It was an hour of simple closeness before I had to wake Amory to the point where he’d drink the healers’ potion.

“Nooo,” he said. The darkness was broken by the brittle light of dawn coming in through the windows below.

“You have to. Another sip. For me?”

It was some back and forth of that, but I got him to drink what he needed, used that brief opening to carefully clean his face with a damp cloth.

After, I peeled my shirt off and settled in next to him. Holding him as he slept felt important, a necessity. I dozed off, but never sank into deep sleep myself. I had to watch him, had to watch over him.

Twenty-Five

BUBBLE



*Just him and me and nothing else, that foolish wish I'd hide
from my lover.*

I LEFT AMORY ONCE more. It was before noon still as I carefully untangled myself, walked around the bed, and collected his phone in case he had an alarm set to go off soon. The healers' potion seemed to have taken its effect. His face already looked better when I saw it in the light that fell into the bedroom as I exited.

“Fucking hell,” I said once I'd gone downstairs and remembered my phone was still broken and the numbers on it not yet transferred to a new one.

I turned on Amory's phone, but the device was dead. “How old exactly are you not to hold a charge for a day?” I mumbled and turned it over. The damn thing needed a USB 3 Mirco-B,

so I headed into my office, down the gallery, past the silent clocks and my Meisterstück, ticking away the seconds.

I found the cable in one of my drawers and hooked Amory's phone up to charge.

On my way back to the stairs, I stopped in my tracks and turned.

My eyes fell on the photo wall. Apart from that photo Amory had texted me about, there was just one other with a person in it. Anger flared. I'd not even realized. Cecil—fucking Caecilius before his curse—was the only other person on there, standing primly in front of the ruins north of Katmandu. I snatched the photo up. If not for the danger of waking Amory, I'd have thrown it across the room.

With it in hand, I went back upstairs and opened the iron door's combination lock. All the gear from the witch hunt was in a heap on the floor, and I dug the burner from my coat pocket. I placed it on the desk that held my tech setup and the file of Amory Simeon had provided, walked past the storage shelves with bones and branches and broken curses.

I put the photo down, grabbed a hammer, and released some of my anger at the face behind the glass. Once I could get to the actual photograph, I ripped that up and turned the shreds to ashes with my kitchen torch, the one I'd only ever used in the handling of cursed objects. It felt fitting.

Back at my tech station, I pulled out the chair and sat, taking a few breaths to calm the fuck down before calling McArthur. I used my burner and dialed his number from Simeon's file.

“Hello?”

Naked or not, I straightened at the deep, no-nonsense tone, lined with suspicion in this texting age. I heard something sizzle in the background, people talking. He was at work.

“Hi. This is Soyer, Amory’s boyfriend. Now, he’s fine, but he got mugged last night.”

An intake of breath, then nothing but the background noise, then a thud and silence.

“He got mugged? When?”

“Last night. He called me.” I swallowed, my throat tight. “He had to call me, because I wasn’t there.”

McArthur exhaled, but it sounded like a hiss on my end.

“How bad is it?”

“The doctors said he’ll be fine. Physically.”

“Got him to see a doctor?”

“Of course.”

He grunted. It sounded approving. “Well, he’s off work until he tells me otherwise. Until he’s well. You’re at his place? If you gotta leave to go to work, I’ll come over there, make sure he rests and takes his meds.”

“Thank you for offering, but I’m not leaving him right now. He’s at my place. I’ll tell him you gave him time off.”

McArthur fell quiet. “He called you?” he asked, forcing me to repeat it.

The lie stung. Mostly because McArthur struck me as a good bullshit detector.

“Yes. Oh, he was very worried about his uniform, which is beyond saving. Haven’t told him yet.”

McArthur groaned. “That boy. Tell him I don’t give a shit about the uniform. He see who did this?”

That was a difficult one to navigate. I was almost certain that if I told him I’d taken care of it, McArthur would just nod and move on. Or he might not like that kind of thing in Amory’s life.

I decided to step carefully. “I know people with police connections. I’ll get him to talk to someone when he’s better.”

Another grunt. “Good. I guess—fuck. Tell him I’m worried. No, tell him to get better and take care of himself. Tell him to call.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you call if there’s anything I can do.”

I promised as much.

When I got back to Amory, he’d stretched out his arm across the bed as if feeling for my presence. For a second, the sheets around him looked like wings.



Eventually, he woke again, and with a shock running through him, pain or memory or both found him, even here, where the

sliding screen softened the daylight and I'd kept him warm and safe.

“Where—”

“Shh, it's fine. You're at my apartment. In my bed. You're safe here.”

Amory's fingers ghosted over my chest. “You came back early. Did you get hurt?”

Gallows humor rushed through me. “Did *I* get hurt? Let me open the doors so I can look at you in the light. You still seem a little bit out of it.”

Awake now, instead of simply squirming in uneasy sleep, Amory did his best to crush me, clinging so tightly I had to stop.

“Don't,” he said. He sounded near tears.

I touched his shoulder. “You don't want me to get up?”

He shook his head, burying his face against my chest, then said, “Kiss me... No. I mean, yes, kiss me. But make love to me, please?”

Slow panic curled through me, uncertainty, a dash of trepidation. And shame. Because there was lust there as well. “Why?”

He winced—lingering pain—and lifted his head away from my chest. “I need... a reason to want to do it?”

This was bad. This felt like a situation in which I definitely needed to do adulting, except I was so fucking bad at that

chore. And I was already rationalizing that taking him in my mouth would simply make him feel good.

But fuck, there was such a thing as fucking up every good fucking thing that landed in your lap, and I should fucking know. I needed to get this right. And he did need a good fucking reason for wanting to fuck in this very moment.

“Not normally, Amory. But now. Do you just want to feel? Forget? Fuck until you cum, until the pain doesn’t bother you as much?” I asked. Amory, being who he was, would shrink back from the demand if it was too much. If he didn’t really need it enough to keep asking for it.

And I thought he would, would accept and demand the comfort I offered in any other way.

I should have known him better, my worrier, my weakness.

He kissed me, right above my heart. “Can it be all of the above?”

If there was a right answer, a way to get his way, then this was it.

As gently as I could, I tipped his chin up. Enough light to see him had seeped into the room.

I had thought about what I was going to say to him when he woke. One iteration had chased the other in my mind, each falling short, each incomplete and failing in some core way.

But ready or not, it was the time to tell him now, and so I said, “I love you.” I watched his face, mindful of it closing down or recoiling. He didn’t. “I wanted to tell you later so

you'd have time to get used to being in a relationship. I wanted to give you all those milestones and memories. I don't give a shit about that now.

“Now, I need you to know that I love you. I don't expect you to reciprocate. I do want you to remember that you will always and forever be loved by at least one person on this damn planet, and that won't change, even if your feelings do.”

I would keep the last as a promise moving forward as we walked together, to be applied at any point he chose that he'd prefer to walk alone. I didn't say that. I wanted anything but him showing me the door, but it was either this or forcing him into a cage.

There was hardly any hesitation in him, and it was baffling. “What if I do reciprocate? What if I'm not like cherry blossoms at all?”

I smiled. At least I knew where his mind had gone. And it was nice to have confirmation about him liking the flowers I'd sent. Then again, there were two ways to see cherry blossoms, either as fragile beauty doomed to fade or as the frail flower, shedding the white petals so the fruit could grow and ripen in its stead.

“Then I would be a happy man.” I stroked a finger along the peaks and valleys of his spine. “And whoever gave you the idea that you are like cherry blossoms?” I asked, though, perhaps, he hadn't even thought that through like I had.

He frowned. “It's—you and your weird cherry obsession. I...I've never loved. Not like this, you know,” he said, and

with the words, set my heart pounding, my head growing hot as if I were a blushing boy again. “In the romantic sense. So I lack the comparison. But I’m happy when I see you, when I touch you. I worry for you when you’re not there. I think I love you too.”

Selfishly, his words allowed me to release some of my guilt. He was giving me exactly what I wanted, and that thing inside of me that had craved the vengeance against the pawn last night, oh, it would not let me leave this by the wayside, this confession of the love Amory knew to give.

