

INDIE BITES

12: HEXES & HEROES

FANTASY STORIES WITH TEETH



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Letter from the Editor

Welcome to this quarter's issue! This time, we're all about hexes and heroes – two staples of fantasy adventure, explored from all different sides here. We have heroes both valiant and reluctant, and hexes both life-changing and ridiculous. Sorcerers and minotaurs mingle with mermaids and werewolves as we explore the burdens of heroism (and the joys of hexing). Our six stories this quarter are a truly varied spread, and in these pages you'll find classic adventure, urban fantasy, sapphic mythology, romantic comedy, pensive fairy tales, and more.

The weather here in the UK has finally turned, and as we hunker down for the start of winter I've found so much joy in putting this issue together. While the themes might not seem at first glance to be particularly cosy, several of our authors this time around have written stories that feel warm and comforting, picking up on particularly the smaller-stakes, more personal side of heroism. These heroes might be on epic quests, or dealing with huge magical problems, but it's often their relationships with themselves and others that are the true hearts of their stories, which feels perfect for a season so focused on the home and family.

In terms of what your editors have been working on apart from *Indie Bites*, there's not very much we

can tell you just at the moment! Mostly, Josie's been working on release day prep for *Winta's Day*, the third book in her *Seekers* series, which will be out on December 1st, and we've both been getting stuck into short stories alongside longer projects (although I've been struggling to keep those short stories "short", as some ideas just seem to want to be novellas!). On the reading side of things, Josie picked up one of my favourite indie books, *A Rival Most Vial* by R.K. Ashwick, and loved it just as much as I do – she says it has incredible cosy vibes that reminded her of Goron City from *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*. I've enjoyed *The Rose Gate* by Hanna Sandvig, a fun Beauty and the Beast retelling that has an interesting twist on the curse, and Rita A. Rubin's *Of Knights and Books and Falling in Love*, which is an adorable and very heartfelt m/m fantasy romance between a (former) dark lord's assistant and the hero who's always been a thorn in the dark side's, well, side.

So that's what we've been up to – and we'd love to hear from you over on our social channels if you've read any good indies lately.

Now, let's get heroic. There's plenty to sink your teeth into!

Adie Hart
Anthology Editor

Our next issue is *Royals & Rogues*, and submissions are open now. Submissions are also now open for our May issue, *Wishes & Wizards*. If you're an indie author or illustrator who'd like to contribute to one of our upcoming issues, then check out our submissions page [here](#). We'd love to have you on board.

A note on language: We are a UK publication, but we accept work from authors all over the world. We retain each author's version of English as written, so pieces from US authors appear in US English, and pieces from UK authors appear in British English etc.

Meet Author Ceril N. Domace



Ceril N Domace is an accountant, the owner of an improbable number of cloaks, and a dedicated dungeon master.

As a lover of fiction works great and small, Ceril has been reading age-inappropriate fiction since her father failed to pull *The Silmarillion* from her grubby little fingers at age five. As a grown-up accountant, her spreadsheet compiling gives her plenty of time to make plans for a fantastic world that isn't plagued by

balance sheets... and also has dragons.

On the rare occasions she manages to free herself from an ever-growing and complex web of TTRPG, Ceril enjoys taking walks and griping that all her hobbies are work in disguise.

Welcome to Indie Bites! This issue we're all about hexes and heroes, so why don't we start by talking about some of your heroes and how they play their roles – willingly, reluctantly, well or poorly?

Owen Williams is the hero of the *Fae Queen's Court*, my first series. He's somewhat of a reluctant hero as his journey was kickstarted by outside forces, but once he's decided to help he dedicates his whole self toward it. Whether that's helping with evacuations, leading a rescue mission, or confronting dead beings who may or may not be gods, he's going to do whatever it takes to protect his family and the people that took them in.

The folks from Professor Clarkfowler's company are probably the ones this group knows me best for and they run the gamut of heroic/anti-heroic stereotypes. There's the classic fantasy hero, the mad scientist, the inquisitive wizard, the rogue with a heart of gold, and also Sweet Potato, the lovable menace the party adopted. They're simultaneously a crack team of highly efficient adventurers and best friends who get

on each other's nerves constantly. They run from job to job, helping everyone they can for a "reasonable" fee, and generally try to leave the world better – or at least more informed – than they found it.

What's the perfect hex to cast to annoy a nemesis?

One that makes their table extra sticky in the middle. It doesn't sound like much, but I had a table that had been finished weirdly when I was growing up and during the summer, dishes always stuck to it just enough to require a little extra force to pick up. As you can imagine, this led to many spilling incidents and stained shirtsleeves, but we'd always forget about it until the stickiness struck next.

Sometimes the newspaper would stick and we'd have to scrub the table to get the remnants off. Imagine having to rewrite your entire sternly worded letter about your neighbor's cat destroying your rose bushes because the table destroyed it.

How did you get into indie publishing? What's your favourite thing about it?

I got into indie publishing via an editor who pointed out that traditional publishing isn't necessarily looking for someone with a completed trilogy. Not long after I finally realised that if I traditionally published, I wasn't going to have much control over

what the final product looked like and I had a *vision* for what I wanted *Haven's* cover to be. Then I reached out to several of my already indie-published friends for advice and decided to go for it since I wanted to get the *Fae Queen's Court* series out in the world sooner rather than later. Now, three years later, that series is done and I'm working on launching my second and third series in between Clarkfowler shorts.

Honestly, my favorite part of the process is just how much control I have over things. I get to decide the cover and the vibes and the timing myself. It's a little intimidating at times, but it also allows me a degree of flexibility I'd never get from traditional publishing.

What does your typical publishing process look like?

I decided after the launch of my third book that I wanted to handle as much in-house as I could, which means that I do all the formatting and the cover typography myself. I hire out for the cover art because, frankly, I think my books will sell better with something pretty on the cover instead of my stick figures and free Canva icons. It's been a trial and error-filled process to work out the exact timing of all this and I do, eventually, have to leave well enough alone, because I was fiddling with the look of *The Fae*

Queen's Court: Collected Edition until less than two weeks before launch.

Is there a hero or heroine in fiction that has had a great impact on you (or your writing)?

Princess Cimorene and King Mendanbar from the *Enchanted Forest Chronicles* were a huge inspiration for the Professor Clarkfowler series, as some readers may be able to tell. I've always enjoyed how that series doesn't necessarily take itself seriously and how it pokes fun at the tropes and cliches that populate the fantasy genre and fairytales in general. It's lighthearted, fun, and perfect for a refreshing break from the more serious fare typical of the fantasy genre.

Have you read any good indie fantasy lately?

I finished *The Stars and the Stage* by D.N. Bryn recently! It's a novella set in their *Guides to Dating Vampires* series and I absolutely adore each entry. *Steel Your Heart* by Atlas Theseus Schmidt was also fantastic. It's a modern fantasy series set in a sanctuary for dragons rescued from the villainous Knighthood organisation and I adored it. I just started *The Modern Mythos Anomaly* by Juniper Lake Fitzgerald and *The Corruption of Souls* by Taylor Hubbard and I'm enjoying both of them a lot.

What's in store for your readers next?

Right now I'm finalising things for the beginning of my next series, a gaslamp fantasy short novel series set in the Flying Isles. The main character, Edward Bardsley, joined a ~~pirate~~ privateer crew as an alchemist to pay for his younger sister's education. Unfortunately, that becomes a more dangerous prospect than he anticipated when the crew is hired to retrieve property that was stolen from the master of Fortitude. It's releasing on January 12th, 2024, and ARCs are available now!

After that, I'm putting together the launch for a second new series, an epic fantasy about the sole survivor of a divine knighthood that was supposed to wipe out the very evil that destroyed them. I'm projecting a June 2024 release date for that project.

I'm so excited to see both of these series out in the world!

We are too! Thanks for joining us!

Short Fiction

Hex Me Once

Adie Hart

The kettle whistled in the kitchen hearth, coughed twice, and belched an unholy mass of writhing black tentacles onto the floor.

Oh, the bastard was at it again.

“I’m very sorry,” I said to Thom Taylor, who was still holding the bandage taut around his arm. “Keep your fingers there for a moment. I just need to deal with this and then I’ll be right back to finish you up.”

“Yes, lass,” said Thom nervously, tucking his feet closer under his chair as the tentacle-thing approached.

I wiped my hands clean of salve on my apron, then grabbed the poker, brandishing it like a sword – how I missed my sword at times like these – at the intruding heap of darkness. “Are you a thinking creature?” I asked.

No reply from the beastly blob.

“Pure magic, then,” I muttered. “Thanks, Darian.” At least now I didn’t feel bad about laying into the thing, which I promptly did. At the first hit, the

tentacles dissolved into a splattering of sticky black ichor – all over my clean kitchen tiles.

I sighed. Darian's magic always tended to the dramatic, which meant I was left with the clean up. Oh well. I'd deal with it once I'd got Thom patched up. I shot him a tight smile of apology and sat back down to finish binding his arm.

The old farmer stretched his arm out when I tied the final knot in his bandage. "That feels much better, thanking ye kindly."

"Just try not to lift anything too heavy for the next few days – and yes, Thom, a sheep *is* too heavy. You'll be right as rain." I paused for a second. "Actually, keep it out of the rain."

He chuckled. "I'll try. Are you not going to read yer note?"

I took another look at the ichor on the floor – yes, there in the middle of the sticky heap was a folded black paper. I picked it up gingerly between finger and thumb. "Don't worry. It's probably not that important." This was the third such missive I'd received from Darian; I knew exactly what it was.

Unfortunately, so did Thom, and half the town.

"It's that sorcerer again, ent it?" he said with a grimace. "One of these days he's going to go too far, lass, get you into some real trouble."

"Don't you worry." I guided him out through the

shop to the front door. “I can handle Darian Smoke.”

Even the bastard’s name was dramatic.

With Thom gone, I set to cleaning up the ichor, studiously using the work to ignore the black note lurking on the table. Even using a rag on hands and knees rather than a flick of magic, I was done all too soon. Fine. Time to see what Darian Smoke, sorcerer extraordinaire, upstairs neighbour, and royal pain in my arse, wanted this time.

Dearest Elerie, the silver-bordered card read, tell me you have considered my request. Alderton is not large enough to sustain two sorcerous talents. One of us must leave, and it certainly will not be me. No need to reply; I will know you’ve come to your senses when I hear you loading your belongings into another creak-wheeled cart.

Your servant,

Darian

It was hard for me to read the last few lines, given that the note was getting ever more crumpled in my clenching fist. That pompous, arrogant... My vocabulary wouldn’t stretch to cover all the names I wanted to call him, and this from a woman who’d spent three years adventuring with a dwarven swashbuckler, an elven assassin, and a girl who’d claimed to be the daughter of the Pirate King, and

who certainly swore like her story was true. It wasn't my imagination that was lacking, it was that Darian was just the most indescribably irritating person I'd ever met.

I rued the day I'd moved into Alderton six months ago, sweet as the offer on this flat had been. "Comfortable and practical for a small business," the elf who sold it to me had said, and it was true that the kitchen was the perfect workroom, spacious and clean, with a cute little shop counter at the front for selling pre-prepared potions and just enough room in the rest of the place for me to live. It had its own front entrance, and they'd mentioned the small garden at the back was shared with the upstairs neighbour; they'd just omitted to mention that neighbour was Darian Smoke, and that he was going to be a colossal dick about me setting up as a healer below his magical lair.

The man didn't even offer healing! I wasn't stealing his clients; in fact, if he thought about it, it would be beneficial for him to have somewhere nearby to send customers who needed medical treatments after getting too close to some of his hexes. Sure, I *could* expand into potions and spells and all that, but that was a lot of effort to maintain. I was quite happy just to build a reputation on healing draughts and bandages. It was my way of giving back,

I supposed; do something good for a community, rather than serving myself and my band as I had for so long. A new healer, especially one as talented as me, was an asset. But no, Mr High-and-Mighty had to be the only wizard in town.

I'd popped up to introduce myself a couple of days after I moved in, same as I'd introduced myself to all the other shop owners on the street. Truth be told, I'd been intrigued by what I'd heard about Darian – a powerful sorcerer specialising in problem solving was exactly the kind of person I liked to have connections with, and the townsfolk spoke about him as witty, talented and well-read. It seemed like more than one of them had a little crush on him, and I could see why, at least in looks and skills: Darian was gorgeous, and clearly very good at magic. The personality, though... Let's just say our first meeting started with him looking me up and down, drawing his eyebrows together, and clearly deciding I wasn't worth his time. He barely said a word to me and couldn't get me out of his shop fast enough. Now it looked like he wanted me out of Alderton altogether.

Well, boohoo for him. I wasn't moving. I'd made the decision to give up the adventuring life and settle down, and I was too stubborn to leave now.

I tossed the now-very-crumpled ball of paper into the air and exorcised a bit of my anger by burning it to

a crisp with a flick of my fingers. Unfortunately, it was only a very small bit of anger, which meant I had more than enough left to propel me out of my front door and up the stairs at the side of my shop before I'd even noticed myself moving.

I *did* have a moment of pause before I knocked – what can I say, Darian's black-lacquered door covered in gold runes was a little bit intimidating, the kind of thing the storybooks more aptly called a *dark portal*, or *the entrance to the villain's lair* – but the fury fizzing inside me won over any desire not to face him. I took a deep breath and rapped on the door.

It creaked open. Slowly. A more dramatic person than me might have said ominously.

"Oh, for pity's sake," I muttered, interrupting the door in its creepy journey and pushing it open the normal way. "Darian, are you in here?"

"I did say there was no need to reply," drawled a dark voice. Darian Smoke appeared in the doorway across the room, draping himself languidly against the frame in a black silk dressing gown embroidered with silver dragons and stars. Cliched bastard. It was a wonder he didn't wear a great big pointy hat. Although then, I supposed, he wouldn't be able to show off his long dark hair, which at this moment was curling round his face like a lover's caress as if he'd just woken up, with such perfection that I knew it had

to be magicked like that. Vain *and* cliched bastard.

“Oh, did I wake you up?” I asked, pouring sweetness into my voice. “Only, it’s two in the afternoon, so I figured you’d be hard at work, what with business booming as it so obviously is.” I waved my hand pointedly at the empty room.

Darian scoffed. “I don’t need to make myself available to the masses at all hours, you know. I maintain a select appointment book.”

“I prefer to help people when they need it,” I snapped back.

“Ah, wonderful, you’ve decided.” A flicker of a smile crossed his lips. “You’ll be helping me enormously when you move out.”

“I’m not moving out.” Had that come out a little louder than I’d meant it to? Probably, from the look of surprise on his face.

“I thought you’d come to your senses,” he said. “It’s nothing personal, dear girl. This town simply already has its needs served – by me. It’s a waste to offer them anything more.”

“And yet I have so many customers,” I said innocently. “I didn’t realise you were bending your great – what was it? – sorcerous talent to cough drops and arthritis potions these days. Perhaps mine are just better than yours?”

“It’s about the *look* of the thing,” he said through

gritted teeth. “I don’t need a little hedgewitch downstairs from me. It spoils the area.”

Hedgewitch? That was rich, considering I’d wager my left boot that I had more on-the-job experience than him and his perfect hair. “Well, if you don’t like sharing with me, feel free to move out yourself.” I said. “And either way, stop sending me notes via weird messy magical things that explode in my kitchen. It’s annoying. If you have something to say to me, you can descend out of your little tower a whole five steps and knock on my door.”

“My dear girl, surely there must be some way I can convince you to le—”

“No, Darian, I’ve had enough. I’m happy here and I intend to stay.” I stalked to the door, turning on my heel to add, “And I’m not your dear girl.”

His eyes flashed, and he smiled like I’d told him a delicious secret. “You’re happy here? I see. In that case, I promise there’ll be no more notes, and good luck to you, *Elerie*.”

Ah. That was actually worse than *dear girl*. His lips curved around my name like a poisonous snake leaning in for the fatal kiss.

I swallowed hard, then swept down the stairs so I didn’t give him the satisfaction of a response. And only slightly because I didn’t have a clue how to respond to the flurry of feelings that had sparked

when he said my name like that. Irritation, I told myself. Anger. Frustration.

I should have felt triumphant at standing up to him, but all I felt was vaguely unsettled. From his words, it sounded like I'd won the battle, but I couldn't shake the feeling Darian was more into war.

The first of the hexes arrived three days later.

I hadn't seen or heard a peep from Darian since our confrontation, apart from catching the back of his long black coat swishing up the stairs at speed once or twice, so a small, naive part of me had started to hope that maybe he'd decided to be decent and leave me alone. A larger, more experienced part of me was braced for trouble, but still, the optimism kept popping its little head up.

Life in Alderton was actually nice when I could relax into it. I liked the townspeople, for the most part. I liked that there was a bookshop, a bakery, and a very decent tavern within five minutes' walk, and I even liked the crisp, chilled late autumn days. It was a novelty to sit in my flat with all the windows thrown open, listening to the sounds of passersby bustling in the street and watching the browning leaves sway over their heads; it certainly beat camping out under long-dead ruins, or bedding down in the stables of some crowded inn because Hannaluna had spent all

our winnings on wine again. And for all I'd ribbed Darian about his sleeping habits, it was nice not to claw myself to consciousness at dawn to trek to a new adventure. Basically, I liked having a place of my own, and the space and time to enjoy it.

I was doing exactly that, enjoying a cup of tea in my crackling-hearthed kitchen, when the doorbell rang. I set my tea down and murmured a quick keep-warm charm over it, then headed out through the curtain to the shop to see who it was. Probably one of the Hatherley boys, here to collect their mother's potion; her backache was always worse on these cold mornings, and the kids knew that I was good for a few sweets when they played courier for her.

But when I opened the door, there was no one there, just a small cloud of purple and black smoke hovering around the doorbell itself. Footsteps pounded up the stairs at the side of the building; I caught a glimpse of black coat flicking out as Darian's door slammed.

Had he... had Darian Smoke, sorcerer extraordinaire, just rung my doorbell and run away?

It took a moment before I could do anything other than stare at the empty staircase, then a burst of disbelieving laughter flew out of my mouth. He had. Forbidden from sending me threatening notes, he'd decided his only course of action was to channel a

bored eight-year-old. It was ridiculous.

The purple smoke had already vanished. I didn't need to worry too much about it, I decided; he probably just emanated the stuff wherever he went to make himself feel sorcerous.

Unfortunately, that was the naive part of me talking.

I'd barely made it back to my tea before the doorbell rang again. I hauled myself back to the front door, half-ready to welcome a customer, half to give Darian a piece of my mind, but once again, there was no one there. No footsteps, either, and when I leaned out and glanced up the stairs, Darian's looming black door remained firmly closed. Perhaps my doorbell was on the blink? I gave it a prod, and the magic activated, chiming obligingly then falling silent.

I waited a few moments to see if it was going to ring again, but neither noise, smoke, nor Darian appeared, so I headed back to the kitchen; that warming charm wouldn't hold forever while I stood on my doorstep like a ninny.

I managed three sips before the next chiming interruption.

"Oh, for the love of—" I muttered, and resolved to ignore it. The damn thing was obviously broken. And ignore it I did, for the next hour or so, as it went off again and again, always leaving just enough time for

me to think the ordeal had stopped before *pinging* back into my consciousness.

It wasn't until a gentle cough startled me and my cup out of my seat that I realised that last time had been for real; Beth Jenkins had let herself in, and whatever she'd originally meant to come visit me, she was now frantically mopping at the spilled tea on the floor.

"Oh, Elerie, I'm so sorry to scare you!" she said, turning her attention – and damp handkerchief – to the splashes on my hem. "I only stopped by to pick up some of my special tea, and you didn't answer the door, so I thought I'd just pop my head in and see if you were busy. I didn't mean to startle you!"

"It's fine, honestly." I took my skirt gently back from her and dried it with a flick of my fingers. "I've been having a bit of... trouble with the doorbell. I didn't think anyone was actually there; it keeps going off without anyone pressing it."

"How annoying," she said. "It's one of Darian's designs, I think. Most of us have them. I bet he could take a look at it for you." Her smile seemed genuine; perhaps not everyone in the town did know about Darian's hatred of me.

I scoffed. "More likely he's the one that broke it." I'd meant it as a joke, but as I heard the words come out of my mouth, they had the feel of truth about

them. What if he hadn't been ringing the doorbell, but doing something else to it? He'd promised not to send me any more notes via weird magic, but not to leave me alone entirely, I realised. Juvenile pranks might well have been where his mind jumped next. I shook my head and turned a professional smile back on. "But never mind. Let's find your tea for you. Is another three months enough, or do you want six to be on the safe side?"

I guided Beth back to the shop and scooped the right combination of herbs together for her – she had one delightful son, and no plans for any more; it had been a relief for her to finally have a healer in town to visit, rather than travelling out to Three Beeches – and ignored three more interruptions from the doorbell.

"Oh dear, that is a bother," said Beth, eyeing the offending doorbell as I saw her out. "Are you sure you don't want to ask Darian?"

"Definitely not." I waved her off, then pinned a note to the door ("Bell broken, please knock") and unhooked the charmed box from the wall, dropped it on the floor and ground it underneath my heel. Another puff of purple and black smoke floated up from underneath it, forming a swirling sigil before dissipating, and my mind finally put two and two together.

A hex, likely designed to annoy me just enough

that I'd crack and move out.

Well, two could play at that game.

Now that the infernal chiming of the doorbell wasn't interrupting me every few minutes, it took me no time at all to think of a way to get back at Darian. If I just wanted to be annoying, I could send a quick hex up the kitchen chimney without looking and let it hit whatever it wanted to, but he might brush it off as a random accident, and anyway, it wouldn't be nearly as satisfying as a specific spell that would bother him in the exact same petty way as his doorbell shenanigans. No, it had to be something that would be perfectly, unmistakeably a pain meant for *his* arse. I had to hit him where it hurt. Or at least, bothered the hell out of him.

And I had just the thing. I'd never met anyone who took such painstaking pride in their appearance, not even the princes and queens and such I'd dealt with in my time as a sword-for-hire. You never saw Darian with a single eyelash out of place, and fluff and dust wouldn't have dared to touch his decadent clothing; he always looked like he'd stepped right out of *Beautiful Wizards Monthly*. I, on the other hand, was usually a picture of potion-spotted skirts and the kind of frizzed hair that comes from toiling over a cauldron all afternoon – but I could hardly bring myself to care

about it. I hoped my customers, smudged and sweating themselves from honest work, would take my mess in their stride. It was Sorcerer Fancy-Pants who was the odd one out among good normal townsfolk, with his soft hands and his perfect, swooping hair. Gods, his perfect hair was so annoying.

The obvious answer was to hex his hairbrush.

The less obvious part was how to *get* his hairbrush. Luckily, it wasn't long before the eldest Hatherley boy knocked at the door (take that, Darian) and I was able to convince him, with the help of a handful of sweets, to take a small never-ending fire charm a little way down the street, set it off in a bin, and then run up to Darian for help.

As the sorcerer swished down the stairs with a huff of annoyance behind a convincingly frantic Johnny, I lurked just inside my own door. I felt like a bit of an idiot hiding behind the door curtain, but Darian didn't even glance at my shop as he hurried past, so that was something. After that, it was the work of moments to race up the stairs and slip into Darian's flat. Thank goodness he hadn't had time to lock the door.

Darian's flat was laid out more or less the same as mine, but he'd walled off the kitchen to just a tiny sliver at the back of the building, to make space for a larger, parlour-styled receiving room that curved

around the front, taking advantage of the windows. It made sense: since he didn't focus on potions, only pure magic, he wanted space for people to sit and be in awe of him, not for him to brew. But the bigger difference was that my shop felt homey and comfortable, whereas Darian's had exactly the kind of silks-and-velvets, I'm-better-than-you kind of decor you'd expect from him. I couldn't imagine anyone lingering here to chat over a cup of tea the way my customers did at my kitchen table.

I didn't have time to poke around his shop, though, as much as I would have liked to; instead, I headed to the door at the back that had to lead to his bedroom.

I only made it one step in before I stopped in shock.

"What is *this*?" I whispered to myself. I'd expected much the same style in here as the main room, something swanky and cool and straight out of a sorcerer's manual, but what I actually found was an enormous, tottering heap of books. Well, I say heap, but it was more like heaps, plural – every single surface towered with spellbooks, notebooks, even a few books that looked like the cheap adventure novels Meggy used to read to us around the campfire (with notes on the piratical inaccuracies). Even the bed – which I noticed *did* have black silk sheets, as I'd half-suspected – was littered with books, many pinned

open... with other books.

So Darian liked to read. Interesting.

But not what I was here for. I tiptoed around the stacks and made for the bathroom.

Wow, Darian apparently really *wasn't* the stuffy neat freak I'd assumed. Where the bedroom had bristled with books, the bathroom – as pokey as my own – was like a rescue home for lost toiletries. I lost count of the number of bottles before I even made it to the end of a shelf. Hair smoothing, skin softening, eye sparkling, it was all there in cream or lotion form. I'd known he was vain, but... this was something else. There were potions in here I hadn't even heard of.

