

# Zinnia Demitasse Patreon by Thomas Bell

## (03/January/2024 - 25/April/2025)

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[Monthly Story](#)

[Jan 3, 2024](#)

Let's do another round of story polls this month. I don't think the chapter will be out until the end of the month this time. I have three birthdays this month and my wedding anniversary. The holidays are still going here. LOL

All of these of course are going to be AU scenerios

1. MC and RO get stranded on a deserted island together and have to either figure out a way to survive or get off the island
2. Modern day (with probably a dash of magic) story told from mainly text messages back and forth.
3. An AU where the RO takes the MC to meet their parents for the first time.

Stranded on a deserted island

Modern day text story

Meet the parents

83 votes total

[Hazel - Meet the Parents](#)

[Jan 12, 2024](#)



"I got these." Holding a bouquet of pink flowers in my hand, I showed Hazel the bouquet for approval. The market was bustling. People running back and forth in what I would like to believe was a similar situation. Beholden to a right of passage in every relationship. Meeting the mother.

Hazel looked at the flowers, catching her lower lip between her teeth. Her hair hung in kinky waves down around her shoulders, her cheeks high with blush. She had put on three different outfits that morning, all of which she tossed aside in favor of her current one because, as she put it, it was less offensive. It was gray with light yellow flowers at the hem and sleeves. It was pretty but it wasn't Hazel. I didn't dare say that to her, however. She had fluttered around the house in a nervous tizzy all morning, repouring her coffee and drinking more and more until I finally dumped the pot down the sink.

"No," Hazel said, snatching the flowers from my hands and putting them back in the bucket. "They're pink."

"What's wrong with pink?" I thought they were nice looking flowers.

"My mother deplores pink. She says it's Satan's color." There was a bunch of burnt orange daisies along with some beautiful eucalyptus. Hazel grabbed that and handed them to me. "These. She'll love these more. Or do you think we should get the roses? More traditional? No, I'm second guessing myself. These. We should just get these."

"Okay," I said slowly.

"Maybe we should go without the flowers completely," Hazel said, shifting back and forth. "It might not be the right time."

"For flowers?"

"For meeting her."

Lucinda Albright had asked for dinner. Hazel and I had been together for over a year and I had yet to go across the Market to her mothers house. Hazel was there almost every weekend but I had yet to accompany her.

"Hey," I said gently, stepping into her personal space. "Listen to me. This is going to be fine. You're overthinking it."

Hazel huffed a breath, leaning close to me. "She's really nice once you get to know her. I know she can seem cold and she'll be judgmental but I'm telling you that it's all out of love. She's just very protective of me."

Malcolm had told me several things about Lucinda. None of which were favorable. But I was taking my opinion as it came and trying my best to be open for Hazel's sake.

"I'm going to buy these flowers and then we're going to go see your mother," I told her gently. "I'm excited to see where you come from. I'm excited for dinner." Hazel looked up at me, her eyes wide and glistening as she tried to reign in her fear. "And tonight, we are going to go home and curl up in front of the fire together. Because today is only one day."

"Only one day," she repeated. Though, she was trying to convince herself more than me.

We walked hand in hand towards Lucinda's house at the edge of the market where the trees grew crooked and the moss was thick beds that hid dangers below the earthen floor. There was a quiet to this area of the market. The birds whispered and the frogs didn't dare to croak. The cottage that was at the edge of the lane was made of gray brick and verdant vines that were braided up and over the roof. The gate was made of pointed iron and was polished with a slick shifting oil.

Hazel smoothed her hands over the skirt of her dress, looking at the twisting rock face of her mother's front door. It was shot through with a deep green light, pulsing with the beat of a heart.

"Okay," Hazel said. "Okay."

I squeezed her hand to reassure her as we walked up the front stoop.

Hazel knocked on the door, straightening up. There were sharp clicks from the other side and a puff of magic that simmered around us. When the door opened, a woman stood there. Her straight black hair hung down to her lower back and her high cheekbones were sharp cuts beneath her eyes. She was the exact opposite of Hazel. I wouldn't have even known this was mother and daughter if I had not been told.

"Hazel," the woman said, her voice deep and husky. She had a coiled smile on her face as she stepped forward to kiss her daughter on the cheek. "Oh, darling. We are going to have to do something about that dress. It's not quite fitting right, is it." Hazel smoothed her hands against it again, not really sure what to say. "Now, is this your significant other?"

"Oh, uh. Yes. Mother, this is—"

"Oh, I know who this is." She turned to me, her eyes sharp. "Hello."

"Hello, Mrs. Albright. Your house looks lovely."

"What a funny thing to say since you haven't seen any of it." I thought she would step aside then. Let us in. But instead she kept staring at me. Almost expectantly.

Remembering the flowers, I held them out to her. "I got these for you."

Lucinda took them. "Pretty." It was only then that she turned, walking into her house.

The living space was dark with woven rugs and heavy wood furniture. It was clean and had a sort of elegance about it that spoke of power. Lucinda went over to the kitchen to put her flowers in a vase before looking at Hazel.

"My darling daughter, can you please go and check on the soup." It was bubbling right next to Lucinda and yet the second that Hazel was about to sit down, she spoke up to her. And Hazel responded.

"Of course, mother."

Lucinda smiled lovingly at her daughter. When the woman walked, it was with a fluid grace. She glided through the room, brushing her long fingers against Hazel's back as she passed her, coming to me.

"Please. Sit." She told me. "Tell me, what are your intentions with my daughter?"

I glanced towards Hazel, stirring the soup at the stove. She gave me an encouraging smile.

"I don't know if I have intentions with her," I said slowly. "I can tell you that I love her. And we were both very excited to come and see you. It's been a long time coming."

"Yes," she said. "I'm surprised that Hazel hasn't brought you here before. I was beginning to think that it wasn't actually serious. Tea?"

I blinked, looking at the tea service that she had somehow laid out in front of us. "I –" There was hesitation. Mainly because I remember Malcolm saying never to drink her tea. I glanced at the cup of tea steaming in front of me.

"Oh," Lucinda said coyly. "I see. You've been talking to my other child."

"Malcolm, mother," Hazel said from the stove. "He comes over once a week."

"Does he? That's interesting. He never seems to have the time for me." She pushed the tea forward. "Would you like to drink that or are you going to believe the rhetoric that I'm a witch." She laughed slightly and I couldn't help but feel the dare that was in her words.

The two of us stared at each other, playing a silent game of chicken while the steam from the tea coiled between us.



"Soups ready!" Hazel called from the kitchen.

Lucinda gave a small ironic laugh before rising to her feet. "Shall we eat?"

"I'll get everyone served up, mother."

Lucinda looked at me with a raised brow until I got up and went into the kitchen, helping Hazel. Hazel bumped her hip against mine, dipping her head. "How's it going?"

"It's... going?"

"She likes you."

Did she? It seemed like a wild assumption to make. I didn't think I could say that to Hazel while her nerves were still frayed.

We ended up sitting at a large round table where a gorgeous centerpiece sat that put the flowers I brought to shame. They were off to the side, tiny in comparison and slightly drooping. Dinner was in relative silence where the sips of soup echoed throughout the room. Lucinda sat right across from us and barely said two words to me. What she did say, was directed towards Hazel. The two of them discussed mundane things about the apothecary where Lucinda interceded several times about different customers and how Hazel should handle their orders instead.

It was an interesting back and forth. One where Hazel wouldn't ask her mother for advice but it would be freely given anyway. Hazel would then listen in rapt attention as if she was wrong if she turned away from it.

When dinner ended, Hazel stood. "I'll take care of the dishes." With a peck on the cheek, she gathered everything, leaving Lucinda and I alone again.

I gave a smile towards the woman, wracking my brain for something to say around her.

"You won't last."

To my credit, I didn't startle. I instead just stared at her, waiting for an explanation. But Lucinda seemed to be the kind of woman who was going to wait it all out. She wasn't going to be the one to talk first.

"I disagree," I told her firmly.

"I guess we'll wait and see. But I know my daughter and I know her well. And you two will not last. Hazel needs more direction in life. She needs someone to reign her in. I just don't see you able to do that for her."

Hazel was independent. She had run the apothecary most of her life and was one of the most caring individual's I had ever had the pleasure of meeting. Like anyone, she had her shortcomings. But so did I. "I don't believe in treating my partner like a child," I said smoothly.

Lucinda tipped her head to the side. “Do you know what she is capable of? It is not treating someone like a child so much as it's protecting her. Protecting you. Protecting the market itself.”

“You really think your daughter would hurt anyone?”

“I think she wouldn't have a choice.”

I was done. I wasn't going to do this. Standing, I nodded towards her. “I think it would be best if we go.”

“That easily? Well, I thought it would take more but this is a pleasant surprise.”

Shaking my head, I turned my back on her. There was so much I could say but I just kept thinking of the nervous woman, meticulously picking flowers for her mother. Hazel was coming out of the kitchen area, ready to get more of the dishes, when she stopped.

“Oh,” she said with a small roundness to her lips. “Are we leaving?”

Lucinda was the one to answer, coming over to kiss her daughter on the cheek. “Bring your brother next time. And that one he is dating.”

Hazel's eyes ticked away. “Of course. I'll ask.”

It wasn't until we were back on familiar streets that Hazel finally looked up at me, a nervous glow to her eyes. “What did she say?”

I had two options at this point. I could do what everyone had always done to Hazel. Try to point out the things that her mother said and did. Point out how she deflated each time Lucinda critiqued her. And I could point out Hazel's silence.

Or, I could just be there for Hazel instead.

Tucking my hand in hers, I lifted it, brushing my lips across her knuckles. “We had an interesting talk. That's all. I am excited to get home.”

“That bad?”

I stopped, the market bustling around us. Market goers veered out of the way as I tugged Hazel closer. “Do you know what I love about you?” I asked. She shook her head. “I love that no matter what, you see the best in people.”

“You're deflecting,” Hazel whispered. But I noticed her blushing at the compliment, pressing closer to snuggle in.

“I am focusing on what's important. Dinner with your mother, the things she says – all of that is not important. You are. We are.”

Popping up on her tiptoes, she brushed her lips against mine. I could feel her smile against me and the way her nose crinkled in delight. "If you want, you could go see Malcolm later and bitch about her. Him and Milo would love it."

I laughed. "I'll think about it. Right now, I just want to get home and be with you."

"And play cards?" she asked excitedly. "Oh! I have those marionberry muffins and we could have some of that with the homemade jam and I'll beat you at cards tonight."

"You don't know if you're going to beat me."

Hazel looked at me sympathetically. "Oh, honey. That's cute." She kissed me again, squeezing my hands before turning to the stalls. I knew her. She was going to go overboard. Get us everything for our impromptu date night.

Lucinda was wrong. I wasn't letting this girl go for the entire world. And I'd fight the woman if she got in our way.

I had a feeling that that day was eventually going to come.

[Milo - Meet the Parents](#)

[Jan 12, 2024](#)



The sun was bright. Living within a world where the light didn't touch, where lanterns provided the nutrients for plants to grow and the streets were lit with candles to illuminate the darkest corners, created a sense of blindness. So when Milo and I stepped through the gate, it took the two of us a long

moment to even adjust to the sun. Dappled as it was through the trees, it still caused my eyes to water and strangely made me feel like I was going to sneeze.