Love, the ultimate forgiver, I thought, and laughed.

I laughed hard. He had slowly worked his way into my life to be the single spot that could hurt me. As I laughed, I thought back to Simeon, who bore my moods and had done so for many, many years. Simeon had Elias and Valentin. *He has a secret bull’s eye, and now, so do I.*

Amory was watching me, was smiling. I ran my fingers through his hair, a touch that felt more intimate than it had any right to.

“That, Amory, was about the sweetest declaration of love I could have hoped for.” I licked my lips. “You still want to make love?”

Say yes, my heart, say you want me. Let me hear it again.

He nodded, eyes going dreamy.

“Then we talk after. Anything you had in mind, hmm?”

He was right back to his shy ways, hiding his face. “I hadn’t—just what you like is fine?”

I want to drown you in pleasure until you forget the pain and forget whatever you remember of yesterday.

“Oh, Amory.” I paused, thinking it over, finally said, “Do you want to do anal again?”

He knew his answer before he voiced it from the shiver that ran through him and drove him to glide the back of his foot against my leg, curled his hand against my pec.

And yet, all he gave me was a single nod.

Inside, I roared at the uncertainty, wanting more from my lover, needing it. Especially right now.

“Yes?” I asked, gently. “I want to hear you say it.”

“Yes,” he said, the single, beautiful word filling the space between us in this room we shared.

“Lie on your back,” I told him, guiding his shoulders, the need inside of me too hot for anything else. “Nothing too strenuous for you.” I looked down on him, and it made me so hard that it was almost painful, knowing that in this vulnerable state, this state of pain and healing just begun, he was trusting me. Asking me for this. It was enough to make me lose my head, but I knew I couldn’t. “You just relax and let me make you feel good,” I said.

I examined his body like an instrument, plotting out a tune. Each unplayed note would be eternal temptation.

“I do feel good,” he said, eagerly lifting his head to chase my lips.

I pulled back, and it took maybe two seconds for that movement to cause him pain, make him lie back down.

“You were saying?”

“Uhh, I feel relatively good?”

As if to prove that, he ground against me. The intention behind it I loved, his skill as far as sex went, not yet refined enough to make the move as seductive as I thought he meant it.

“Yes, I see.” I kissed his collarbone, careful to avoid touching his jaw entirely. His skin was warm, slightly damp with arousal. “You smell so good.”

That, of course, was the wrong thing to say, and I should have realized it. Amory trembled with shame.

“I can shower if—”

I covered his mouth, my hand barely touching his lips. “I meant that in the literal sense, Amory. You smell good. Like you.” And like me, like he’d spent the night in my bed. I lowered my head back to the crook of his neck, ran my tongue over his pulse. “Really good.”

I savored him, the taste of his skin, the racing heartbeat I could feel echo through his chest as I kissed my way down. His fingers dug into my back, and I coaxed him to go harder. The idea of him clawing me raw above my curse mark, that was something else.

Amory didn't do that. And while I had a mind to get him where he wouldn't be able to help himself, today wasn't the day. Today, he needed softness, care expressed in the language of desire.

Before too long, I reached for the lube in my nightstand, got ready to use it to work him open.

In the half-light, he said, "I like being with you. You make me feel like I'm always safe with you."

I froze. I was nothing, just a speck of wasted life born centuries ago. I should have died in my forties, illiterate and alone. And yet, Amory gave me purpose, more of that than I deserved or could have hoped for.

And he thought I was his safety. "Fuck, Amory." I bent to kiss him, his forehead, taking care with his jaw and mindful of any lingering swelling. "I found you bleeding. Because of me. A better man than I would walk away from you. A better man than I would have never walked toward you." My chest tightened. "But I can't let you go, Amory."

His nails pressed against the firebird living on my skin. "I don't want you to go."

The truth of that was evident on his face. He wanted me despite the world I came from, despite every potential hurt or danger. Deep inside me, the beast roared in victory.

Clarity chased the sensation. I had never in all my time felt for anyone as I did for Amory. The sense of rightness that accompanied him being in my life was a siren song, as if hope

and happiness combined had festered into...*more*, an undiscovered place on a map I'd not known existed.

“No. No, you don't. Something's changed, and I don't know what it is.”

I couldn't dwell on it. The sight of him, his warm body, it wouldn't let me.

I touched him. We hadn't done that often, and the thrill of newness drove me to spend some time exploring. The idea everything was new to him made me want it to be perfect.

Without warning, his body went slack in the exact right way. It was the fucking trust fall equivalent in sex, and it was the worst and best fucking turn-on I'd experienced ever.

I slid two fingers inside him, the resistance barely there. “Fucking hell.”

For the next five or so glorious minutes, I had him completely at my mercy. He was pretty, face serene and gasping under what bruising and soreness remained. He received everything I gave, let me squeeze joyful shivers out of him like ambrosia.

“Soyer, *Soyer*...Soyer.” He kept repeating my name. Pride filled me, and greed took root. I'd want more of that, soon.

“I'm here. I'm all here.”

I readied myself and filled his waiting ass with my cock. I fucked him with abandon at first, the noises he made the sweetest thing, their echoes settling into my memory. I slowed

before long and reached for him, his cock slick and wet, just like my hand had left it.

He came after moments, eyes rolling and mouth falling open, muscles jerking. Watching that was the satisfaction of savoring a glass of well-aged wine.

I did my best to get all he could give, even as his cock softened in my hand and he whimpered.

“You are so fucking hot, you know that? Fuck.”

I released him, braced against the mattress and thrust. There was zero resistance still, just him, all open and willing. It didn't take long for me to cum, fill him with a part of me.

I enjoyed the glorious mess between us for a few minutes before reality overtook us. When it did, I told him he couldn't go to work, which he had fully been intent on doing. I told him magic had healed him, and that him getting hurt was my fault in the same way that taking care of him now was my responsibility.

He loved the fucking bathrobe I'd ordered for him. I didn't want either of us to have to leave this apartment for the foreseeable future.



Amory got out of bed, but the bout of energy that had gotten him up didn't last much beyond that. He ate though, which was good. He remembered more than I would have wanted for him, which was reality.

As evening turned to night, I rubbed the ointment the healers had given me into his face while we sat on the couch, him leaning against me, me loosely holding him in my arms. It was domestic almost. But of course he had noticed that I'd taken down a photograph.

I ran my fingers along the bridge of his nose and glanced back to the photo wall. *He's your ex?* Amory had asked when he'd made the connection between the missing photograph of fucking Cecil and Caecilius, whose pawns had attacked him.

My ex. The fucking irony.

What was worse was that look on Amory's face. I traced the place where his frown lines formed now, though I'd grown fond of that frown without noticing it. It was doubt that I didn't want on Amory's face, doubt about him and me, and all it had taken to put it on my lover's face had been the idea Caecilius and I had had anything more than a night of mutually satisfying sex.

I rubbed the last bit of ointment in and moved to rest my hands on Amory's shoulder. His eyes were falling shut, head resting against my chest.

"You want to go back upstairs, Amory?"

He wiggled into the perfect position between me and the backrest. "It's a nice couch."

I drew his bathrobe closed over his chest so I could place my hand there, then pulled him up slightly so he wouldn't lie on the side of his face. I didn't want him to rub off the ointment

on me. “Well, you’re pretty much all over me, so how could you tell?”

“You’re nicer than the couch.”

I basked in that, ready to let him nap here and watch over him. I could tell he was drifting off, his breathing slowing, his eyes closing and staying that way.

Just when I was about to reach behind me and turn down the lights with the remote, he stirred, forced his eyes open, and looked at me.

“The sorceress who hurt you? Did you ever find her?”

Well. When I’d let slip that I did some witch hunting while we were eating earlier, I’d mostly hoped it would distract him from Caecilius, but of course my Amory had to take that information and go this way.

I said, “Dark thoughts lead to dark deeds, they say. Dark dreams in your case. Won’t you just rest?”

“You could always feed me Xanax.”