And there, balanced on the shelf above the sink, with an honour guard of small shining bottles, was his hairbrush.

I made a grab for it, of course. I'd already lost enough time gawking at the mess – and really, who could blame me? He didn't *look* like a housekeeping disaster! – and I needed to get out of here before Darian came back and caught me red-handed.

Ah. Perhaps literally. A bottle snagged on my sleeve and toppled, smashing and spilling scarlet liquid all over the sink, the floor, and everything in between – that is, me.

Damn it. Couldn't the bastard have made it easy for me? Darian was sure to realise his whatever-it-was

lotion was missing, and I hadn't come here just to trash the place. Cause a little chaos, sure, but smashing stuff just felt a step too far. I snatched up the shattered base of the pot, which still held a few drops of liquid, then muttered a spell to sweep up the rest of the mess. There. Spotless. Spotless-er than it had been, to be honest, but I had to hope he wouldn't notice that.

At least the hex took no more than a moment to place. Once I was satisfied it had settled, I placed the hairbrush gingerly back on the shelf and made a quick exit.

I only paused to swipe a copy of *The Black Rider* from the bottom of the bed on my way out. What? Meggy had never got round to finishing it before she lost the book in a dungeon somewhere, and I wanted to know how it ended.

Ah, the sound of barely-contained rage in the morning is a wonderful thing.

I guessed my hex had done its work well, judging by the anguished sounds that were floating down from Darian's flat. Grinning, I slipped out of bed, dressed quickly, and made my way to the front of the shop to look as innocent as possible, in case he was swifter on the uptake than I had been.

Some fifteen minutes later, my door slammed

open.

“Elerie Bannon,” growled Darian. “What have you done?” He loomed in the doorway, a billowing storm of embroidered robes and perfectly-sculpted scowl. This would have been intimidating, if his normally raven-tinged tresses hadn’t been a bright, eye-searing, luminescent pink. It really was hard to overstate how well the hex had taken.

I smiled my most professional customer service smile. “Good morning, Darian! I don’t believe I’ve done anything unwarranted today – what seems to be the matter?”

“My hairbrush. You did something to it. Just look at me.” He gestured angrily at his head.

“I *did* think you looked a bit different today,” I said, thoughtfully. “It’s... an unusual choice, for sure.”

“Don’t give me that. I know it was you. You broke in, and you did something to my hairbrush, and...” He paused, frowning. “And you cleaned my bathroom floor, for some reason.”

“That sounds like a strange thing for a nice friendly neighbour to do. Are you sure?” Damn, I hoped I was keeping the giggle out of my voice.

He frowned harder, some of the anger going out of him. “But I thought... Is this not retaliation because I hexed your doorbell?”

“Aha!” I yelled, making him jump. “So you *did* hex my doorbell!”

“And so what if I did?”

“Well, so what if I hexed your hairbrush?”

A very unsorcerous groan burst out of him. “It’s like talking to a child.”

“Back at you,” I said, and resisted the urge to stick my tongue out.

Darian closed his eyes and pressed his lips together tightly. “Change it back,” he ground out.

Oh, this was *delicious*. “Ask nicely.”

“Can you change it back?”

I shook my head. “What’s the magic word?”

He sighed enormously, rolling his eyes. “Can you change it back, *please*?”

“Unfortunately not,” I said, with a smile that had won me a way out of more than one dungeon. “But I can certainly sell you some hair dye.”

The words that left his mouth would have made even Meggy blush.

I didn’t hear anything from Darian again for another four days, although the sparks that occasionally drifted down past my windows implied he was working hard to break my hex. Shame. The pink hair had suited him in a way I hadn’t expected, making his green eyes look softer, more “forest pool” than

“volatile reagent”. Probably the bastard just looked good in any colour, for all he preferred black.

I busied myself with my work, hoping a little more with each day that standing my ground on the hex front had been enough to make Darian back off. Certainly news of the feud had done wonders for my business, with more and more townsfolk popping in, ostensibly to buy cough pastilles or salve to have on hand, but really to ask me if I’d truly been the one behind the sorcerer’s new look. I took the credit without crowing (much as I wanted to); better if the town saw me as the wounded party here. He’d started it, after all. I’d just let him know I wasn’t to be messed with.

Unfortunately, that fourth day proved that he hadn’t quite got the point. I’d popped out to the bookshop – the newest edition of *Potent Potions* was out, and there was a recipe for a warming draught I wanted to perfect before midwinter – and returned to find Thom Taylor on the doorstep, squinting at the “Back Soon” sign on the door.

“Oh, Thom, I’m sorry. Was I expecting you?” I unlocked the door and waved him into the shop.

“No, lass,” said the old farmer. “Just thought I’d pop in and have you check on me cuts.” He waved his bandaged arm at me cheerily.

“Well, you wouldn’t have been able to wave like

that last week,” I smiled. “I expect you’re probably all healed up – come on through and let’s have a look.”

Thom eyed the hearth nervously as he came through the curtain into the kitchen. The fire crackled warmly; not a beastie to be seen.

“Don’t worry,” I said firmly. “I’ve had words with Darian and all that nonsense is done with.”

Thom chuckled. “Oh yes, I’ve seen the hair! Though...” He winced as I unwound the bandage. “I did see him outside your shop earlier. He looked like he was about to come in, but when he saw me coming down the street, he changed his mind and went upstairs.”

I didn’t know quite what to make of that, so I focused on bending over Thom’s arm for a closer look. “Hold still a second – yes, it’s healing nicely. You can leave the bandages off now, but I’ll grab you some salve to stop it scarring.”

Thom followed me back to the shop. “I didn’t mean to worry you, lass...”

“I’m not worried,” I lied. “Maybe he was coming to apologise, or maybe he’s finally backed down and decided to buy some hair dye. Maybe he was just walking past.” Maybe he was interrupted before he had a chance to unleash his nefarious plans.

“Mm,” said Thom, clearly as unconvinced as I was.

I handed him the salve and waved him off, then, as soon as he'd turned the corner, began to inspect every inch of my doorway. There was no trace of Darian's purple and black magic, even when I rattled the letterbox and flipped the doormat up; perhaps I was right, and Thom had interrupted Darian before he could be a dick. In the specific, that is. He was always a dick in general.

I made a mental note to offer the Hatherley boys some coins in exchange for keeping an eye on my shop door the next time I went out. Which would probably be for dinner; I could smell a faint waft of fried fish in the air that made me suspect the Cow and Clover had a special on.

Some hours later, full of the Cow and Clover's excellent lamb stew – they'd had no fish on, to my surprise – I made my way back towards my flat. I was feeling more content than I had in days, probably thanks to the rather large glass of wine that Vella, the gorgeous redheaded landlady, had pressed upon me as a thanks for the joy of seeing Darian's new hair.

My relaxing stroll was cut rather short by the appearance of a panicked-looking Kieran Hatherley.

"There you are, Miss Elerie," he panted. "I've been looking for you."

"What's up? Is it Darian?"

“No,” he said, grabbing my hand and dragging me into a run. “It’s cats.”

“Cats?” I asked, dumbfounded, but before he could answer we rounded the corner, and I could see that it was, indeed, as he’d said: it was cats. Dozens of them.

You could barely even see my doorstep for the mass of furry heads, bodies and tails milling in front of it. They weren’t fighting, as I’d feared at first, but cats of every colour and size jostled for position, meowing so loudly I could barely hear myself think, though I couldn’t tell what they were after; they seemed to be... rubbing their heads on the floor? I’d never seen cats behave like this. Even the tabby from down by the river was here, pressing in with the others, and I knew for a fact she hated people and felines alike. I’d only made the mistake of trying to stroke her once, and come away with a vicious slash for it that had taken two jars of salve to heal – so what on earth could have made her give up on her usual bitterness?

I paid Kieran what I’d promised him and sent him home, then pushed closer. As I stepped into the mass of cats – two more streaking up from behind me to join the throng – they parted slightly, rubbing their heads affectionately against my shins. The smell of fish, which had only been a waft earlier, now hung heavy in the air. I stepped carefully onwards through

the feline sea until I made it to the door, then turned around to address the cats.

“Shoo,” I said, feeling ridiculous. “Go on, get. I don’t have anything for you.”

A fat mackerel-striped kitten yowled at me plaintively, then returned to licking the doormat. Wait, licking the doormat? I bent down to pick it up – the mat, not the kitten, though it made a valiant attempt to cling on – and surprise surprise, a swirl of purple and black smoke puffed up from underneath it. The scent of fish intensified; so did the cats’ meows.

“Darian,” I muttered. That utter bastard. It seemed I needed to up my game.

First, though, I needed to deal with these cats.

“Go home. Yes, I know you’re adorable and I do love cats,” I added to one black, fluffy cat that had fixed me with a pleading stare, “but I do not need fifty-three of you lurking outside my door. Go and find your owners!”

I wouldn’t be able to break this hex as easily as I had the one on the doorbell; even with years of swordswomanship, I doubted I was strong enough to destroy a coir mat with my bare hands. Instead, I cast a containment spell I usually used to help me deal with infections, and the fishy smell in the air dissipated, trapped inside its limits.

The cats looked sad.

“Oh, don’t look at me like that,” I said. “If you’re cross it wasn’t real fish, take it up with Darian.”

For a moment, I almost thought the cats might head up the stairs, but instead, they began to wander away in twos and threes until there were few enough that I thought it was probably safe to unlock the door and slip inside.

I sank into my comfy chair by the kitchen hearth and let my eyes fall closed in a mix of exhaustion and frustration. When was Darian going to give up this crazy idea of his? I’d have to swallow my anger and go and talk to him again... but tomorrow. I simply didn’t have the energy to deal with him tonight.

“Meow.”

My eyes snapped open. Four cats stared up at me from the hearth rug.

“Oh, no no no,” I groaned. “Did you follow me in?” The cats didn’t answer, but one, a ginger the size of a small horse, rubbed his head against my boot. Oh. I still smelled like fish, even if the doormat didn’t.

I looked the cats over. Apart from the ginger gentleman, there was also a fluffy cream cat that looked like a cloud come to earth, a sleek long-haired black cat with piercing green eyes, and a plump calico I recognised as belonging to Beth Jenkins.

“Fine,” I grumbled, getting up. “I have some dried herring somewhere. You can have that, and then you

go home.”

All four cats tucked into the hard-won treats. After licking the bowl clean, Beth’s calico gave me an affectionate headbutt and when I held the door open, she sauntered out, carefree. The others gave me sad eyes.

“You don’t have homes to go to, do you?” I said, bending down to give the creamy-fluff cat a pat on the head. “I don’t recognise any of you.”

Well, I *had* been thinking about adopting a cat before all this nonsense with Darian had begun. I’d always wanted one, but I’d never had a permanent home before, let alone time to devote to a pet. Maybe I could get something good out of this ridiculous argument.

“Okay, fine. You can stay tonight.” Was it my imagination or did the cats look like they understood? “I’ll ask around tomorrow, and if it’s true that none of you have a place to stay, then maybe – *maybe* – you can stay with me.”

The cats were definitely happy with their victory. The orange and cream cats *boffed* my shins gently as I shut the door, then strolled off to lie in front of the fire. The black cat was more standoffish; it blinked at me once before joining its fellows.

“I guess I have cats now,” I muttered to myself. “Thanks, Darian.”

I got used to the cats quickly. After a week, no one had responded to the signs I put up on the town noticeboard or in my front window, and the three furry menaces showed no inclination to leave. I dubbed them Marmalade, Cream Puff, and – in a fit of humour, realising who the long black hair and green eyes reminded me of – Smokey, and they took to draping themselves around the flat with no regard for me. Marmalade and Cream Puff liked to stay close to me while I worked, and were happy to accept fusses from my customers, but Smokey was more independent; most days he disappeared for hours at a time, returning only when I closed the shop for the night, and he often startled me by streaking out of a room when I came in unexpectedly, like a kid caught looking at something he shouldn't. I'd often hear a clatter from the back rooms while I was busy serving someone, but when I went to investigate, Smokey would saunter out, tail waving haughtily, and I'd find no evidence of what had been broken; in fact, sometimes I could have sworn it looked tidier than when I'd left it.

It was a quiet week, the quietest since I'd moved in. Between customers, I broke the hex on the doormat, perfected the warming draught I'd been working on, and restocked the shelves with my winter

basics; then, bored and feeling slightly guilty for my accidental destruction in Darian's bathroom, fished out the shards of potion-stained glass from the drawer where I'd shoved them, and set to work figuring out how to recreate the potion from the dregs I had. It was something cosmetic, that was for sure, so I just had to narrow down the ingredients and fine-tune the formula. This was the kind of project I loved, and I was good at it; I'd saved one of my crew many times by reverse-engineering a poison or potion they'd accidentally ingested. This might not be so life-threatening, but I was still nervous Darian would realise it was missing, so it was with a great relief when I finally cracked the formula – some sort of hair-taming serum, if you were wondering – and hurried out to the garden to send it sailing gently through his open bathroom window with a flick of magic. Hopefully, he'd spot it lying on the floor and think he'd knocked it down himself; I crossed my fingers that he wouldn't notice I'd used a slightly different bottle.

Of course, that came a little too close to being nice to Darian for my liking, and I still owed him for the fish hex. It took me a while to think of something perfect, but when I did, it came to me in a flash of inspiration. Alderton was nearer the coast than I'd ever lived before, so the winter winds that came off

the sea were harsh and strong, and it was a small but slightly evil joy of mine to see the townsfolk walking along with their coats flapping wildly like an army of brightly coloured windmills. The wind problem didn't seem to affect Darian; if you ever saw him out in a gale, he was as neat as a pin, perfectly unruffled while everyone else battled with their outerwear. So vain. He probably had his coats pre-spelled for all kinds of weather.

All it took was a nicely-aimed hex when he passed my front door, and *flup*, his collar caught on the breeze and flapped up to smack him in the cheek.

I suppressed a giggle as he brushed it back down angrily, then pointed again.

Flup.

Darian spun round, fury on his face; I ducked below the window frame. Cream Puff meowed innocently above me, presumably all he could see, and I hoped against hope that he assumed he'd seen the swish of her tail and not an awkward, meddling healer crouching down. I crawled to the counter, then grabbed a jar at random and rose, trying to look like I'd just been fetching an item from a lower shelf. Phew. He'd headed off without spotting me.

I came back to the window, tweaked my hex wording slightly, and hit him again.

Flup. Flup flup flup. Every loose part of Darian's

flowing coat, from wide collar to deep sleeves to long, sweeping skirt, was flying back and forth as if it were trying to take off.

He looked like an embroidered bat.

I couldn't hold my laughter in; luckily, nor could anyone else in the street, so I wasn't alone in leaning out of my window to see more of the spectacle. Darian, on realising the whole town was looking at him flap-flapping his way along, let out a huff of indignation, tore his arms out of his coat, and stalked back up to his flat with the offending article wriggling under his arm.

Of course, that meant everyone saw the look of total scorn he threw me as he passed my shop. *Childish*, it said.

I snorted. He could talk.

The winds continued to rage all day and into the night, so I wasn't surprised when Marmalade and Cream Puff snuggled into bed with me around midnight to keep warm. Groggily, I looked around for Smokey, but when I beckoned him over to join us, he simply fixed me with a glare from the bedside table and swished his tail at me. Well, whatever suited him. He was by far the least cuddly of my new companions.

I must have drifted off again after that, because I woke with a start when something small and hard hit

me in the chest. Marmalade yowled. Half a year ago, if I was woken in the night I'd have shot up and readied my sword to return the attack, but now my reflexes were rusty after living the soft life, so I simply dragged myself up to a sitting position and mumbled, "Wuh?"

"You stole my book," said Darian Smoke, looming by the side of my bed.

"I... huh?" I rubbed the sleep out of my eyes, but there he remained, all six-foot-whatever of him, eyes flashing even in the dim moonlight. He looked sleep-rumpled, softer than usual, but still furious.

Was this a dream? Had I somehow hit my head before I fell asleep, and conjured up a pretend Darian Smoke in my bedroom, looking delectable in soft black trousers and a loose black shirt that revealed a tantalising hint of the dip in his collarbone, just where I'd like to... No. It wouldn't be the first time I'd had a... shall we say, *intense* dream about an enemy, but not even my imagination could do that much with standoffish Darian. Could it?

I reached out a hand and squeezed his forearm. Seemed solid to me.

"Don't do that," he said, jerking his arm away.

"Sorry," I said. "Just checking if this was a dream."

"You're supposed to pinch *yourself*," he said.

“And I’m flattered to think you dream of me, but no. You’re awake, and I want to know why you stole my book.”

“Your book?” I looked down at the thing that had hit me. *The Black Rider*. “Oh. I wanted to see how it ended.”

“You... what?” He looked bewildered.

“I’ve finished with it now,” I said, holding it out to him. “You can have it back if you like.” This conversation made no sense, but maybe if I was just nice he would go away? “Have you read it?”

“Yes, it’s one of my fa—” He cut himself off, shaking his head. “Elerie, this is theft we’re talking about. Another crime to add to your list. Let’s see.” He ticked them off on his fingers. “Breaking and entering, burglary, assault on my person—”

“The hair thing? You should thank me. It looked nice. Broke up this whole crow-thing you have going on. What *is* with all the black, anyway?”

“I dress as befits a sorcerer of my stature,” he huffed. “I’d rather that than... whatever you have going on.”

I looked down at my sleep-shirt, an old cambric thing I’d nicked from a prince once when he’d put us up after we rescued him from an ogre. It was a little see-through, sure, and it didn’t have all its buttons anymore, but it was comfy. “What’s wrong with how

I dress?”

Darian paused. “I will not answer that. Anyway, we’re getting away from the point.”

“Which is?”

“Crime!” He brandished *The Black Rider* in my face.

“Oh,” I said. “That’s rich coming from the man who broke into my flat in the middle of the night to throw things at me.”

“I was invited in,” he said.

“You most certainly were not!” Perish the thought.

He let out a low chuckle. “Oh, but I was. Not an hour ago, you even beckoned me into your bed.”

I snorted. “Like that would happen. Look, you’re very pretty, but you’ve been nothing but a dick to me since I arrived. Maybe *you’re* the one having inappropriate dreams.”

Darian’s eyes glimmered, and a slow smile crept across his face. “Meow,” he said quietly.

Oh, fuck. “You were the cat?”

He nodded.

“Great gods,” I whispered. “I’m going to need a drink.”

Wrapped in a dressing gown with a glass of whisky in my hand, the fire stoked and crackling in the hearth, I felt a little more collected as I faced down Darian

across the kitchen table.

“Right, start talking,” I said. “You turned yourself into a cat so, what, you could steal my stuff? Catch me undressing?”

Darian choked on his drink. “Certainly not. I just wanted to look around for clues as to what might make you move out. Did you not notice I made a point of never being in the room while you changed?” Actually, that was a good point. Marmalade and Cream Puff basically lived around my ankles. Smokey, not so much.

“Wait, the other cats—”

“Normal,” he said. “I promise. I thought you’d be more likely to accept me as part of a crowd.”

“What if I’d had a horror of cats and kicked you all out?”

“I knew you didn’t,” he said simply. “You’ve made a point to pet every cat you’ve met since you moved here. I’ve seen you cross the street to blow kisses at the most horrible mogs.”

That was true, but... “What, you’ve been stalking me since I arrived?”

He laughed. “Hardly. You were very... noticeable.”

Well, I was going to put that to one side to deal with later. “So where did my other cats come from? Did you steal them from someone just to trick me?”

Did you magic them into being? Do I have to give them back?" The thought made me surprisingly sad, for all I'd only had them a week. I liked having their little furry faces around the place.

"No."

"What do you mean, no? Cats don't just show up out of nowhere, Darian."

He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed; when he finally spoke, his voice was quiet, with a laugh in it. "I bought them, okay? I went to Newbridge and I found some pretty cats I thought you'd like, and I bought them for you."

I couldn't help the laugh that spilled out of me, even when I clapped my hands over my mouth. The thought of Darian setting out to find cats for me, cats I'd particularly like in looks and temperament, was more than I could manage. And then he'd inserted himself into their number...

"Gods," I managed to choke out between giggles. "You're even vain as a cat."

Darian's lips twitched into the shadow of a smile, but he fought it back down. "Can we get back to the topic at hand, please?"

"Sorry, sorry." I waved a hand at him while I brought myself back under control. "Look, I think we're probably even, aren't we? I count two hexes apiece, plus one minor theft on my part and one...

whatever you want to call the cat thing on yours.”

“And you stole my hair serum,” he added gravely.

“Hey, I returned it!” I said indignantly. “It took me ages to work that out, thank you. And besides, if we’re talking infractions, how many things did you break in here while you were a cat?”

He snorted. “I never left them broken. In fact, I fixed plenty of things, too. Your smallest cauldron was on the verge of rusting right through.”

Huh. I’d had it on my list to buy a new one. “Thanks, I suppose. That saves me a job.”

“It was a health hazard,” he said primly, but there was laughter in his eyes. “I don’t want you killing my customers.”

“Luckily I only use that one for annoying sorcerers,” I said. “Okay, so we also have one count each of... doing something weirdly nice for each other. Can we just leave it at that, and be normal neighbours?”

His face dropped back into that steely gaze. “No. You have to move out.”

Great gods, I was going to do this man an injury if he didn’t start making sense soon. “But *why*?” I said, letting all my annoyance bleed into my voice. “What threat am I to you? We don’t sell any of the same things, and I can’t imagine you want my customers bleeding all over your fancy-pants parlour. Why do I

bother you so much?"

"Because you unsettle me!" he cried, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "You make me want to stop and talk to you, and waste time I could be working thinking about you, and... and you make me want to buy you cats, for fuck's sake." He laughed sharply. "You're a distraction, Elerie."

"What?" Me? *I* was the distraction, when he swanned about looking all perfect and gorgeous and haughty all the time?

"I don't know if you've noticed," he continued, "but I trade on my reputation. You call me vain, but that's what works for me – silly little girls and blushing boys and lonely matrons, all tempted up to my shop by the chance to see the handsome sorcerer. I fix their problems while they daydream about fixing me, turning me into the perfect husband. I can't be distracted by... by interesting people. I have to focus on my customers. My skills aren't sorcery, they're making people want me enough to hire me. My business isn't magic, it's flirtation."

"It's shocking you're so bad at it, then," I said, putting down my whisky.

Now it was his turn to stare at me dumbfounded, as I rose from my seat and came to perch on the table next to him.

"You see, Darian," I said, reaching out to tweak a

lock of his hair where it curled against his jaw, “flirtation doesn’t involve magical pigtail pulling, oh no. It goes something like this.” I dropped my voice to imitate his. “Good morning, Elerie, you look nice today. My, you are so talented at making potions, I’m so glad you moved in. Have you read anything good lately?” Darian started to speak, but I held a finger up. “You’re allowed to have a life outside of work, you vain, stupid, beautiful man. You’re the most talented sorcerer this side of the mountains. No one’s going to stop visiting you just because you have a girlfriend.”

“Gods, Elerie...” Darian’s smile finally defeated him. “I don’t know what to say.”

“How about, ‘would you care to go for a drink sometime?’”

His eyes glittered darkly. “How about, ‘can I kiss you?’”

“Now you’re getting the hang of it.”

He surged out of his seat and, in one fluid motion, swept everything off the kitchen table with a curl of purple magic and bent me back in the most spectacular, breath-taking, heart-searing kiss I’d ever had.

Well, Darian Smoke always was dramatic.

Adie Hart is a lover of stories and the words behind them. With a background in the history and literature

of the Ancient World, and an abiding love of classic fairy tales, she writes fun and fluffy queer-norm fantasy rom-coms, many of them set in her District Witch world. This story stands alone, but if you enjoyed it, check out Unfinished Business in Indie Bites Issue 5! Check out her website [here](#) or find her on social media as @adiehartaauthor.

Soul Purpose

Zoe Shakes

CONTENT WARNING

This story contains sexual content.

I was ten years old the day I learned I had no soul. It was one of those uneasy days – the days you feel in your gills, the days where the water tastes stormy. Far-off waves churned my hair and a bitter current raged above, close enough to set my tail on edge. Every fin stood to attention; every breath cut deep. There was something dizzy in the water, something thicker than bubbles. I knew that. I could sense it. Perhaps, looking back, that's why I wasn't surprised when the statue fell from the sky.

Of course, back then, I didn't know it was a statue. All I knew was that an enormous something had rushed past and landed in the seagrass, sending a cloud of sand thwomping upwards. Its shape was lost as the sand rose, thickening through the water like a ghostly dune. When the shockwaves settled, though, I knew, almost at once what I was looking at. The

strange object was a person. At least, it looked like a person. It wasn't alive, wasn't breathing, and in place of skin it had smooth, grey rock. But, lifeless and unfamiliar as it was, it had a form like a merman's.

And what a man he was. I could see the stretch of stony muscles under his skin, trace the bow of his collarbone. He must, I supposed, have been made by someone. Somebody had laboured over him, chiselled him out right down to the tear ducts. He was a masterpiece, plain and simple, the handiwork of a genius.