"Why?" Milo groused. "Who would enjoy this?" His face was scrunched as he dipped his head lower to try and block out some of the light. His hair fell messily in front of his eyes, casting shadows across his face.

Blinking, I looked around. We emerged from the gate and stepped into a maple grove. The trees stood tall and glittered with red and orange leaves swaying softly in an apple sweet wind. Fallen logs had tiny little mushrooms sprouting from their depths, the caps looking like ripe fruit as opposed to the toadstools I had seen in Hazel's garden.

"It's hot," Milo said. "And there's bugs."

I looked at him. The fae realm. It was the first time I had seen him here. The place he was born. While Milo had crossed over a few times by now, this was the first time I had gone with him. Thus far, he had tried to do these trips on his own. One thing I had learned about Milo through the years was that when he was put into a high emotional situation, he liked to do things at his own pace. Mulling it over in his head until he got it straight. So I sat back. Let him discover his birth place. And then at night when he would come home and sneak into bed with me, wrapping his amber scent around me.

"Your freckles pop out here."

Milo glared at me. But the dotted freckles up and down his arms and face were far more prominent than they were in the dark.

"You're covered in them," I marveled. I saw the redness spread across his skin with embarrassment, somehow coloring his face even more.

"Leave me alone," he muttered. He grabbed at me, wrapping both his arms around my waist and tugging me into his arms.

"Seriously, how have I never known before? It's like a second skin."

"I will throw you in the creek," he said, swinging me towards a small trickling brook as a threat.

There was a small giggle that came from the trees, the leaves shivering in a strange way. I snapped my gaze upwards, catching sight of the way the limbs moved, revealing little glimmers of iridescent wings within.

"Are those pixies?" I whispered.

"Yes. Brutal little fuckers," Milo said, guiding me down the orchard path. "First time I came here they threw acorns at me. And the acorns here explode like mini bombs. They were waging a full on war in these woods."

I glanced upwards, watching as bugged eyes peered out at me. They reminded me of the wisps back at Hazel's except there was a light in their gaze that was far more mischievous.

"What's making them behave this time?" I asked.

Milo looked up. "They know who I am now. Apparently they don't fuck with people if they belong." He slung an arm around me in a display that claimed me as his. I could see the way he was looking at the pixies. Knowing Milo, he was not innocent in the pixie vs. Gatekeeper war.

The road we were on was wide and winding, bordered with small white flowers. The roots of the orchard protruded from the ground, creating small hovels for the creatures that lived in the woods. Every once in a while, we came across small fox statues embedded in the land, its nine tails swooping out from behind. Plates of nuts and berries were placed in front of them like an offering while perfectly shiny apples were piled nearby.

"What are those?" I asked.

"Offerings to the gods of these woods," Milo said. "It's said that the goddess of the autumnal court is a kitsune. She guards these woods, producing food and providing for the land. Nourishing both fae and fauna. People who are trying to have children, or are trying to produce a good harvest, pray to her. Leave her small offerings to gain her favor."

I looked around the world. At the onslaught of bright and vibrant colors. The way that the grass and wind seemed to play together. Everything felt far more whimsical than back home.

There was a sprawling garden at the edge of the tree line with fat pumpkins and large stalks of corn. Beyond that, was a large tree, a door carved into the front. Overflowing baskets of produce and flowers sat outside the door. The land looked worked. It looked well lived in. The gate that separated the orchard and home was made from wood from the apple forest and the gate was tied shut with a ring of witch bells.

"Is this it?" I asked nervously.

Milo squeezed my hand. "Yeah."

Before we could go any further the front door opened. A tall, wide hipped woman stepped out, a basket tucked under her arm. Her hair tumbled past one shoulder, thick and strawberry blonde and the freckles across the bridge of her nose and bare arms stood out from here. Her amber eyes were focusing on something off to her right as she stepped down into her yard, a couple little foxes running around her feet.

Milo was frozen by my side, just staring at the woman. "Is that her?" I asked, holding him close.

Her eyes shot up when she heard my voice, narrowing as she saw me but widening in delight upon looking at Milo. "Pup? Is that you?"

“Hey, ma.”

A smile spread wide across her face as she set aside her basket and rushed over to us, pushing through the gate. She threw her arms around Milo, pulling his body close and tucking his head against her shoulder.

“Oh, my boy. I wasn’t expecting you for another week. Look at you!” She jostled him back and forth, switching between hugging him close and pushing him away so she could take him all in. “You’re not eating enough. Now, I told you, you need to start gettin’ some fat on your body. I’m gonna have to feed you more. Send some extra food home with you.”

She looked out of the corner of her eye at me, then looked back to Milo. When the man still didn’t say anything, she tapped him on the shoulder with a sharp little wrap of her knuckles.

Milo jumped. “What the fu– hell?”

“I’ve been standing here now for an entire minute and you haven’t introduced me to this beautiful individual next to you.”

Milo wiped a hand over his face. “Ma, this is my…” he looked at me. “What are we calling each other now? Partner? Lover? Boss?”

I shook my head, holding out my hand. “I’m the one who puts up with your son,” I said with a small laugh.

With her hands on her hips, she just stared at my hand before tsking at me and pulling me in for a warm hug. “Now that’s a tall order,” she said. Her hug had me melting. She was soft and smelled of a brisk fall wind and had an air of comfort around her that had so much power beneath.

When she pulled away, she had a knowing little look on her face. “Oh, I like you. I can tell you’re good for him. Now come on. Come inside. I got an apple pie cooling on the window sill. And I’m going to whip something up for dinner really quick. How long are you staying? That gate holding just fine? Pup, you looked a little tired the last time you were here. You sure you’re okay to keep it all open?”

“Ma, I’m fine,” he muttered. I had to hold back my laughter. Milo looked nearly bashful with the way she was fussing over him.

“I’ll be the one to tell you whether or not you’re fine and I can hear your stomach growling from here. Now go and grab those bushels over there and bring them in the house. Your Partner/lover/boss and I are going to go get acquainted.”

“Oy! I didn’t come here for manual labor.” Though I could see it. He was excited to do something for his mom. She was waving his complaint off and rolling her eyes as she opened the door for me.

Despite her home being a tree, it was a full cottage inside. The roots came up to form different rooms and the kitchen was completely open to the back yard with weaving branches making up the walls and letting swaths of buttery light within. The house itself smelled like baked bread and dried fruit. There was a fire going deep within a clay oven, heating the house comfortably. Every inch was cluttered with bowls and pots and woven baskets. It felt like home.

"I'm Andi, by the way," she said, tying her hair back. Her eyes were following me, looking me up and down. "You are gorgeous, you know that? The Night Market, yeah? Milo told me about your situation. Believe you me, I got after that boy of mine. Honestly. Thinking he can take everything on himself. You look smart as a whip. Should have told you about it. Oh, I know. I know. You technically did know but not in that state. But, that's neither here nor there. Do you like apple butter or plum butter?"

I felt overwhelmed as this woman talked. The love she had for her son poured off her in reverence and I couldn't help but feel slightly emotional about it. "Whatever you have on hand."

"I have both." She cut off a slice of fresh bread and put two bowls of preserves down next to me. "Now," she said, sitting down across from me. "How are you two doing?"

I stopped, my hand halfway to the bread.

"I know we just met but honey, this is a lot. I love my son. More than anything in this world. But, when I heard everything that had happened? To his life. To your life. You okay?"

"I don't know how to answer that."

She sighed, leaning back in her seat and crossing her arms. "I'm not going to mother you. I have to stop myself from being overbearing and mothering him."

I laughed a little. "I think he'd actually be okay with that."

"In due time. But what I'm worried about is the two of you. I'm not here to judge. I'm not here to dictate anything. I'm just here to be a listening ear and rat him out to you when he comes here complaining about things."

"He comes here complaining?" I asked.

"Not yet but you better believe I'll get after him if he does. Now eat."

The door opened as Milo kicked in a few crates. "Why are you growing all this? It's just you out here."

"People still got to eat, Pup."

Milo placed the crates down, coming over to the table and placing a kiss on my cheek. "She scaring you yet?"

"I am not scary," Andi said. "Now sit your ass down so I can feed you."



Milo plopped down next to me. I looked at him out of the corner of my eye. There was an ease to his face. An eagerness in which he looked around the home. Like he was trying to imagine what it would have been like to grow up here and was excited to see what the future held. When we had found out where Andi was within the fae realm, Milo had left that night. Since then, he made a point of going to visit his mother whenever he could, but he was quiet when he came home. He was torn. His life now in two separate places.

Andi hummed as she swayed around the kitchen, making a meal out of nothing in the matter of moments. I leaned my head against Milo's shoulder, feeling him curl his arm around my shoulders.

"Do you want me to fix the back fence while I'm here?" Milo asked.

Andi looked over her shoulder. "How long are you staying? I would figure the Night Market and the Gatekeeper can't be gone for a long time."

"Mal's got it," Milo dismissed.

Andi tutted at that. "Now pup, you know I want you here. We have a lot of time to make up for. But I'm not going anywhere, baby. If you need to get home and take care of some responsibilities I'm not going to hold it against you. I got Nolan to fix the fence if I really need it."

"Nolan," Milo spat a little.

I raised my brow, looking at him. It was the first time I had even heard the name. "Who is Nolan?"

"No one," he muttered under his breath..

"Milo, now don't you go and be like that," Andi scolded. "You don't get to go passing judgements on my lovers."

"Why not? You were with dad."

The fire gutted completely out and the foxes that were sitting at the windowsills all skittered away. Slowly, Andi turned to us, her amber eyes glowing bright in the dimmer light. She stared her son down, her face hardened as she walked slowly to the table.

Milo's face went pale.

"Now, pup. You go out there and you fix whatever it is you want," she said slowly. "Sounds like you need to take a minute to pause and reflect on a few things and come back to your mama with a bit more of a kinder tone."

I expect Milo to fight. He never had been one to back down. But his head lowered a bit, his cheeks pink with shame. Rising, he nodded to her. "Yes, ma'am." Before he walked away though, Andi took him by the shoulder, cupping his cheek.

"Now pup, I know you got a lot of anger in you. I don't blame you for it. And that man that donated some dna to help make you, will be getting what comes as soon as I find him. But you don't get to come to my home, and treat me like that. You hear?"

Milo swallowed thickly. "I'm sorry."

"You misspoke. Now you go take a walk before you do it again." She kissed his cheek and then pushed him along, watching him with her hands on her hips as he walked out of the house and out towards the back gates. She sighed, shaking her head a bit. "That poor boy."

"He told you everything?" I asked.

She hummed a bit in response, turning back to the dining table and sitting down across from me. The fire relit itself and the foxkin came back. "He told me some of it. I figured out what happened to him as a child. That boy needed me around and I wasn't there. And I will kill the man that took him from me."

When her eyes connected with mine, she smiled again. "But let's not go talking about that. I want to get to know you. I want to turn over a new leaf. I want this past of ours to not control us any further and..." she trailed off. "Oh, I'm sorry, darlin'. Old wounds have yet to heal for us all."