I want to feed you my breath, kiss your tender lips. “Maybe I’d rather not have to feed you that.”

As if to soothe or calm me, he reached up to rest his hand on mine.

“Tell me?”

“I killed her when I escaped, but it needs to be done a certain way to stick. I didn’t know at the time. Later, I saw her again.”

Red lips. She'd had the reddest lips. "I froze, then ran. I haven't seen her since."

Amory nodded, and soon after, drifted off. I drifted into memory. The witch, walking through London's streets, never safe at night, and that, without a doubt, why she did it.

I'd been on the second floor of The George, she just walking toward the pub from Borough Market, dressed well but not too well, not too shabby either. The moment was crystal clear in my memory, even now. She stopped outside the pub, in the middle of the busy pavement where drinkers sang and spat and made arrangements with one of the girls forced to work there.

The witch had been like a tiger in tall grass, like a tiger who'd smelled prey. And she'd lifted her head as I looked down at her, frozen by fear, numb, the noises around me silent all of a sudden.

The next thing I knew, I'd broken the glass in my hand, just squeezed until the shards sliced into me. The pain of shards destroying my palm had been all I needed. I'd taken off. Whether the witch saw me or not, I didn't know, not then, not now. I had killed several of her kind by that point, but...I couldn't.

I left the piss-rank streets of London behind me that very night, and that was that.

I banished the memory and reached for the remote, turned the lights down.

“I care more about you than I care about that witch,” I whispered into Amory’s ear.

Whether that truth found him in his dreams, I didn’t know.



Amory woke before nine, his face looking much better. While he was in the bathroom, I snuck behind my iron door and grabbed one of the spare phones I kept there.

I was setting it up downstairs, my laptop open next to it on the dining table, when Amory looked down from above.

“Do you have my phone? Also, what time is it?”

He was up and walking, and his eyes were clear, but if he thought that meant he was going to get to leave the house, he was very wrong.

“Your phone is in my office, and it’s too soon to go back to work.”

“Maybe that wasn’t even why I was asking.”

He retreated to the bedroom where I couldn’t see. I had a brief fantasy about him lying down and asking me to come up and suck him off.

Concentrating to keep my tone even, I said, “I’d be a poor mind reader if I missed that.”

“You said you don’t read minds.”

He walked toward the stairs, dressed in my sweatshirt and pants, the clothes I’d laid out for him yesterday, the ones he’d

snubbed in favor of that bathrobe.

“I think I’m getting good at reading yours.” I watched him. Head in the opposite direction from where my office was. “No, that way is a guest room and storage. Left, along the windows.” I set my phone to sync to the settings of the old one. “I told you that you could snoop around the place.”

“Felt wrong.”

I watched him sashay toward the gallery and my office. Well, he was just walking. But it was a joy to watch his back, dressed in my clothes. Any other person walking toward my office, which held more keepsakes than I should be hanging on to, would have stressed me at best, made me angry at worst. That Amory was going to look at my memories absolutely failed to bother me.

I leaned to the left, watching him slow to look at the collection of unmoving clocks. At the end of the gallery, he stopped, and I got up to follow him silently.

He was examining my Meisterstück. There was nothing I could do about that making me self-conscious, especially when his lips quickened into a smile.

When he opened my office door, stopping there to find the light switch, I took a few more steps forward.

Once the lights came on and Amory walked inside, I listened to his low *Wow*.

I approached the door. He stood in the room, looking at the shelves with their bones and paper, with their old things and

dead things and things I expected meant little to someone born only a few decades ago. His gaze wandered to my desk, which was low on clutter, though large enough to hold much.

It's also large enough to bend you over it, Amory, I thought.

“It’s a cabinet of curiosities more than an office if I’m being honest. But your phone is older, and this is where I keep all the spare chargers.”

I went to my desk and pulled the phone off its power umbilical. I held it out and weathered a brief moment of panic: I hadn’t asked him to use his phone to call Dwayne. If he wondered where I’d gotten McArthur’s phone number...

Well, if that happened, I had a clear conscience about not peeking at all the research Simeon had produced for me. If I got very lucky, he’d simply assume I’d called the Moonlight, not Dwayne directly.

Amory’s eyes wandered over the dark expanse of my desk, which didn’t exactly help my imagination to let go of all the images of him spread all over it.

“You really are that old, huh?” he said like any other regular person who couldn’t possibly comprehend what it meant to live a thousand years and never change while everything else did.

“I told you I am old. Do you think I would lie to you, Amory?”

He looked over his shoulder, either at the sextant or at the soroban. “It’s just that hearing it is one thing, seeing another.”

He turned back around. He was at ease, I realized, no fear lingering, not in his shoulders or his hands, not even on his face, which looked so very close to healed. If trauma was a river, the current had slowed, and he had his head above the water, breathing the air of normal, carefree days.

I owed him normal and carefree, and so much more. I put his phone down on my desk and pulled the chair toward me, sat.

“Come over and sit in this old man’s lap, Amory,” I said, offering up a possibility.

Amory’s pupils darkened until I could make out the golden coronet. Then, he looked at the door.

Displeasure rumbled through me. He looked at me, a boy caught stealing cookie dough.

He asked, “Can you catch me? If I ran?”

I had not seen that challenge coming, but I understood the need in his bones. For running, for getting away.

“Who knows. Do you want to be caught, Amory?” I asked, because if this was happening, that much had to be clear. “Or come over here, forego the chase altogether.”

He didn’t move, didn’t take a step toward me. He was thinking, cheeks darkening at the possibilities in front of him.

“And if I don’t want either?”

What makes you ask this? Those pawns who knew not to leave you be, or me?

Slowly, clearly, I said, “I will never touch you when you don’t want to be touched. Not today, not tomorrow.” Then I wondered, had the question been born from him thinking that I walked the same circles as those pawns and therefore was not opposed to the same cruelties? Or did he think that all the minds of past ages had always failed to understand consent? “There are actual reasons to fear me, but that isn’t one of them, my heart.”

Amory accepted this, and by the slow nod, he was satisfied. Then, he considered once more, maybe realizing if he wanted a game, he was to be in charge, even if he’d be the one getting chased.

Either way, he licked his lips and tensed his muscles in preparation while cherry blossoms bloomed in his cheeks.

“Run,” I told him, and in a perfectly delicious demonstration of obedience that made me hard, he held my eyes a moment longer before he ran out the door.

I smiled and stood, said, loud enough so he could hear, “Run, run, fast as you can.”

It was backwards, and he wasn’t made of spices, but run he did, and I jogged after. He paused in front of the couch, spun to grin when he saw me, and made for the kitchen.

I chased him around the kitchen island, knew I could have gotten him by going over it. Round the couch he went, and I stalked close, leaving it to him to choose whether he wanted to go up the stairs or elsewhere.

He picked the hallway I didn't go down a lot, the one with the guest room I kept despite the extreme rarity of guests. On his way, he opened the room down there I used for storage, abandoned that, then found the guest room on the right.

In front of the bed, I pounced. It was a king, made up and ready to be used. I caught Amory two steps away from it, driving into him carefully though with enough force to let him know the chase was at an end.

"Got you," I whispered against the shell of his ear, then moved him, one step, two, and threw him on the bed with my leg behind his and his arm in a lever I could easily control.

He gave me no resistance and went easily. Beautifully even, air rushing out of his mouth as he hit the mattress. I followed, ready to claim what was mine. And paused, my hand steadying Amory's head, fingers in his hair.

Before I did another thing, I watched, felt. Underneath me, he adjusted himself, fit himself against me, and his brows were relaxed, no sign this was too much.

"Open your mouth," I told him.

He did readily and patiently waited for what would come next, eyes on me, body soft under me, yet hard where it mattered. And his mind, his mind was only in the here and now.

I bent to kiss him, controlling his head by his hair so he didn't accidentally hurt himself. I was careful too in case any of this might aggravate his still healing jaw.

Amory, horny and greedy, groaned and pulled against my hold, though I didn't ease it. I wasn't going to let him make himself more sore than he was.

“What, you're not satisfied? You want to watch a movie and chill instead?”