So I couldn't understand what had gone wrong with his tail. At his hip, the tail diverged, sliced awkwardly down the middle. His tails – for there were two of them – were odd and gangling, articulated in jarring bends. I couldn't take my eyes off them.

By the time Grandmother found me, the sun had dimmed to red. Its face was a rippled spotlight in the water above, smudged like the blood that floats after a shark attack. The waves that had sent me my statue must still have been unsettled.

Grandmother frowned. "Where did you find this, then?" she asked.

"He fell from the sky," I said. "I think someone must have made him, don't you? They've done his tail wrong though, see."

As I pointed to his broken tail, Grandmother was

silent. Something in her eyes – though it was too dark to be certain – seemed hard. “It’s a statue,” she said at last. “People up above, they make them sometimes. Vanity, I call it. But that’s no tail he has. Those are legs.”

“Legs?” I asked.

And so she explained, telling me about the land above the water – the land where the sun lived, outside the cold cocoon of our world. Her voice rippled the waters around me, vibrating hard enough to make me shiver.

“They look like him, the people up there,” she said, and pointed to the statue, with one disdainful finger. “Humans, they call themselves.”

“So they’re the same as us,” I said. “Besides the legs, I mean.”

“I don’t know, dear.” My grandmother wrinkled her nose. “There’s all sorts of things different. All sorts of things people say.”

“Like what?”

“They believe differently, I suppose. All high and mighty, they are – think they’re far better than us.”

“Why, though? Why do they think they’re better?”

Grandmother sighed. “To them, dear, a mermaid is worth nothing. They think we’re all trying to lure them to their deaths, for one thing – just like sirens. And then, of course, there’s the fact that we don’t

have souls. They've no business dealing with soulless temptresses like us."

"Soulless," I repeated. I didn't know that word, not then – but I knew the feel of it, the weight of it in the water between us. "What does that mean?"

When my grandmother spoke now, the water trembled around her. But she explained it all nonetheless. She told me about souls – about how the humans could pass into another world when they died, leaving their bodies and entering eternity with souls intact.

"And that's why they think they're better," she finished. "They're chosen by God. They get to exist forever in this perfect world the rest of us will never see."

It's funny, because until that day I'd never thought about it – about life or death, a world beyond the one I'd always known. But right then, there was space for nothing else in my mind. The sea was only a womb. There were worlds cut off from me, and I felt their weight, heavy atop the surface of the sea.

"I don't have a soul," I said, and my grandmother nodded.

"But you have three hundred years," she said. "That's plenty long enough. Three hundred years before you die and turn to sea foam."

I didn't know where a soul was supposed to be, but

I felt its absence. It wasn't an absence like a missing organ; it was as though each cell was hollow, somehow less substantial than it had been before. My body was just a body, just skin, just scale. There was no magic thrumming in my blood, nothing eternal about the tissues of my heart. All I was was flesh. Already the sea foam strained at my seams.

All life begins in water. That's the backbone of evolutionary theory – before we had spines, or skin, we had water. We started there, all of us, inside one solitary cell. If you unpicked the stitching of that cell, you wouldn't see the pathways. You wouldn't see the billion potential species tucked away: no fins or fingers, no tails, no scales, no teeth. But in that water, the cell tore itself apart, doubled and trebled until it wasn't a cell at all. It was a creature – a semi-creature, at least, a fumbling towards consciousness – complete with heartbeat and breath.

That's how evolution works. That's how water works. Right from the beginning, when we learned to breathe, it was our air. It's the purest, most natural form of breath we have. It predates lungs, predates thoughts. The call to the oceans isn't in our bones or our blood – it's in our DNA, the first thrum of life we ever knew. To make for the sea is the most natural thing in the world.

Which is why I'm so bloody sick of this laptop.

I stare at the screen and imagine ocean salt on my lips. Perhaps I could convince myself that a beach visit constitutes a research trip – a marine biologist must, surely, spend time with sand between her toes. But this Macro-Evolution of Marine Organisms paper isn't going to write itself. Not that I've been doing much writing lately.

My phone – face-down on the table – buzzes. I ignore it.

There must be words, somewhere in my mind, words I could formulate into a sentence. *All life begins in water*, I write, but then I'm thinking of the ocean, how water would taste if you breathed it, and I'm thinking of my phone and the text I mustn't read.

Another buzz tickles my fingertips. I flip my phone onto its back, and the screen clicks on. The notifications are stacked deep: *Your step count is down from yesterday*, one says, *Nathan Green and three others reacted to your post*. And there it is, at the bottom: a text from him.

“Am I disturbing the genius at work?”

The voice comes from right behind and I jump, breath skipping from lips to lungs. For a second, I think I'm drowning. Then Nathan's arms are around me.

“You okay? You, like, leapt.”

He squats and spins the chair till I'm looking him straight-on. There's a moment – just a moment – that I think of telling him about the text. But then Nathan's pulling this cross-eyed face and I'm doing it back and we're laughing.

“How's it going, anyway?” he asks.

“Pretty tragic. Words just aren't happening.”

“You want a hand? I don't know much about fish or evolution or whatever. But I know English.”

“So do I.” I say. The words come out more defensive than I meant. I bite down on them, gritting my teeth as I flick open my thesaurus. Nathan strokes a silent apology into my hair.

“I didn't mean it like that. Bet you know more English than me already.”

It's sweet and all, but it doesn't help. I find the right page and scowl into the thesaurus. In my language, my words are full – everything I want to say is contained in them, packaged into sentence-shaped boxes. But the English rendering is clunky. It's fragile, my voice: so fragile that it struggles to make its way from thought to word, from one language to another. It dies on my fingertips, a half-idea poised against a keyboard.

“I can't work it out. There's this word I'm looking for. It's something like counterpart and something like analogue. But not those.”

Nathan blinks, then shakes his head. “You really do know more words than me,” he says.

He leans in for a kiss and, as our lips meet, the air tastes of him. I kiss him harder and I can’t get enough; can’t get over the thrill of breathing him in. There’s no word, in any language, to describe this feeling.

He pulls back and presses one last kiss into my forehead. “I’ll leave you to get on, then. You’ve got this.”

With a stroke of my cheek, he’s gone.

The moment he’s out the door, my phone vibrates, and there are all those notifications again: I should walk more, two new people have reacted to my post. And that text is still unread.

I want to go to the ocean, taste that water where my first cell was born. But instead I unlock my phone.

Hey Karla, it’s Adam. Hope you’re well. Just wanted to say congratulations. Can’t believe you’re getting married! Proud of you.

And he caps it all off with a smiley face.

Innocuous – almost. If that text had come from anyone else, I’d have typed out a reply already, sent it off without a glance. But this is different.

If he was saying those words out loud, would he have said them with the exclamation mark? Was he

smiling as he typed? Perhaps it was a nicety. That hope isn't more than a well wish, the polite thing you come out with when there's nothing deeper to say.

Or when you're afraid of saying more.

I turn off the screen, push my phone across the desk. *All life begins in water*, I type, but I've already written that and now there it is, twice. I type it again till I've almost filled a line.

Then I pick up my phone.

Thanks, I write. *How've you been?*

I don't look through the old texts that must still be there, don't scroll up, don't read a thing.

But I remember all the same.

Once I'd learned of the world above, nothing could keep me from it. Every day I'd surface the ocean, till I was dizzy from lack of air and my gills burned breathless. I'd stare at the sky, wondering at the colour of it. It was blue – I knew blue, of course I did – but this wasn't like any shade I'd ever seen before. And then there was the sun. In those early days, the sun was almost abhorrently bright: bold, a distilled block of light so strong I couldn't take it face on. This, I imagined, was what humans felt when they stepped into heaven. And I was already greedy for my taste of it.

So I needed a way out.

It's funny what you can hear when you're listening for it. A secret could carry in on a current, on the backs of salmon venturing into new seas. The ocean is full of unknowns – so enormous, so vast, that almost anything could exist within its folds. When I heard tell of a sea-witch – echoing in far-off whalesong, murmuring amidst shoals of eel – I followed the whispers, to the darkest, emptiest parts of our ocean kingdom. The sun bled through the water still, but it was thinner this deep down. The plants petered out the further I swam and the sand was pale like fish bones. But it didn't faze me. The ocean was a place of death, that's what I thought. A soulless place. It was a finite world, and we were all swimming in the foamy ashes of our ancestors. I could bear the dread of it all, because I knew I was leaving it behind.

And so I swam right up to the witch's hut. She looked so menacing that my blood seemed set to swim away from her, whether my body followed or not. Eyeing her teeth, full of half-eaten flesh, and her nails, long and jagged enough to fillet me with a swipe, I longed to turn back. But I didn't. I just braced myself and told her what I needed.

"What you want is legs," she said, after I'd finished.

"And they'll make me human?"

"They'll make you look human. You'll not be the

same as the rest of them – you won't actually have a soul yet. And you won't be able to speak with them."

"Why not?"

"Humans talk all different to us. They have to use their tongues to make sounds, you see. Imagine it – tiresome process, I reckon," she said. Then she seemed to catch herself, affixing a tight smile to her mouth. "Although I'm sure it becomes easier with time. Perhaps you'll be able to learn."

I thought of the easy way my voice rode the water, the echoes and vibrations that radiated from my body like whalesong. I'd always loved to sing – to feel the waters whistle around me, pulsing out the rhythm I set for them. But, right then, it didn't matter. My voice was another primitive hallmark of ocean living. If it was keeping me from a soul, I didn't want it.

"I'll learn to speak," I said.

"Of course you will," the witch purred, and the vibrations of her voice were smooth against my skin. "It's a good deal, lovey – I mean, just think. The moment you get one of those humans to marry you, you'll win half his soul. And you can't put a price on a soul."

Her voice was still soft, emanating in calm, languid ripples. But when I looked her in the eyes, there was nothing calm about them. She needed this deal. A tail, willingly given – to a woman in her

industry, that was invaluable.

But I needed the deal even more.

“Do we have an agreement, then?” she asked. “Are you saying yes?”

“I think I am,” I said.

When the witch spoke then, the waters roared gleefully, rushing like a current around my head. Frenzied, she told me what would happen next: how, by sunset, my new legs would grow in; how my gills would recede and lungs would sprout; how I needed to find land or drown. I nodded, but I wasn’t really listening. I gazed up, at the dark waters overhead, and fancied I felt the heat of the rising sun. Soon, the sky would be mine. My hair would dry in its warmth, my eyes would fill with that brilliant blue. I couldn’t bear to be apart from it a moment longer.

So when I left the witch’s cave, I started my journey at once. I headed out west, until I met a shoal of eels who assured me there was land to the south. Soon enough, I felt the tug of a far-off tide. As I surfaced at last, I never thought to relish the feeling of the sea on my scales. I just threw myself at the purpling horizon and the fat strip of sand ahead of me. This was sunset. This was land. I’d never felt closer to salvation.

The walls are lined with dresses. There are racks of

them – a hundred skirts skate the floor, hanging like lacy willow-branches. If I were a child, I'd love this shop. I'd explore it on my hands and knees, gaping up from between dresses with tulle scratching my widened eyes. But I'm not on my hands and knees. Nothing's quite so magical when you see it face on.

"Any of these take your fancy?" the assistant asks.

I go tip-finger from dress to dress, feeling my way round each: a pinch of organza, a scraping of voile. I hum and I thumb and I still don't know. When we reach an aisle of ballgowns, I pause. These dresses are elaborate and flouncy, exactly the type that a princess might wear.

But as I linger, the assistant shakes her head.

"You're tall, lovey – you need something that'll show that off. You'd get lost in a dress like that."

I nod, like the thought of getting lost is a bad one.

"What you want is a mermaid," she says.

"A mermaid?"

But there it is in her arms, almost before I've asked – a tight satin dress, cut into dramatic, unyielding curves.

"You like it?"

When I nod, the assistant pats me towards the mirror and draws a curtain behind us.

"All right then, lovey. Down to your undies, there's a good girl."

Good girl. I remember Adam calling me that – he'd get me to strip off, down to the undies and past the undies and good girl, he'd say. I'm sure he wasn't imagining me in a wedding dress.

The assistant hikes the dress over my body, and I watch her work her magic. She pulls me in, tugging my waist till it cinches tight.

"My goodness," the assistant says. "Don't you look a picture?"

I don't reply. I look like me, but not like me – a hyper-realised version, drawn in the back of a teenage boy's sketchbook. In this dress, you couldn't tell anything about the body underneath. The dress holds its own shape, clenches my flesh into its skin-tight fist. I'm a whole new woman with a whole new body – right now, you couldn't even be sure whether I had legs beneath this satin sheath. I could be anything or nothing, human or mermaid.

Something must change in my face, because the assistant beams.

"I see that smile," she says. "What do you think, then? Are you saying yes to the dress?"

I cringe as silently as possible. Then I nod.

"I think I am," I say. And the assistant claps and I smile, but there's nothing behind my eyes and there's no tail beneath my dress and I am empty.

While Nathan cooks dinner, he's asked me to look through wedding photographers. He's left me with his laptop and about 56 portfolios, all open in their tabs. I scroll through shot after shot of white dresses and cornfields, couples posed in airy soft-focus. This is the dream. I just don't know if it's mine.

When my phone pings, I don't mean to look at it. It's a reflex of the pupils, of the mind. But when I see his name, there's nothing reflexive about the way I click.

How's Nathan these days? Hope you two are having loads of fun together.

I wrinkle my nose and remember the fun I used to have with Adam – the bed we shared, the places he touched me, the way it made me feel more human than I ever had before. He's thinking about it too, probably: thinking of the way my body feels in the hands and the mouth, the nooks only a lover would know. Perhaps, even now, he's sitting on that Chesterfield in his living room, thinking about the first kiss we shared right there. He knows he shouldn't talk to an ex like this, but he isn't thinking about his wife right now – he's compelled to text me, fingers itching because he needs to do something with all that memory.

And I'm texting him back.

He's good. How about Flora? How's married life?

Don't ask that. Boring question.

Why's it boring?

You'll see, soon. It's all anyone asks you once you're married. As though that's the only interesting thing about you.

I get you. Feels like all me and Nathan ever talk about is wedding stuff.

I'm not texting anymore when Nathan steps through the door – but when he strokes my neck, I put my phone down sharpish.

“You found anything?” he asks.

“Maybe.” I pick up the laptop and pull up a tab at random. Nathan frowns.

“I wasn't sure about that one,” he says. “Bit staged.”

“Staged how?”

“None of it's candid.” He leans in, pointing to illustrate his words. “You need someone good at candids for a wedding. Not just portraits – weddings

are about capturing a moment, not curating one.”

He talks and talks, and his voice, I realise, is sharp. There’s an itch to it: something like a drone, something that sticks, something I feel in the teeth.

“See what I mean?” he goes on. “We need someone who cares about what’s real.”

The world above was colder than I’d imagined.

There’s a warmth about the sea – it wraps you up, clings like a shawl or a skin till you forget it’s there. When you’re a mermaid, you never notice the cold. You were born in it, born in a warm thrust of body-heat into the deepest cavity of the ocean. From the day you entered the world, you learnt to embrace the chill, breathe in time with the tide.

But above, there was only air. It wasn’t as close, wasn’t as pervasive. It glanced at the skin in breaths, like an inattentive lover.

The beach had been cold and Southend had been cold, and when I reached London it was cold too. But it was easy to be voiceless there, so I didn’t plan to leave. As all of us Londoners negotiated our way through the streets, we never said a word – even those who, I imagined, knew how to speak in this odd, cold world. We sat together on buses, but didn’t say a word. If we had names, we didn’t share them.

Although humans were quiet, I realised right away

that they did not speak my language. The first man I'd met, on the beach that day, had made a lot of harsh, awful sounds, twisting his lips this way and that to push his noise at me. I'd not understood a word of what he said. But I began to pick it up quickly. Mermaids have good brains for languages: we know how to speak with plankton and whales alike, how to interpret every click and rumbling the ocean has to offer. Soon enough, I learned to decipher the human chattering. Speaking like a human, though – thrusting my tongue about the way they did it, finding noise in my throat – proved impossible.

But, luckily for me, I didn't need to speak to use dating apps. I could talk up a storm with my fingers, text my sweet nothings into a chat-box. I flirted, teased, sent pictures on request. That was what the men went wild for – photographs of my body, posed and angled just so. They lapped up my pictures, sent me their addresses, and then the game was on.

As I sat on the 103 that day – it wasn't a long journey, but I still hadn't got used to walking – I was hopeful. Perhaps this time, I'd find a soul at last.

My phone pinged, lighting up with a text from my latest match, Adam:

You on your way, beautiful? Can't wait to see you.

Nearly there.

Adam replied with a string of hearts and I smiled. Most men didn't send hearts. Usually, I received drooling yellow faces, accompanied by demands for more photos. The man I'd been texting with yesterday had said he'd *changed the sheets* for me, told me he was *hard* for me, and sent me the photographic evidence. But not this man. *I'm making you dinner*, he said.

Did I dream you up?

You're the dream, gorgeous.

*I can't speak, remember. Bit sus that your dream
woman doesn't say anything.*

*Sometimes I prefer doing things that don't involve
talking.*

The bus pulled into the stop and I lifted myself, clinging to the pole and trying not to stumble. The legs bucked against me, so I staggered from one step to the next. I knew the weak spots in these new ankles, the sore parts where my calves strained. But no matter how well I knew these legs, I didn't own

them. I stretched my toes, and they still weren't mine. They were unseasoned by water, newer and fresher than the rest of my skin.

I stepped off the bus and hobbled the final stretch to Adam's door. He was waiting for me on the pavement, and he waved when he saw me. I waved back between steps – only lurching a little – and he frowned.

"Are you okay?" he called. "Did you hurt your leg?" Just like that, he was jogging towards me. I rested as he neared, waiting for him to reach my side. And, for a moment, Adam just stared. He looked me up and down, feet and legs and face, and I smiled. My legs burned, but when he looked at me I couldn't feel the pain. There was something stronger than that overtaking me, something tugging from within. I couldn't say where the sensation came from, exactly, which fibre of my insides it was tied to. But it felt like the first strain of a soul.

"Is it really sore?" he asked, and I nodded.

"I could carry you? If that's not weird, I mean."

I smiled and nodded again, beaming as he lifted me off my feet. Every part of my body that touched his seemed to sing. I was resonant, in the arm around his shoulder, in my hips where his fingers clasped. He carried me into the house and I stared into his eyes and I thought, *this is it*.

Normally, this would be where we'd head to bed. That was how it had worked out, those past couple of weeks – I didn't need to speak to seduce. But after, there'd been no talk of second dates, let alone of marriage. I'd slept in a different house every night since I came to London. And I'd found a soul in none of them.

But this felt different. We sat on his Chesterfield and sipped on wine, feeding each other forkfuls of the salmon he'd cooked. He talked and I listened, and we ate till we were kissing and our mouths were too busy for food. When we had sex, I understood for the first time how this act could spark a soul into being. His tongue filled the inside of my mouth like seawater. I inhaled and I was breathing, for real, for the first time in weeks. I'd never go back to the ocean, so long as I could live in his arms. It was a good thing I couldn't speak. If I could, I might've said "I love you" right then.

I've retreated to the library for research. I'd told Nathan I needed to get out – "I can't focus with all this wedding stuff everywhere," I'd said, pointing to our half-filled confetti bags. But even here, inspiration is flighty. I open a case study on the tails of aquatic mammals – but, as I read, I'm thinking about that mermaid dress. My mermaid dress has a mammal's

tail: its skirt flares out to the sides, not the front and back. But mermaids aren't mammals. They have gills, I'm sure – I can't imagine them surfacing for air, can't imagine them with lungs in their chests.

I get to my feet and search for a book, something new to inspire me. I walk through the science shelves, right into the biology section. But my feet don't stop there. I keep going, somehow, till I'm picking through the spines of mythology guides and lifting "Mermaids in Folklore" off the shelf.

I flick through a section about anatomy – there are no answers to my gills vs lungs question, but I keep skimming through. It's only when I reach a chapter on souls and spirituality that I start to read properly. I don't know why; there's not much biologically interesting about a soul. But I read anyway.

According to folklore, the book says, mermaids don't have souls. They marry their way into heaven; ride in on the coattails of the menfolk they woo. They look for men who'll share their souls, and all they have to offer in exchange are their bodies. It's prostitution, in the most literal way.

I don't know why the myth bothers me, don't know why it makes my legs go numb. But somehow, the thought makes me seasick.

We spend the evening reading through catering deals,

sending emails and updating our wedding website. Well – Nathan does, anyway. He stretches across me on the sofa, intermittently wagging the laptop in my face. I dispense opinions as required.

“How about this?” he says. “We could have pan-fried salmon, £30 a head.”

“I prefer chicken,” I say.

He takes the laptop back, pulls up new tabs.

“Should I pay the deposit on that DJ?”

“Sure.”

It’s déjà vu, this conversation, familiar even though we’ve never had it before. But then, everything about Nathan is familiar to me. The shape of him is traced under my eyelids; if I drew, I could capture him blind. I’ve staked out all his lines with hand and mouth, caught him in flesh memory. After five years together, every nerve-ending is tuned to him.

But sometimes I look at him too hard. Sometimes, when I’ve stared a while, something about Nathan feels off – like when you read a word ten times and can’t believe it’s real anymore.

“Do you think we’ll change?” I ask. “After we’re married, I mean.”

Nathan frowns. “I think we’ll have a lot less chats about flowers and napkin-rings.”

I remember how it was when we first met – back

when I looked at Nathan and knew nothing about him for sure. Back then, I hadn't learned to speak English properly, but that didn't put him off. We fumbled our way towards relationship, speaking only body language. I'd tell him things with the heat of my thigh, the murmuring of my fingertips on his wrist. And every night, I'd text with him till sunrise.

Where are you from, originally? he asked me one night.

Near Denmark, I replied.

So you speak Danish?

Something like that.

He longed to learn my language, even though I told him it was far too difficult.

It's an odd dialect, I said, but wouldn't tell him which one.

He began a Danish language course anyway, and came over on his free nights to help me with my English. I soon widened my vocabulary enough to write him whole letters, but I could barely even say his name: out loud, my English faltered. Somehow, fitting each sound into my mouth had felt impossible.

But the more time I spent watching Nathan speak – the more time I spent with his tongue flicking, fluent, through my mouth – the more I understood. There’s something intimate about a tongue. With his tongue, Nathan made me feel things that had me crying out – noises that sound just the same in every language. With his tongue, he whispered “I love you” that first time. When I finally learnt to say it back, no words had ever fit so well in my mouth.

I’d told him about Adam, right at the beginning. And I’d tried to explain why I was hurting – with what English I had – but the words I knew weren’t big enough. It was only a year later, when I was almost fluent, that I realised it had never been the language barrier’s fault. No words, however dextrously spliced together, could hold that kind of pain.

“I miss how we were back then,” I say. “Before we had to plan a wedding. Sometimes it’s like it’s all we talk about.”

“We got right boring,” Nathan says. “We’ll be worse once we’re married. Just chatting about mortgages and school catchment areas and the Telegraph.”

When I don’t reply, Nathan prods me in the nose.

“I’m joking, Karla. We’ll still be us after the wedding – we’ll just be a less stressed version of us.”

He’s right, of course he is. Souls aren’t lost and

gained at the altar. After we've said our vows, I'll be myself, still. I know that.

Except I don't.

We never talked about moving in together – but after that first night with Adam, I stopped looking for new places to sleep. We fell into a routine right away. Every morning he went to work, and every night, when he came home, he took me to bed. We'd lie there, and I'd marvel at how it felt – how skin-on-skin was anaesthetic to me. With his hands against me, I couldn't feel the strain in my feet.

"It always gets me, how different this feels," he said, once. "With you, I mean."

What's different? I texted.

"Everything. The way this feels – I've never had anything like it. With my ex—" He paused, frowned. "Is this weird? I mean, to talk about exes."

We can talk about anything.

"Well," he said. "Flora didn't believe in commitment. Never wanted to get married."

I believe in marriage.

Adam smiled. "I know. You've restored my faith in humanity."

You've restored my faith in humanity. There was no irony when he said it: Adam sensed no absence in me, hadn't the slightest inkling I wasn't human at all.

When he touched me, he didn't feel how empty I was.

The days rolled by, and all remained the same. As the sun lowered its head, it pinkened the clouds. As the clouds went pink, Adam came home.

In the evenings we kissed and had sex, and afterwards he'd cook dinner. Fish, most nights, because I'd told him it reminded me of home.

But time passed, and soon, when the skies pinkened, Adam wouldn't be home. He stopped cooking – it was too late and he was tired – so I started to do that instead, putting the fish fingers on every day as he stepped through the door. When I asked him for help with the dishes, he was tired still. But at night he woke up. He was always alive enough in the bedroom, always found the energy to get inside me. It wasn't the same though – not the same as it had been that first week. His touch didn't have that resonance anymore – his hands on me didn't reach deeper than my skin. My body was all that he saw, and it was hollow.

So it wasn't a surprise when he sat me down one day, while the fish fingers were still in the oven.

"There's something we need to talk about," he said.

I said nothing.

"It's not your fault," he said.