"It's okay." I didn't know the entirety of the story, but I could see it. The way Milo's words hurt. The way she still parented him through it all. I wondered who he would be if she had been there.

When Andi reached out and took my hand, I felt a bolt of power come through me. The world beneath my feet shifted as like called to like. I looked up at her, eyes widening and lips parting. There was power within her. More so than could be contained. I thought of the trees outside, the lush gardens and the people who traveled here for her food.

Andi was far more than she let on.

"You are good for him," she said. "Thank you for caring so much for my baby."

"I—" I felt my throat close as I was oddly choked up over the sentiment. Milo and I were on a rocky path. Had been for a long time. But the love was there. So was the care. I couldn't imagine losing him in any capacity. And he was this woman's son and had been ripped from her arms for far too long. "Mal really does have it back home," I told her. "We'd like to stay. At least for the night."

She grinned. "Well then. I'll have to break out some of my homemade moonshine."

"And maybe invite that Nolan person over?"

Andi tipped her head back and laughed. It was done with such a carefree motion that it reminded me of Milo. "Oh, do you wish to see him squirm? He hates that man. No one will be good enough for his mama and I kind of love it."

"Invite him," I told her. "I think Milo will be on his best behavior tonight."

"Done." Getting up from the table, she looked out the back window where Milo was beginning to mend the fence. She shook her head, tutting at the sight of him. "Too skinny," she muttered. "Come on over here," she called back to me. "I'm gonna teach you how to make foods he'll actually eat. Such a picky little pup he is. We need to fatten him up."

Getting up, I went over to the stove, standing shoulder in shoulder with Milo's mother. Out in the back, Milo began tearing apart the fence in the late afternoon sun, foxes and sprites hesitantly coming out to watch him.

"Watch," Andi whispered.

I stared out at where she was pointing and when no one was looking, Milo knelt down, petting the little foxes and talking to the pixies that had come out. He had a few acorns in his pocket that he offered to them.

"Big old softie," Andi laughed.

As the sun beat down outside and the kitchen filled with the smells of home, I sighed. I wanted this for him. I wanted Milo to be here more. To see the sun. And as I looked at the woman out of the corner of my eye, seeing similar features to the boy she had lost, my heart ached for the two of them.

"Oh hush, child," Andi said. "I can hear your thoughts from here. Stop being so sentimental and pass me the oregano. We're going to make Milo's favorite."

I looked at her. "What's that?" I actually didn't know.

"Humble pie," she grinned.

I had a feeling that Andi and I were going to become really good friends.

[Belladonna - Meet the Parents](#)

[Jan 19, 2024](#)



Note: This is an AU where Bella's parents never died.

Belladonna held court at the front of the cathedral. Pale thighs crossed each other while black spider silk draped across the rest of her body. Each forearm rested upon the edges of her throne, black lacquered nails tapping impatiently.

"I don't think I'm making myself very clear," she was saying, addressing a room of vampires that all had the bloodless look to their cheeks. Not because they hadn't fed, but because they were very much aware of just how much danger they were in if they continued not to listen to their mistress. "When I said, 'find other accommodations' I truly did mean, 'get the fuck out'."

"But, my lady..."

Her molten eyes snapped towards a young woman with long silver hair and deep blue lips. "What? What could you possibly say to me about any of this that is going to make me stand up and tell all of you that I was wrong. Of course you can stay and continue with your unnecessary debauchery."

The woman went silent. She backed into the crowd a little, her head hung low. It didn't stop others from speaking up, however. Stepping forward with ambition and high hopes of becoming the next Baron.

"You cannot kick us from our home." This time it was a darker haired woman who spoke. I recognized her from many of the meetings prior. Most notably because she often liked to speak out against Belladonna. The woman had been planning a coup that no one had been brave enough to support her in.

"Your home?" Belladonna laughed. "I wasn't aware this was your home. You are not paying rent. You do not give tribute to me. You lounge in my bottom rooms, sucking the necks of whoever comes your way. You all are lazy. Mooching off the good graces of your betters and lounging until your food comes to you."

"Because you will not let us hunt!"

"Through the streets, you are correct. I don't relish our dwindling numbers. But if you would like to disobey me, please. Your dust will be swept away with the morning trash. You very well can hunt in the areas that are designated. It's funny how no one seems to want to do that, however, when I have food delivered to you here. Perhaps I should cut that off as well, hm? You've all grown too soft in the mind and fickle of the tongue."

Standing, she looked around the room, her red hair cascading down one shoulder and brushing against her waist. "Now, do I need to repeat myself or will you all be leaving without complaint."

I stood off to one side, watching the room. They grumbled like normal but in the end, each and every vampire left. They filed out one by one, some of them dragging their feet in a weak form of protest. Their complaints followed them through the door and the heavy iron gate snapped closed behind them.

Belladonna stepped off the throne, rolling her eyes. "Petulant children."

"They just don't like change," I told her. Though, I couldn't help but agree with her frustration.

"I don't like half of them and yet I still put up with their attitudes." Her heels clicked sharply as she walked to my side, pulling me to her so she could kiss me soundly. I could feel the cool slide of her tongue against my own and the way her nails scratched low on my back.

When she pulled away, I couldn't help the little grin that reached the corners of my mouth. "You're nervous."

"I am not," she bit back at me, her body stiffening.

I smiled softly at her. It was the tone that she used when I caught her in something. A lie. Or, in this case, what Belladonna considered a weakness. "How long has it been?" I asked.

Belladonna's eyes went upwards, like she was tired of this line of questioning already. "Since seeing them? Not that long," she said truthfully. But they hadn't been here. They had never been to the Night Market. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to go get dressed."

I rolled my lips into my mouth and nodded. I supposed seeing her parents again in a high slit lace dress wasn't exactly ideal. When Belladonna was just about to slip through the door, she looked back at me.

"Will you wait out here? In case they come early?"

My look softened. "Of course."

A gate was to open to Bella's old world. She had gone home a few times but as of yet, her parents had not made the trip here. The Night Market was far different from the rolling wheat fields and farmland of Bella's childhood. While she wouldn't speak of it, I knew she was concerned about what her family would think.

When the front doors opened, I looked up. Gabriel stood in the doorway with two middle aged individual's. I locked eyes with him and knew immediately that this was Belladonna's parents. Immediately I could see familiar features on the woman. A high brow. Beautiful rolling locks of hair. Upturned lips that knew more than they ever told. And while Belladonna looked nothing like her father, there was something behind his eyes. A clear look of authority. I'd seen it in Bella's several times before.

"Hello," I said pleasantly, walking forward. "You must be Bella's parents."

They looked at me, confused. Gabriel cleared his throat, giving me a pointed look.

"Madeline," I corrected. "You must be Madeleine's parents."

"Are you her lover?" Bella's mother asked. Her father didn't look thrilled with the connotation. I was surprised she had even said anything.

"I... yes."

Gabriel cleared his throat. "It was very nice to meet the two of you. I'll be back to escort you to your gate tomorrow afternoon."

"How can you even tell when it is afternoon?" her father said, eyes narrowing. "Nothing here seems proper."

"Alden, hush," the woman admonished. "Thank you, Sir Caine. Our journey to this cathedral has been enlightening."

"At least she's in a cathedral," Alden murmured. "She has not forgotten where she comes from."

Gabriel gave me a look that clearly said, 'good luck', before he left the room.

"I'm Annmarie," her mother said, bowing slightly. "And this is my husband Alden. We've heard plenty about you." Her accent was thick. I could hear it even with the Night Market's translation. I hadn't realized that Bella had even spoken of me. The fact that she had filled me with a point of warmth.

"Where is Madeline?" Alden asked. He had a harsh voice and was not the kind of man that stayed still to partake in pleasantries.

"I think she was just getting changed. She had a meeting today and wanted to freshen up before you both arrived."

"A meeting?" Alden shook his head. It was clear that this was not what he had imagined for his daughter. As he looked around the cathedral, noticing the dark tapestries and the pews with small tables for making conversation, his face fell a little more. "Is service held here?"

I cleared my throat. "Not exactly."

"She has remained unclear about what she does for a living. Is she a priest of some sort? Can women take on that role here?"

Annmarie rolled her eyes, stepping past her husband. Her eyes landed on a small little bar area, the crystal wine glasses glittering as they hung from the wrack above. "Oh, how lovely. What is all this?"

"Drinks are served there," I said, willing Belladonna to come through the door.

"Like a tavern?" Annmarie asked excitedly.

Alden narrowed his eyes. "In a place of worship? What exactly is she thinking? I told you. She should not be here Annmarie. We will be bringing her home at once."

The door opened to our right and I had to do a double take. The woman who stepped out was not the same woman who walked away from me. In place of the spider silk dress was a long cotton shift. It cinched in at the waist with a looser corset, leading up to a high collar of white frills. But not even that was what shocked me. It was her hair. The bright red was toned down to a soft auburn brown and the heavy make up was replaced with a clean and dewy face.

"Father," Belladonna said as she walked in the room. "We've spoken of this before. It will not be something we speak of again."

Annmarie gave a small squeak of delight upon seeing her daughter, running over to her and throwing her arms around her. "Oh, you look so lovely," she cooed. "I love this dress on you. The fabric is decadent, darling. But why such a high neck line? Come now. We both know that is not necessary."

Belladonna gave her mother a wane smile. "It's what is proper, mother."

I tried to hide my wide eyes. Annmarie obviously was a bit more loose with her propriety than what Alden wanted and what Bella had been raised with. I found I rather liked that about her. When she rolled her eyes at Bella I saw every inch of where Bella got her attitude from and I tried hard not to laugh.

"Oh, pff. Proper," she said. "Showing a small bit of neck is not improper, my girl. Hush with that nonsense."

Bella's lips twitched a little as she leaned in and kissed her mother on the cheek. She then turned to her father.

When he first entered the cathedral, he had a harsh line to his face. He was a stern man with a brow that looked in a constant frown. But when he saw his daughter, it all melted away. He stepped forward, smiling widely at her.

"It is good to see you, father," Bella said.



"Madeline," he breathed. He met her halfway before embracing her and I could see the way he looked. Like the moon rose and set on his little girl. "This place is... interesting."

Belladonna smiled at him. "I told you, father. It's not the type of cathedral you are used to."

He bit his tongue to not say anything unkind. "But you are helping people?" he asked. "You are not letting anyone walk all over you or take advantage of your state?"

"No. Of course not, daddy."

,

Taking a deep breath, he took both of her hands in his own, looking her in the eye. "Then I am more proud of you than any father can be."

I couldn't believe the switch. It felt odd, seeing it play out in front of my eyes. The way the man had come in with a harshness to him I thought he was going to criticize everything she had done. But instead, he suddenly was looking around the room as if he was seeing it for the first time. What his daughter had built with her own two hands.

"Come," she said. "I have tea. I would also like you to get to know my partner more."

"We've met," Annmarie said, looking at me. "You and I are going to be thick as thieves. I'm letting you know that now."

I smiled at her. I had a feeling we would get along.

"Right through there," Bella said, motioning towards the back room where I knew she had set up an afternoon tea service. She came to me, however, threading her fingers within mine. I could feel the squeeze of her hand. "What do you think?"