“Soyer—”

“Yes, Amory?”

He trembled. “Want you to fuck me.”

Shy, oh so fucking shy. Yet at the same time, so daring.

I narrowed my eyes. “What did you say?”

He widened his knees and sank even deeper into the mattress, his whole body an invitation. And I couldn't wait.

“Please, Soyer. Fuck me.”

He wasn't hesitant about demanding it, and that needed to be rewarded.

“Since you asked so nicely.”

I reached into his pants, watching his every reaction, and wondered what I wanted to risk here. Joy was pain's sibling, and perhaps by calling out one in just the right way, it would banish the other.

I eased into the handjob, but Amory turned his head away. Unacceptable. I needed to see him.

“No, look at me. Watch and see what touching you does to me.”

That worked, and before long, his hips were straining to work with my hand.

I smiled and went in for what I knew might prove to be a tightrope walk.

“Can’t wait for it, can you? Ready to spread yourself open at the first hint you might get cock. What a little slut you are, Amory.”

He’d been watching himself rut into my hand, but at the words, he looked into my eyes, and I knew without a doubt that if I shifted tone and spoke softly now, it would feed into his shame. Because he *was* turned on, very much so.

I said, “Yes, there’s a good little slut.”

“Soyer...”

His fingers raked along my hips, to my belly, the groping uncoordinated. Until it wasn’t and he managed to pull my pants down. My cheeky worrier.

I glanced down at myself. “You want that, do you? Can’t see a nice cock and not want it, hmm?” I could have left it there. I didn’t. I bent forward and whispered into his ear. “That’s why you like being on display, isn’t it? So pretty in your uniform and knowing it gets all the men sitting at the counter hard when you refill their coffee.” He didn’t freeze or curl in on himself, sighed in pleasure instead. I was glad. “Yes, that’s the sound you make, as if you are in heat. Lift your hips.”

He obeyed, and I shoved his pants down, revealing his pale skin and flushed cock. He accepted the fantasy and trusted me

to steer him through it, easier in this moment than having to navigate the pain of getting hurt by those pawns.

I said, “Amory, look at yourself. You know you were hard when I caught you. And now, you’re offering yourself up to me, aren’t you?” *And there is no shame in any of it, and I have you.*

He hummed and moaned, eyes on me, drifting on my words, and trusting.

“Don’t pretend to be shy,” I went on. “Admit it—you’re offering yourself because you’re a little slut who wants it.”

I waited for him to realize that he could be that if he wanted, that there was no shame there, and that this was not what had happened to him at the diner. Here, with me, he was in control, and he was safe.

His eyes on mine, he said, “Yes, I want it.”

For about five seconds, that was the truth. Then he tensed, and his eyes left mine, looked elsewhere.

I stilled. “Amory, why did I just stop?”

He winced. “No, I—don’t stop? I want this. I was just thinking.”

You weren’t supposed to. “About how it’s strange you like me calling you a dirty little slut?” I asked with what I hoped was a wicked little grin.

His eyelids fluttered. Yeah, he liked hearing that.

“Maybe I don’t like it at all.”

“Oh, but I think you like it just fine.” I examined him, the rawness of him, the newness of all these experiences while he was healing and maybe learning what love was. “Come on, give me a show. Touch yourself.”

“W-what?”

I ran my fingers up and down his thighs. “I want you to touch yourself. Touch your dick and think of me, my little slut.”

Sometimes, it was the smallest acts that made you feel in control, taking out the trash or answering the fucking phone when all you wanted to do was lie in bed and watch the world end. For Amory, jerking off was letting go. Of some of the things he’d been holding on to for so long. It was a delight to watch him do it, to listen to his needy whimpers as he got himself ready to cum.

“You’re enjoying yourself. You like fucking your hand. Stop.” He did. And looked up at me expectantly. “Very nice. Maybe I’ll watch you play with yourself sometime soon. Not right now.”

I took hold of the both of us and finished, first him, then myself. It was a rush, and it was slow, a memory so precious because of the way he looked up at me: as if I were bright like a star, warm and wonderful.

We’d made a mess of the both of us, were sticky together, the sex smell hanging in the air like rich perfume.

I covered Amory with my own body and lifted my lips to his ear. “You’re perfect. You look beautiful when you let go. I could get used to watching you. You’re my treasure.” I placed a kiss on his temple. “I have never wanted anyone like I want you.” Another kiss. “It’s like whenever you are with me like this, whenever we make love, you become purer.” And another. “You’re so strong.”

The last brought tears to his eyes. I stroked his hair, all the way to his neck, and spoke again. “You are also very pale, and it makes you look like a classy Victorian doll, the kind that’s haunted and runs around with scissors in scary movies.”

He chuckled, and the tear ran down the side of his face. I dabbed at it with my cheek.

“What kinds of freaky movies do you watch?”

“You’ll have to find out. But it will be difficult. You have become my favorite entertainment, all pristine and smooth.”

More tears. No wonder. Hurt was a shameful thing these days, and this was what that idea bred: more hurt.

I kissed his salt-wet temple. “Sometimes when I came to watch you at the diner, I’d imagine this. You, under me. Slick for me. And I’d think how your face would look. My imagination never did you justice.”

It went on from there. I did my best to dry these silent tears of his with my words, and to hold him, make myself an anchor while he traversed an ocean he had to travel alone.

Twenty-Six

QUIET



WE LEFT THE GUEST room arm in arm, Amory soft but rising from his crying daze. Not much later, after he'd showered and dressed himself in more of my clothes, he called McArthur. That ended with Amory deciding we'd go have some late lunch at the diner.

I wasn't thrilled about that, but it was probably good. And I'd be able to control the situation, pull Amory out of it if being back so soon was too much for him to handle.

On the way to the Moonlight Diner, we stopped at his place because he wanted his own clothes. Once we got there, he didn't just pack like I'd thought he would, he actually changed and left me frowning on his couch.

"What happened to my work clothes by the way?" he asked, taking off my clothes in favor of his. I was not impressed, but sure; he was independent like that. Such a shame.

"I told Ben to get them laundered and the shirt repaired, if possible. You kept going on about how you couldn't ask

Dwayne for another spare, and how you couldn't tell him you'd ruined your shirt yet again," I said and sent the pawn a message through the Hawthorne app: *If my lover asks you about his uniform, you tell him I told you to get it laundered and fixed, but that there was no saving it. Tell him you are very sorry and offer to pay for a replacement out of your own pocket.* The pawn began typing, stopped, then sent a thumbs-up. I wouldn't go so far as to say I liked him, but I appreciated his sense of duty.

"Oh, sorry," Amory said, his belly showing while he'd stopped dressing himself to deal with that twinge of guilt.

Should I feel guilty about how sexy he looks when he feels guilty? I wondered and decided that, no, this was fine.

I said, "You didn't do anything you need to apologize for. You were very upset, but you did let me calm you down in the end."

He covered up. I frowned. He looked to where I knew his wardrobe was, brow creasing, and I sighed. Apparently, he needed an invitation.

"Worrier. How about you spend the weekend at my place? Bring what you would bring for a sleepover." I walked over to him, held out my hand for him to take, which he did. "Or you let me buy things for you," I added, deciding I might as well gamble high while I was at it. "I think I would make a very good sugar daddy. I'd enjoy trying that."

Amory looked away and shook his head. "Thanks, but you're already constantly overtipping, just like your friends,

and I can work for things.”

My friends? Well, he was suffering from a concussion, but I’d have to talk to him about that. He couldn’t walk around in my world, thinking I had *friends*.

For now, I stayed on the topic. “I know, my heart. I know you worked for all of this. I admire you for it. It makes you even more attractive, so you can understand how I would love the opportunity to be allowed to give you things, to woo you.”

He grinned up at me, a twinkle in his eye. “You already got in my pants. How much more wooing do you need?”

That cheeky man. I’d have loved nothing more than to get in his pants this very moment, but it wouldn’t do to lose focus. “All of it, Amory. Because I intend to be granted future access to your pants. Will you accept gifts from me? Nothing too outrageous. Something to beg for your forgiveness for my knowing Caecilius, maybe.”