I said nothing.

“It’s Flora – she’s changed her mind, she says. She thinks she does want marriage after all. She wants me back.”

He talked and talked, until his words bled into one another and I could hardly listen anymore. I longed to scream, to feel the noise rip out from my body in one thunderous explosion. But my useless tongue made not a sound.

“We’re soulmates, her and me,” he said. “Always have been. I was just too blind to see it.”

Soulmates. I knew, then, that he was never going to share his soul with me – no one wants a soulmate who can’t offer you a stake in their own. I’d never seen myself so clearly: I was a parasite, a soulless temptress, a user. Adam was discarding me, and it was everything I deserved. It was hopeless, this game I was playing. Even if I could woo a man with my body – my fake body with its fake legs – no man could ever love me just for that. You need something below the surface to be loved. And all I had was flesh. My cells didn’t feel hollow anymore – they felt dense, so shrunken that there was no room for a soul in even one of them.

When I stood, it hurt like hell but I didn’t care. I packed up the few things I had and made for the door. Adam didn’t try to stop me.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and pressed a wad of cash into my hand.

As I walked out, I smelled the fish fingers burning.

With this pain in my legs there was no time for wandering, so I headed straight to the station. I typed the words I needed into my phone – *I want to go to the sea* – and went to the ticket-office.

Twenty minutes later, I was on a train to Southend.

Darkness by the beach felt different to darkness in London. It was deeper – away from the smog and street lamps, the black sky was pure. It reminded me of darkness under the sea, how thick and empty everything looked at night, fathoms away from city-lights. God, how I’d missed the ocean. I ran to it, all the way down the beach, and it wasn’t enough. It was so far from enough. I threw myself at the waves as they recoiled, splashed and scrambled till I was deep enough to swim. But even with my head underwater, I couldn’t breathe it in. I could taste salt on the roof of my mouth, but I couldn’t feel it on my gills. It jarred between my legs and my skin tanged, something like sea foam frothing at my nerves. I felt it, for a moment, the foam pouring from the cracks in my lips, the corners of my eyes. But the longer I stayed there, the less I felt. My lips were cold, my legs were colder. Perhaps, if I was lucky, they’d fall right off.

When I get home from the library – for the fifth time this week – Nathan has a surprise for me.

“We’re going to the beach,” he says. “You deserve a treat, after all that studying.”

Which would be true, if I actually had been studying.

I smile and say, “you’re too good to me”, and don’t tell him the truth: that, for this whole week, I’ve done nothing but read about mermaids. So we get in the car and set off. By the time the sun sets, we’ve arrived.

It’s nice, walking with Nathan. There’s something calming about it: the sand underfoot, the waves tickling the shore, his hand in mine. He catches me staring out to the horizon and shakes his head.

“You’re not thinking about going in?”

“Feels a waste to come to the beach and not get your feet wet.”

He prods me at the waist, right where my tail would start if I had one. “You’d freeze your legs off. And you know how much I love your legs.”

Adam always used to talk about my legs. He fell in love with the gap between my thighs, the hard, fluting shell of my calves. He’d stroke there, follow the tendons with his fingertip. His nail drew invisible lines: if I were a pencil sketch, it would be my outline; the curve he drew would mark my edge. But humans

don't have edges like that. Nothing's quite so clear cut.

Nathan prods me again, and this time I can feel the worry in it, something uneasy stabbing at my side.

"You sure you're all right? You've been quiet."

"I'm fine."

"Just stressed?"

"Not at all."

"Not about the wedding?"

"Why would I be stressed about the wedding?"

"Most people get stressed about weddings."

"I'm not thinking about the wedding."

"So what are you thinking about?"

"Souls," I say. And I'm surprised I said it, actually, because I thought I'd forgotten how to talk to him like that, about real things. But here I am. And Nathan's still holding my hand.

"What about souls?" he asks.

"I don't know." I search for words that won't circle back to mermaids. "I guess it all comes down to evolution."

He raises a brow. "Evolution?"

I stare out at the waves, that watery womb from which all life unfolded. Back then, in the beginning, I shared a cell with Nathan, with Adam, with all the mammals and mermaids that have ever lived. I fix my eyes out there, pull my mind back – to that time

before plankton were divided from people, when all we had was DNA and we shared every strand.

“We all come from a common ancestor, right?” I say. “Like, generations ago, our species wasn’t human.”

“Right.”

“Well, there came a point where we definitely were human. We had civilisations and language and fire, and we were 100% people.”

“Yeah,” Nathan says.

“Thing is,” I say, “it’s really tricky to know when that point was, exactly, when it shifted. And that’s important, when it comes to souls. Because with a soul, either you have one or you don’t. It’s binary. You can’t have half a soul.”

“I suppose.”

“So,” I say. “Perhaps that’s when it changed.”

“What changed?”

“Us. When we stopped being animals, when we became people. Maybe that’s what it is, to be human. It’s not about cooking our meat or developing a writing system. It’s about having a soul.”

Nathan’s quiet for a moment. It’s hard to see what his face is doing in the low light, and it’s crazy how quickly sunset turns black.

“Right,” Nathan says. “So why’s all that got you upset?”

I shrug. “I’m just confused, I think. I’ve been reading, and now I’m not sure I have a soul at all.”

“Is that so bad?”

“Of course it is.”

“Why though? Perhaps you don’t have a soul,” he says. “It doesn’t matter either way, does it? Not exactly like it has any bearing on your life.”

But of course it matters. No one can evolve a soul for themselves. We crawled from the water, grew ourselves lungs and legs just so we could reach the light. We hoisted ourselves up and prayed, one day, we could grow souls to go alongside our new feet. Because no random mutation can spark a spirit. No degree of natural selection gets you to heaven. A soul is divine, bestowed, ordained. To seek your own is futile.

I stop there, on the beach, pull my hand from Nathan’s.

“You okay?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

I think of the mermaids, begging souls from their men. They sacrifice all they have – their voices, their legs, their homes – and hope it’s enough. Because they have to. If they don’t give up their voices and their bodies, they’re finished. I think of Adam, of my wedding dress, of soulless mermaid temptresses and of myself.

“You sure?” Nathan asks. “Are we good?”

I nod. “Absolutely.”

Nathan kisses me and I kiss him back and we are good and I love him. But I don’t kiss with my tongue.

And when we pull apart, I’m looking out to sea.

“I think I will go for that swim,” I say.

I stare at the waves, thick with oxygen, listening to them burble as they suckle on the shoreline. And once I start for the ocean, I don’t turn back.

Humans begin aquatic – in the womb, we have tails and gills. We go through our own evolution, the nine months we wait to be released. Gills disappear, tails give way to legs. But something in us remembers our origin. We know where our flesh started, the shape it took when it first had form. We know we were made to breathe water.

Of course, we can’t breathe it now. When it fills our lungs, our bodies don’t know where to find the breath. There’s life in water, enough to kickstart all of creation.

But humans have forgotten how to use it.

So I only stay in the ocean a minute, swim until the cold gnaws my toes. Then I make for dry land. As the wind blows the wet from my skin, I know I’m home.

I’ll forget the ocean, one day, just like everyone else. Everyone gives up their gills – some do it in the

womb, some in a witch's cave. I'm just going about it slower than most. I'll dry off, spend the night in a warm bed, and when I wake up my skin won't taste of salt. On my wedding day, I'll breathe the air just fine. Nathan and I will wear white clothes and say our vows in church, taking photos in a cornfield far from the seaside. When it comes to it, we'll make our life on land. Our legs aren't made for ocean-living, our lungs can't hold the water. The life I choose is built on solid ground.

But all life begins in water.

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Adventures in Gardening and Other Uses for Fire- Breathing Begonias

Ceril N. Domace

The unfortunate truth about enchanters is that they're much more vulnerable to side effects from their magic than other spellcasters. A wizard may practice the darkest crafts for research, but hold their heads high above those dark waters. A sorcerer may be tempted by the gods and demons whose power runs through their blood, but not be beholden to the loyalties of their ancestors. A witch may know all the secrets of the earth, but the darkness below holds no dangers unless they dive in.

An enchanter though... each spell they cast latches onto them. Lingers around them. Infects them with itself for good or ill. They build up over time,

influencing each other and their caster. Even an enchanter who only uses their abilities for good things, to help and heal or to provide protection against the darker forces of this world, will find themselves beholden to their magics – and that’s a problem.

See, spells latching onto enchanters? That’s not a metaphor. An item becomes enchanted when a bit of magical power is put into it and given a job to do. The problem is, items can’t actually produce any power themselves, so that power has to come from somewhere.

Wizards bind spirits or elementals to items, witches brew potions that grant items enough life and sentience to produce their own magic, and sorcerers ask their extraplanar relatives to help them out a bit. Enchanters, though, don’t have any of that. They have to use their own magic to power an enchanted item and that only works for so long before the enchanter starts to go bonkers from exhaustion. This is one of the reasons that there aren’t thousands upon thousands of enchanted items flooding the markets and battlefields of the world: there simply aren’t enough enchanters to make such a thing feasible, especially over the long term.

But going back to my original point, it’s not generally a problem when an enchanter listens to their

bodies and limits how much magic they're using at one time, but when they ignore their own limits... Well, it starts with burnout. It gets worse after that.

Burnout, for an enchanter, is worse than it is for normal people. As I understand it, burnout happens when they've stretched themselves too far. Their focus, and thus their ability to control the enchantments they've cast, decreases exponentially. This usually starts with the smaller charms acting up, like a broom with a cleaning enchantment breaking windows instead.

Now, in case you judge these poor rural villages for not putting two and two together, you should know that most of us connect the dots right about now, when the quality-of-life enchantments around the village start acting like a cat that's got into the catnip, and folks realize no one's seen the enchanter in a while.

There's a sweet spot there, where the villagers can hopefully find the enchanter and convince them to take a vacation, but it's incredibly narrow because the second major side effect of enchantment-related burnout is delusional paranoia. If there's one thing a paranoid person with access to arcane abilities beyond the ken of mere mortals doesn't like, it's a hoard of folks descending on their house to check in on them. That's when the enchanter turns their power toward

self-defense. From experience, it's rather terrifying when a half dozen flying forks start shooting acid at anyone who gets within a hundred yards of their maker. Worse still when your village isn't much more than a hundred yards end to end, so you've got to abandon your homes for your own safety.

After a certain point, an out-of-control enchanter isn't something the average village can take care of themselves. In fact, there aren't many folks capable of handing someone like that their rear end, so there's really only one option. We have to outsource.

Which is where they come in.

"They" being "Clarkfowler's Exterminators, Wranglers, and Travelling Librarians". They're the premier – and only – force willing to take on the various monstrosities and magical afflictions that plague the fifteen kingdoms at a reasonable cost, all the while providing top-quality education and reading material to anyone who wants it. In the two centuries since Clarkfowler emerged from the wilderness with her self-propelled wagon and her books, her company has become essential to the safety and wellbeing of people all over the fifteen kingdoms. They've negotiated countless treaties, broken thousands of curses, and eliminated more threats to the safety of sentient beings than anyone else in this or any lower plains.

To put it bluntly, they're the best shot that folks have at safely dealing with the dangers of this world. They're heroes that have inspired thousands of songs, hundreds of books, and enough legal precedent to make a lawyer salivate.

I've had the pleasure – or perhaps misfortune would be the better word – of working with them before. Once, when I was a little girl, because a nearby wizard lost control of the hellhounds they summoned to heat their spa, and twice as an adult to deal with beetle infestations. No offense meant to them, of course, since their staff is never anything less than completely professional, but one only deals with a pest control company when one has a pest to deal with.

And since the pest in question this time was someone I grew up with, it was even less pleasant than usual. Ms. Siobhan said someone needed to write this report for Clarkfowler's records, which is good I suppose. Alfie ought to have someone who really knows him to tell how it all went down.

After all, he just wanted to help.

The first thing you should know is that the village of Bhacker's Break is small and out of the way, even for a small and out-of-the-way village. It's too far from the major cities in the surrounding kingdoms to see much trade and barely large enough for a weekly

market, if I'm being honest. Our only inn, the Cat at the Crossroads, produces a fine blueberry ale, but its food is middling at best and the wine may as well be vinegar. We don't even have a smith since Felicianna Broadbeard married that gnomish fellow a few years back and popped off to Dwarrenberg to have a family. The one thing we did have was a particularly skilled enchanter by the name of Alfred Johannes Preston Roger Schmidt – Alfie to his friends. Not that there are many of those these days, mind you.

Alfie and I grew up together. He was the son of the former village head and I was the daughter of the local alchemist. Since he had no fondness for leadership and I didn't care for alchemy, we traded inheritances, or so he liked to say. I was elected as the head of the village after his father retired and he became my mother's apprentice. It was... unorthodox, but it worked for us.

My mother always said that Alfie was a better enchanter than alchemist and he's proved that a thousand times over the course of his career. All the flowers in his garden glow under the starlight, and he lines the village square with them during festivals so everyone can dance until dawn turns them back into normal flowers. Local children learn the stories and history of our village from the puppets he taught to sing and dance. The farms and gardens in the area

haven't had to worry about bugs or animals eating their produce in decades.

In every way he could, he made life easier for folks, until things started going wrong.

It all started with the autumn festival. We'd had a successful harvest, the most successful anyone could remember, and the village council and I wanted to celebrate. We hadn't expected to get much of a harvest at all, what with those bandits to the west stealing everything that wasn't nailed down and burning everything they couldn't carry off, but we'd been lucky. Between Alfie's enchantments and the local hunters, we'd managed to drive them off before they could get to our fields. We even took in some of the survivors from the surrounding villages.

It all went downhill from there.

"How many managed to get out of the village?" Garrett Talthen hadn't changed at all since my last encounter with Clarkfowler and her company a decade ago. His elven blood was doing him plenty of favors there. Between his resplendent armor, the dashing blue of his cloak, and the delicate curl of his hair, he could've been a knight out of a bard's song. Gods, his hair was even the same shade of red it had been when I first saw him as a little girl.

I sighed and rubbed my forehead. "Just the

refugees and a handful of folks that were decorating for the festival.” The others hadn’t believed me when I said we should evacuate the village before we went to confront Alfie. They said I was being too paranoid, that he’d never hurt us this early in the burnout process.

The fools. It was their fault that so few folks had managed to escape before Alfie truly lost control of his enchantments. It’d been a week and there wasn’t a single house in the village that could hold out for longer than that without another source of food and water.

They should’ve listened to me. I’ve known Alfie longer than anyone left in the village and if there’s one thing I know about him, it was that he was a proud bastard. He’d probably been dealing with this for months, maybe even since before the bandits started to attack. He’d been joking last winter that his age was finally starting to catch up to him and that he might not make it to the next harvest like he wanted.

I should’ve known then. I should’ve said something.

Gods above and below, we were so lucky that Clarkfowler had been nearby. With the hellhound, it had been a month before we could get someone down to deal with it and we’d lost twelve fields and four houses to its reign of terror.

The little gnome at Garrett's side, Siobhan, hummed and tapped her chin with the end of her quill. Like most gnomes, she barely came up to my waist and had furry ears that never stopped swiveling and twisting about like an owl listening for prey. "So we've got roughly two hundred folks trapped in their houses and the inn, and the enchanter is holed up in his house, correct?" She scribbled something in her notepad when I nodded. "I see. We'll have to make evacuations a priority then. Aleksandr?"

"Sweet Potato and I can handle that." The voice came from the top of Clarkfowler's wagon, where a muscular human named Aleksandr sat with his cat. He was a newcomer to the company, but Garrett assured me that he and his cat, an enormous ginger tabby named Sweet Potato, had more than proven themselves since they'd joined the company. "Can't we, boy?"

Sweet Potato yowled loud enough that it would've deafened me if I weren't most of the way there already, and aggressively headbutted Aleksandr's side. Somehow, the man managed to not get bowled over, despite the fact that Sweet Potato was taller at the shoulder than he was. I assumed it was only possible due to the death grip his prosthetic hand had on the wagon roof.

"I'll man the wagon," Clarkfowler said cheerfully,

popping out from behind Garrett's broad and cloaked shoulders like she'd been there the whole time. She, too, hadn't changed since I was a little girl, although her green hair had acquired a handful of leaves and flowers growing through it, which lent credence to my theory that she was a dryad of some kind. "Siobhan and I can break the more troublesome enchantments while we're going, which should make this whole process easier."

I watched them discuss this, breaking down their plan to save my village and my oldest friend like they'd done it a thousand times before. Garrett would lead the charge, holding off the flying tools, living scarecrows, and enchanted plants holding the village captive. Siobhan and Clarkfowler would, as they said, direct the wagon around the village and break as many of the enchantments as they could while Garrett protected them. Aleksandr and Sweet Potato, meanwhile, would handle the actual evacuations while the enchanted items were distracted.

It was impressive; they were a credit to their field. It was just a pity that I'd had to call them at all. Alfie wasn't the only one who'd let age catch up to them.

Ten years ago, I'd have noticed that Alfie wasn't doing well long before things came to this. He'd danced with burnout before and each time I'd been there to pull him back from the edge. I'd been the one

to tell the rest of the village council to shove off until Alfie could cast without hurting himself again. The bandits and the harvest had gotten me all muddled up this time and—

“Ms. Lillian?” Siobhan’s voice broke through my mental fog and I blinked down at her furry, smiling face.

I quirked up the corner of my lips in a way that could’ve generously been called a polite smile. At my age though, I’d been told it looked much more like a constipated grimace. “Yes, deary? Did you need something?”

“I just wanted to let you know that we’ve got the junior librarians setting up a triage station in the biology section. Do you want to wait there? I’m sure the rest of your people would appreciate it.”

I couldn’t hold back a snort. “What good would I do there?” Pushing myself to my feet was more a difficult affair these days than it had been thirty years ago – especially since I was sitting on the ground instead of a stool or convenient boulder – but my knees and back limited their complaints to cracks, groaning, and other forms of quiet misery. “I’m the village head and it’s my job to see this kind of thing sorted out. I’m coming with you.”

Garrett wavered and his eyes darted between me, Clarkfowler, and Siobhan. Whatever silent

conversation passed between the three of them didn't seem to please him or pull the frazzled look from his face, but he took a deep breath and put on a dazzling smile. "Ms. Lillian, in the kindest way possible, this isn't going to be like the acid beetle infestation we put down the last time we were here and you're not exactly..."

He trailed off and I stared at him expectantly. I knew where he was going with that remark, but I wanted to hear him say it. If anything, watching him struggle with how to politely phrase "you're older than dirt and your knees are louder than a dwarf's battlecry" was the only good part of this whole rotten affair.

Sadly, Clarkfowler ended my enjoyment before it could get that far. "Oh, sod off, Garrett, if she wants to come she can. There's plenty of room on the back steps of the wagon and she can hide inside if anything tries to spit fire at her."

Garrett let out a high-pitched garble that *almost* sounded like "criminally liable" before Siobhan reached up for his hand. The strange sounds pouring from his mouth stopped with such abruptness I almost wondered if the hearing charms Alfie had cast on my earrings were acting up.

"She'll be safe, Garrett," Siobhan said. "The wagon won't let her fall off if we ask it to keep an eye

on her.” She didn’t look any happier than Garrett at the idea I’d be tagging along with them instead of hiding away inside, but at least she wasn’t fighting me about it.

“Oh, pishposh,” Clarkfowler loudly declared. She waved a hand in front of Garrett as if it would drive all his concerns away. “She’ll ride up front with us. Someone needs to hold the toolbag while Siobhan and I deal with the enchantments.”

Before Garrett could open his mouth to argue some more – and really, this was the least polite interaction I’d ever had with them, I ought to mention that in the payment negotiations – Aleksandr cut in. “Not to cut in on this little debate you’re having, *but...*” He jerked a thumb over his shoulder, toward the village, and my weary heart leaped into my throat. “I think the inn is on fire.”

I inhaled sharply and stumbled forward, one hand out like that would stop the flames. There were a hoard of fiery toy fairies surrounding the Cat at the Crossroads, floating and dancing around like the creatures they were based on and lighting up the thatch each time they touched down. Gods, Alfie’s containment spells must’ve worn off – those were supposed to be hidden away until it was time for the midnight maypole dance. That, or Alfie had set them loose. I didn’t know which was worse.

Garrett let loose a stream of unfailingly polite words that nevertheless had the air of violent cursing, grabbed me around the waist with one hand, snagged Siobhan's collar with the other and unceremoniously dumped us on the wagon bench. "Get going," he ordered loudly, practically leaping into the saddle of a giant stag that he'd tied to the wagon. "Aleksandr—"

"On it!"

And they were off, Garrett on his stag and Aleksandr on Sweet Potato, headed straight for the inn.

I watched them go distantly, the way one does when a wagon tips over in the road or a horse breaks its leg. The sort of situation where I couldn't stop whatever was happening, but I couldn't stop looking either. My breath was coming in sharp bursts, too light and too short to do me much good, and I chided myself. Now was not the time to panic.

Fortunately, Clarkfowler and Siobhan agreed with me, because we were off like a rabbit mere seconds after Garrett, Aleksandr, and Sweet Potato left and I didn't have time to panic anymore. Clarkfowler pulled a heavy sack from the depths of her skirt, plopped it into my lap, and let out a loud whoop. "Come on, you two. Aleksandr said he'll steal me a copy of *Galribious's Guide to Gallant Gadflies* if we can finish this before teatime!"

What followed was chaotic to say the least. Much closer to the hellhound incident than either of the beetle ones, and yet as smooth as a well-tended clock.

While Garrett cut down Alfie's jury-rigged defenses around the village – from flying silverware, creeping vines, and flaming flowers to the toy fairies, scarecrows, and rogue gardening equipment – Aleksandr and Sweet Potato prowled the edge of the conflict, clearing each house and taking the frightened inhabitants, one by one, to the safety of the wagon. Clarkfowler and Siobhan logged everything they saw, taking notes about the particulars of each enchantment and shouting theories to each other about how each effect had been achieved. Once they had a thorough idea of what they were facing, they turned to me.

More accurately, they turned to the bag I was holding. From it, they pulled a fantastically varied collection of artifacts such as I'd never seen. Iron chains to bind the toy fairies, bottled water elementals to put out the flames, and endless books of incantations to confuse and undo Alfie's work. Somehow, they even managed to get the innkeeper's good porcelain tea set to behave and stop throwing scalding water at us without breaking it, which would make her weep with joy when she found out. She'd been hoping to show it off at the festival.

I honestly couldn't say how long we worked, but I do know that the sun was high in the sky when we started and edging close to the horizon by the time the bag in my lap was empty and all but one of my scattered flock was safely inside the endless depths of the wagon library. It was time to address the source of all this trouble instead of just treating the symptoms.

The wagon rolled to a stop twenty feet from Alfie's house – my childhood home, which had passed into his hands when we traded inheritances – and our eclectic group gathered in front of it. Once, the cheerful red shutters and the blue plaster walls had been as comforting to me as my own bed, but right now I couldn't even see them.

Clarkfowler considered the path before us, which was currently hidden behind a ten-foot wall of begonias, roses, and other assorted plants that spat fire, ice, and acid whenever we got too close. Behind those, and visible only through tiny gaps in the wall of flowers, was the rest of Alfie's garden. I followed her gaze and shuddered as I fingered the burns in my skirt. When these troubles began last week, those flowers had only been waist-high, and still not even the miller or butcher could chop through them. The miller's son had such horrible burns from the effort that I'd insisted he be treated before I even arranged for someone to contact Clarkfowler.

Sweet Potato let out a curious warble when Aleksandr got off his back and chittered loudly at the flowers. Aleksandr answered in kind as he ran a hand through the cat's tangled and stained fur to clear out the bits of debris that had gotten caught in it throughout today's adventures.

Finally, Clarkfowler hummed and dug deep into one of the pockets hidden within the folds of her skirts. "Well, that makes things slightly more difficult." She turned toward Garrett and tossed him something silvery. "Try and collect some of the acidic ones, won't you? I want to see how he did that."

Garrett rolled his eyes, but slid what I now saw was a chain over his head. "Of course, I'm sure it'll be a breeze to grab them without getting a face full of acid."

"That's the spirit," Clarkfowler said cheerfully, pulling more of the chains free from her seemingly bottomless pockets. Each of us received one in turn, even Sweet Potato, whom Aleksander was now actively holding back from investigating the begonias. The gears inside his prosthetic arm whirled and hissed from the effort and his heels were making small trenches in the dirt as he was slowly dragged forward by a cat determined to let curiosity kill him.

"What is this for?" I asked carefully, eyeing my chain. It felt heavier than it should. Warmer too, like it

had been hanging around my neck for ages already and pulled all the warmth from my skin. “Will that help him?” No matter what Alfie had done, I still didn’t want to see him hurt. He was sick and he needed help, if possible.

Clarkfowler nodded as she slid her chain over her head. “It’s a nullifier. I won them off a fairy in a poker game. It should, theoretically, disrupt the enchanter’s connection to the items he’s enchanted, if we can get close enough to him.”

Garrett narrowed his eyes. “How close?” She smiled knowingly, and Garrett groaned. “We’ll have to touch him, won’t we?”