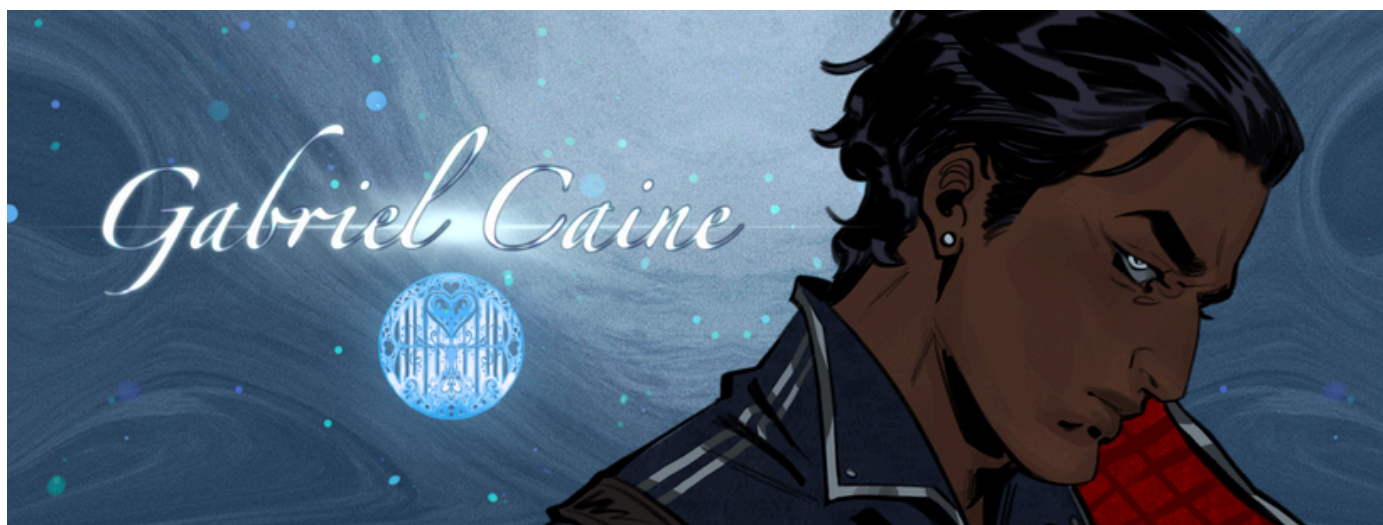
I looked up at her with a small smile. "They love you dearly."

She looked out towards them, watching as her parents walked through the cathedral, arms wrapped around each other. "They will love you as well. Beware of that."

Honestly, I couldn't wait.

[Gabriel - Meet the Parents](#)

[Jan 19, 2024](#)



The waterwheel spun slowly, trickling into a small brook before it meandered down the rocks and towards the depth of the forest beyond. The surrounding field was covered in dew while fog rose in generous curls towards the night sky. Gabriel stood next to me, a bottle of wine loose in his hand. He had dressed down for the occasion. Wearing a pair of dark black slacks and a navy blue sweater.

“We truly do not need to do this, you know.”

I looked up at him. He had been trying to give me every excuse he could to not go to Reese’s house tonight. It had been a planned event for the last few weeks and Gabriel had called off most of them due to work.

“Gabriel, I’ve met Reese. This isn’t a big deal.”

His face was placid but I could see the turmoil deep within his eyes. It was different. For him it was different. This was the first dinner that he was bringing me to as a couple. While it felt commonplace for me, given that I already had several interactions with Reese, it was a moment for Gabriel that was significant. And one that was causing him some nerves.

“I can make no guarantees of how he is going to be tonight,” Gabriel told me. “He can get rather animated when he is at home.”

“That’s not a bad thing,” I reasoned. “And Reese is a great cook. I think it’s going to be a pleasant evening.”

“Perhaps.” Though Gabriel sounded less than convinced. “If not, I am almost certain there will be trouble within the market that I will have to attend to.”

“You cannot just make up trouble.” It was not beyond reason for Gabriel to get called away but I was certain that Reese would murder anyone that even tried to get Gabriel to come back to work for the night.

"This is the Night Market. I do not have to fabricate trouble. That happens simply by existing."

"I take a bit of offense to that."

He kissed me on the forehead but I couldn't help but notice that he didn't change his tune.

We walked across the small footbridge and towards the little cottage. Given who Reese was, I had always thought the little ramshackle house was at odds with his personality. Dead geraniums were still planted out front next to marbled glass orbs that washed up on the shore of the beach. Braided hemp hung from various hooks and a broken chair provided a home for a lone bullfrog.

Stopping, Gabriel turned to me. He stepped close, his free hand coming to rest against my cheek. "We could have dinner together. Go out and share this bottle of wine."

I leaned into his palm, sighing gently at the way he looked at me. The beautiful way he just held me with his gaze, cradling me gently like I was the most precious moment in his life. I tried to give him the same look. Telling him through my eyes.

"That sounds wonderful," I told him. He looked visibly relieved. I let it wash over him for a small moment before I dragged it all away. "But no."

Gabriel dropped his hand and immediately stepped away from me. Irritation etched across his face as he had to accept his loss.

The door opened only moments later, a gust of wonderful smells drifting from the house. Reese stepped through the doorway, looking at the two of us.

"Oh, now he's got that face on. What'd you do, Night? You tell him no?" Reese was laughing as he stared at Gabriel. Gabriel did not share the same amusement. "Yeah. You got that pinched, bitchy look on you, son."

"Good to see you too, Reese," Gabriel intoned. He took a few steps forward, ready to head into the cottage, when Reese was pushed aside. My eyes grew wide as a pale flash of energy came bursting out of the cottage, pale hair glowing in the eternal moonlight.

"My son!"

Elias launched forward, wrapping his arms around Gabriel. I had seen Elias a few times at the Baron meetings but Gabriel had always been one to keep a distance with him. A professional barrier. Here at the cottage, that was obviously not going to be the same.

"Oh, Gabriel. Son. I am so excited for you to be here for dinner. We have all your favorites. And we even have your old chair set up. I had to make Reese repair it because the leg was uneven but he did that for you, my son. Because we love you. Oh, we love you so much."

Gabriel's eyes were wide as he stared down at the top of Elias's head. "I was unaware you would be here tonight, Elias."

"Elias? No. Father. We can go with father now, right? Now that we're not in public."

Reese snorted. "And it took only two minutes. Come on in, Night. It'll be a few minutes of boundary discussion."

Walking past Gabriel and Elias I gave Gabriel a small smile of encouragement. But I was not about to stay outside during a discussion with Elias. I still remembered my first meeting with the man and it was not one that was easily shaken.

When the door shut behind us, I looked up at Reese. "Did you purposefully not tell him that Elias was going to be here?"

"Of course," Reese laughed. "You have to lie to Gabriel to get him here lately." Gabriel was not one to go out of his way to visit anyone. Not anymore at least. I had yet to crack into the reasoning behind it. But Gabriel had buried himself in work for so long that I wondered if it was habit by now. To just ignore everything but his so-called duties.

"Was it always like that? Even before... you know." Before Reese faked his death and Elias became a Baron.

Reese walked over to the stove. There were a few pots boiling and something sizzling in the oven. "Gabriel has been an enigma since the day I met him. I contribute it to the whole Fallen thing. Elias was a bit like that in the beginning."

Elias was still like that now. Apparently he toed the line a bit more since our initial meeting but Gabriel held no delusions that it was going to last. While I was far more optimistic, I tended to agree with him.

"How are you two doing? Must be strange to be around Elias again." Reese brandished a wooden spoon and smacked my hand.

"Get away from the stove, Night. You don't know how to cook."

"I do too," I protested.

"You are a baby in this world. You may be older than me but walkin' around like you are, you are still a baby. Which means you don't know shit about cookin' so back away." I put my hands up in surrender and walked over to the table. "And Elias and I are Elias and I. No need to worry about that."

"I'm not worrying. I'm making conversation," I told him.

Reese smiled, laughing under his breath. "It's a conversation you shouldn't be makin'," he warned.

"Why?"

I saw Reese look out the window, obviously watching what was going on with Gabriel and Elias. He was keeping an eye on the two. Probably knowing how they could be better than anyone. "Because it's between Elias and I. We are complicated. Unconventional. And private people. Want me to start askin' you how it's goin' with you two?"

I leaned back in my chair with a challenge. "Be my guest."

"How's the sex?" he asked. "He get over his purity thing or is he someone that can't get enough of it. Elias is someone that couldn't get enough of it."

The door banged open and Reese's laughter rang loud and clear through the room as Gabriel marched in.

"I will not hesitate for the two of us to leave," he said.

"You listenin' in, son? Didn't we ever teach you not to press your ear to the door?"

"It's that celestial hearing," Elias said, sauntering up to Reese's side and cooing over what was on the stove. Gabriel was standing, looking at the two of them, his jaw clenched.

"Reese has said I can't be near the stove," I said, grabbing Gabriel's attention. "Want to come over and keep me company."

"Oh!" Elias bounced. "I'll pour the wine."

Gabriel came over and sat down, his back straight and his expression emotionless. Elias was dancing around the kitchen, finding clean glasses while Reese stayed at the stove. But something strange happened as we sat there. In this tiny and cramped little kitchen, Elias and Reese seemed to fall into a rhythm. I couldn't help but notice the way Elias brushed against Reese each time he passed him. Or how Reese kept his eyes on Elias, smiling fondly at the man. There was an ease within the room that was a reflection of how they were before. I suddenly got why Reese had gotten so defensive.

The thing was, the two men on their own were harsh. They were brash. Cruel. They were not people that often could sit in pleasant conversation. But with each other, they almost seemed normal. They brought out the best in each other. Softening their harder edges. There was no doubt in my mind that they loved each other.

I reached out, placing my hand on Gabriel's knee. "You okay?" I whispered.

It had been years since he had seen them together in any sort of capacity. It had been even longer since he had sat with them as a family.

"It's fine," he said simply. I squeezed his knee hard.

Reese began placing large plates on the table. Succulent slices of turkey with crispy brussel sprouts and pots of cranberry sauce. A board of soft bread, still steaming, was placed at my side. Meanwhile, Elias had poured four glasses of wine and placed little finger sandwiches out along with a charcuterie board of olives and cheese.

They both took their seats across the table.

"Let's pray," Elias said.

"Nah."

I looked between both Elias and Reese. The glare from Elias was immediate but Reese was busy piling everyone's plate with food.

"Reese, my love," Elias said tightly. "I do think we should be saying our thanks."

"Say your thanks," Reese agreed. "We thank the people who we bought this food from. The good workers who grew these vegetables. The turkey that was slaughtered. We do all that. But the Knowing is not allowed in my house."

Elias's face creased. "Gabriel and I—"

Gabriel cleared his throat. "Elias, perhaps we should respect Reese's rules. This is his house." It was a sentiment that shocked me but I could see the way Reese nodded towards Gabriel in respect. An old conversation passed between them.

"Used to be my house," Elias muttered.

"It's not though," Reese told him. "Not now."

"It could be," Elias sniffled.

"Well then you better move back in."

The room went silent as Reese began to start eating. Motioning to me to tuck in as well.

Elias's face lit up, his eyes watering. "Oh, Reese. Really?"