I tried looking very guilty about that. It was difficult, because even thinking of Caecilius pissed me off these days.

Amory tilted his head to the side. “I thought my forgiveness wasn’t what mattered to you,” he said as if he were auditioning for chief bargain-maker at the market. Fucking hell, he could be stubborn.

“Maybe I can make it matter. And I really can do better than a too-soft bathrobe.” I glanced back at his table. “And a giraffe plushie.”

He brightened. “It’s just the right amount of soft, and I love the giraffe.” I got hard. He didn’t notice, but added, “Fine. But don’t make it weird with the gifts, okay?”

He was fucking difficult. Why did he have to be so fucking difficult? “Well, I’m not agreeing to anything. I do have something to ask that isn’t really a gift, however.”

“Yeah?”

I looked at his ancient phone, which he’d put on the bed. “I’d like you to have a new phone, and I’d like to set it up. I would have done so already, but I didn’t want to invade your privacy beyond going through your contacts to let Dwayne know he didn’t have to file a missing persons report,” I told him and tried looking a tad guilty, almost like I’d really done that. “It’s really about security, which is why I would also like to get you a laptop that’s a bit harder to hack into than what you are using now. May I?”

Not that I had tried hacking into his laptop, but it probably wasn’t even password protected.

He considered this but finally nodded. I called it a win.



Amory walked into the diner all right, but it was the sound of the bells above the door that got to him. Evil Eye Jenny saw him go pale and sweaty and clearly thought that was my fault by how she tried to get him to go into the back with her.

I was ready to get in the middle of them, but Amory being Amory handled that just fine, and when he needed to feel me, he reached for my hand. I knew that was a lot for him.

He ended up picking a different table than mine for us, still more in his head than here with me. His pupils had gone wide, his breathing flat, and his forehead shimmered with perspiration.

I sat next to him, nudging him in close to the window, making sure he felt my leg against his own. He was doing so fucking well.

I squeezed his hand. “I’d like to tell you we can leave whenever, and we can, but it’s better if we don’t, if you don’t run from the fear. Fear always catches you in the end.”

He’d picked a point on the clean blue Formica tabletop to look at. “Would that look bad, the Black Shuck’s boyfriend running scared?”

“Amory, I will never be ashamed of you. I meant that getting past the fear now might help you in the long run. It’ll haunt you if you let it, but in my experience, if you learn to face it, you’ll be able to conquer it in the end.”

My mind went right back to The George and the witch walking toward it in the London twilight. I was a fucking hypocrite. I was also right. The witch would haunt me until I found her, cut off her head, and burned her body and bones.

“You ran away from the sorceress who cursed you,” Amory said, turning mind reader on me.

“Mmhmm. And I wish now that I hadn’t. When I see her again, I will not be running.”

“Okay.” He took a deep breath. “Okay, we’re staying. So did you ever throw that towel out?”

“What towel?”

“With my blood on it. Ben wiped my hands with it.”

Well, bless that pawn, and bless my workaholic boyfriend. I barely just managed to not roll my eyes. “Ah. Cleanup will have taken care of that. If it had to be thrown out—and they probably would have—they’ll have replaced it. Everything here is like it was before. I promise you, they are really good.”

Evil Eye Jenny interrupted us and asked for our drink order, placing a menu in front of me. Amory closed up, his panic rising.

I smiled at Jenny. “A large chai tea with soy milk and honey for myself. Amory, some coffee for you while you decide?”

He nodded, grateful, and Jenny left us alone again.

Amory kept looking at the table, squeezing his eyes shut, then blinking.

I leaned in closer and held the menu at an angle for Amory to read. “So what’s good?”

His eyes went over the dishes listed there, not seeing, but slowly his strangled breathing eased and his pallor evened out.

“There’s a Waldorf salad sandwich on rye that’s really nice. And you can’t go wrong with fries of course. Oh, and the

veggie scramble with baba ghanoush is *really* good.”

And there he was. I bumped his shoulder. “You want two of those with lots of fries on the side?”

“That’s my line.”

“It’s not your line today, Amory. Today, you get to say whatever the fuck you please.”

And he said, “I love baba ghanoush.”

I leaned in closer. “I figured.”

Evil Eye Jenny brought our drinks then, forcing herself to be polite.

“You decided?” she asked, taking out her notepad and tapping it with the point of her pen as if she wished it were my eye.

“We have. Two veggie scrambles and extra fries.”

“That’ll be all?” she asked, glancing at Amory, who was coming out of the worst of the panic and not really paying attention to her.

“Yup.” I handed her the menu back and fake-smiled.

“Coming right up.” She fake-smiled back and walked off, looking at me over her shoulder. I wasn’t sure, but maybe she was warming up to me, like an alligator warming to... whatever alligators warmed to.

I turned my attention back to Amory and swapped the tea I’d ordered for his coffee. “You should try this. This place makes really good tea.”

I felt eyes at the back of my neck. Jenny's. Thought the thing about warming up to me over.

“Did you order the tea for me?” Amory asked.

She hadn't liked seeing me order for him and sitting where I was, which could be construed as me boxing him in. She was probably worried I was keeping him locked up, coercing him to be with me. She was being a good friend.

“That depends,” I told Amory. “If you want it, I suppose I did order it for you. If you don't want it, it's all mine. Your Jenny is looking at me as if she wants to ram a fork in my eye. Will you be fine if I step outside and pretend to make a phone call while I let her talk to you? I'll keep an eye on you though, and you don't need to worry.”

He licked his lips, hand circling the mug of chai. “Might not be a bad idea. I'll be fine.”

“I know you will. You're strong, Amory.” I kissed his cheek, mindful to keep it chaste, and stepped out.

The door twinkled, and I turned to watch Jenny head toward Amory's table even as I dialed.

“What now?” Valentin asked.

“Nothing now. I'm checking about last night. All went well?”

“The cleaners have handled worse, which you know. I had Caecilius's pawn patched up and told him it was in his best interest to leave town and never return. I can't promise the

package will arrive in Italy before Caecilius hears of this, which is a shame.”

“Hmm, agreed. I saw the video.”

He was quiet for three seconds. “Yes. The team holding it were all vampires, by the way. That void creature...they are rarely that strong, Bennet.”

I looked at Jenny, who stood by our table, her face full of concern but also anger. Of what had been done to someone she cared about. *I share your anger, friend of my lover. I am angry at myself.*

“I think there’s another witch.”

“Excuse me?”

“The witch I hunted. I think she shared meat with someone. She had a phone. They are slow to catch up with technology, and their magic fucks it up a lot of the time. I called the only number she ever dialed on that. They hung up.”

Valentin hissed. “And now?”

I paced, shrugged. “Now nothing. I tried to find the phone I called, but it’s a burner most likely, and it’s been disconnected. Right this moment there is nothing for me to follow, and even if there were, I wouldn’t. I’m busy.” I paused, considered, but then said, “Plus, it might be Caecilius.”

“Now you’re thinking he teamed up with a witch? It wouldn’t be so bad if it ends in the two of them going at each other.”

Valentin was first and foremost a practical man, I had to give him that.

“True. But Caecilius might still come out on top. He’s smart enough to know a witch would cross him.”

“Ever the pessimist. I like that about you. Can I tell Elias your Amory is well?”

I looked back inside the diner, and Jenny stepped away to talk to another customer. “You can. In fact, I have to go.”

I hung up and made my way back to Amory, who was sipping his chai tea.

“This seat taken? It doesn’t feel right that a man as handsome as you should be sitting alone.”

He blushed, smiled. “Stop.”

I slid into the booth next to him. “Can’t. Wooing you. For continued access to your pants.”

“Shh!”

He even smiled. I’d have preferred to keep him home, but I couldn’t deny that it had been good to come here today.

“Good talk?”

He shrugged. “She’s dating now.”

I nodded. “Good. I’m happy for her.”

Amory looked at me. “You don’t have to pretend. I’m really sorry. I will make sure she gets to know you. She’ll like you then.”