Dread filled my stomach and I swallowed back the sharp comment that had been on the verge of slipping past my lips. Alfie had been enchanting that garden since the day my mother first taught him how to put his magic into things. Each flower, root, leaf, and vine there was riddled with his magic and was practically an extension of him by this point. Worse still, since plants were living things, he only had to put the smallest amount of his magic in any particular plant to get truly staggering effects, like the feverfew that spat fire or the chamomile that put people into an endless sleep. Getting through it would make all the effort we’d put into getting here look like turning a page in a book, if we weren’t smart about it.

“Yep!” Clarkfowler’s pointed ears wriggled and she clapped her hands as she spun to face me. “All right, Ms. Lillian, is there anything we should know before we get going?”

It took a moment for it to hit that she was talking to me. “Well... nothing in particular,” I stammered, smoothing my skirts out with shaking hands. The thought of getting through Alfie’s garden made me want to run far more than any of the events of the past week, but at the same time I wouldn’t have left for all the gold in all the realms. This was my job and he needed me. “The entire garden is enchanted within an inch of its life, but I’d particularly avoid the reagent section. He spent the better part of his thirties encouraging the plants there to grow faster and stronger for the alchemy shop.”

Which, in hindsight, should’ve been something I discouraged no matter how powerful it made his potions. He’d had a good reason for making the begonias shoot fire, but I struggled to remember what that was now that they were shooting fire at *me*.

“Wonderful,” Garrett muttered under his breath. He glanced at the garden, which had added some glowing green mist to the elemental nonsense that had been cascading through it since we’d arrived, and then looked consideringly at his axes. I shook my head silently and he sighed. “I don’t suppose there’s a

backroom or cellar we could use to bypass all that?”

“None,” I said apologetically. “At least, none that would be useful. He’s using the cellar to grow mushrooms and, believe me, those spores are nothing to mess with.” And the cellar door was inside the garden next to the foxglove, which was unfortunately bitey these days, so it wouldn’t help us anyway.

“The old-fashioned way then,” Clarkfowler said with a degree of finality I’d never heard from her before. “Siobhan, if you would?”

Siobhan nodded grimly. “Of course, Professor.” I opened my mouth to ask what they meant, but Siobhan waved a hand to silence me. “Wagon, it’s time to put ourselves into the middle of things.”

The wagon shuddered and it was only when Garrett, Aleksandr, and Sweet Potato joined us on the now exceptionally-crowded bench that I realized what they intended. By then, the wagon had turned around and was trundling forward faster with each moment, so there wasn’t anything I could do to stop it. At least not with Sweet Potato stretched out across our laps.

The wagon crashed through the wall of greenery, arse-end first. The fire, ice, and acid attacks fell apart against the cheerfully painted wood and canvas coverings. The flowers passed over our heads like lethal stars and we were on the other side before I had a chance to even scream.

“To the house,” Clarkfowler crowed, leaping out from under Sweet Potato and off the wagon with all the grace of elven nobility. “Don’t destroy all the flowers, Garrett, I want to get samples!”

“What—” I barely managed to get out before Aleksandr lifted me bodily onto Sweet Potato’s back and sent the cat charging forward after Clarkfowler and Siobhan, who both seemed unfazed by crashing through Alfie’s garden wall and coming to a stop in the middle of his pumpkin patch.

Barely had we set foot onto Alfie’s property when the garden came to life. The pumpkins shot out curling vines that wrapped around legs, arms, and wheels to trip us up, the reagent garden sent forth a wave of necromantic energy that Alfie *definitely* hadn’t run by the village council before adding, and a handful of carrots started throwing themselves at us like flying orange knives.

Garrett and Aleksandr watched our backs as we ran, but the thirty feet between us and Alfie’s front door had never felt longer than it did today. If it weren’t for Sweet Potato, I wouldn’t have made it. Between my dodgy knees, bad back, and the fact that a scarecrow had run off with my cane three days ago, I could barely hobble, let alone sprint like the others.

As it was, the vegetation seemed to understand that I wasn’t as big a threat as the others and left me alone

to focus its attention on the ones with axes and knives and claws. Sweet Potato deposited me off near the door – less than gently – and then ran off to join Aleksandr and Garrett in mauling the pumpkins.

Siobhan and Clarkfowler were both fighting with the door when I awkwardly hobbled up to them. It was locked, of course, but Alfie hadn't moved the spare key since he'd taken the house and shop over from my mother. If he wanted to keep me out, he should've tried harder.

With a victorious shout, I shouldered the door open and got my first look at what Alfie had done with the place since the burnout set in. Gods, the sight made my insides curl and tears well up. I barely even noticed the door slam shut behind us.

The house was a wreck. The antique furniture Alfie's grandfather had carved was broken and battered, shoring up the windows and back door, his dishware was shattered on the floor, and what seemed like every enchanting book and item he owned was spread out in front of him. The garden had made excellent progress on moving inside with him, so dead and dying leaves littered the floor while the vines and branches that produced them forced their way in through each crack and window they could find.

Alfie was waiting for us, his back pressed firmly to the far wall, a broom clutched in one hand and a fire

poker in the other. His nice robe, the one I'd given him on his last birthday, hung off his shrunken form and thick vines grew up his legs. His wild mane of white hair, normally as well maintained as a blacksmith's fire, practically stood on end, and his eyes were black pools of blown-out pupils.

"Stay back," he yelled, waving the broom and poker in front of him like swords. "Stay back or my garden will rip you to shreds."

Clarkfowler stepped forward, her hands wide and welcoming. "Good afternoon! May I just say, the things you've done with your garden are *inspired*. I must know what you did to the petunias to give them teeth when all this is over with."

I would've stared aghast at her, but frankly she'd done the same thing with the hellhounds, so it really wasn't that much of a surprise. That, and I couldn't have torn my eyes from Alfie if my life depended on it.

Siobhan let out a tired sigh and stepped up on my other side. Her boots crunched heavily among the debris on the floor in a way that Clarkfowler's didn't. "Sir, we're with Professor Clarkfowler's Magical Pest Control, Wranglers, and Traveling Librarians. Ms. Lillian called us in because you're experiencing burnout."

"Burnout?" Alfie scoffed and brandished the poker

wildly. “I’m fine. I don’t have time to not be fine when I’ve got this much work to do. Lillian needs me to be in top shape for the autumn festival and I’m not going to let her down just because I’m a little tired.” The vines and branches rustled around us, creeping and inching toward us. The door rattled and sounds of combat outside disappeared under the heavy rustling of leaves. “No, no, no, you’re trying to distract me and we can’t have that. The bandits are coming soon and I won’t let them ruin the festival.”

And like snakes, the vines leaped up from the ground. They hit Clarkfowler first, wrapping around her limbs and dragging her down, down to the ground. Next they struck Siobhan, yanking her back to the door. And then they—

Ignored me. The vines I’d thought were coming my way fell limply to the ground, all life and energy stripped from them as they dried into shriveled husks.

Siobhan yelped as the vines tied her to the door and let out a series of rather unprofessional words. “Sir, I assure you, we’ve been hired to help. Why don’t we all just sit down and we can—”

But Alfie didn’t want to hear it. He waved the broom and one of the vines cut Siobhan off. Clarkfowler, who apparently hadn’t been trusted to speak at all, let out an angry squeak at the sight.

He turned to me, something like recognition

burning in his eyes and I swallowed. Outside, Garrett let out a harsh cry that was brutally cut off, followed by Aleksandr screaming for Sweet Potato to take cover. Clarkfowler's gaze dug into the back of my head and the silver chain she'd given me burned around my neck. Since the others were metaphorically and literally tied up at the moment, it looked like the task of saving Alfie from himself fell to me.

"Alfie," I whispered, holding my hands high in the air. The leaves crunched under my feet when I took a tiny step closer. The chain pulled heavily around my neck, so hot I might as well have pulled it right from the fire. "It's me, Alfie. Lillian." I took another step and smiled like I'd brought him a batch of cookies. The vines rustled as they squeezed ever tighter around Siobhan and Clarkfowler. "You've got yourself into a bit of a sticky situation here, haven't you, Alfie? You've stretched yourself too far."

The recognition in Alfie's eyes flared and he paused. "Lillian?" he whispered, the broom dropping for half a second before darting back up again. The vines slithered around me but never touched me, drying up and dying before they even got close. "Lillian, what're you doing here? It's not safe. The bandits are after me. They already got everyone else, but I'll get them back, you'll see. They want to destroy the village. I locked everyone inside, but the

bandits—”

He paused, eyes unfocused, and the vines stopped with him. I quickly took three more steps forward, less than five feet from him now, but the vines whipped in front of me again before I could close that short distance. Even if they couldn't touch me, they could still trip me up and at my age that was a bigger threat than most people realized. I wouldn't be much good with a broken hip and Alfie was in no state to help me.

I stared at Alfie as he gazed into nothingness, my hand raised to touch him and unable to get closer. Then he started shaking and both broom and poker fell from his wrinkled hands. “Gods, I tried to stop them, but they got through my defenses, *broke* my enchantments. They took everyone else. They had you, but you were smart, you were clever, and you brought them here so I could protect you.”

I glanced over my shoulder at Clarkfowler and Siobhan, who nodded vigorously. Siobhan had wriggled an arm free and pulled a knife from somewhere that she was using to saw at the vines holding her in place. Clarkfowler, in the meantime, seemed to have resorted to biting the vines pinning her down, to minimal effect.

“That's right,” I said finally, whipping my head around to look back at Alfie. “You always did such a

good job with the enchantments in your garden. I knew you'd be able to beat them here." The vines shook underneath me as I took another step forward, not dying like the others, but still letting me pass. I was almost there. Another step and I'd be within arms' reach. I just had to touch him, then Clarkfowler and Siobhan could take care of the rest.

Alfie nodded vigorously and tugged on the vines running up his legs. I bit back a gasp when Siobhan let out a pained yelp. "Yes," he insisted, pulling harder still, "and we'll get the others. Once that damned rogue and his cat are out of the way, we'll get everyone back. It'll be safe again and the festival can go on as usual."

"Of course," I said gently, not daring to move while the high-pitched keening was still going on. "It'll be a fantastic party. Everyone's been working for days, you know, and the flowers this year will be gorgeous."

He needed to pay attention to me and not the others. Siobhan's cry petered out after another moment, but that didn't mean she was safe. Alfie was hardly aware of what was going on. One wrong move and those vines would strangle us all, not to mention whatever was going on outside.

"We'll have tarts," Alfie insisted, finally dropping the vines to wave his arms around enthusiastically.

“And dance. I’ve got to make an announcement this year, but first we’ll dance. It’ll all be all right, you’ll see.”

He and I hadn’t danced since we were in our sixties, but I nodded encouragingly and took that final step forward over the vines. Alfie smiled dimly at me, eyes black and somehow still burning with the conviction that he had this all under control. It broke my heart to see how much he trusted me. None of the others, not the rest of the village or the council or anyone with Clarkfowler, could’ve gotten close to him, but I could.

Because somewhere deep inside him, where even the burnout couldn’t reach, he trusted me. He knew I’d never hurt him and I’d never betray him.

Which was the only reason my heart didn’t shatter into a thousand pieces when he let out a terrified wail as my arms closed around him and the silver chain did its horrible work of cutting him off from his enchantments.

He collapsed like a puppet with its strings cut and I nearly fell over trying to hold him and myself up. “Gods,” I said with a hiss, sinking to the floor as gracefully as I could with my joints in the state they were and Alfie in no condition to help me. “Alfie, stand up and—”

“Get the chain over his neck,” Clarkfowler called,

or at least I thought that was what she said. My hearing had gone all fuzzy since Alfie fell down and —ah. Right. The hearing charms on my earrings were powered by one of Alfie’s enchantments too.

I slid the chain over my head – which was an awkward affair seeing as I had Alfie practically curled up in my lap and it was playing devilish tricks with my bad knees – and onto Alfie as fast as I could. As soon as the chain hit his chest, the enchantment powering the hearing charms died away entirely and I was left in a silent world with my best friend sobbing on my lap.

“Alfie,” I whispered into his wild hair, “you and I are getting much too old for this nonsense.”

Clarkfowler and the others wrapped things up in the efficient manner I was accustomed to, once Alfie was out of the way. They gathered up all the items he’d enchanted over the years and broke the lingering enchantments that would keep draining him once the chain came off – including the ones on his garden that required his personal attention, much to Clarkfowler’s despair – while the village council inspected the damage he’d done. The largest problem we’d had to face was that the Cat at the Crossroads needed new thatch, but even that was something we all agreed had needed doing before winter anyway, so it was no

major loss.

Siobhan was even able to create a reasonable replica of the hearing charms Alfie had made for me, via a wind spirit that owed Clarkfowler a favor. It was quite nice of her, even if I had to give the spirit a bowl of fresh milk every other week. As wonderful as it was to not have to actually listen to the village council complain, I did still want to hear everything else.

I'm also happy to report that Clarkfowler won her bet with Aleksandr, which made Garrett groan for reasons that weren't clear to me. We had tea together while the junior librarians looked Alfie over for injuries and gathered pamphlets on recovering from burnout. They might also have slipped one or two books about gardening without magical enhancements among them, but I wasn't going to say anything about it, not until I'd patched the holes in my skirt at least.

As for Alfie and I? The village council agreed with my decision about our imminent retirement and decreed that he wasn't to be held responsible for the damage he'd done, provided he helped train a new enchanter as soon as he recovered enough to do so. Fortunately, we've a newcomer from one of the villages the bandits struck that shows a remarkable aptitude for alchemy and enjoys gardening almost as much as Alfie does. He's taken her on as an apprentice, but I suspect she'll be running the place

before long.

But that's far off in the future. For now, we make potions, go for walks, and enjoy the retirement we should've taken ages ago. We'll be fine, and it's all thanks to Professor Clarkfowler and her team.

But by all the gods, I hope I never have to hire them again. Four times was enough for the village coffers and my nerves.

Ceril N Domace is an accountant, writer, and owner of two perfectly normal felines. If you enjoyed this, why not try Haven? When his wife dies after turning into a gryphon, a grieving father struggles to keep his children safe from anti-fae extremists. The fae haven of Tearmann offers him safety, but also pulls him deeper into the war between the fae and those who want to destroy them. Check it out [here](#).

You Can't Go Back

Josie Jaffrey

CONTENT WARNING

This story contains injury detail, drug abuse and domestic abuse.

Fighting centaurs isn't as easy as it looks, which is to say that instead of being just fiendishly difficult, it's actually virtually impossible. Most of those who try it end up getting trampled before they can even think about swinging whatever phallic implement they're wielding, and those who do manage to join combat are hampered not only by their relative lack of stature, but also by the horrendous crick in the neck occasioned by trying to keep their opponent in sight. It's not for the novice hero.

Fortunately, Odie is no novice. After ten years spent waging a pointless trade war at the very edges of civilisation, she's faced almost every enemy the known world has to offer. Fighting her way through the local cryptid population to get back to her fleet and off this godsforsaken wasteland is, if anything, a

welcome break from all the bronze-armoured pillocks she's spent the past decade deshelling. At this moment, she is in her element.

Shoulder to shoulder with her army and crew, she lets loose three arrows in quick succession, each of which finds its home in a centaur's vital organ, then she hands off her bow and buries the butt of her spear in the ground with the point angled towards the charging enemy. The horse-human hybrid barrelling towards her notices the danger too late to slow his feet, which slide and scrabble in the dirt as he runs his own breast inexorably into the bronze tip, impaling himself with such force that his momentum flips his ungainly body up into the air and over the heads of Odie and her battalion. Halfway through the arc, his weight snaps the spear shaft and the whole thing collapses like a broken trebuchet, sending Odie's battle line into disarray.

She's not worried, though. None of the Ithacans are. They know their leader, and they know her strengths. They know what happens when she lets the anger take her. When she pulls her ornate bronze blade from its scabbard, it sings like the bards who will soon be hymning the victory she'll win this day.

She smiles. She stalks forward. She cuts.

She is bathed in wine-dark blood when she is done.

“Ten years,” Odie says.

She’s standing on the deck next to her lieutenant, Yuri, as the crew rows the bireme away from the place they have called home for so long. There are twelve ships in all, following each other along the coast like ants on their way back to the nest.

“It’s a while to be away from home,” Yuri says. “Particularly when you have a family waiting for you.”

Odie turns to look at him. “I didn’t know you were married,” she says, tracing the cragged lines of her second’s face with her eyes. He looks like exactly what he is: a weather-beaten soldier with little respect for personal hygiene and even less for good manners.

“I was talking about yourself,” he says. “You’ve people waiting on you.”

Nell.

The name is so precious to Odie that she can no longer bring herself to whisper it, let alone say it out loud. She doesn’t need to, though; her crew knows it well.

In those early days, the stories came easily. They sat together around the fires they made on foreign shores at night, talking about the loved ones they’d left behind, imagining their triumphant homecomings. Back then, they thought it would be a matter of months – maybe weeks if they were lucky – before

they were turning for home in ships laden with shining riches and newly-minted heroes. Instead, they'd stayed away so long that the memories of home became painful, and even the weight of treasure in their holds couldn't overbalance the agonising lightness of all the friends they had left behind, buried in the sand between two rivers stained with their blood.

There will be families to inform on their return. That task is Odie's alone, and it hangs over her like a cloud. For once, she is grateful for the length of the journey home; perhaps by the time they finally reach Ithaca she will have found the right words to deliver the worst of news.

But Yuri is right; her own family will be waiting, and she is not yet dead, despite the best efforts of soldiers and seas.

"Are you worried?" he asks her.

Odie pushes away her memories and turns her attention back to her lieutenant. "About what?"

"Well... it's been years. It would be natural to worry that she might not be waiting still."

Odie laughs. "You wouldn't have asked that if you knew her."

"Maybe not," Yuri says, but he looks unsure.

"She'll be waiting," Odie says with all the assurance she doesn't feel. "Even if every suitor on

the continent is knocking at her door, she'll keep faith."

And it feels true, every word. However long the journey takes, and whatever might occur during her absence, Odie knows that her wife will remain exactly as she remembers her: blameless, prudent, wise Penelope.

They waste years on the wind. At first they're tacking with the breeze, catching every helping hand the weather can offer to speed them on their way, but the moment Odie adjusts their course to fill the sails, the winds seem to switch and twist beyond her grasp like dragons of air sliding serpentine around the mast and away.

The crew might have dealt with these trials easily enough – after all, they have two banks of oars and they can slog the whole way home against the wind if they have to – but for the storm that zeroes in on their ships as though it has been sent against them by some vengeful god.

Four ships are lost under the waves with all hands. Two are wrecked beyond salvation, but the rest of the fleet manages to save at least a portion of their crew before they're swept away by the current. The remaining six ships are blown so far off course that they lose sight of the coastline they were using to

guide their route and can't find it again.

They see no land. They see no ships except their own. Even the sun and stars seem to come out of alignment to cheat Odie's instruments, leaving her with no idea what course to plot.

In the end, low on water and half-starved, they follow the birds.

To a cluster of islands Odie doesn't recognise, spread out in an archipelago so large that it covers the horizon, and yet somehow appears on no map she has ever seen. People live there in sociable clusters, fishing in the shallows and rivers from hand-carved canoes decorated with patterns more ornate than even the finest carpenters back home can manage. They are welcoming and hospitable, despite the lack of common language, and they – along with the abundance of fruits, meats and sweet-tasting fresh water – make the tree-covered islands feel like paradise.

"We could stay," Odie suggests to Yuri after three days of good eating, drinking and resting in the warm shade have weakened her resolve.

"Stay?" Yuri replies. He's been watching the ships every waking second since they paddled ashore and left them anchored in the bay, as if he's desperate to continue their journey. If Odie didn't know better, she'd think he had a reason to hurry home, but there's

nothing left back in Ithaca for him except ashes and bones.

“I don’t know where we are, or how to navigate from here,” she says. “If the options are living out our days on these islands or risking it all on tides we can’t trust, perhaps it’s wiser to stay. Besides, after all they’ve been through, how can I ask the crew to carry on? Look at them. They’re happy here.”

And, truly, they are happier than they have been since... well, ever. Odie can see them, spread out across the beaches and under the canopies of huts with food and drink in hand, battle-hardened men and women relaxing so hard that anyone would think they’d reached the end of their travails. Even Perry, who hasn’t cracked a smile for years, is laughing with his crew mates as though they haven’t lost a quarter of their number on the journey here, and more still in the war that they left behind.

It’s a little eerie.

But still. They seem so happy.

“You want me to drag them away from this on the promise of... what?” Odie says. “More storms, more lost lives?”

“You’re not the only one with people waiting on you,” Yuri says. “They have families too.”

“It’s been thirteen years. Who knows what’s waiting for us at home?”

“Do you doubt your wife?” Yuri says, with a challenge in his tone.

“Of course not.”

“So why do you think the others should doubt theirs?”

It’s a fair question that she can’t answer.

“A week, then,” she says.

“A day,” Yuri counters.

“Five days.”

“Two.”

“Four.”

“Three, and then I’ll give them the choice,” Odie says. “If they want to go home, we go. But if they want to stay...”

“Fine,” Yuri agrees reluctantly. “Three days.”

With the clock running, Odie doesn’t waste time. Perhaps she should be looking after her people. Perhaps she should be talking to the islanders, trying to establish some method of communication so she can work out where they are and how to get home from here. Instead, she finds a quiet corner of the beach sheltered under shady fronds and goes to work on a stash of food and drink her crew has saved for her. There’s sweet liquid that cracks from the inside of a furry, hard-shelled seedpod, there’s tender fish grilled over sandy campfires and, above all, there’s a fruit that grows in clusters on the trees a little further

inland. It's so heavy with nectar that the branches bow down under the weight of their burden, so sweet that the hummingbirds line up to prick it open and sup, and so fragrant that even with its delicate scent, it overpowers every flower on the islands. The fruit is the size of a fist, covered with a soft skin that peels back as though eager to reveal its secrets. The flesh beneath is the colour of gold, filled with juice, and if it contains any seeds at all, they're too small to be discerned. In sum, it is the perfect food. Odie has begun to believe that a person might survive on this fruit alone for the rest of their days and neither require nor miss any other form of sustenance.

They call it lotus, a name they whisper.

Later, Odie understands why.

After one fruit, she is merely hungry for more. After two, she feels as though the sunshine nectar is reaching out through her body and somehow healing her hurts. After three, she begins to remember things she has almost forgotten.

The night Nell first came to her bed in a dream of dark hair and golden eyes, a dream Odie couldn't believe was true until she woke the next morning to find the siren still asleep in her arms.

The day they were bound together in the orchard on her father's palace – now her palace, hers and Nell's – and the night that followed with soft lips and

hard breaths.

The morning she left Nell crying in the garden and ran to the dock, too afraid of her own weakness to stay a moment longer with the woman she loved.

She couldn't go back.

There's a shadow over the palace and the darkest parts of Odie live inside it.

She can't go back.

After four fruits, Odie forgets that she has forgotten anything at all.

Three days later, Yuri finds her on the same beach under the same shady fronds, surrounded by discarded lotus skins and crabs that have sidled up the sand to pick them dry.

"It's time," he says.

Odie can only moan and rub her eyes. For a second, a moment, a minute, her mind is empty and she struggles to fill it.

"You were going to talk to the crew," Yuri reminds her. "About leaving. Did you forget?"

Nell is waiting.

She has not forgotten.

"I'll put it to them," she promises.

It takes half a day just to gather herself up, then another half day to gather the crew in one place, and even then they're missing several of their number. Whether they've dispersed over the archipelago or

disappeared into the sea, or whether they're just avoiding Odie, there's no sign of them. Odie sets out the options for the rest, but when – unbelievably – half of them elect to return home, Yuri doesn't offer her the same choices.

“Don't you want to go back?” he asks.

She should, she knows, but when she weighs the journey up against the joyful oblivion of the lotus fruit, she struggles to make the scales tip towards home.

“You're their leader,” he says. “Their king. Would you abandon them? Would you abandon your wife?”

“Of course not,” she lies.

“Well, then.”

Yuri doesn't give Odie time to renege. Within the hour, they leave the lotus eaters behind and strike out for the ships, heading into unfamiliar waters. They have only enough sailors left to crew four biremes, so that is all they take.

There are more storms. There are bad winds. There are hostile peoples and forbidding shores. Still, the remnants of Odie's crew press on into the unknown, hoping that they will one day find a landmark that sparks a memory and sets them on a course for home.

Before that day comes, the monster finds them.

The location is unremarkable: just another green

hill behind another sandy dune beside another seaweed-stinking bay. Odie and her nomad crew have seen hundreds of hills just as green and nondescript over the years as they've drifted around these seas. In the beginning, this one seems no different from any of the others. Then they see the sheep.

Meat.

The word is whispered at first, then shouted in excitement. It's been months since they last ate any meat that didn't come out of the sea. The sheep aren't even afraid of them, coming so close that the sailors might catch them simply by waiting with their arms outstretched, and there seems to be no one around to whom the flock belongs. The crew doesn't wait for Odie's permission, they just take. In those circumstances, she can do little but order them to build spits and share the meat fairly.