Reese leaned forward, pressing his lips lightly against Elias's. "I would love for you to come home."

"I'll move in right away."

"I love you."

"I love you too."



Next to me, Gabriel downed the entirety of his wine. The whiplash of the conversation had him reaching for the bottle.

I snorted in laughter at the display, the topic of the Knowing suddenly dropped as Reese and Elias whispered to each other in some strange marital bliss. Yet, somehow, it made the room lighter. The tension bled away into nothing.

"I'm not helping you move those statues," Gabriel stated.

Elias was plastered to Reese's side now and Reese was grinning ear to ear.

"To hell with the statues," Elias said. He covered his mouth like he said something foul, giggling behind his perfectly manicured hands.

"Now that's a toast I can get behind," Reese said, raising his glass. "To hell with the statues!"

Grabbing my own wine, I raised it up. "To hell!"

Next to me, Gabriel sighed. But his arm was warm around me and a smile crept onto his face. "I'm not saying that," he told us with certainty. But it didn't matter. Because it was the ice break we all needed. A moment in this little ragtag family that had chosen each other.

And I was finally a part of it.

[Malcolm - Meet the Parents](#)

[Jan 22, 2024](#)





I was curious about my new Gatekeeper. He was younger than I expected. Someone that hadn't taken the role by choice but instead had it thrust upon him. That in itself wasn't highly unusual but he seemed almost in shock. His body could not handle the pain the first week and he fell into a fever. The second week, he was concerned, looking at the world like it was his enemy. The paranoia heightened to a hardened fear in his eyes as he peered into the shadows and the little cracks in the world that most could not see. I wanted to reach out to him. Let him know that I had no plans to hurt him. But the pain was too sharp and I didn't know how to get him to listen.

He seemed sad. It was curious really. As I peered into his life, it looked like he had friends. Family. A sister, if I wasn't mistaken. But he still went home at the end of the day and when he stepped inside the place he made for himself, his face fell.

So I looked into his past.

Looked into the memories I held of him.

When Malcolm was six he was at the stove. I could see him, up on a stool, his hair tucked up inside a hat as he stirred a pot of stew. There was a little girl playing on the floor of the kitchen, a rag doll in her hands.

"Hazel, you need to wash up before dinner," he was saying to the girl.

"Why?" She looked up at him with the biggest eyes I had ever seen, clutching her doll close.

"Cause of germs. Go wash."

Hazel looked at her doll, tucking the braided yarn strands of hair up under the doll's hood. "When's mama going to be home?"

The boy, Malcolm, breathed in sharply. It was funny, though. Because I didn't see the breath. But I could feel it as if it shook my very core.

"Not tonight. I'll tuck you in though."

"Will you snuggle me?"

He stepped off the stool and grabbed the bowls from the counter. "If you wash up. After dinner I will." The girl ran off just like that, leaving the boy to dish up their meal. It was meager and one bowl had more in it than the other.

I frowned. That didn't really tell me much.

The scene changed again. This time Malcolm was older. About ten or so. His sister was in front of him crying, her knee bloody.

"It's okay, Hazel. Just take some deep breaths." He was taking a small gauze pad and dabbing it with something that made the girl cry even harder. "I'll get it all fixed up, okay?"

"They pushed me," the little girl sobbed.

"Who?"

"The boy in the market. He said mama was a witch. Mama ain't no witch."

There was a look that crossed Malcolm's eyes. And again, I could feel more than see his emotions. The way he tucked it inside. Later, he would go and track down that boy. Scare him. Shove him down so not just his knee was split open. He would then wash up and bring his sister ice cream for the evening.

"Why does everyone hate us?" Hazel cried to him.

Malcolm's lips thinned. "Because people in this world don't like what they don't understand. And we are something that they don't understand."

She wiped at her cheeks. "Why?"

He sighed, placing a bandage on her knee. "I don't know."

"I just don't want to see anyone anymore. Every time I go out they get worse and worse."

He looked at her sharply. "No. Don't say that. A few bad experiences does not negate the rest of the world." Leaning forward, he wrapped his arms around her, holding her close. "Don't be like them. Offer understanding to the world. Even if it doesn't always offer it back."

When the scene changed, Malcolm was seventeen. His sister was smiling brightly as she sat in the middle of the park, paper animals rolling around at her feet. Malcolm was sitting back, watching her. Smiling. Hazel was picking up the animals and snuggling them close.

"Mal! Come on! Come sit with me."

"This is your birthday, Hazel." He had saved up. Malcolm had worked for months, saving all of his money so he could rent out every exotic paper animal he could. And now he sat back, because in a moment, they would all burst into the air and become large. Hazel would get to ride an elephant. She would get to roll with the tigers. She would scream at the snake but Malcolm would take care of that quickly.

He was twenty four the next time around, walking into his own apartment and leaning heavily against the door. He had moved here by himself. No one had helped him. No one had even known he was moving. He had bought and paid for the place for himself. Because everything he did in life, he did on his own. Never asking. Never seeking out someone to give him advice or comfort.

Sliding down to the ground, he covered his eyes, trying to hide his tears from even himself. His heart was broken. Something had happened and he felt his heart split in two. And no one was here to comfort him.

I flashed back to the present as he walked through the streets. Hands in his pockets, confidence filtering across his face. I wanted to reach out to him. Tell him that he could talk to me if he wanted. But how? I could see him. I could see his world. But I couldn't seem to do much more than that.

Then, it hit me.

The lights.

I began flashing the lanterns, trying to gain his attention. Frantically I blinked them at him. He looked up once but paid no attention to it. But the second time he looked up, he stopped. My Gatekeeper was smart, it seemed.

Tipping his head to the side, he stared at the string of lights, watching as I flicked them on and off, one by one.

"You and I friends or enemies?" he asked.

Friends. I wanted to tell him we were friends. I knew he had no one he had depended on in life but I wanted to be that for him. Or at the very least, be an ear for him.

I don't know if he thought the lights were a fluke or if he had already forgotten, but he continued on down the street. I followed him, jumping from lantern to lantern, skipping across the alleyways and brightening the shadows for him. Maybe putting some life into him. I saw the way his shoulders began to ease. The warmth from the lights above sinking into him and warming his bones.

He stopped just outside of the Spice District, the steam from the alleys heating the world around him and filling it with the rich scent of cardamon and smoked paprika. I watched the lights play across his face, flickering against his tanned skin.

"You here to pick up those supplies for your sister?" A woman stood at the edge of the alley, surrounded by baskets of herbs.

"Yeah," Malcolm said. "She said that the last cold front took out most of her crops."

The woman tsked. "Poor thing. You sure you're going to be able to carry it all yourself?"

Malcolm nodded. "I'll take a few trips."

"You're too kind, Malcolm." Her voice was soft. This was not the first time he had set his time aside for someone else.

"She's my sister. Anything for her."

Malcolm raised her. I could see it now. How he took care of his sister. Tucked her in at night. Made sure she had enough food in her belly. Made sure she was cared for and loved.

But who had done that for him?

"I'll get your stuff. Just wait here. Maybe I can borrow a cart for you."

"Thanks, Tara."

When the vendor left to go find him a wagon for the supplies, Malcolm leaned against the wall. He looked tired. Run too thin. I watched as he wrapped his arms around himself, rubbing his arms gently. The market was apparently still a little cold. With everything I could, I put my energy into the lights near him, dipping the lanterns down closer to his shoulders. He looked at them, eyeing the lanterns carefully. He leaned towards them though. Subtly. It felt like a victory.

He didn't say anything. I watched him wait for the cart. Load it all up himself and start off towards his sisters. I wanted to follow him. Watch over him. I wanted to let him know that he didn't have to do this all on his own.

But I was growing tired and the call for sleep was coming.

But as I stared at my new Gatekeeper, watching the weight of his life settling across his shoulders, I committed his face to my heart. My Gatekeeper.

I wanted to show him that he was not alone.

The lanterns would always care.

[Dev Blog 1/29/24](#)

[Jan 29, 2024](#)

Hey everyone!

It's been a while.

I am working on chapter three. It has taken a lot more time to get back to work after the holidays than I previously expected. We had a slew of birthdays and a really bad ice storm that left us with a lot of broken bits of our property and a hole in our roof. So, needless to say, it's been a difficult few months of just trying to schedule in some creative time. The juices are low just because life has been so busy. I do

want to assure everyone that I am working on the next chapter however and am very excited about it. It's still in an early stage of writing but the concepts that are going into this one are quickly becoming my favorite.

This chapter is going to feature the first of the kickstarter shopkeepers. Back when I launched my kickstarter after book 1, the higher tiers got the opportunity to design a character to place within the Night Market. I'm splitting them all up between chapters but chapter three is going to have about three or four of them features. Along with that, they will have the opportunity to come back later in the game as MC needs to choose a few different routes.

Now, obviously book 2 is far more of a beast than book 1 with its branching paths. I'm hoping I do not leave dead story ends but always feel free to remind me if I do. Especially in discord. That's where I troll when I'm trying to come up with ideas or figure out what I've forgotten.

I hope all is well.

Much love,

Zinnia

[Stories for the month of Feb.](#)

[Feb 4, 2024](#)

Time to pick the theme of our stories this month!

Stardew Valley AU

Two people/One bed

Trapped in an elevator

110 votes total

[Malcolm - One bed](#)

[Feb 9, 2024](#)



Authors Note: At an undisclosed time in Mal and MC's relationship.

The rain was coming down in droves by the time we got inside. It was a small shack beneath the Eternal Staircase. Apparently you could rent them out for a few buttons and a promise. We should have trudged home that night, but the streets were flooded once more. An ever growing problem now that the mouskin had closed off the drains so they could build their own necropolis down below.

Malcolm lit a storm lantern, brightening the room with dull orange light. It reminded me of Milo. The way the Distillery he lived in used to be. When I watched Malcolm shake his head I wondered if he felt the same. Thinking of the man that was lost to us now.

Pushing the hair away from his eyes, Malcolm turned to me. "You need to get out of those clothes," he said. We were both soaked through. The storm had hit much harder than we expected. A torrential downpour that ended up turning into tipping buckets from the lanterns and filling the streets with an ankle deep flood of water without even a moment's thought. Getting home was going to be hard. Getting somewhere safe was far more important.

"We have no clothes," I told him. We had been at dinner across the market. The only thing we had was the clothes on our back. Malcolm had to mangle his shirt to even pay for the room. If you could call it that.

He looked around, his eyes wandering in search of something. There was a large armoire next to the only window in the room. It was cracked down the middle as if someone had tried to split it in two. When he opened it, there were several piles of sheets and a few blankets.

Malcolm looked over his shoulder. "Toga party?" he asked with a raised brow.

I snorted a little, shivering as my body temperature began to drop. "You joining?"

"Wouldn't miss it."

We both turned our backs to each other as we stripped out of our wet clothes and wrapped ourselves in soft gray sheets. When I peeked back at him, I saw the sheet wrapped around his waist, giving me a full view of his muscled back. There was a scar that ran along his spine that I hadn't seen before. Another one that wrapped around to his front.

Bent down, he began loading the wood available into the small potbelly stove. It smelled musty and damp in the room, the wood not fully dry.