“Amory, I’m not pretending. I’m happy someone who would fight to protect you has found someone who will hopefully do the same for her. And it’s enough if she keeps liking you.”

He nodded, glanced at the table. The one where I’d sat him down, where the healers had treated him.

The swing doors going made him flinch, just a little. He covered it by taking another sip of his tea, and I didn’t comment on it, had some of my coffee.

McArthur came striding toward us, plates neatly balanced on inked arms. He had purpose written all over his face.

“Got your order,” he said and placed the food in front of us, the extra bowl of fries between us. “Mind if I join you?”

This, I knew, had been unavoidable. “Of course,” I said before Amory could so much as open his mouth.

McArthur slid into the booth, making sure to really spread out. He was wider than me, and he looked in shape. I was pretty sure he’d have an easy time going from his kitchen to hunting me down if he thought I deserved it, and he was here to show me that. Except unlike Jenny, he seemed to be willing to give me the benefit of the doubt.

I tried some of the scramble, sweet potato and broccoli, and dipped it in baba ghanoush. “This is excellent,” I said, meaning it. “Amory said your baba ghanoush was.”

McArthur grunted and bobbed his head. “Need to sear the eggplant properly, and I never skip salting them beforehand.”

Amory looked back and forth between us but quietly ate his food, pairing fries with seared and salted eggplant dip.

I nodded. “Attention to detail’s important. As is not skipping steps if you want just the right outcome.”

McArthur flexed his muscles. It showed through his crisp robin egg blue tee. “You’re still off work?”

I nodded. “My schedule is quite flexible, and I often work from home, though I do occasionally travel for consulting work.”

“Consulting?”

“Real estate development.”

If Amory was surprised, he kept that to himself.

McArthur grunted. “Thanks for taking him to see a doctor.” He nodded in Amory’s direction.

“Of course.” I swallowed hard and said, “I’d have preferred to have been there sooner. To prevent it in the first place. But I was away. Consulting.”

That seemed to suffice for McArthur, and I had a few more forkfuls of the food. Whether he believed me about consulting, I wasn’t sure. Probably not. But he believed me about the other thing, about how I wouldn’t have let it happen if I’d been there, that much I could tell.

“You’d call yourself a good man, Soyer?” McArthur asked.

“Erm...” Amory said, looking as if he was about to run interference, but I squeezed his knee.

“I wouldn’t. But I’m a hard worker, diligent, driven. And I am driven to be good for those who are important to me.”

He gave me a particularly approving grunt for that. Amory’s jaw dropped.

McArthur looked at him. “Amory is like a son to me, and I look after my family.”

“I’d expect nothing less. I am the same,” I told him, not blinking, not looking away.

We measured each other for a while longer before McArthur nodded once more and walked back to the kitchen.

Amory turned to me. “What the fuck was that?”

“I believe I was granted provisional permission to be in your life.”

“You were both being all macho.” His voice had an edge of huskiness to it. Even Amory would have recognized the approval in McArthur.

“Eat your food and stop pretending you don’t like me being all macho when it comes to you, Amory.”

“Such a macho,” he said and bit into a fry. I really loved watching him eat.



Amory came home with me, exhausted to the point he dozed off in the cab.

“Do you want to lie down upstairs?” I asked when I closed the door behind us.

He looked at me with tired eyes. “It’s the middle of the day. But...do you want to watch the rest of that show on the couch?”

“Hmm.” I toed my shoes off and walked toward him, closed him into my arms, stroked his neck. “How would you feel about doing that upstairs in bed? I have a projector I should use more.”

“If that’s really okay with you?”

“Yeah.”

And just like that, we ended up spending the rest of Friday in bed. Amory, still healing, needed the sleep, and the show being projected on the screen doors didn’t really keep him from that.

I watched over him. It was strangely soothing to do nothing but be near to him, learn the exact outline of his sleeping shape and the sound of his breathing through all the stages of dream.

At one point, long after I’d turned the show off and put on a screen saver of pale clouds drifting in front of a dark sky, he woke. We undressed each other slowly, touched each other, slow at first, then fast. He called my name when I made him cum in my hand and looked at me in the shifting gray light as if I were the only thing that existed in the entire world.

He was everything.



Saturday was similarly slow, but Amory managed a string of hours he was awake in the afternoon. There was nothing much we did during that time, though he told me he liked gingerbread cookies and Renaissance painters. Gargoyles had been his favorite TV show as a kid.

“How about you?” he asked me, having sagged against my chest on the couch, the sun glowing golden as it was about to set. “What did you like as a kid?”

“Foraging,” I said without thinking.

“Huh?”

“Going into the woods to find wild blueberries and mushrooms. Beechnuts too.”

He chuckled and looked up at me. “Sounds exciting.”

It was a good way to escape the belt. “It wasn’t too bad.”

He looked thoughtful, too thoughtful. “I didn’t mean to... sorry. It must have been very different when you grew up. But I am really interested to hear about it. If you want to tell me?”

“Hmm.” I stroked a finger along his frown lines. “I don’t remember all that much. I do remember going to Lake Eureka for the first time and having decadently buttered popcorn.”

He grinned. “You? Having anything decadent? Can’t imagine.”

“My cheeky little Amory. I’m sure you can.” I stroked his back, almost down to his ass. “But of course, nothing is quite as decadent as fellating you.”

“Soyer,” he said, blushing.

Ten minutes later, he came down my throat, tasting more decadent than anything I’d ever had.



Sunday, I made a concession. The baba ghanoush at the Moonlight bothered me. It had been excellent. It had tasted like a challenge.

In the morning, while Amory was still asleep, I’d texted the pawn, Ben, a shopping list consisting mostly of eggplants as well as some peaches, because that was apparently how infantile I was.

“What’s this?” Amory asked two hours later when I was holding out his new phone to him at the breakfast table.

“The basic setup, only has my number and a few apps.”

He hadn’t showered yet, and his hair was wild with sleep. He blinked at the device slowly. “This looks fancy. Feels fancy. It’s heavy.”

I shrugged. “It’s just a phone.”

A knock on the door broke up the conversation. I let Ben inside to put the shopping on the counter.

“Sir. Glad to see you’re better,” he said to Amory.

“Uh, thanks.” Amory looked at me, then Ben. “Soyer said you took my uniform to get laundered?”

The pawn stopped in his tracks but covered it by unpacking some of the groceries before fully turning around to look at Amory.

“I did. But...I’m very sorry, but it was a lost cause.” He glanced at me, then added, “I’d happily pay for it myself, sir.”

I liked this one, I really did.

Amory got up, his new phone no longer at the forefront of his mind. “That’s not necessary. I’ll talk to Dwayne—my boss. Plus, I still have a spare, so no harm done.”

The pawn left quickly after that, but brightened when I thanked him at the door.



Amory allowed me four more days, four more blissful days we filled with eating the food I cooked, three versions of baba ghanoush and possibly too much peach cobbler as well as dishes I’d only ever made for myself.

I learned Amory’s routines, his patterns, his likes and dislikes. I learned his taste and his scent, before and after sex, learned the things he’d say to me when I used my mouth on him or my hands, when I rode him until he was spent.

I wanted the days we had to never end. I wanted our present to be our eternity. It was not to be. By Wednesday, I overheard him on his new phone, calling McArthur and telling him he

was coming back to work. The following morning, he told me, and because I was born a fool and hadn't learned after all these many years of living, I let him go.

Twenty-Seven

FIRE



I tried many things to break my curse. For the longest time, I hoped there was a way, hidden in some corner of the planet. I learned that hope is a poison not strong enough to kill me just like all the others I had tried.

AMORY'S FIRST DAY BACK at work was torture. I sent Ben to watch him and spent three hours cleaning the house. Then I rented a movie theater, figuring that type of date event was something he'd like to do. I spent another hour scrubbing away at the grout in the bathroom, hating how quiet the apartment was without Amory there.

In the darkened movie theater, we shared a bucket of popcorn, buttered to the perfect level of decadence. All of it was normal in the very best of ways.

"I cannot believe you booked the entire place. And made them show a movie at four in the morning," he said to me when we were taking the cab home afterward.