The carcasses are already bare when a roar splits the air and the earth begins to shake. The crew turn inland as one, looking for the source. As they watch, the shaking continues in a rhythmic pattern that, it soon becomes clear, is exactly what it seems to be: the footsteps of a giant. Its head crests the hill fully sixty seconds before the rest of it becomes visible, so they have time to appreciate every inch of its immense form. Its fists are the size of boats, its teeth the length of javelins; the single eye in the middle of its forehead

is the size of a boulder, and its clothing so voluminous that Odie could collect all the sails in her fleet and still not have enough material to cover it.

When the monster spies Yuri, sitting in a place of honour at the largest fire, it is to him that it addresses its enquiry.

“What is your name, stranger?” it booms in their own language.

“Yu— Ooo!”

Odie subtly stamps on her lieutenant’s foot before he can speak his name in full. No matter how many gods and tricksters they encounter, he can’t seem to get it into his head that there is power in a name.

“*You*,” the monster muses. “A strange name for a thief.”

“Who are you calling a thief?” Odie asks, bridling. Perhaps she should be scared, but she can’t just sit by and allow the honour of her lieutenant to be called into question. Whatever else Yuri might be, she knows that he is an honest man.

“What else would you call a man who steals and butchers another man’s sheep, then sits picking his teeth with their bones?” the monster asks.

It’s another fair question that she can’t answer.

“And what should the penalty for that man be, do you suggest?” the monster continues. “It seems to me that the only proper recompense is for the man to be

butchered himself, so that his bones might become toothpicks for the man whose sheep he stole.”

“Hang on—” Yuri says, quickly discarding the sheep bone and getting to his feet.

“Then what would be the penalty for the man who butchers him?” Odie asks, talking right over Yuri. “No. Come now, we’d end up going back and forth until everyone was butchered and eaten, and where would that get us?”

“It would get me a full stomach,” the monster rumbles.

“For a few seconds, perhaps,” Odie concedes, pulling her spear from the ground. “Not much longer than that, I’d wager.”

“You mean to fight me?” the monster says, incredulous. “*Me?*” When it laughs, little pebbles rumble loose from the top of the hill and skitter down towards Odie’s feet.

It’s a bad idea. Odie knows this, and she’s sure her crew does too. Really, they should try to placate the monster, or strike out for the ships, or run and hide in the brush, but where would be the glory in that? Besides which, the monster’s scorn has provoked the part of her that can’t back down. Her pride won’t let her consider any other option, so instead of doing the clever thing she catches up her spear and hurls it at the beast, aiming for the heart.

It strikes true.

Then bounces off the monster's skin and drops harmlessly to the ground.

The monster smiles. "The woman has doomed you, You," it booms, then it crouches down and grabs for Yuri.

Yuri ducks, just in time, and the monster's hand knocks the spit and the tripod that supported it into the fire. The monster yells in frustration, then snatches up two of the crew in one gigantic fist and dashes their brains out on the rocky ground. With the other fist, it grabs two more of Odie's friends, and soon their broken bodies are lying at her feet.

The rage warms her soul like the sunshine warms her skin.

In this state, she doesn't need to think. There is an unbreakable connection between her body and her instincts that's been trained to perfection over years of combat, and she relies on it now. She doesn't consciously take the hot spit from the fire at her side, but it is now in her hands. She isn't aware that she's been tracking the monster's movements, but she can anticipate them well enough to know when he will bend down again for another swipe. She lets the anger take her. It lends strength to her limbs as she runs the burning stake into the creature's eye, blinding it in a gruesome burst of boiling liquid. Odie doesn't hear

the monster's screams. She doesn't feel the disgust that overwhelms more than one member of her crew as they watch; she is safe in the hot embrace of her rage.

She returns to herself only when the monster stumbles away, howling as it clutches its face.

"POLLY?" a voice booms from over the hills.

"Help me!" the monster cries out.

Yuri looks at Odie and says, "Now you've done it. It has friends."

"What's wrong?" the voice shouts back.

"Someone has stolen and eaten my sheep, and blinded my eye!"

"Who?"

"You!" the monster shouts out.

"I did not!" his friend shouts in reply.

"No, You did!"

"I did *not*!"

"Not very bright, these monsters, are they?" Odie says to Yuri.

"No."

"And nor are we if we hang around," she adds. "Let's go."

The crew quickly gather up their things and clamber into their dinghies while the monster stumbles around blindly, calling for his friend to come to his aid. By the time they reach the biremes, the

monsters are fighting one another on the shore. The newcomer throws a rock at the retreating ships, smashing one of them to smithereens. The remaining three biremes row on, dodging more rocks, leaving any survivors to swim to shore alone, if they dare.

“Your father would be proud,” Yuri says to Odie, but his tone doesn’t match the compliment she finds in his words. She’s saved as many as she could, and she’s maintained her honour. Her father *would* be proud, even if Yuri is not.

Odie’s second never had the stomach for this job. She should have replaced him long ago, but she finds his disdain reassuring. It reminds her that she is made to be a hero, and he is not.

She will not flinch from what needs to be done.

She will not back down.

The years run like water through Odie’s fingers. They aren’t any easier than those that came before, but they seem less substantial, like spectres of time passing. It’s hard to grasp onto them because, like the hours, the travellers never stop moving.

Until they see the island through the pouring rain.

“The crew’s tired,” Yuri cautions Odie. “They need to rest. This could be the place.”

“*This* place?”

“It looks magical.”

And, from a distance, it does. That's Odie's objection: no island should look so rich and welcoming. Even from miles out, she can see that the vegetation is lush, the rivers are plentiful, and there's even a little stream of smoke issuing from the chimney of a cosy-looking home in the hills. Everything about the island feels too... nice.

When they drop anchor and row ashore, Odie's fears are not assuaged. There's a woman waiting on the beach to greet them, draped in fine fabrics with a doe at her side. The creature is even wagging its stumpy tail.

"Welcome," she says as Odie and Yuri drag their boat up the sand with the first load of sailors.

"Hello," Yuri says politely.

"And what is your name, stranger?" the woman asks.

"Yu—"

"—should know better than to ask that of a stranger," Odie interrupts, shooting a glare at Yuri. Will he never learn?

The woman switches her attention to Odie as she narrows her eyes with sudden interest. "It appears that I have misread the situation. Captain?" she says to Odie.

Odie tips her head to acknowledge the title.

"Then perhaps you and your crew would like to

follow me? You must be tired from your journey, and I can offer you food, drink and shelter.”

Odie hesitates, because there’s something about the woman that’s unsettling her, but their would-be host insists.

“Please,” she says, “allow me to extend my hospitality.”

Her people are hungry and soaked through. The night will be cold. The woman is beautiful. How can she refuse?

And oh, the woman is beautiful. The day after their arrival, Odie lays her down on the grass in the orchard and unwraps the gilded scarf from around her hair. When the locks spill out into Odie’s hands, they run in slick streams the colour of old blood. They remind Odie of something she thought she’d lost a long time ago and half the world away, and she grasps the strands in her fists as though by holding onto them she can hold onto the things she has forgotten. The woman’s lips taste like perfumed sunshine.

Odie doesn’t intend to stay so long.

A night, she thought, perhaps a week, a month at the outside, but the years carry on running while Odie takes the woman to the orchard and lays her on the grass. One kiss becomes ten, becomes a hundred, becomes a thousand, until there are so many that they can no longer be counted at all.

“I can’t go back,” Odie whispers into the woman’s blood-red hair, inhaling the fragrant scent of her skin.

“You won’t.”

Nell.

“I have to.”

“You don’t.”

But Odie knows she will, sooner or later. She can feel the guilt eating her from the inside out; besides which, the crew are becoming restless. Yuri has told her more than once that they want to leave. At first, they welcomed the break. After six months had passed, a few began to pine for their homes. Now, they’re starting to grumble amongst themselves, and Odie knows enough about her people to know that it won’t be long before their grumbling turns into misguided action.

That day comes sooner than she predicts.

“They’re taking the boats,” Yuri says, running into the orchard to disturb her.

“How many?”

“About half the crew, I’d guess, but they’re taking everything. They mean to strand us here.”

She rouses herself unwillingly from the woman’s arms and, pulling her clothes on as she goes, follows Yuri as he runs to the beach. The crew must have been working on this plan for weeks, because the barnacle-covered biremes have been careened and she can

smell the fresh pitch on the boats that they're dragging down into the water.

"What do you think you're doing?" Odie asks.

Most of the crew just carry on with their work, ignoring their captain as though instructed to do so, but Ellie – a fierce soldier and able sailor who captains one of the biremes – meets Odie on the tideline with her hand on her scabbard.

"Stay here if you want," Ellie says, "but we're going home. We've rested long enough."

"You can swim if you want," Odie counters, "but you're not taking my fleet."

"Your fleet? Your fleet is two ships."

"*Two*? We arrived with three."

"And you neglected one so poorly that the timbers rotted right through. We were lucky to be able to save the two we did, and if we stay here much longer, we're all going to rot with them. You've lost yourself, Captain," Ellie says, pouring scorn into the title, "but we're not going to sink into oblivion with you. I'm taking them home."

Odie draws the blade from her belt and says, "No, you're not."

Ellie tries to draw her own sword, but she can't rely on her instincts the way Odie does. No one has her reflexes, her speed, the inner core of anger that keeps her sharp. Ellie hasn't even pulled her own

weapon half out of its scabbard when the tip of Odie's blade lodges in Ellie's eye socket, with unerring accuracy. Perhaps Odie doesn't mean to push the sword all the way in. Perhaps she means only to menace Ellie a little. Whatever her intentions, the result is the same: Ellie lies dead on the sand and Odie has to put her foot on the woman's head to get enough leverage to extract her blade.

The crew are no longer moving.

"Boats back up the beach," Odie says quietly, demanding their attention as she wipes her sword clean on the leg of her trousers.

Still, no one moves.

"Back up the beach!" she yells. "Everyone!"

Bereft of their rebel leader, they jump to the task. Not one of them meets Odie's eye as they return the boats to the top of the sand, beyond the tideline, and flip them over into a neatly-stored rank. The two seaworthy biremes remain at anchor, the eyes painted on their prows watching Odie as she follows the crew back up the dunes and into the heart of the island.

Her heart is waiting for her there.

For now.

The months begin to run like blood, slowing and congealing in the sun.

The crew are resigned to their fates on this island,

so resigned that there is no longer any talk of returning to families or friends. Instead, they are focused on building new lives here. But in the meantime, Odie's thoughts have finally begun to turn to home.

It isn't that Odie doesn't like the woman of the island. She thinks she might love her, maybe, and she certainly would were it not for the memory of Nell, who casts a shadow she can't escape. The problem is that Odie has begun to notice all the ways in which the woman is not quite as vivid as Nell is in her memory: her hair is a little less bright, her skin a little less clear, the colour of her eyes a little less brilliant and enthralling. Aside from that, she doesn't make Odie laugh or thrill the way she remembers laughing and thrilling with Nell. And so, although she is conscious that the deficit may be in her memory rather than in reality, Odie cannot help but long for the more complete version of a love that she half-remembers, and pine.

She has taken the pining far enough that she has a plan.

There is a herb that grows on the island, a herb that imparts safety from poison to those who consume it. Odie eats that herb, then picks another plant that she recognises and crushes its leaves into the bottle of wine she shares with her lover before bed. While the

woman sleeps, drugged into unconsciousness by the plant, Odie – immune to its effects – creeps around the house and searches for what she knows must be hidden somewhere in the woman's rooms. There have been other sailors who've reached this island. Odie knows this because the woman has hinted as much, and because Odie has found their bones and broken ships in a cave by the shore. That is proof enough that they came, and that they never left this place.

Odie does not mean to meet the same end.

After hours of searching by the light of her oil lamp, Odie finally discovers the thing for which she is searching, tucked at the bottom of a wooden chest beneath folded coverlets and clothing from ages long since past. It's a map, and there are places on it Odie recognises. Using those waypoints, she can navigate a path to Ithaca. After the storms last winter, she has only one bireme left, but with a chart to guide their way, it should be enough.

Finally, they are going home.

Odie begins to make her way quietly back to the bedroom through the kitchen, her path lit only by her lamp and the embers of the fire, and is startled to find the woman by the hearth. Odie's lover shouldn't be awake, not with the amount of sedative she's consumed, but here she is, sitting in her chair with a bowl of dark liquid on her lap. Patterns and colours

play across the surface beneath her fingertips.

“You’re going to fail,” she says. Odie would swear that she’s smiling, just a little.

“Don’t prophesy dire fates for me, witch,” Odie says. “You know nothing of me or my journey.”

“I know you, king of Ithaca,” the witch says, reaching out to grasp Odie’s hand in her own. “You don’t need to tell me your name for me to see that you will never find your home.” As she speaks, she looks into the still, black pool. It paints a dark reflection of her face, distorted with barely-restrained glee. “There’s nothing for you in your kingdom anymore.”

“There is less for me here,” Odie replies, shaking the woman’s hand away.

“Is that the truth you know in your heart, or simply a lie you choose to believe? I am here. She is there, but she is not waiting for you.”

The blow that follows is an instinct that surges out of Odie’s heart.

Faithful Nell would never betray her. The witch is a spinner of deception. Her lips are spitting lies.

Odie’s palm stings and the air sings. The bowl has been knocked from the woman’s hands and now it rolls in circles on the floor, spilling water onto the flagstones.

The witch clutches her cheek in her hand for a second, then reveals it again so Odie can see the mark

she has left. There is blood on the skin, scratches from the rings Odie wears on her fingers.

“Your anger will not change the fact that you have lost her,” the woman says, settling her shoulders back as she regains her imperious composure. “You can’t go back.”

“I will go back,” Odie insists through the red-hot shame-rage. “I am going back. Right now.”

“With what crew, exactly? They know what you are now. They’ll never follow you.”

“They will. They always have.” Odie turns to walk away.

“You can’t go.” The witch is grasping at her hand again, pulling her back, reaching for her arms, her shoulders, her neck as though she means to overwhelm Odie here in this foggy little room in this dank little house on this grim little island and bury her within its bones. She’ll imprison Odie in her arms just as surely as the lotus fruit imprisoned the crew in their own heads and hearts.

“No,” Odie says, and the rage fills her.

She can’t describe exactly what happens next, because she doesn’t truly live it. Those moments are inhabited by another creature, one made of fire and fury. It isn’t Odie. She’s set apart from it. This isn’t her. It *can’t* be her.

There’s a knock on the door and Odie can hear

Yuri calling for her on the other side. There was noise in this room a moment ago, but now everything is silent. That's when the horror sets in.

"We're leaving," she says, wiping her hands on her trousers as she leaves the room and closes the door firmly behind her. With that action, she erases everything she's left behind inside.

"Is everything all right?" Yuri asks, glancing at Odie's hands, at the door.

"Of course." She smiles, and her smile is so genuine that you might think she really, truly believes the words she's delivered with it. Perhaps she does.

"You want to leave?" Yuri asks, uncertain.

"Didn't you say it was time for us to go?"

"Months ago, yes, but—"

"Well, you were right, so we're going. Gather the crew."

"Captain, I don't think—"

"They get in the boats or they answer to me," Odie says, tapping at the hilt of her sword with one bloody hand. "Understand?"

They have to make two journeys in the small boats to get the whole crew safely to the last bireme. Not one of them tries to stay behind.

From that point on, the journey home is a dream. There are pleasant beaches, abundant springs, kind

winds and bounties of fruit and meat large enough to fill their hold several times over. It seems that everywhere they put to shore has been designed purely for the purpose of accommodating them. Soon enough, Yuri spots a familiar rock formation, and they are drawing into the harbour at Ithaca within a year. It all passes so smoothly that Odie can barely remember a thing about it.

Her homecoming, at least, is memorable.

The crew carries her aloft off the ship and into the city, shouting their praise for their captain and king, the woman who led them safely through wars, harsh seas and monstrous encounters to deliver them home to their families. As they parade her through the streets, she can hear the whispers already as the crew passes stories to the people lining their route as they go. By the time she reaches the palace, she's surrounded by snatches of her adventures, imparted in reverent tones.

*Felled a one-eyed giant as large as a mountain...
crewed the ship single-handed through a hurricane...
outsmarted a witch... freed them all from her
enchantment... blood on her hands...*

Or maybe the tones aren't so reverent after all. As the remains of her army lift her up the steps towards the grand palace gate, she starts to hear the censure beneath the praise.

Blinded the poor creature... nearly got them all killed... sure she was a witch? Just because she spoke unfavourable words... and so few came home... murderer... only one eye... never saw her again...

Everything is slipping.

“Put me down,” Odie says quietly to her crew.

They can’t have heard, because they carry her onward.

“I said put me down!” she snaps.

A hush falls over the crowd, and Odie begins to feel uneasy. She remembers leaving this place in a triumphant parade much like the one that has heralded her return home, but is that memory even real? Weren’t there whispers in the undercurrent back then too? There’s a memory itching at the back of her ear and turning her stomach over in its grip, a memory as elusive as it is visceral, and it’s drawing a dark cloud over the palace like a shroud. It happened here, whatever it is she’s not remembering. She has a feeling that it’s something so important she should never have forgotten it.

Nell.

She just needs to see Nell, and then everything will be fine.

Unfortunately, when Odie throws open the palace doors and strides inside, it’s not Nell that she sees. Odie’s sister is the image of her, so similar that they

might have been twins, in form at least. In substance, they are nothing at all alike. Odie has her father's determination and strength, destined for greatness from childhood, but Seia is weak in body and will. Not even willing to accompany Odie to the war, let alone fight in it, Seia earned the contempt of Odie and her father. She bends like a river weed, allowing herself to be drawn along with the current, never standing against anyone or for anything. She is everything that Odie despises.

Seia's posture changes when she sees Odie. In a moment, she is all jutting lips and hands on hips, standing between Odie and the door that will take her into the inner sanctum of the palace, to Nell. Coming from her pliant sister, the opposition is unexpected.

"You dare to stand in my way?" Odie says.

"Someone has to." Seia practically spits the words.

"I'm going to see Nell."

"No, you're not."

"I'll fight my way through you if I have to."

"Because that's your answer to everything, isn't it?" Seia says, braver than Odie has ever seen her, and clearly resolved on her course. "Nell doesn't want to see you."

"I don't believe that," Odie says, but she's starting to get that slipping feeling again, as though she's the only one who doesn't realise that the world has turned

upside down.

“We didn’t think you’d ever come back,” says Seia. “Not after what you did. Gods, how could you dare to show your face here?”

“What are you talking about?” Odie says slowly, as the first tendrils of horror wrap their way around her chest.

“Did you forget?” Seia says mockingly. “Because she didn’t. I haven’t. It doesn’t matter how hard you try to convince the world that you’re a hero. We know what you really are.”

“And what’s that?”

Seia doesn’t reply. Instead, she reaches for her belt and unsheathes a short dagger that Odie hadn’t even realised she was wearing. The hilt is bejewelled and the blade is sharp, honed to an edge so fine it could cut silk. Odie knows this because she’s the one who honed it, her favourite knife, the one she hasn’t seen since—

Here is the thing that Odie has forgotten.

When it comes, it comes in a deluge, as though a dam has broken somewhere in her head and let the memory come flooding in. She remembers the rage. She remembers that first time, two long decades ago now, when the heat poured over her skin with an urgent need to be spent.

Her emotions were always hot with Nell. What had

it been? One smile at someone else, just a fraction too warm. One night Nell returned to bed, just a fraction too late. One question asked and answered with an explanation that was just a fraction too weak. Odie had let the anger take her then, and it had burned too fiercely for Nell to quench it with her words.

Blood on her hands. Rings curled in her fists. Ugly words shouted as the gilded scarf bites into her lover's skin. One eye staring up at her, while the other... goes.

As the memory floods in, Odie is already backing away from the palace, her feet carrying her without thought out of the side gate, through the blighted orchard, along the bloodstained path that she took that night as she fled. She runs to the dock and jumps into the fishing boat that's moored there, the same one she sailed in as a child, the one her father built with his own hands. Seeing the wood he hewed, it's difficult not to remember the other things he worked into shape with his arms, his fists, his blades. Everything he built, he built to last, and Odie was his greatest creation.

The witch was right.

You can't go back.

Odie grasps the oars and rows with all her might, breaking through the surf to the calmer seas beyond. There is one route, and one route only, that she can

use to return home, and it tastes like sugar and sunshine.

She thinks she can remember the way.

Josie Jaffrey is an indie author of urban fantasy, paranormal romance and young adult fantasy who lives in Oxford, England. If you enjoyed this short story, you might enjoy May Day, the first book in Josie's Seekers series. It's an urban fantasy novel featuring a chaotic vampire detective with a serious grudge against the only man who can help her solve her latest case. Check it out [here](#).

The Hesitant Hero and the Very Vexing Hex

Ella T. Holmes

There's been a right mix-up, let me tell you. I was not born a hero – some greedy wizard stopped by my cottage in the woods, hexed me with heroism, and told me to venture into the Harrowlands, that I was the kingdom's only hope since the last prince died. Terrible fate for the kingdom, really. Worse for me.

If you must know anything about the Harrowlands, it's that the lot of it is made of grey slate, some tufts of moss growing here and there between cracks in the stone. Is slate a rock or a stone? I don't know. But I think about that the whole time I'm trudging over it in my old boots, pocked with holes and restitched with so much thread and so many knots that if the bottoms ever peel off, I'll let them go with my blessing. And curses. I'm not beyond the odd naughty word or two,

even if they aren't meant to spring from such a feminine tongue as my own. Gods above. I'm going to get that wizard and teach him a lesson.

When I'm done, I guess. If he's to be believed, the survival of the kingdom is currently balanced on the edge of a rather frightening and literal cliff. If he's to be believed, the cliff will only talk to a mighty hero. And, poor Prince Paravel, I'm the only one for the job.

Of course, it rains. I've helped enough heroes over the years to know that their trials do not begin once they've made it where they're headed. No, they often nearly drown in torrential rains, take terrible falls in the mud slicks that follow, face dark creatures in the woods – sometimes all three. Lucky for me, there are no woods here. Unless there are tiny beings in the tufts of moss, I think I'm safe. All the same, I mumble many *thanks for letting me pass*, and some *sorry for disturbing yous* as I go. Just in case.

Wet to the bone and shaking with cold, I find a cave to hide in. As I slump against the icy wall, there's movement in the dark shadows, and I let out a most extravagant sigh. There's only so much I can do in a day, being as pain-riddled in the joints and hero-hexed as I am. "Please, I know how these tales go," I say to the dark. "Deliver your challenge to me, then I'll have a rest and be on my way."

The creature that emerges is giant, at least twice my size and thrice as hairy. The horns on their head are sharp and gleaming, like their hobby is polishing them while sitting in the dark. Can't blame them, honestly. The dark is often peaceful and easy on the headache eyes. "You're s'pposed to tremble and beg for your life," they mumble.

"I thought minotaurs were supposed to have good enunciation?"

"Mm. It's not like I get many visitors to talk to, and you're not doing what's expected."

"Well, it's not like I'm not already on a quest, and I'm rather tired. Built like a mountain and scary though you may be, if it's trembling and begging you're after, I'm afraid you're out of luck."

The creature sits cross-legged across from me. "Down to business, then. I'm Bled. On your quest, you will climb high and come to a clearing of moss and mushrooms. In it, there is a silver snail to be found. He's my friend and it'll take him an age to get home if you don't bring him back."

"Alright, Bled. I'll bring him." I close my eyes and let my head rest back against the stone wall. "But I'm afraid we'll need a contract, and I'll need a wage."

"Is there not enough kindness in your heart that you would do it for free? What has jaded a hero so young as you?"

“Hark! Jaded, you think? *I* think I’m rightfully annoyed at being cursed and kicked from my home and made to go on a walk that is as terribly long as my joints are aching – and they ache all the time, and very painfully thank you. Worse, I’m losing work, being on this quest. I’ve still got to feed myself now and when I return home.” If. If I return home.

Bled’s chuckle shakes the very walls. “Rightfully, yes, I’ll give you that. I shall also give you three gold pieces for your trouble, and another three upon your return.” A rustle of paper, and the sound of a quill marking its surface.

I open my eyes in time to see the minotaur hold the contract out to me, already signed. The paper smells of old wood. I read it over, the plain little contract that dictates what I shall do and what I’m owed. I sign it, and when they take back the implements, the ink moves from the paper to the skin of their left arm.

“It shall not be removed until we fulfil the terms,” they assure me. “And you’ve no need to worry I’ll stiff you on the payment. This tattoo does not match the rather elegant horse on my back, and your signature is as rough and ruinous as chicken scrawl.”

“My chickens will be happy to hear they taught me well,” I reply, and Bled laughs louder this time, flipping me the coins he owes. “Now, are we to sit in the cold, or could I trouble you for a fire, and perhaps

a mug of hot water for these pain-relieving herbs?”