"You dressed?" he asked.

"Yeah."

He brushed his hands off on the sheet, standing to full height and turning to me. The scars on his chest were prominent in the soft light of the room. I had seen them a dozen times before by now, but I could never get over how jagged they looked. It had not been an easy surgery. He had once told me that it was a rather back alley one. Something that happened when he was young and naive and didn't know how to safely become who he was to the outside world.

We both stood on opposite sides of the room, listening to the rain thunder outside. The room was minimalistic. There was nothing in it other than a small pile of wood. A kettle for tea. And a singular bed.

Malcolm's eyes seemed to rest on the bed at the same time. "I can take the floor," he told me.

I frowned. "No. Malcolm, that's ridiculous. Besides, it's freezing. We both should have the bed."

The bed was no bigger than a twin mattress and looked threadbare. I was seriously considering that we both should take the floor. Afraid of the diseases we would wake up with if we did curl up on the bed.

"Are you ready for that?" Malcolm asked.

"For sharing a bed?" Things between Malcolm and I were different. There was a comfort between us that I hadn't felt with others. Maybe because I knew him the longest. Maybe because he would talk to me when I had no voice to respond. I felt seen with Malcolm. Safe. But that's where it had stopped, thus far. We hadn't talked about the subject of us. If there even might be an us. When it came to those small moments, we brushed by them. I couldn't tell if we were avoiding them or if the time was just not upon us yet.

"Malcolm," I continued. "We can share a bed. It's not a marriage proposal."

"Yeah," he said with a small smile.

He turned from me then, picking up a few more logs and tossing them onto the fire. He then went around the room, securing the window. The door. Stepping on the floor boards as if they were loose enough to allow someone entrance. I watched him do it all with a very curious eye.



After his third pass around the room, he finally looked at me.

“Are you nervous?” I asked. I didn’t think I had ever seen Malcolm nervous. I didn’t even know what that looked like.

“About what?”

“You tell me,” I said softly. I was sitting on the edge of the bed now. He had yet to even step towards me.

“Are you cold?” He was changing the subject. It hit me then that he did that often. Malcolm was someone who wished to speak about comfort and boundaries. About respect. But when it came to him, he deflected.

“It’s warming up,” I answered.

He walked towards the armoire, grabbing the few quilts that were there. He spread them across the bed, motioning for me to get under the blankets. I pulled the sheet that was wrapped around me a little, feeling it get trapped beneath me as I scooted over to allow room for him.

“I think I’m going to stay up a bit,” Malcolm said. “Make some tea.”

“Mal,” I said softly. “There is nothing in the room. What are you even going to do?”

“You would be surprised at how often I just sit and do nothing,” he told me with a small smirk.

“You could sit and do nothing on this very mediocre bed,” I suggested to him.

He laughed a little. “Just get some sleep, Lamplight. I’ll be along eventually.”

And there it was. The bed was the problem. Sharing it with me was the problem. “Malcolm, do you not want to share a bed with me?”

Malcolm stopped, his eyes settling on mine. I could see the war within his eyes. There was something more here. With measured steps, he walked towards me, sitting down on the edge of the bed. The action was brought about only to prove to himself that he could even do it. I didn’t hear him suck in a breath but I could see it in the way his back expanded.

“I’m being weird,” he said after a moment.

“A little,” I said. “I’m just curious as to why.”

He gave a small, self deprecating laugh. “Because I haven’t shared a bed with someone for over a decade. Granted, I was dead for that time...” he trailed off.

“Was Milo the last person you shared a bed with?”

"A couch," he said. "But that's not actually what I was thinking about. It's more... sharing a bed has always meant more to me. It's been intimate."

"Why?"

"Because it was the only thing in my control for most of my life." Shifting, he turned, bringing his legs up on the bed, leaning back against the headboard. His sheet was low on his waist, the curve of his hipbone sharp against his tanned skin. "I couldn't control my home life. I couldn't control my job. I couldn't control how people saw me. Talked to me. I couldn't even control my relationship. But I could control who I invited to my bed. Who I felt was safe enough to share that with. And now I'm becoming very aware that it has maybe become a bit of a mechanism to keep people out."

"That's very self aware of you."

He snorted. "Right? Great at that, huh?"

I curled up on my side, staring at him, resting my own head on my arm. "We don't have to sleep in the same bed," I assured him.

"That's the thing, Lamplight. I know three people in this world really well. You are one of them. This shouldn't be a big deal for me."

"But maybe it is because it feels like a step into a different direction for us."

"We spend a lot of time together," he pointed out.

"During the day. Not at night. Not when we sleep. Not when we're vulnerable."

Malcolm closed his eyes, trying to relax his body. I watched as he stretched out his feet, flexing his toes, trying to unclench the fists that he had curled at his side.

"Well, you've found it," he laughed a little. "We both knew I had to be weird about something."

"I don't think it's weird," I told him. "I think that you've had a lot of things you've gone through. And it's going to manifest in certain ways. And this is just one of them."

It took a minute, but Malcolm slid down to lay on his side, staring at me. We shared the same pillow, our breath mingling between us. Reaching out, he rested his hand on my cheek, his thumb swiping against my jaw.

"Thank you," he said softly.

"You're welcome. Now, sleep. I don't think you do it."

"I don't," he laughed a little. I saw the moment his face relaxed. The way the deep circles seemed to smudge under his eyes. He looked exhausted. The way he held himself was suddenly slipping away

and he looked two seconds from sleep.

“Goodnight, Lamplight,” he murmured.

Turning my head, I pressed my lips into the curve of his palm. “Goodnight, my Gatekeeper.”

[Hazel - One Bed](#)

[Feb 12, 2024](#)



The roar shredded from beneath the floor, ripping up through the ground and tearing into the dark. The shadows were torn apart, screaming into the abyss as one by one they were attacked by the unseen. A glowing sickly green brightened the room, magic cracking like a whip and splitting the air. Hazel floated several feet off the ground, her arms outstretched as poison dripped from her fingers.

I rolled out of the way as another creature came lunging towards me. It was made of faint outlines and forgotten moments. Barely able to solidify until the final second when the creature pounced upon me, snarling into my skin. It slammed onto the ground with a hard shake, roaring in an anger that rivaled the Guards own. But Hazel's words persisted, spewing across the room until they gathered like smoke on the ground. She couldn't hear me. I didn't think she could even see me. But she was protecting me. Somehow, in ways I didn't understand, she was making sure that I lived to see another moment. Another day. I was terrified it meant that she would not.

A loud bang shot off like a pulse, the rocky surroundings crumbling in a slide of debris and foul smelling rot. The creatures that prowled were veering back, looking up towards the darkened ceiling with newly discovered fear. And then there was nothing. Just the soft cavern we had entered. The one that was nothing more than a garden to someone's home.

When the wind died down, Hazel dropped. I yelled, scrambling towards her to break her fall. I caught her in my arms, feeling how limp she was in my embrace. Her head was tilted back, hair stuck to her forehead, lips bloodless.

"Hazel," I whispered. "Hazel." The shadows were flat. The world quiet. And Hazel was barely breathing.

On unsteady feet, I lifted her, bringing her with me as I stumbled through the dark. There was a small cabin nearby. We were supposed to be making a delivery here but when we arrived, the door opened and the world had exploded around us. I didn't think I could take her all the way back. The journey itself was six hours. Seven if you counted the amount of times we took a wrong turn. I didn't trust myself in taking the two of us home.

The cabin door was still splintered open when I reached it. It was no more than a small room with a makeshift kitchenette and a small bed shoved in the corner. I laid her down on it, brushing her hair from her face. She looked at peace. Which was more than I could say when she was floating mid air with holes for eyes, magic bursting from her skin in a crackling heat that made my thoughts boil in confusion.

As she slept, I did what I could to make a new front door. I didn't know if there were still creatures out there. They had unraveled with her last burst of power. But I didn't want to take any sort of chance. When I was done with that, I went to look for extra blankets, piling them on the bed. Whoever had lived here, I think had burst from the doors. I didn't know if this had been a setup, or if something terrible had happened. Milo normally made this trip for Hazel. He had just not been around this last month.

A moan came from the bed over an hour later. I rushed to Hazel's side, just as her eyes fluttered open. They were that soft green brown once more. The exact color of moss edged deep beneath a log.

"Hey," I whispered to her. "Try not to move too much. You fell pretty far."

She shifted, the blankets rustling beneath her. "You caught me," she said softly.

"I'll always catch you."

When she looked around the room, a dawning realization crossed her face. "We were too late," she said sadly.

"What do you mean?"

With effort, she sat up in bed, leaning back against the headboard. "The tonics we were delivering. They were supposed to keep the monsters at bay. The client was infected with a parasite. What we were giving him was keeping the parasite asleep."

The cabin was ravaged but I could see how at some point, it had been lived in. There had been love here. A home. Whatever had burst from the man had taken his life along with it.

"How were we late?" I asked. "The books were pretty clear. They should have still had another week's worth of their dose."

Hazel shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe they had to double up one night. Maybe something happened." I could see the weight of this action settling on her shoulder. Her eyes traveled around, trying to find an answer.

Crawling into bed next to her, I wrapped my arms around her. "It's not your fault."

"It feels like it."

"But it's not." How could she have even known? The man had been a client of hers for years. She had never missed a delivery before. She had braved the market herself to get the tonics here on time because Milo could not. "Bad things sometimes happen," I told her sadly.

She leaned her head on my shoulder. "I hate that."

I let her sit in silence for a long moment, letting her come to terms with what had happened. She scooted closer to me, urging me to pull the blankets up and over the two of us.

"We're going to have to stay here tonight," I told her. "You need to rest a little."

She tensed. "Oh. Are you alright? Seeing all that... was it too much?"

"It was a little different," I told her. I knew Hazel had power, but I didn't often get faced with it. "You saved us, though." I wouldn't have even been able to fight those creatures on my own.

I shifted, moving over slightly to allow her more room. She wrapped herself fully around me, however, practically scooting onto my lap. I looked down at her, my hand splayed across her lower back.

"Don't go," she said. "I know we haven't really shared a bed too much but I would like for you to stay here. Keep me warm." She was clinging to me. Not wanting me to move even an inch.

"Are you sure?"

She nodded against my chest. "Taking it slow is important," she said. "But, getting to cling to you completely and make sure that we become one is equally as important to me."

I laughed a little. Because that was Hazel. Zero to a thousand with a snap of a finger.

"That's not scaring you, is it?" She bent her head to look upwards a bit more. Her eyes were soft and round and all her own again. I knew what she was really asking me though. Does she herself scare me?

"You could never scare me," I said. I scooted down, bringing her with me until we were both bundled beneath the blankets. Her thigh cinched between my own, half of her laying across my chest.

"I scare me," she confessed.

I held her tighter, trying my best to mold her to my body. "I think you're beautiful," I whispered, placing a kiss on the crown of her head. I could feel her blush as her cheeks warmed against me.

"Thank you," she whispered, burying her face into the crook of my neck.

I laughed a little, feeling myself grow drowsy now that the danger had passed. It had been a long day.

"Get some sleep," Hazel whispered to me, her own voice sounding riddled with exhaustion. I pulled the blankets up higher on us. "Just stay with me," she murmured.