“Then don’t. Imagine the movie was so bad no one but us wanted to see it, and that it was simply a night owl-friendly screening.”

He snorted, looked at me, the city lights streaking over his face and making his eyes glitter. “Thanks. For doing this.”

“Any time, Amory, any time.”

He didn’t raise any complaints about coming home with me, undressing with me. He let me sink into him in pleasure as if he were a precious dream. I whispered in his ear while he slept, promises and I-love-yous, hoping he’d hear my voice in his dreams.

As I lay there in the darkness, I felt a profound sense of peace. It was as if my existence as it was now had drifted apart from reality. The asshole next door had been exactly like me right now, on his last day. Exactly like it.



Ben texted me earlier that Friday night with an unmasked-for update.

The regular waitress who usually works with your lover is out again. The diner is very empty tonight.

I thought, *Good, I’ll come in early and he can close up early too*, knowing he wouldn’t want to. Knowing I wouldn’t mind once I was there and shared some cherry pie with him.

I was on my way when Ben texted me once more.

EMERGENCY come quick, vampire has the waitress, going in now.

“Hurry,” I told the driver.

He flinched at the single word. Then he broke the speed limit.

Twenty-Eight

THE END



I RAN THROUGH THE Moonlight Diner's doors, the chiming loud enough to break a spell. Jenny and Ben were on my left, Ben in front of Jenny so as to protect her with his half-shifted body, the shift wanting out, straining against his clothes.

“Amory.”

He was on my right, behind the counter, flushed, an empty pot of coffee in his hand, facing off with a vampire I didn't recognize. The vampire's face was wet, his shirt soaking up the brown stains of coffee. My Amory.

I ran and leaped over the counter in one go, coming down in front of the vampire, between him and Amory. I grinned at the vampire's coffee-slick face.

To Amory, I said, “Stay behind me.” My grin dropped, and I reached for the calm within me, the center of that angry storm brought on by this pawn attacking Amory. “He's mine, vampire. I protect what is mine.”

The fucker leered. “I wanted you anyway.”

He drew a blade a good four inches long and nicely made. He twisted it in his hand.

“Pretty little knife.”

The vampire laughed, and before I could wipe that laugh off his face, the door chimed again.

“Oh, fuck,” Ben said, and I heard his body go into full shift.

I glanced at the door to see my error manifest: Caecilius’s pawn, his newly one-eyed, one-armed, tongue- and dickless pawn stood there, come to haunt me and make a mockery of my decision to let him live.

He laughed, glassy eye wide and full of frenzy. He lifted his arm, and I spun as soon as I saw the gun.

I grabbed Amory’s arm and kicked at his legs to get him down. Worked. I followed, going to one leg when the shot rang through the diner. I caught it in the neck, and I knew from experience that this would kill me. There would be a moment of death, right before I came back, when Amory would be *alone*. With every gush of blood, fury rose. I had to end them fast.

“Soyer.”

He said my name, the one he’d given me, and there was no way I’d not look at him. My ears were ringing, and I heard the echo of a voice, my former neighbor’s voice, rough from chemo. *You’ll find someone who can love you like you deserve. And when you do, everything will work out.*

You always were an idiotic asshole when you lived, I thought, looking at Amory. But you were right.

The vampire said something, but I'd lost too much blood, couldn't hear. I felt the knife as it was driven into my heart, sharp and cold, and *different* than all the other things that had killed me before.

Witch blade. The extreme depth of my failure washed over me like the darkness creeping in from the edges of my vision. I looked at Amory. Fuck, but he looked sad. So sad.

"I'm...sorry," I tried, not sure if the words came out properly.

There was a loud bang. I couldn't see Amory anymore. I didn't see anything.



Twenty-Nine

BURN



In mythology, the phoenix bird burns at the end of its naturally allotted life. It burns instead of dying, the right to simply end forfeited to the flames. Through a vicious fire that takes everything the bird has become in that one life, he is reborn, the flames forming an egg he has to fight through in order to gain life anew. In order to live again.

It never made any sense to me why my skin had been marked with a bird of fire.



MANY ASPECTS OF RELIGION came to me late, but when I woke to find myself surrounded by flames, I thought, *Well, fuck. Guess the Christians got it right after all.*

I looked closer. And wasn't sure what I was seeing: Amory. Amory was in front of me, kissing close, holding me, but he was also not himself anymore. He was burning, the flames growing around him like wings, his blue eyes with their crown of gold gone fully liquid gold now, the blue eclipsed by brightness, his skin the yellowish white of a flame's heart.

I thought I was having one of those death visions that would make dying easier. Then I smelled fire eating at the interior of the diner, eating our clothes, eating pretty much everything apart from him and me. Amory and I, we were part of the fire but not burning, and it made no fucking sense.

The flames died with a sudden hiss, and everything turned dark. Or no, not fully dark. Just the kind of dark you got after a fire at a nice diner when the sprinkler system went on.

Someone was growling. Ben. I locked eyes with Amory, who was a sooty wet mess, his clothes in blackened tatters, his skin...fine.

He gaped for what felt like a whole minute but was probably much shorter.

“Oh, thank fuck! Soyer, you asshole!” he said.

I looked down. We were both on our knees, and the witch blade was between us.

“Shouldn't be coming back,” I said, looking at that blade.

The bulk of a shifted body hit the wall to our left, breaking whatever it was that had been there.

I said, “Oh, shit,” and stood to get a sense of what was happening.

I had no fucking idea what had just fucking happened, but yeah, there had been a fire. There was also still a vampire, who had tossed Capable Pawn into the coffee machine. And I was naked. Fuck. That had been my back-up coat.

I looked at Amory, who was unhurt, steam rising off his skin as the water hit him. I picked up the knife.

“Ben, watch Amory.”

The large wolf made a noise of agreement, and I jumped the counter. Its surface had blistered like a hand held above the stove.

The vampire was showing teeth. Behind him, Ben had clearly gotten his fangs in the one-armed pawn, ending him in my stead. I heard a whimper from one of the tables. Jenny. Fuck.

“What the fuck was that? That was a witch blade, and you should be dead,” the vampire said.

I lifted the deadly weapon in my hand. “Maybe it’s broken?” I knew full well it wasn’t. I hated the thing, but Amory’s fire had burned everything else I’d had on me in terms of weapons.

The vampire attacked, lashing out with claws very nearly too fast to follow. I sidestepped, he moved forward, I stopped him with a fist to his throat and sliced at the exact same spot with the blade. It went through him with ease, steel through water.

He bled profusely, eyes going wide. Vampires could heal rapidly, but I saw none of that. I delivered a kick to the side of his face, and as he slammed down, his head hit one of the barstools with a satisfying crack before he crumpled on the floor.

Just to be sure, I drove the witch blade that had been in my heart into the vampire's. The gash on his throat showed no sign at all of closing, and he lay there, unmoving. Dead. A puddle of blood and water was forming around him.

The sprinklers turned off, and it was suddenly very quiet, my own breathing noisy.

I said, "Nah, the witch blade works just fine."

I stood and turned to Amory. As I walked toward him, I could feel it. What he was. What he had become. A pawn unlike any I had ever seen, for reasons I couldn't understand. All I knew was he had burned. For me.

I reached for him and pulled him into a kiss. I felt his need echo my own, fire calling to fire, a magnetism neither of us could resist.

He was still hot as coals, the water seemingly not enough to cool him down. In the distance, the noise of first responders blared out their siren song, and we managed to pull apart.

I looked at him. The sight of him overlapped with the image seared into my mind, Amory with wings of flame. Somewhere between then and now, the thing he had become had hatched from the shell of rebirth. On his skin, on his chest, there lived

a firebird, not a copy of my own, but *mine*. I knew the truth of that in my bones.

“Beautiful,” I said, placing a palm above his heart to feel it beating in the rhythm I knew so well.

Amory looked down. He wasn't scared, and when he saw the firebird that had burned its way onto his skin, he smiled.

“Oh.”

“Amory,” I said, but the sirens had gotten closer.