I dream of the bloody wizard, probably because I fall asleep still angry at him – I’ve heard it said that anger is a bit of a nasty doorway. My joints ache with the fever of a fish stranded on land, flipping and flapping in a wasted attempt to get back to the sea, and when that happens, my mood turns sour as old milk. Bled, tall and frightening though he looks, simply sits and listens to my complaining about the hex, my hurting feet, and the wizard.

“Can’t even get a good night’s sleep without him barging in again! Telling me the kingdom is in peril, that the poor Prince Paravel is dead, that I’ve got to hurry. Climb to the top of the mountain and face the Whispering Cliffs on its western side so I might talk to them. With *my* joints? I could hit that man,” I say, gathering my dried shawl and wrapping it about myself. Even without the hero hex, I think I’d be doing this quest, because this kingdom is my home too and it shouldn’t just be up to heroes to save it. I’d be doing it differently, of course, in a way that isn’t quite so agonising.

Right now, I ought to be resting in bed.

Bled thrusts a satchel into my hands, full of apples, cheese, and flatbreads that smell of garlic and honey. Where he conjures them from, I don’t know and I

don't ask.

"Thank you." I force my voice into a kinder, more respectable tone. "I appreciate the hospitality, and shall leave you now."

"I've changed my mind," they say. "I'm going with you." Another satchel appears, strung across their muscled torso.

"According to the wizard, it wouldn't be very hero-like of me to accept," I grumble. I can't help it. I'm tired, and he barged into my mind the same way he did my house, with no care or respect.

"One drop of rain does not make a flower grow," they say, and shrug. "I'm not much of a poet, but I live in this kingdom same as you. I'm going to help. Is there some rule that says every hero must go on alone?"

"Not rule, per se. It's only expected. Don't you know how the tales go? I say yes to company *now*, then *later* comes, and I'll still end up alone and helpless."

"Well," Bled says. "Later has never met me."

And so we walk the Harrowlands together, through the dark grey slate and the moss tufts and the scraggly weeds that stick up like the hackles of a cat when we pass. The rains do not return. Better yet, Bled makes for good company, whistling tunes in time with the beat of their cloven feet. The Harrowlands are

uneasily quiet otherwise, offering not a peep of sound beneath Bled's songs and my *thank yous* and *sorrys*.

When midday hits, so does the full force of my sore joints, and I lay flat on the ground with a laborious sigh in an effort to find some relief. Face down, of course. It's more dramatic that way.

"I can't go on," I groan. "Not today, anyway. Your friend will have to wait."

"Then we shall rest," Bled says, and in an instant they've conjured a small fire and mugs of tea, which I have to sit up before I can accept. "I heard you talking to the moss. They could likely help us, you know."

"Help us?"

"They're Mossmates, or so it's said. Mates. Friends."

I raise my eyebrows, glancing around at the tufts of green. "They can help us get to the clearing?"

"If you ask nicely," Bled says. "And in rhyme, of course."

It surprises many what can be accomplished with simple kindness. I see it every day, yet the very idea of this seems almost laughable to me. I take a piece of bread from my satchel and chew it while I think.

"I can't do it," Bled says. "You know how deadly a minotaur is when they rhyme, and I'm not well-spoken enough to do it with any effectiveness."

Of course. I'd forgotten about that odd magic,

but... “I don’t think you understand how this works. I’m supposed to climb this mountain of slate and almost die doing it. It’s part of the trial. All heroes must prove themselves a hero, even if they’re hexed and didn’t choose it,” I say.

Their face turns a particular shade of yellow that can’t be good. “That’s probably why a lot of heroes die, even when they succeed in their quests.”

“Saving the kingdom is the point. Living afterwards is a luxury.”

Bled violently vomits. “Sorry.” They wipe their mouth, vomit a second time, and wipe their mouth again. “I’m severely allergic to human stupidity. Please refrain from saying such things aloud.”

I’m at a loss for words now, so I say nothing and put my tea down. I’m not sure I can keep my stomach after that display. I need time to think, anyway.

After a long while, Bled asks, “So, the moss? Have you got a rhyme?”

And I say, knowing that such things require precision and manners, “Mossmates of the Harrowlands, please give us a helping hand. Help us to the clearing where moss and mushroom meet, and leave us safely standing there with warm and un-sore feet!”

When the Mossmates come alive, it’s in a sudden sea of tumbling and tossing green. It gets under us,

picks up and carries us up the mountain like a shallow but powerful tide, laughing giddily all the way.

Bled's friend is waiting for us in the moss and mushroom clearing, his silver snail shell shining in the grey sunlight. His name is Pardon, and he's very, very, very slow. Slower than me when I have to get up from the ground after the Mossmates leave us, and that's saying something.

Bled shortens the distance between them and Pardon in four cloven steps, and bends down with a gleaming grin on his face. "It's been too long, friend. How have you been?"

"Well, it's taken me a year to travel what you just walked in two seconds," Pardon says, "but that's fast for my kind, and I can't complain. They'll draw me in the corner of scrolls and parchments, to be sure."

"Don't mind me," I call out, sitting on a red and white spotted mushroom that's big enough to hold three Bleds and still have room for me. "I'm happy to sit here while you two catch up."

"We're caught up," Bled says. "Didn't you hear? Pardon's been nowhere but here. Can't have seen much, can you, Pardon?"

"I saw a tree frog," Pardon says, his eyes sticking right up on their fleshy stalks, wide open. "Odd things, aren't they? And who are you, miss?"

“I lost my name when I was hexed, and have none to give. I’m the hero on this ridiculous journey.”

“Ah,” Pardon says. “I suppose they’ll write whatever name they come up with for you in the scrolls and parchments too. Perhaps they’ll draw you with a sword and codpiece, battling me like I’m some magnificent beast.”

“Tell him about your quest,” Bled says to me, then leans closer to Pardon. “We’re mad at a bad wizard. Hexed her without permission or preparation. She’s going to hit him when she gets home.”

“I said I want to,” I correct, “not that I’m going to.” Though, I really might. “The kingdom is in danger. Apparently, the Whispering Cliffs on this here mountain are prophesied to fall into the sea and take our entire island with it, and the only way to stop them is to climb to the very top and defeat them.”

“Defeat them?” Pardon asks.

“With what?” Bled adds.

“The wizard didn’t say. A hero is meant to have a sword” – Bled heaves, and I go on quickly – “but the wizard’s hands were so full carrying the hex that he didn’t bring one with him, and I’m not the type of lady who keeps a gaudy stick of steel by the hearth. Actually, I do have that iron poker. I didn’t think to bring that, though.”

“Well,” Bled says, “I can make you one. Here.”

Just like that, a gleaming silver sword appears, lying beside me atop the mushroom I'm sat on. It's rather beautiful, all shiny and twisty about the hilt, with tiny metal vines and flowers. I find myself staring at Bled. They have made contracts and quills and food appear from nothing at all, yet this shining sword has me speechless. And perhaps a little envious, if not discomforted at the thought of using such a thing. "Thank you. This is lovely. Really. I'm just not sure I want to go in brandishing a weapon when I don't really know what or who I'm going to face."

"Well, as for getting up there, just ask the Mossmates again," Pardon says, his stalk eyes bobbing here and there.

"That's much too easy," I say drily. "I'm supposed to collapse with exhaustion after expending all my energy saving the kingdom."

Bled vomits.

"Sorry." I wince. "But what will the king think if I do what his dead son could not, and with hardly any effort?"

"Who cares what the king thinks?" Pardon says. "He's just a man with a weird bit of tin on his head."

Bled shakes their head. "I think it's gold."

"Well that's worse, isn't it? He's wearing a fancy hat and our hero here has got to fight some great

battle, right after exhausting herself climbing to the top of a sky-spearling mountain?" Parson turns his eyes on me. "I absolve you of that expectation. There are means to make your quest easier, and you should take them. Besides, you've got to have enough energy left to hit that wizard of yours."

I clear my throat. "Yes, well. I can't argue with that."

"Wise," Bled says. "As is your choice not to go in weapons brandished and blazing and ready for blood. Few heroes would choose that approach."

"Yes, well I'm only a hero by hex," I say. "I've not got a natural heroic bone in my naturally aching body."

Bled raises their brows, and stokes their hairy chin. "I'm not sure. Even if that is true, there ought to be one heroic bone between the three of us."

"You're going to continue on with me?"

Pardon hasn't moved. Or maybe he has, by a half-pinch. "Of course. And we'll hear no arguing about that, either."

I could argue that they'll soon leave or disappear, like in all the tales and as the hex mandates, but I won't. There's only so much of this hero's quest that I can cheat, isn't there? I don't want to bring on our darkest hours sooner than I must.

The Mossmates deposit us all at the very peak of the mountain, in response to another of my simple but kind and rhyming requests.

Here, I can smell the sky itself. Like rain and apple skins and freshly beaten metal. I breathe deeply and let the coolness sit in my bones, which are throbbing fiercely even thanks to being carried up here – there's a lot of strength needed to keep one's body upright, and I couldn't bring myself to lie down loose-limbed and laughing like Bled did.

Pardon rests on Bled's shoulder, eyes pointed toward the sudden emptiness about several paces ahead of us. I near the edge, and peer down to the Whispering Cliffs. If I were one who judged by appearances, I'd say they look more like Grumpy, Swearing cliffs, for there are a thousand little stone faces frowning at me, and not a single one of them happy. The hex ignites in my body, like a sudden fire lit in my veins. This is the part where I must be the hero. Say the heroic thing. Save the kingdom.

"Pleasure to meet you," I yell down. What else am I meant to begin this conversation with? I've got to be diplomatic. Hero or not, I don't hold with threats and fighting. "I hear you're planning on crumbling into the sea and taking half the kingdom with you. I'd be ever so appreciative if you didn't, please. And thank you," I add.

Bled looks at Pardon and Pardon looks at Bled, then they both look at me and shrug. Seems they've got no other suggestions, so we wait.

The wind carries the soft voices of the Whispering Cliffs to us, a thousand of them speaking over one another in a tapestry whose threads I have to focus on if I'm to pull them apart from one another and understand them. "We have held this kingdom for centuries. Centuries! And what do you humans do? Break the soil, starve the dirt. Set fires. Never a thanks or sorry uttered when you carve roads and split stone!"

"Oh," is all I can say. I understand what the cliffs have said, as I was taught by my mother and grandmother to treat the land like a friend. The wizard mentioned none of this. But then, he hardly mentioned anything at all. "I am a wise woman. I see the emotion and the hurt in your words, and I feel your pain. Is there nothing I might do to fix this, and save my people?"

"We," Bled calls out over the edge.

"We will do it," Pardon adds. "Together."

I thank them with a smile. "Please?"

"Hmmm..." The cliffs whisper, and the shaking beneath my feet is like laying a hand to a rattling chest as the person breathes. "No," says one.

"This one did utter thanks and sorry as she

climbed,” says another.

“And she’s a wise-woman!”

“She is kind.”

“But she is a hero,” says one more. “She is like the prince, who came here with sword in his fist, swearing and demands in his mouth. A loud one, he is.”

I hold my hands up. “I have brought no sword. And technically, I’m an unwilling hero. A sod of a wizard hexed me with no respect for the word ‘no’, or the words ‘take your shoes off before you come inside’.” I’m rambling now, so I shut my mouth. “Wait, is... is Prince Paravel alive?”

“He tried to attack us—”

“—he struck and got his sword stuck in the stone
—”

“—along with his silver armour. We couldn’t very well tell the difference between steel that would slice us and steel that would not.”

The voices rise, still whispers, but sharper now and very insistent.

“Besides, he needed time to calm down,” they say.

Bled and Pardon look all around us, at the bleak and solid slate landscape beneath our feet and the sheer drop below. Pardon stretches his eyes around. “Might we negotiate for his release?”

Bled shakes their head. “What of the kingdom?”

I bend over the edge a little more, to better see the

still-frowning rock faces below. “If you give us Prince Paravel, I shall take your wishes back to the King and see that they are met, within reason. I cannot make promises beyond that I will try. But try, I will.”

The cliffs mumble and murmur amongst themselves, and the air bites a little chillier. I don’t think that’s their doing, but who knows? I didn’t think myself a hero – still don’t – yet here I am. The mountain trembles again, this time great enough to make me hold on to Bled, who of course, as a Minotaur, has impeccable balance. “Have I made them mad, do you think?”

Bled whispers, “Perhaps we did.”

“We. Right,” I concede.

“Look!” Pardon doesn’t have to turn around. His eyes simply swivel and he can see. Bled and I spin on our heels and look in the direction he points at, finding the dark slate of the mountain is moving to reveal Prince Paravel, stuck forever in a pose of slaughter. Slaughter of a rock.

His great silver sword is stuck in the stone, shining in the gloomy midday light. And his feet. Shelled in armour, his feet are buried in the rock as though it were once dark water and now sits frozen around him, fixing him in place.

“Don’t look at me,” Prince Paravel shouts. “I’m helpless!”

I glance at Bled, who stifles a snort.

The cliffs whisper, "Prove your worth to us. If you pull the sword from the stone, we will know your promise to be true and binding."

I let go of Bled's arm. "And what are your wishes? We shall tell them to the king and fight for things to be righted."

The cliffs whisper again, speaking of kindness and thanks. Treat the land with respect, they tell us. They describe the way they miss the trees in the north, now almost all cut down for boats and rafters. Plant more, and more still. We must tend to our gardens with loving hands. Take what the gardens give us, and give back to it our scraps. If we split stone, be sure not to waste it. If we split a river, be sure not to make thirsty that which used to drink the water where it flowed.

"We have heard you," Pardon says.

"And we agree with you," Bled adds.

"We see the wisdom in your wishes, and give our word that we shall take them to the king. If he wants his kingdom to remain, he will see the wisdom in granting them," I say with hope. There is little choice in this, but even if there were and even if I weren't hexed, I would fight for it. I go to the prince, who stands stone-still and wrapped in his silver armour, and grip the hilt of his sword.

Try though I might, it will not budge. Bled comes

and tries, and it doesn't budge either. Pardon blinks. Then we all look to Prince Paravel with raised brows.

"You think I haven't tried to free it, or myself?" he asks.

"I think you haven't given your word," I say. "The Whispering Cliffs have made a request, and agreed to our terms. We're waiting on you."

"Oh. Right," he says, and looks over at the edge of the cliff. "I've heard you, and I too will ensure the king hears you."

"And?" Bled prompts.

"And I shan't seek revenge for this defeat. I shan't even speak of it," Prince Paravel says.

"And?" Bled prompts again.

"And I'm most sorry for attempting to strike you." We all hear the prince swallow. "I regret that my actions were so... unkind."

The cliffs whisper their thanks, and together, all four of us draw the sword from the stone.

The week-long journey back to the castle is uneventful, though Prince Paravel's complaining about having to scale the mountain was nearly enough to make Pardon secrete all over his boots when we stop for the night – and the aftermath of that, I'm sure, would have been entertaining to see. It's not fair, you see, that he had to climb while we had help. But of

course, pointing out that he needed only ask did not quiet him.

King Phillipe greets us with such kindness and music and food that it takes another half day for us to discuss everything that happened. He is so overjoyed at the return of his son, and it distracts them both. Or perhaps that's the wine, which has brought a flush to both of their cheeks.

"You shall marry, of course!" The king announces, to the delight of the queen who sits beside him. "My heroic son and my wise soon-to-be daughter!" He laughs and smiles at me, but all I can do is gape at him like a fish.

This too is part of my hex, but I shan't accept it. "I don't think so – your grace," I add, thinking quickly. That damnable wizard. Perhaps he can finally be good for something. "I have a man at home, to whom I must return to."

Prince Paravel, tall and gleaming, shakes his head. "I shall accompany you and fight him for the right to your hand, Lady. You have done much for me," he says. He was not clear in telling his father just how he became stuck and unstuck, and how we all lived to tell the tale and eat this grand supper. "I am quite besotted."

His mother smiles, her hair a shining yellow. "You make a fine match."

Like a fire to wood, I think to myself. Neither of us would come out of that marriage any better for it. “We hardly know—”

“Do you not want to be married?”

I glance at Bled, who looks like they’re about to be sick. “I think a marriage would please me if—”

“Then there is nothing to fear,” Prince Paravel assures me, spearing meat with his fork. “It shall be an honourable fight for your hand. Let it please you.”

He is no better than the wizard. So be it. “Alright,” I say. “I shall give you my hand in the way that pleases me most. You have my word, and know what that is worth.”

He smiles. “We ride when the sun rises.”

The instant we arrive at my thatch-and-thistle cottage, the wizard emerges from the surrounding trees, his pointed hat as askew and his beard as full of frilly mushrooms as it was the day he hexed me.

“You,” I say, slipping down from the horse I rode – behind Paravel, of course, because why should I be allowed to ride with anyone else?

“You’ve done it!”

Paravel dismounts too. “And you hexed this poor woman! You ought to have spelled me with greater strength and speed instead!”

Bled and Pardon and I sit down against the old

fallen trunk out front of the cottage, and lean back.

“Right,” Paravel says, and unburdens himself of all his weapons. It was part of our agreement that this be a truly honourable fight, you see, one with fists and not forged metals. “Prepare yourself, wizard.” And with that, he swings his fist.

As I learned when the wizard hexed me, he needs time to make spells. Under threat of balled fists? He has no time to do much at all, save duck and run and cover the twirls of his white moustache, to which he seems extremely attached. The fight goes on for a few moments, with both men running and dropping, throwing punches and dodging blows. Bled hands me the three coins he owes me. Our contract is complete, but he flashes one more coin.

“For the entertainment,” they say with a wink, and I take the extra coin gladly. Eventually, the prince and the wizard tangle their arms up together and end up on the ground, damp from rain. It kicks up everywhere, smearing their clothes and faces with dark dirt. And at the end of it, they end up laying side by side, chests heaving in tandem as they catch their breath.

With that out of the way, I stand over Prince Paravel with a honeyed smile. “Need a hand?”

He takes it, grinning with pride and humour. But before I’ve helped him rise all the way, I let go, and he falls back to the ground with a pained groan.

“There. You’ve had my hand in the way that pleases me most. Now you’ll listen to me and listen well. I endured far more than I should have had to endure on that quest that you—” I point at the wizard. “—hexed me to go on. I have enough joint pain just sleeping and waking up, I didn’t need to traverse the Harrowlands and climb a damned mountain, and I certainly didn’t need to be claimed as some prize for having done the job you—” I point at Prince Paravel. “—could have done properly. Beating each other into bags of bruises is but a small pinch in the measure of my aches and pains. If I ever see either of you here again, it had better be with respect and apologies. Am I understood?”

They nod, then a dark shadow falls over both men as Bled comes to stand behind me, and their nods become more committed. Pardon glares at them.

“Good,” I say. “Now go home and ensure you uphold the promise you made on that mountain. Be the hero you say you are, and you be the wizard you should be. Otherwise, you’ll have us three to deal with.”

We watch the prince scramble to his horse and ride away, while the wizard slinks back into the forest with one hand nervously holding the end of his mushroomed beard. With that, my new friends and I share a laugh, and Bled conjures a plate of butter

biscuits which will go well with a shared pot of tea.

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In the Moon's Eclipse

Amara Lynn

I don't have a home. All I've got is my old yellow Mustang and the clothes on my back.

A few towns prior, my former boss and lover screwed me over, and Gabby disappeared, and now, I'm a loner again. I miss Gabby's gabbing, talking to everyone who will listen, even toads. I don't miss Gram, though, because all he turned out to be was a liar.

Not all witches are bad. I learned that from Gabby. There are a helluva lot more good ones. Maybe one day I'll find the place Gabby mentioned. Yverwood, he called it. A magical town. There are many magical towns in the world, though most of them are hard to get to, especially if you have no magic about you. Yverwood is where Gabby is from, though, so if I can make it there, someday, someday, maybe I'll meet him again. Eventually.

For now, I'm broke and out of gas, stuck outside of the town I was almost to. I could walk the rest of the way... I'm a fit enough looking guy that I wouldn't be worried about anyone messing with me. I don't think I have enough cash to fill a canister enough to get my car into town, though. And walking will mean leaving my car, my baby, out here unattended, not to mention the hassle of walking back.

This blows.

I know I'm cursed with bad luck, but do the fates really have to be so cruel? Can I not catch a single break?

If someone drives by, I'm hoping I can convince them to help me out. This area is so dead, though, so I don't know when that'll happen.

My stomach growls. I have a single granola bar in my glove compartment, so I munch on it, leaning back in my seat and gazing at the moon. I wonder if it'll be full by All Hallow's Eve, or Halloween night. It'll be close. I don't know if that will be an unlucky occurrence or not.

"Hey, what happened?" A voice says out of nowhere.

I jerk upright and find a guy I'm surprised was able to sneak up on me, as buff as he is, standing by my passenger side door, head tilted in question, topaz eyes staring at me.

“Outta gas. Outta money.”

A quick glance around confirms there’s no other car around. This guy came on foot, wherever he came from.

“That sucks. I’m sorry.”

He must be a drifter like me, only one without a car. His brown hair is just long enough to stick up, going multiple directions, like he woke up that way and didn’t bother fixing it. He’s wearing a worn Deftones shirt, sleeves ripped and showing off his strong, broad shoulders, and jeans ripped off at the knees.

I pull my eyes away from his biceps. I don’t have a type; strong and tall and handsome, cute and flirty, grumpy and pouty, I like it all. He’s ticking the strong, tall, and handsome boxes for me right now. There’s an innocence in his eyes, a friendly smile upon his face, which gives me the feeling either this guy is a closet serial killer or just super friendly. With my luck it will be the former, but hopefully it’s the latter.

“Uh, where’d you come from, anyways?”

He smiles sheepishly, and I really hope he’s not a wolf in sheep’s clothing. I’m not out of shape, but with his tight, corded muscles, I’d be no match for him.

“I don’t have a car, so I walk everywhere. Or jog.”

My eyebrows rise. "Everywhere?"

"Yeah. Sometimes I hitchhike." He's still smiling, all relaxed and like it's no big deal. I don't know if I find it cute or strange, but his smile is kinda magnetic.

Might as well take a chance, I guess. "You wouldn't wanna help me out, would ya?"

"Sure," he replies without a second thought, his smile not faltering.

"Do you have any money to get me some gas and bring it back? I'll find some way to repay you as soon as I get an odd job in town, I promise."

"It's all good, don't worry about it. I'll be back in a flash with some gas. You have a gas can?"

"Uh, yeah." I stumble out, surprised he so readily agreed. This guy is too good to be true. He's a saint. There's no way my luck has suddenly turned around. I'm literally cursed. "What's the catch?"

"No catch. People should help each other out, you know? There's not enough kindness in the world."

There's a catch here somewhere, and I'll find out what it is eventually. Either that or he won't come back, and I'll be back where I started.

"I guess. Thanks, uh... What's your name?"

"Val." His smile widens and God, he's cute and pure and sweet but also hot? I don't know how he pulls that combo off, but he does.

"I'm Addison."

“Nice to meet you.” He sticks out his large hand, and I clasp it; his grip is firm and his palm rough, like that of a wilderness-hardened mountain man, or something.

“You, too. You’re sure you want to do all this for me?”

“Yeah, it’s really not a big deal. It’s only a few more miles to town. I’ll be back before you know it.”

Only a few miles, he says. Well, I guess that’s not a lot when you walk or jog everywhere like him.

“Thanks. I’m really gonna owe ya.”

“No problem!”

He takes the gas can and is off. I watch his backside as he takes off down the road, admiring what I can see and wondering if it’s as muscular and firm as his arms.

Still waiting for the catch. There will be one, I’m sure there will be. It’s only a matter of time. I’ll wait, because I have nothing better to do.

“Addison, I’m back!”

“Ah!” I jolt awake and bang my knee on my steering wheel, forgetting where I am and who the hell is talking to me for a moment. “Val?”

“Yeah. I got your gas.” He’s leaning in the driver’s side, and his face is really, really close. He smells kind of like... a dog? It’s not unpleasant, just strange.

“I could kiss you!” I blurt out exactly what I’m thinking, reaching through my window to grab his face before I can help it, before I can stop to think maybe that’s a bad idea.

I pause and look into his eyes. He’s not pulling away, just staring back with his big brown doe eyes and smiling like he wouldn’t mind me kissing him one bit. I wonder if he likes guys? This is *not* helping my tendency to fall into bed with people.

He pecks my lips and stands up straight again. “I’ll get you filled up,” he says as he heads to the back end of my car, leaving me staring blankly at the fact that he gave me a peck on the lips without a second thought.

After he’s done, he hops in the passenger seat and makes himself comfortable, leaning the chair back.

“Ready to go?” I ask.

“Yeah, let’s roll!”

I start up the car, and turn down the radio. I’m still waiting for that catch, for the moment he turns out to not just be a nice person, but a killer or something. Val is just vibing in my passenger seat, looking like he might fall asleep at any second. That jog to town and back might be catching up with him. Maybe I should let him sleep?

“So, you ever been to Wolves Hollow?” He asks.

“Nope. Have you?”

“Yeah, I have some friends there. It’s actually where I was headed when I came across you.”

Maybe that’s how he got help?

“Oh, is that why you’re headed there, then? Visiting your friends?”

“Yep. I’ll probably stay through Halloween.”