"Forever."

[Milo - One bed](#)

[Feb 16, 2024](#)



It had been a long road. Getting to the point where I would even go to Milo's house was an act that had not been easy to bring myself to. But here I was, following hastily described directions, with a bottle of ghost wine in my hand. Because this was a new start. This was the beginning of us trying.

Milo had left the distillery and risen up in the world. He now lived on a quiet and secluded little street with eclectic houses that lined each side of the road. He had boasted about his new place like it was the best thing he had accomplished in life. Which, given how his old place was, I couldn't actually fault him for. The distillery had been falling apart. It had a smell in it that bordered on toxicity, and rats, *real* rats, had lived beneath the loose tiles that littered the floor. Which was odd, given that there were no tiles within the distillery at all.



Turning down the road, I was pleasantly surprised by what I saw. There were flowers in cedar whisky barrels and pillars that had been erected so the candles could have a place somewhere other than the road. The cobblestones themselves were well maintained. There were several trees which was an oddity in most parts of the Night Market. And, each house looked well maintained.

A door was flung open not far from me where Milo came bounding out of the two story house and into the road. He skidded to a stop, his hair falling all about his face. He looked nervous, his feet shuffling back and forth as he gave me an aborted wave.

"Hey. Hi. You're here. Are you early? You're not early." He gave a nervous laugh, running his fingers through his unruly hair.

I came to a stop in front of him, raising a brow and feeling my lips twitch. "I can walk around the block one more time if you need a few minutes to tidy up," I told him.

"No," he quickly responded. "No. Shit. Sorry. I'm just... you're the first person I'm having over. I'm excited."

"So you've said." Several times, in fact. Over and over again since he had gotten it.

"You're going to love it," he assured me. "There's a functioning bathroom in this one. No more back alley pee's at night."

"You know, now that I think about it, that alone should have been a deal breaker in our relationship."

"I know, right?" he laughed. "What were you thinking?" He wrapped an arm around my shoulder, his embrace tense, like he wasn't sure if this was allowed. When I didn't shove him away, he pulled me a little closer, taking the wine from me. "Okay, so, hear me out. When you walk in, you are going to be in shock. You are going to fall to your knees with the cleanliness of it all. You may even weep."

"Over your home?"

"You are going to wonder how something so beautiful can even exist in this world of yours." He grinned at me, his eyes crinkling at the corner. "Okay, that's probably talking it up too much. But, it's nice, darlin'. Like damn nice. And you know it has to be because I can't lie."

I had to give him that.

We walked up the three unbroken steps to his front door. It was a deep wood shot through with plum. A surprising choice for Milo but I had been learning how much he loved color. "That's pretty," I said, trying to show my excitement.

"I did it," he rocked back and forth on his heels. "I didn't hang the door or paint it or put varnish on it. But I shined it up."



I squeezed his hand. He gave off the vibe of a little boy who was far too excited to show off his accomplishments.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

I nodded. I was ready. Ready to see this apartment. Ready to begin healing. Ready to see where Milo and I went with our life.

When the door opened, I gasped. The downstairs was beautiful. Decorated with warm colored wood floors, deep blue walls, and gorgeous art pieces that were tastefully displayed. The room was bright and clean and full of love and warmth.

“Oh, Milo,” I said. “I am actually shocked. I wanted to believe you but I am intimately aware of your previous home.”

“Oh, this isn’t mine,” he said.

I turned to him. “What?”

“Yeah. This isn’t mine. This place is rented out for photoshoots. I don’t know who owns it. I live upstairs.” He covered my eyes as he hobbled me up the stairs, his thighs brushing the backs of mine as we took the steps one by one. “Alright,” he said, lips brushing against my ear. “Here is the real piece de resistance””

He uncovered my eyes and let all the glory of his home fall before me.

His very plain home.

The walls were white brick and chipped. The floors were stained. And there was no furniture in the room other than some haphazard floor pillows and a large table piled with keys and some old take out boxes. But there was junk. There were bits of paraphernalia everywhere I looked. Old baskets. Broken lights. An old sofa that looked like it was dismantled.

“I got you these,” Milo said, bounding over to the ‘kitchen’. He came back with yellow flowers that I was pretty sure were the weeds that grew on Hazel’s back fence. They were in an old coffee tin.

“I...” had no idea what to say.

“I thought the tin was a nice touch,” he said excitedly. “It’s kind of like this upcycled thing that Hazel was talking about. And I left the coffee grounds in there so the flowers could smell like it”

“I don’t think that’s how that works,” I said, lips rolling in my mouth as I took it all in.

“Oh, and look.” He grabbed my hand, dragging me towards what I thought might be the living room. There were several crates stacked up where books were tossed in. Not even displayed nicely. Or stacked. But thrown in. “I’ve taken up reading again!” he told me. “I found this book seller down the

road. She sells novels she stole off this old blanket. Her stock changes every week. I'm pretty sure she's been in here and taken some of the books that I've bought from her," he laughed.

I stood in the middle of the room, looking around. It was clean. I would give him that. It was actually clean. But it was still Milo messy. Reminiscent of a hoarder in small corners that were revealing themselves as I continued to look around.

"Do you want to see the bedroom?"

"Sure," I said, still trying to stay positive. It was a step up. It was a far cry from the distillery. I could walk across the floors without my feet sticking. But, when he opened the door, I couldn't contain it. There was no way I could keep quiet about this one, very specific thing.

"That's the same bed."

In the middle of the room was the mattress. The beaten down and stained mattress from before. No bedframe. A nest of blankets that were moth ridden. It wasn't even straight. It was laid at an angle where dirty laundry was peeking out from beneath it.

"It's not," he said quickly.

"No. That's the same bed," I told him.

"No. It's not at all."

"Milo, yes it is." I pointed accusatory at the bed as I walked over to it, jumping up and down on the mattress. "The springs are popping out and breaking through my shoe."

"Oh, come on. It's not that bad," he protested. There were a few crates by his bedside. They were absolutely from the distillery and were laden with half burnt white wax candles. "I think this place has class," Milo was saying from the bedroom door.

"It doesn't have vermin, I'll give you that."

"Vermin is just another word for friend."

"No. Companion is another word for friend. Vermin is another word for rat. And I'm glad they're not here. I'm—"

I spoke far too soon. Because the squeak that sounded from what I was assuming was the bathroom was loud and echoing, as if to try and let me know that they were, in fact, still here. And they had grown in size.

I placed a hand over my face, trying to calm my voice down. Because Milo was excited. He was genuinely happy about this and had wanted to show me. But this was, well, it was something.

"You don't like it?"

My hand dropped. He was standing across from me, one arm wrapped around himself while he bit the thumbnail of his right hand. I felt my shoulders drop. My face soften.

"I like it," I said. "It's different than I feel like you've told me but I do think it's an improvement. And I'm proud that you've done it."

"Yeah?" he grinned.

"Yeah." Walking towards him, I wrapped my arms around him. "But you need to admit that that's the same bed."

"It's not," he laughed. "Not technically."

"Uh huh. How'd you get around that lie?"

He grinned, placing his lips against my temple. "I restuffed it."

"Not well."

Grabbing me around the waist, he pulled me down onto the bed, breaking my fall. "Stay with me tonight?"

"In this bed?"

"Let's make new memories in this bed." He rolled until I was on my side, my thigh up and over his. "New, good memories."

"I don't know. The previous ones were pretty nice." That was one thing that I never could shake. Milo and I had always had fun together. Minus the entire ball situation and the months following that.

"Yeah they were." His lips brushed mine, soft and sweet and full of apologies. There was a weight that was taken from him now. One that I had never seen off his shoulders. It was like discovering him all over again.

But through this discovery, he was still Milo. It was seen through the minor touches throughout the room. His bedside a clear example of that.

"Milo." His lips were brushing against mine still, his eyes hooded.

"Hm?"

"Are those the candles from the streets?" I asked, eyeing the candles at his bedside.

"Yeah."

I smacked his arm. "Milo, those are to guide people home. Go buy a normal candle. Don't take it off the street."

"There are tons of them on the street! Why can't I take a few?"

"They are life saving candles."

"Good. I nearly tripped and fell the other night. The candle did its job and saved my life."

Taking him by the chin, I narrowed my eyes. "New bed. New candles."

"Then sexy time?" he asked.

"We'll see."

When I flopped back down on the bed, I felt laughter bubble in my throat. Because leave it to Milo to talk up a very mediocre place with the same condemned bed and candles he stole from the alley. I kind of loved him for it.

"Stay with me?" he asked, curling me close to him. "Tell me all the things that you want to see in this place."

"It doesn't matter what I want to see in this place. It matters that you like it."

He brushed the hair from my eyes. "I would like a trash can as long as it had something warm to drink and a pillow to lay my head on."

"A trash can?" I asked in disbelief.

"I'm a simple man, darlin'. There's not much I can say to that."

I shook my head. "You have fallen in love with a construct of a cosmic god in which you walk upon. There is nothing simple about that."

"Nah," he said, shaking his head, his eyes mapping out the lines across my face. "That's been the easiest thing I've ever done. Nothin' hard about loving you. I've not questioned that once."

I melted against him. My immediate response was that he was lying. Telling me a line. But, I could see it. In his eyes. The way he held me. The desperate way he clung. Milo couldn't lie. He could hide from himself and from me, but in this moment, he was peeling everything away and quietly handing me the truth, hopeful that I would smash it upon the ground.

Leaning forward, I sighed against his lips, holding him close to me. "I'll stay," I told him. "You owe me breakfast in the morning, though. And I don't want you cooking."

"I wouldn't wish that horror on either of us," he murmured. We giggled like children as we rolled around in the bed, trying to get comfortable. Situating the blankets up and over our shoulders. And in the end, when we laid there, staring up at the ceiling, I couldn't help but relax. This was how it was supposed to be. This was peace.

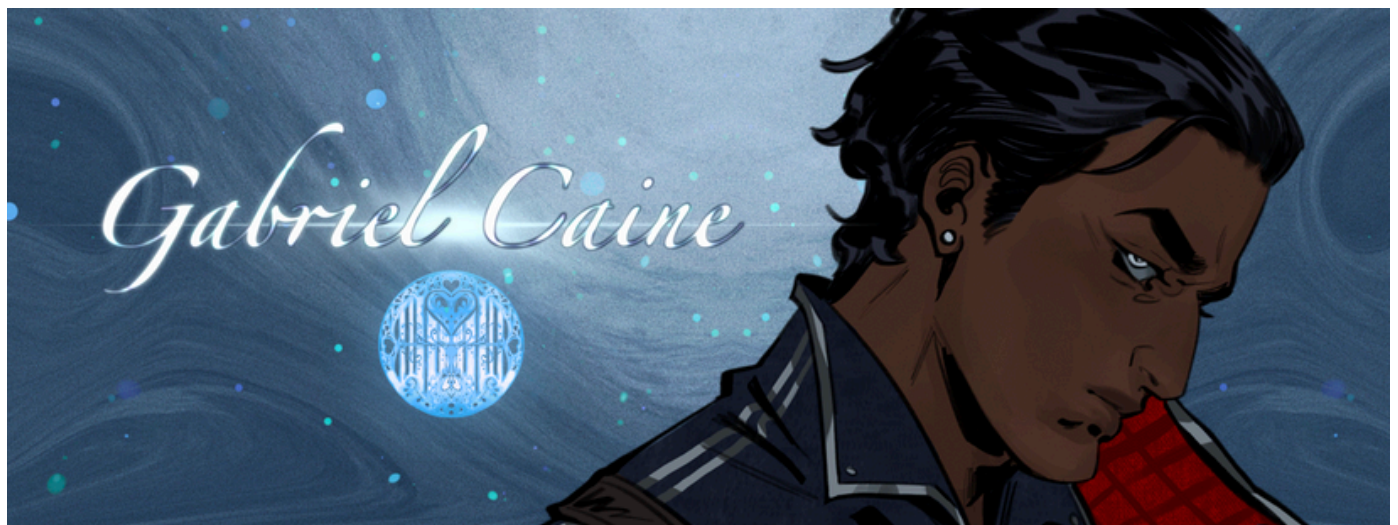
Then one of the candles flew across the room and hit a rat with a loud squeak.