Ben had noticed and turned as well, and there were now three naked men in the sooty puddle that remained of the Moonlight, Jenny soaked and weeping, and two dead bodies, just to top it off. Valentin would be challenged to handle this one.

Thirty

EMBERS



I TOOK AMORY HOME. I could feel him now, not him, but what he had become. For me. He was huddled under a thin blanket while I'd ordered one of the firemen to give me his coat in whose pocket I had smuggled the witch blade out of the burned-out diner.

The house pawn gaped openly as we walked in, and I said, "We were in a fire. Unlock the apartment for us."

"Y-yes, sir. Right away. Erm."

It took him ages to get the key. Took him a lot more to keep his remaining composure.

"There you go," he managed when the door fell open for us.

"Have a new set made. One for Amory as well," I told him, then pushed Amory across the threshold.

I threw the door shut and was on my lover in moments.

"Stop! I'm filthy," he said.

"Filthy, you say?" I took a good look. He was also aroused.

“No. Fuck. You know what I mean. All the soot, it’s going to ruin—”

I kissed that objection right out of him, falling against him, our bodies close, touching, friction budding and—

And he was crying in my arms, just a little at first, but he kept working himself into a weeping, sobbing state, his entire body shaking with it.

“Shh. Everything is going to be fine. You don’t have to worry about a thing. I’m here, Amory. My beautiful, precious Amory.”

In that moment, nothing mattered to me, nothing in the world, but making sure he was okay. We stood there, his tears finally cooling his skin, that fire that still lived inside him subsiding.

Afterward, we made love in the shower, the water washing away the scent of smoke, the remnants of what we had been before the flames: two beings, cursed to be apart by the specter of death.

We weren’t that anymore. Amory had taken something from me, had taken on something for me, and whatever space between us there had been, he had incinerated it. We were one, linked through magic that bound our hearts, unintended, but true. A curse turned into wonder. Hope, for once, had won.



EPILOGUE



BEN THE PAWN LIVED a short walk away from where most of the rest of his pack did. He lived two streets down from the cemetery.

So I visited the asshole's grave first, taking a bunch of flowers from the youngest sister.

April was warm this year, and songbirds filled the cemetery with the joy of a brighter season to come. I went to my knees in front of the headstone, laying down the carnations and bowing my head.

"It looks like you were right after all. I found him. Well, he found me. I'm not sure. His name's Amory." I brushed a leaf off the stone. Silly. It was just a stone. "You would've liked him, I think."

The April wind stung my eyes when I left, and I wiped at them, all the way to the pawn's place.

Ben opened the door, the shock on his face obvious. He was wearing gym clothes, was possibly about to go for a run.

“Sir?”

“I’ll make this quick. I need you to watch Amory on a more permanent basis. He’s not going to stop working just because I want him to, and I can’t very well watch him all of the time. How would you feel about coming into my service?”

Ben’s jaw dropped. The werewolf was taller and wider than me and hitting him over the head with this was immensely gratifying.

“You mean—I’d be acting in your name, sir? As your vassal?”

“Yes.”

“You haven’t ever—do you really mean that?”

I sighed, checked my phone. “Either yes or no, or do you need some more time to—”

“No!” He flushed. “I mean yes. I would be honored to watch Mr. Saintclair. And I won’t ever fail you again.”

I narrowed my eyes at him. “I’ll say this once. You saved his life that day. If you hadn’t texted me, I wouldn’t have come early. I won’t ever forget that.”

“Sir, I—”

But I walked away before he could make it awkward for the both of us. After all, what had the world come to if the Black Shuck was thanking a pawn?



When I found the apartment the Star-Garbed had found for the half sex demon and their sister, I was beginning to feel like a salesperson. And because I had a salesperson's luck, the sister opened.

"Holy fuck, it's you," she said.

"The fuck is wrong with your eyes?" I asked her.

"It's eyeliner. Like yours."

"It's too fucking much."

Her sibling walked up behind her. "Ella, you're late for school."

Ella rolled her black-framed eyes like any teenager anywhere. I took that to mean the two of them were okay.

"I just need a moment," I told the sex demon.

They nodded as their sister brushed past them and went down three flights of stairs in noisy heels.

"Do you want to come inside?"

I shrugged and did. Their apartment reminded me of Amory's place right away. It wasn't that much bigger, surprisingly not much more cluttered, and it smelled of toast and oatmeal.

I sat down at a tiny kitchen table, the teenager's half-finished breakfast in front of me.

"Should try feeding her pancakes," I said. "Or maybe Chinese food."

Rae narrowed their eyes. "I'm trying my best."

“Not fighting her on the eyeliner?”

They shrugged. “Picking my battles.”

“Smart. So you want to work for me?”

They were surprised, but they had better control of their features than Ben. “Yes, Mr. Bennet. Anything if it means my sister stays out of it.”

“I’m offering vassalship.”

Their mouth fell open. “You mean that?”

“I do.” I stirred the cooling oatmeal. They’d put raisins in and fresh fruit, neatly chopped. “I need you to watch my lover. You’ll be working with him at the diner I happen to co-own with a human as of two hours ago.”

“A...diner.”

“Not a euphemism. Just serving food and cleaning tables.”

“Well, I already said yes.”

I nodded and stood. “It has to be renovated. There was a fire. I’m putting you on paid leave until the reopening.” I checked my phone. “My lawyer will be in touch with a work contract, and the announcement will follow shortly. I have to go now and pick up my lover from a juice date.”

They stood too. “Huh?”

I sighed. “He made friends with a vampire. They’re having juice. At least get the kid to use brown eyeliner. Works better with her complexion.”



I walked past Simeon, who was in a car parked across the street from where the two of them were chatting away at a tiny table. He opened his window.

“What the fuck? They’re still talking,” the vampire said.

I stopped. “So? I can talk too. I’m done watching my lover from a car for the moment, Simeon.”

He snorted. “Over-stalked it, did you,” he said before closing his window.

“Fucking vampire and his need to have the last word,” I said as I crossed the street.

The juice bar was narrow and bright, empty but for Amory and Elias. Probably thanks to Simeon.

“Oh, I didn’t know you were coming to pick Amory up,” Elias said. He was drinking something purple.

“I didn’t either.” Amory smiled up at me and moved a seat over. “You have to try this. It’s pineapple, lime, apple, and banana.”

He slid his juice toward me, and I sat. There was no point telling him no.

“I never thought I’d see the Black Shuck suck a banana,” Elias said.

“Gee, Elias,” Amory hissed.

“Isn’t banana to your taste, Elias?” I asked the vampire.

“Ah, you know. So long as you put whipped cream on top, I’ll eat anything.”

“Can you two stop?” Amory said.

I leaned over to kiss him. “Of course, my heart. And apologies, for indulging Elias here as well as for barging in. But I wanted to let you know I talked to Dwayne. Long story short, he and I are now co-owners of the Moonlight, and the reopening will happen in June.”

“Oooh!” Elias said.

Amory stared. “You...bought half of a diner?”

I shrugged. “Had to. They serve damn good cherry pie there.”

“*Ooooooh!*” Elias said.

The surprise turned to something softer on Amory’s face. “Just because of the cherry pie, huh?”

“Not just because of the cherry pie. Because of you, my heart. All of it, because of you.”

He didn’t kiss me, but he hugged me as Elias made more swooning noises.

“Soyer,” Amory said into my ear.

“I am, my heart.” *Because you made me. You gave me a name and a purpose.*

Not even the noisy slurping of an annoying baby vampire made Amory pull away from me. Getting hugged in a juice bar

was not the bliss I'd ever hoped for, but without a doubt the bliss I wanted right in this moment.

I wanted my Amory, now and forever.



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Thank you!

Alexa Piper

Goodreads

Where to find ***Black Heart Blooming***

About Alexa Piper



Alexa (she/they) has a lot of characters living in her head and wanting their stories told. Many of these people get snarky and won't stop complaining if Alexa is too slow writing them, which means that for this author, sleep is a luxury. Consequently, Alexa is a coffee addict, but she is sure she has it under control (six cups of coffee are normal in a morning, right? Right!?)

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