I’m not so sure where I’ll be by then. I do need to find work of some kind, since I’m recently unemployed. My last job was hunting down witches – only, I came to find out, my boss (and now ex-boyfriend) had been deceiving me: not all witches are bad. I’d met with a particularly cute one, and he’d helped me realize that I still had a whole lot to learn about witches, and everything else supernatural. *If* I remained involved in that world.

“What about you?” Val asks, jerking me back to the present.

“Dunno. I’m out of work and homeless because my ex-boss is also my ex-boyfriend. So, I’m not really sure what the hell I’m going to do now.”

“Wow. Well, I’m happy to help out some more. I’ve got a lot of connections in town.”

“Really?” Still waiting for the catch. Still waiting. Maybe he’s trying to lure me into his murder house or cult. I don’t know. But his smile is cute, and he’s so aloof looking, I just – I don’t think he’ll turn out to be a murderer. Even if I do have bad luck.

“Yeah, of course. Like I said, people gotta help each other out. There’s not enough kindness in this world.”

Damn, that’s cheesy and heartwarming. A killer wouldn’t say that. I mean. Unless he’s a sociopath and really, really good at acting. Well, innocent until proven guilty, right?

I smile in an attempt at blissful ignorance. “Thanks, Val.”

Once we’re in town, Val directs me to his friends’ place. We’re driving down Main Street, the speed limit is like five, and everyone on the walkway looks at us as we go by. Is it the car? It does stand out. Or is it me?

They’re all giving me this look, like if “INTERLOPER” were a look, that’s it. That’s what the look says. I’m surprised they aren’t pointing at me and yelling as we pass by.

It’s really creepy and not the least bit welcoming.

“Here it is,” Val says, pointing to a tall brick apartment building.

I park, trying not to focus on the leering townsfolk, and we walk to the door. Val taps the old knocker, a beast with a ring clutched in its jaws, and steps back.

The door opens enough for a face to peer out: a bearded, dark-haired person.

“Tully,” Val says cheerfully.

The person’s look softens, a welcome smile replacing the scowl. “Val, it’s been a while!” Tully opens the door wider, revealing a form that’s even more burly than Val’s, with arms covered in thick hair. They kinda remind me of Wolverine.

“It has.” The two of them clasp arms and Tully brings another around to pat Val’s shoulder.

“You needing to stay awhile?”

“Yeah... And actually, I have another guy with me in need.” Val points a thumb over his shoulder.

I smile and try to look friendly. “Hi.”

Tully looks me over with skepticism, then back to Val. “Is he...?”

“No, he’s just a drifter.”

Is he what?

Tully looks at me again. “Just don’t cause any trouble. And you make sure he doesn’t, Val.”

“Thanks, Tull! I owe you one.”

“Everyone does,” Tully says, shrugging and turning away from us to walk down the hallway.

“Come on, Addison.” Val waves me onward.

I step in after him, glancing around. The floors are lined with shaggy maroon carpet and the walls are old wood paneling. Damn, it’s been awhile since this place had a remodel.

Val takes us down one of the halls, not the one

Tully went down, thankfully. The doors have dry-erase boards mounted to them, many with handwritten names, some doodles, and pronouns, I'm assuming done by their occupants, since none of them have the same handwriting.

"Here we go, there's two next to each other!" Val takes the dry-erase board and marker off one and holds it out. "Write your name, pronouns, and if there's anything else you need people to know, too."

I take it from him but don't write yet. "What was that with Tully at the door? Am I... what?"

Val stiffens and doesn't look my way, instead pulling the dry-erase board from the door next to mine and writing his own info on it: *Val Meyer, (he/him), likes hugs and physical contact. <3*

"It's better if you don't know," he says as he hangs his board back up, then finally looks at me and claps my shoulder. "All you need to know is you'll be safe here, and you can stay as long as you need to, until get yourself back in order. And I'll be right next door if you need me."

"But why? Why do this for me? What's in it for you, or Tully?"

I write on my own whiteboard: *Addison Walker, (he/him), loves a good corny joke.*

"Because it's what Tully does. They help people like me. They've helped me countless times, so I'm

paying it forward.”

People like him? Like what? Something that I’m not, whatever the hell it is Tully asked at the door. Something it’s better I don’t know? Val said this is a safe place though, so I guess it’s not something dangerous, whatever it is.

All my imminent bad luck alarms aside, I really think Val is serious and genuine. And I guess Tully is, too, even though they seemed grumpy. I’m guessing they’re one of those hard exterior, soft heart types.

Maybe there’s no catch. Val is just nice... And a hugger, apparently. And a kisser.

The only thing left for me to do is just... trust Val. Trust that, for whatever reason, he’s not out to get me like the rest of the world. And trust that if I need to know whatever he’s keeping from me, he’ll tell me. If it’s something dangerous, he’ll tell me. I hope.

“Thanks,” I say, because there’s nothing else better to say now.

“You’re welcome.” Val hugs me out of nowhere. “Stay as long as you need, and let me know if I can help.”

His strong arms are warm, and his chest even warmer. I miss Gabby, but there’s no telling if I’ll ever see him again, and this feels nice, too. Different from Gabby’s slender body; still nice. I let my head rest against his chest as I hug back. He kisses the top

of my hair, and when I look up, my lips. It's a more lingering kiss than the peck from before. His mouth is searing against mine. My knees actually go weak. Damn. His arms tighten around me, holding me up.

I can't fall into bed with this guy, I just met him! Okay, well, that's not true. I could fall into bed with him. I'd done exactly that with Gabby. But Gabby didn't keep secrets, and Val had a secret.

I force myself to pull away. "Um, goodnight," I say, and hurry into my room, shut the door, and lean heavily against it.

I can easily imagine Val's body over me, enveloping mine. But I can't succumb to my passion. Not so easily. It would only make whatever secret he's keeping harder to take, and lead to another heartbreak.

Without bothering to take in my surroundings, I slink under the covers to sleep. The only thing I take in is the scent of the blankets. Dog smell. Not in a good way.

Breakfast is a chaotic experience.

There are at least ten people staying here, some fierce and strong looking like Val, some younger, maybe teens, and all as hungry as rabid animals, stealing food out from under each other's noses and even growling at each other.

“Now, now, pups. There’s plenty for everyone,” Tully says as they set a large platter of pancakes and eggs on the table.

Val sees me and makes a bee line towards me. I hope things won’t be awkward after last night.

“Uh, hey. I got you a plate.” He hands me one; the plate he keeps has twice as much food on it.

“Thanks.”

We both stand there silently. Yeah, it’s awkward.

“Val—”

“Addison—”

We both try to speak.

“You go ahead,” I say. I don’t actually have any clue what I would’ve said.

“I’m sorry for last night. I can get carried away and caught up in my emotions. I know I need to be better. I understand if you don’t want to be around me.”

I dismiss the last sentence with a wave. “It’s okay, really. I didn’t dislike it or anything, it’s just... I’m coming off of two breakups back to back, so... Can we take things a bit slower?”

He’s got this look on his face like a dejected puppy that morphs into joy by the time I finish my sentence. If he had a tail, I swear it’d be wagging right now.

“Yeah, of course. I’ll ask next time.”

My heart’s racing at the thought of a next time,

despite everything. Damnit. Why does he have to look so damn cute? “Thanks, Val.”

#

After breakfast, Tully takes Val and me out to help us find some work. Around Tully, people are a lot less skeptical. I guess knowing them makes a difference.

Now that we’re out in the daylight, I take in more details of Wolves Hollow. With its large amount of brick buildings and roads, it looks ancient. I get the feeling the place is close knit.

It takes a bit of persuasion on Tully’s part, and a couple of tries – a general store, a bookstore, a cafe – but third time’s a charm, and the cafe owner agrees to give me a job.

Another of “Tully’s kids”, as the manager so called them, works at the cafe. I recognize Lecks from the breakfast table that morning, one of the younger, gangly ones, who waves to us enthusiastically. I note the they/them on their name tag as I wave back.

A coffee shop gig isn’t my first choice, but I’m not going to be picky, and my previous experience as a witch hunter was kinda useless, especially considering my ex/boss lied to me about I don’t know how many targets. It’ll be a long time before I can move past that fact. How many innocent people had I delivered into his hands to be locked up, simply for being a witch?

The thought is sickening even now, still too fresh a

memory in my head. I drop my half-empty coffee cup into a trash can as we're walking along Main Street.

"You all right, Addy?" Val asks, the nickname clenching at my heart.

He's not the first person to call me that, and probably won't be the last, but my heartbreak is still so new.

Gabby, who I don't know when I'll see again, had called me that. Gram, in the heat of the moment, when we were in bed, would call me that, too. Most of the time he would just call me Ads, though, and I'm only now realizing how much I hated that.

"I'm fine," I say, even though I'm not fine, and I have no clue when I will be fine again. It'll take time before I'm carefree and throwing jokes around again.

"Okay..." Val doesn't sound convinced. "If you need to talk, I'm here."

Maybe I'll talk when he's not keeping his own secrets. For now, it's probably better if I don't.

Tully gets Val a job at a mechanic's shop, which he tells me is where he actually got my gas from. I can totally envision him working with cars, grease staining his face and jeans, shirt opened and wiping sweat from his brow... Okay, stop it, brain. Down, boy.

The next morning, there's a joke written on my

whiteboard in Val's handwriting.

What do you call a pile of cats?

I think about it for a moment before going to Val's board and writing an answer.

A meow-ntain.

At breakfast, Val grins at me.

"Did I get it right?" I ask.

"You did. You're good! I'll try again tomorrow."

True to his word, Val writes another joke on my board the following day.

What do you call a magician without magic?

Ian.

And the next day:

What do you call a wolf with no legs?

Anything you want, they can't chase you.

And the next:

Why couldn't the pirates play cards?

The captain was standing on the deck.

So it continues this way, day after day. On a Friday morning, I'm greeted by Val himself instead of a joke.

"What's up?"

He flashes me a crooked, sheepish smile. "Friday night's movie night in the house. Be my date?"

"I'd love to," I say, grinning.

Movie night is almost as chaotic as breakfast. Tully makes us a boatload of popcorn and passes out sodas. The kids let me and Val have a seat next to each other on the worn couch in the den. During the first movie, *Marley and Me*, Val puts his arm conspicuously across the back of the couch, and when the end rolls around, and everyone in the room is tearing up, I lean into Val, and his arm slips around me, and I think maybe this is perfect.

Tully puts another movie on, *Underworld*, but a lot of the younger kids are dozing off early on. Tully picks them up one by one and carries them to their rooms, until it's just Val and me.

"Val?"

"Hm?" He looks at me with lidded, groggy eyes.

"Do you think a werewolf and a vampire would

really make some like, super-supernatural being?”

Val snorts. “I don’t think a vampire and a werewolf would be together at all.” He bumps his head against mine. “Vampires suck.”

I half-laugh “Literally.”

He laughs. “Good catch.”

“Val?”

“Yeah?”

“I wanted to tell you about what happened with me and my exes before we met.”

Val rubs my arm, eyes changing from tired to concerned. “Are you sure? You don’t have to.”

“I want to.” I sit up straighter and take a breath. “Gram was my ex...boyfriend and boss. I was a witch hunter, and I captured whatever witches he told me to. I thought I was doing the right thing. But then, I met Gabby. Long story short, turns out I was wrong – Gram was going after witches that weren’t evil. Gabby showed me all witches aren’t bad. So, I left my job...and Gram.”

Val, the eternal nice guy that he is, listens intently to my speech. “And...Gabby? Is he your other ex?”

I nod. “We parted ways. We’re just on... different paths right now.”

“I’m sorry you went through that.” He pulls me closer again, and I gladly lean against him, taking in his scent. Still kinda like a dog, still not in a bad way.

“Thank you for telling me.”

“Thanks for listening, Val.”

“Absolutely. You can tell me anything, Addy.”

And in that moment, I wish I could tell him the rest, about my ill-fated curse. But I’ve told him all I could, and that’s what matters. He knows my secrets, and he didn’t bat an eyelid. He’s still here.

He really is a good guy. Whatever else is going on with this strange place, I can count on Val.

The jokes continue to appear day after day, and with each one, the sadness in my heart fades further and further away.

What do you call an angry carrot?

A steamed veggie.

What did the wolf eat after the getting its teeth cleaned?

The dentist.

What’s a wolf’s favorite food?

Me.

When do wolves go trick or treating?

Howl-o-ween.

What did the wolf say to the moon?

You make me howl.

What did the moon say to the wolf?

You make me feel full again.

I know, I know, the last two aren't really jokes... I wonder about the strange abundance of wolf jokes, too... Maybe Val just likes wolves. My warm fuzzy feels are clouding my judgment, I guess, because I'm completely at ease. I'm... Maybe even happy again. Or on the way to it. He hasn't asked to kiss me again yet, and I haven't mentioned it either. I think I'd like to, though...

I decide to write Gabby. I don't know if he'll get it, but I think I need to if I want to keep moving forward, if I want to take the plunge with Val.

Dear Gabby,

Things aren't bad. They're... maybe even good.

I still miss you. I'm not sure you'll get this, unless

you've got some fancy spell to whisk this letter to you.

I'm just writing it because it's the only way I know how to let go of you. I know you said we could see other people until we meet again, but I wouldn't feel right if I didn't get this out in words.

There's this guy I like.

He's cute, but in a big goofball kinda way. And he's really kind. His friends are all nice, and even though I'm an outsider to them, they quickly took me in and made me feel like family.

I'm pretty sure Val has a big secret, along with all of Tully's kids. Sorry, that's what everyone calls the drifters staying at this house. Hell, everyone in the town may be in on the secret. It seems like this Tully person knows everyone in Wolves Hollow. I keep wondering if I'm into some Truman Show or Stepford Wives bullshit, but everyone's really nice, which makes them both more suspicious and more endearing and it's really bugging me. Am I being prepared to get inducted into a cult? Will I be one of Tully's kids, too?

Back on track.

I just wanted you to know I'm okay. Things are going really good. I've been thinking less and less every day about all the shit that went down with Gram. I even told Val about everything that happened. When I'm with him, I feel safe and at ease.

I still miss you, but I can let go for now. At least until we meet again.

I hope you're okay, wherever the hell you are, you talkative, lovable bastard.

Maybe there's a chance you find this. Whenever I move on, I'm gonna leave it with Tully, and seal it with spit like a good ol' fashioned letter, so that maybe whatever tracking spell you put on me will pick up on my DNA, or however the hell your spell works.

*Love always,
Addison*

There's a knock on my door as I'm sealing my letter. I stuff it in my pocket and answer.

"Hey, Addy," Val says.

"What's up?" I smile, but he's not smiling back. "Is everything okay?"

"Can I come in for a minute? I need to talk to you about something."

"Sure."

I step aside and let him in.

"I need to talk to you about All Hallow's Eve."

"What about it?" The smile falls from my face, replaced with a furrow of concern.

"There's a tradition in Wolves Hollow which falls on Halloween night this year. It's called The Running of the Wolves."

“What is it?”

Val crosses his arms over his broad chest, forcing me to try not to get too caught up in staring at his muscular arms. He still looks so grim, which is weird on him. Whatever this Running of the Wolves thing is, I doubt it’s something fun.

“All you need to know is it’s dangerous, and you’re gonna need to stay inside that night. Don’t go out after dark. No matter what.”

“Why not? What’ll happen?”

Val growls and stands up straight, unfurling his arms and clenching his hands into fists. “Just stay inside. It’s not safe.”

If he had hackles, they’d be standing straight up right now. I’ve never seen him so... angry. I take a step away from him and put my hands in front of me like a pathetic excuse for a shield.

His eyes soften. “Addy, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to scare you, but I’m just trying to protect you.”

He steps closer to me and I put my hands down. I’m not quite ready to let him off the hook, though.

“And protecting me means keeping me in the dark?”

Val stares at the shaggy, red carpet instead of me when he replies. “It’s better for you this way. Trust me.”

“Shouldn’t that be for me to decide? I told you

about Gram and Gabby, so why can't you tell me what it is you're keeping from me?" I thought I could count on him. I'd leaned on him for support, yet he isn't leaning on me at all.

He growls, deeper and more feral.

I step back again, but I bump the wall. He's literally backed me into a corner. My blood boils.

"It's complicated. I just need you to trust me, okay?"

I turn my head away and scowl at the wall. "Fine. Whatever." I'm done with all the secrecy. I'm done. Val, apparently, isn't. I've had enough of secrets. Gram screwed me over with his secrets, and I'm not too interested in going through that again. If Val isn't gonna give me the truth, isn't going to rely on me like I've been him... I guess I'm done with him. "Are we done here?"

Val's frowning when I look back at him.

"I guess so."

He leaves.

The next day, there's no joke on my whiteboard.

I guess we're done, then. That's it.

Maybe I should just go. I thought Val might be someone I could open up to, even though my heart's kinda still a mess. I guess it was silly of me to think he'd open up, too. Things had barely even gotten started between us, but they're already ending. Sigh.

I shake my head. There I go, talking like Gabby. I push all that out of my mind as best I can tomorrow.

I'm scheduled to work until the afternoon at the cafe. I'll need to give them my resignation and get the rest of my pay, which I'll need if I'm skipping town. By the time I get back to Tully's house and pack, it'll be getting dark.

Val said it would be dangerous to go out in the dark. Even though I'm pissed at him, he was really adamant and more serious than I'd ever seen him. So, I should probably listen to him. Right?

Probably.

Probably.

Okay.

I firmly decide I'll hole up in my room to avoid Val and leave in the early hours of the morning, before Val or anyone else can stop me. This place has worn out its welcome for me. Time to try my luck somewhere else, even if my luck is crap. It has to be better than this mess of lies.

When I'm finally back in my room that evening, I start another letter to Gabby.

Dear Gabby,

I had a different letter for you, but I'm tossing that one.

I've been at Tully's house in Wolves Hollow for

only a couple weeks, but it's time for me to move on. I thought things could be good with Val. I was ready for things to be good, after everything I've been through. I told him about you, and Gram, and how I'm a mess. I guess he wasn't ready to tell me his secrets, though. So, I'm done here.

I hope the next place I end up is better than here.

I miss you.

Love,

Addison

I seal the new letter and venture into the hallway in search of Tully's room. There's no one in the halls. There's no one in the den. I find Tully's room. It's locked and there's no answer.

There's no one in the house, is there?

Did they really all go out on Halloween night and leave me here completely *alone*? On the bright side, Tully's kids aren't trying to recruit me. On the not-so-bright side: alone. And I don't even know why.

To hell with this. I'm going out.

Outside is strange.

There are people. A few. But not crowds dressed up in goofy costumes like I expected on Halloween night. And the ones that are out are wearing red. Some are in red cloaks which obscure their bodies, hoods

pulled down to hide their faces, while others wear red hoodies and LED masks. No matter which way they dress, all are in red, and all have silver amulets around their necks.

Strange.

Stranger yet, instead of candy, every door has a bowl of fresh, raw meat set out, unattended.

This place has gotten so strange, so suddenly. I mean, it hasn't been the least strange place by any means, but now it's jumped to the top of the strange list.

Maybe I should have stayed inside...

There are howls in the distance. The hairs on the back of my neck prickle.

I step forward. One step, two steps, three. Even though every part of my body is screaming in protest, begging me to turn back, my stubborn brain is countering with a firm disagreement. Why should I let Val boss me around? Other than the fact that whatever is going on tonight in town is creepy as hell?

There's a strange red glow on everything.

A clock tower tolls, jarring me. It's midnight. And a glance upwards at the moon confirms the cause of the red glow. There's a lunar eclipse. Clouds are moving in to block the blood moon. I keep on walking. The red glow fades as the clouds come in.

A figure stands at the next corner, not in red –

instead, shirtless and only wearing a pair of cutoff jeans, which I recognize.

Val.

“Addison?”

“Val?”

He runs towards me with inhuman speed, his eyes fierce and his brows knit together. I actually slouch, it’s so intimidating.

“Why are you out here, Addison? What the hell are you thinking?” He grabs my shoulders with enough force I think it’ll bruise.

“I—” I don’t even know what to say.

“I told you,” He cuts me off. “It’s too dangerous out here tonight. You’ve gotta go back to the house, as fast as you can.” He shakes me, staring sternly at me as he admonishes me like I’m a child. “Do you understand?”

“Why? Why can’t you just tell me the fucking truth, Val?” I wrench myself away from him. “Just tell me! I deserve to know... Before I go.”

That removes the stern look from his face, replacing it with a softer, surprised one. “You’re leaving?”

“Yeah... In the morning.”

“Addy—AGH!” He’s interrupted by I don’t know what, but he doubles over like it’s painful.

The red of the lunar eclipse is returning, painting

him in crimson. I reach for Val, grazing his shoulder. He stumbles away from my grasp and growls so low it's not human sounding.

“LEAVE!”

The pain of rejection couples with the rising fear in my gut, roiling together in a toxic potion which is nauseating. He wants me to leave? He wants me to stay away. He warned me of the danger. I ignored the warning and now, I don't know what the hell is going on.

Hair is sprouting across his arms and his face is morphing, lupine features replacing the human ones.

He looks at directly at me again with the same fierce eyes, but a face somewhere between man and wolf, and growls out, “RUN! BEFORE I LOSE CONTROL!” It's unsettling, words coming from a mouth that's more animal, snout-like now. “RUN!” He bellows one more time as he settles onto all fours, finally jarring me into motion.

I run.

I run and run and I don't look back, even when snarls fill my ears and wolves howl in the distance. I run straight back to the house, lock my door, and pull the dog-smelling blankets over my head, as if I'm hiding from not werewolves but bogeys that go bump in the night. I know a blanket won't protect me from anything that goes bump in the night, especially not

WEREWOLVES.

Fucking werewolves!

Finally, the catch has made itself known. This is Val's big secret. Not only Val, but all of house Tully, I suspect.

Sigh. Just my luck.

I don't sleep.

Not long after it's light out, there's a knock at my door. I already know it has to be Val.

I slink out of bed and stop at the door, not opening it.

"Who's there?" I ask.

"The wolf," Val answers.

Is this a knock knock joke? "The wolf, who?" I try.

"The wolf who is sorry he kept this secret from you. He knows he fucked up, but he was scared of how you'd react... he was scared you'd leave, and he really likes you."

Damn. He got me right in the feels.

As much as I want to stay mad, was up all night thinking about it, when he says those words... I just melt. After all, Val has been nothing but kind to me. He's been looking out for me since the moment we met, and last night was no different. Val would protect me, even if it hurt to do so. He'd said it himself, I would be safe here.

I open the door.

“So, you’re a werewolf?”

Val is standing there, looking at me sheepishly with his biggest puppy dog eyes, his hands stuffed in his pockets.

“Yeah...”

“I wouldn’t have left.”

His brows rise. “Really?”

“Of course not. You think you’re the only one with issues? I’ve got stuff I can’t even tell you wrong with me. I don’t care that you’re a werewolf.”

“Really? It doesn’t scare you?”

“I could never be scared of you. You’re like a big puppy. Now get the hell in here.”

I throw my arms around his neck and yank him into my room. He pushes the door closed behind us and touches noses with me.

“Can I... kiss you now?”

“You’d better. Right now.”

His lips turn up as he does so. I capture his bottom lip between my teeth and nibble on it as I guide us backwards to the bed, pulling him down on top of me. His bulky weight feels so good bearing down into me, and his hips grinding against mine even better. He’s already hard as he presses against me. Need thrums through my body, hot and electric.

I break the kiss to speak, a random thought

popping into my head. “So, do uh, you do that knotting thing?”

Something between a sigh and a laugh escapes Val. “Nope. I’m just a regular dude all the other nights of the month.”

“Cool. Good to know.”

He lifts himself up on one elbow to look at me. “Addy?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you stay?”

I can’t say no to those puppy dog eyes, who am I kidding? “Yeah, I’ll stay.”

“Good.”

There’s that adorable, earnest smile again that I’m pretty sure caught me up in Val from the moment we met, and I’m not at all upset about it.

Dear Gabby,

Final take. This is the letter you’ll actually get, when I do finally move on from this place. It’s not in the cards at the moment.

Right now, I’m happy with where I’m at. I’m happy with Val. Turns out, he’s a werewolf. No, they can’t shift at will, and they don’t do the knotting thing. (I asked, and I know you’d ask so I’m telling you.)

But the point is this: I’m okay. I’m better than

okay. Every day it gets easier. I still miss you, but I'm okay. I just wanted you to know that, so you don't worry about me. I hope you're doing okay, too, wherever you are, and that we'll meet again one day. I know you'll come looking for me eventually. After all, you put a spell on me.

See you when I see you.

Love,

Addy

Amara Lynn is a quiet daydreamer and cryptid enthusiast who resides in the midwest USA with their spouse and cats. Toil and Trouble (Yverwood Witches, #1) is an introduction into the magical, cozy town of Yverwood, and introduces the characters who star in each subsequent story in the series. It is available for purchase or for free by signing up for Amara's newsletter, and 'In the Moon's Eclipse' takes place in the same universe, so if you like it, you'll enjoy Yverwood! Check it out [here](#).

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