"See?" Milo said. "Life saving candles. I need them."

I buried my face in his shoulder and listened to the rat scurry back towards the bathroom.

### [Gabriel - One Bed](#)

[Feb 28, 2024](#)



The door slammed, shaking the false windows and rattling the few pieces of furniture that were not nailed down within the room. Gabriel stormed inside, ripping the scabbard from his belt and tossing it carelessly to the corner. The blade stuck within the soft wood floor with a slight squelch as silver cracks of light shot out, encircling the room and sinking into the walls and ceiling in a hazy ethereal glow

"This is absolutely ridiculous," he growled, beginning to rip off his coat, a button taking the brunt of his ire. "They know who I am. They cannot keep us here."

We had been enjoying a day out. It was the kind of day we never got to partake in given that he was a workaholic and I was cursed with the inability to not be involved in world shattering events. It had taken quite a bit of finagling to get Gabriel to even agree to leave the office. And for the first few hours, he

was seeing monsters in every corner. It wasn't until I had taken his hand and reminded him of our promise to each other,, that he even came back to himself enough to think rationally.

And then the district we were in was quarantined.

We got word of it halfway through our day and as we made our way back home, we were stopped by the Velvet Guard. Three of Gabriel's men that had worked for him for several years now, stood in our way. No one was allowed in or out of the district. Not for three days. If we didn't show signs of contamination by then, we were allowed to leave.

In all the years I had watched my warden, in all the times we had been together, I didn't think I had ever seen him raise his voice as loud as he did then.

"I am the Warden," he continued now, looking around our room with a sneer. "I cannot just sit here for the next three days while the market falls apart."

I looked at him with a tilt of my head, recognizing his anger but trying my best to not match whatever this fear was. "Isn't it protocol to lock down a district if the people there are getting sick?"

"Yes," he said without preamble.

"So aren't your men doing the exact thing that you trained them to do?"

"I did not train them to imprison their Warden."

"They are not imprisoning you, Gabriel. They are following orders."

"I am above those orders," he snapped.

I raised a brow at him. "You really believe that?" From my position on the bed I could see his agitation. The way his fingers flexed, the cracks of his hands deepening as his grace bled through.

"Yes," he said, voice laced in confusion. "No. I don't know. Perhaps there needs to be exceptions put in place for this kind of situation."

"You start putting exceptions in place for people in power and you are going to have a lot of angry citizens on your hands. Including me."

It was a slap to the face that irritated him far more than he wanted me to see because he wiped it from his expression just as quickly as it came.

I felt a small sigh escape me. This wonderful, strong, and oftentimes, stupid man. I adored him to no end but the structure of power that he allowed himself to partake in was a dying hierarchy. One that I had made a point of killing since walking these grounds. I could see the toll it took on him. The way that Gabriel looked lost in the dead of night. I felt sorry for him most days. Guilty at my own words for putting

the fear in his eyes. But the Velvet Guard could not continue the way he saw fit during bouts of anger. Nothing good ever came from it.

"Come here," I beckoned, scooting over on the bed.

"Absolutely not."

It was my turn to be taken aback. "Why?"

"If we are contagious then we will need to stay on opposite sides of the room in order to lessen the risk of transfer."

He couldn't actually be serious. There was no way that he was committed to this. "Gabriel, we kissed earlier today. We've held hands all day. You and I shared a glass of wine. I think the time for concern has already passed."

"I will not hear of it. This is my line," he stated firmly.

I rolled my eyes. "You only have this line because I called you out on your idiotic viewpoints."

The muscle of his jaw flexed. Called it.

"I do not think we will be able to stay here for the three days they require," he said. "Especially in these accommodations." Most had scrambled for a room. The one Gabriel had managed to get, even when trying to throw his weight around, had been mediocre at best. I still wasn't convinced that this wasn't an abandoned little apartment somewhere that an opportunist just had us buy out for the next few days.

Still...

Three days with Gabriel was not the worst thing that had ever happened to me. I just needed to make him see that as well.

"Gabriel, you are acting ridiculous," I told him, softening my voice. "Just come to bed. Lay down with me. We can sit and talk and—"

"This is your fault."

It took a solid minute for me to understand if I heard him right. Gabriel was pacing the room now. "How?"

"We never should have gone to this flea market that you love. It clearly is unhygienic. And it had nothing of value to it."

"Flea markets are not unhygienic," I groaned, flopping back down onto the bed. How many times were we to have this argument. "You just don't have taste in furniture. Or clothes."



"I beg your pardon."

"You're pardoned."

"I do too have taste."

"You only wear your uniform. Even your day off clothes are just different pieces of your uniform. And as for your furniture, it is all monochromatic and utilitarian. There is nothing about it that speaks of you. Your style. Your personality." I paused. "Actually, I take that back. It does speak of your personality a bit."

"I am offended at your take on my life."

"Just as I am offended by the very boring aesthetic that you foster within your home. Hence the reason we came to the flea market."

"And hence the reason we will be dying in a puddle of our own vomit."

I kicked off my shoes then, pushing myself under the covers. They were actually warm and surprisingly soft. "Gabriel, stop being prissy and get into bed, please."

There was silence. I wasn't sure if he was contemplating what I had told him or if he was trying to decide if he was stubborn enough to sleep on the floor. I knew he wouldn't. Unhygienic was a theme with Gabriel. It was a tick that sent him spiraling immediately.

I smiled to myself as I heard the click of his belt and the tines on his trouser's zipper. When a warm and smooth plane of chest pressed against me from behind, I snuggled back, reaching down to lace my hands within his own.

"I love how secretly snobby you are," I told him.

He scooted around as he settled down. The lines of tension from his body were wearing down as he held me. "I apologize for my earlier assessment," he whispered gruffly. "Just because I am Warden does not mean I am above the law."

"No it does not."

"However," he said, shifting again. "These accommodations will not do. This bed is far too small." At six foot seven, a twin sized bed was comical for him. Add me in there and we were practically going to sleep on top of each other tonight. An idea that I was not upset about.

Rolling over, I straddled him, stretching my body across his own. "I am looking forward to the next three days," I told him, running my finger down his chest. "No Velvet Guard. No Warden duties. No Night Market catastrophes. Just a good old fashion vacation while we both wait to find out if we have the plague."

His nose wrinkled. "You have a way with words."

I laughed loudly at that, leaning down to kiss him. His lips were soft and pliant against my own as his hands came up to encircle my hips. I could feel the way he shifted beneath me, the telling hardness growing as I ground down against him. Plague be damned, I was going to have fun the next few days.

## [Belladonna - One Bed](#)

[Feb 29, 2024](#)



The room was exquisite. The kind that I hadn't even dreamed of. It was placed at the top of a bluff, overlooking the market. Above the lanterns, I could see the stars shining. They winked in and out of existence. I raised my hand, waving back at them, watching as stardust swirled to spell out my name, asking me if I could come play.

"Not tonight," I told them. Not most nights, now. Not until I figured out a way to get back to my body. And even then, I didn't know if the option would be there.

They looked on at me in disappointment but they understood. Cosmic beings had an eternity to play. Sometimes, that meant they went far between their games.

Turning, I looked back at the room. Silks hung from the ceiling in deep plums and maroons. Gold lined settees of teal velvet were pushed against the walls, and a large sunken tub with koi swimming between the bubbles. The crown jewel of it all, however, was the bed. One large enough to fit at least a dozen people, most of them twice my size.

The door clicked open, calling my attention. Belladonna swept in, her curls piled half way upon her head with small tendrils dripping down her back. She wore a sheer black dress that draped across her thighs

with skeletal applique reaching up to squeeze her neck. With her signature blood lipstick and her molten eyes, she filled the room with the sheer magnitude of her presence.

"You found it," she said with an air of pleasure..

"The three vampires you sent to escort me made sure of that," I told her.

She smiled at me coyly but her lips clearly said that I was toying the line of cheekiness. Some days she enjoyed that. Other days, she would rather sit in silence. It depended on if she had Baron duties or not.

Pulling her silk gloves from her hands, she placed them on a large onyx dais. "Well, what do you think of our accommodations for the evening?"

I looked around. "They're beautiful. But you know that."

She paused, taking in my tone. "You are displeased."

"No, of course not," I said quickly. How could anyone be displeased when they were showered constantly with finery.

"But?" she pressed.

"Bella, it's nothing. This is really stunning. I don't even know how to describe how amazing it is."

Her stare searched every inch of my skin. From the day I met her, she had this ability to see right through me. To see through everyone, really. It's what made her good at her job and so terrifying at times.

The click of her heels were loud echoes through the expanse of the room. She walked towards me with an even pace, her hips swaying from side to side. When her fingers gripped my chin, it was with the most gentle of pressure. I felt my eyes shifting to hers as if on their own accord.

"I would really appreciate it if you would tell me why you are displeased, dear heart."

Like always, I felt a twitch deep in my gut. One that spoke of the pull she had over me. Once, I had asked if she was hypnotizing me. If that was even a thing for vampires. She had laughed loudly, brushing her hand across the line of my cheek. But she had never answered.

"I want to spend time with you," I told her finally.

"You are spending time with me."

"I want to spend time with the *real* you."

At that, her grip fell. The face Belladonna showed the world had been harder and harder to crack since she had become Baron. Sometimes, when she came home, she forgot to leave it to the outside world.

"We cannot do that in luxury?" she asked, clearly miffed.

"We can, but..." I glanced over at the bed. "I mean, are we planning on doing that in luxury with several other people and a few giants?"

Rolling her eyes, she stepped away from me, beginning to take the pins down from her hair. "Please. Do you think I would let giants into our bed? I do have class."

"You know what I mean, Bella."

"I clearly don't. I fail to see why the size of the bed means I'll be fucking other people."

My eyes widened a bit. I could see strands of hair rip from her scalp as she flicked at the pins, tossing them to her vanity. "Whoa. That's not what I said at all."

Her lips were thin, her hair tumbling in soft curls down her back. "Come unzip me."

I walked over to her, settling at her back and looking at her reflection through the mirror. She had paid quite a bit to have that magic installed within any of the mirrors that she owned. I wondered if this place just offered it as an accommodation.

"You seem agitated," I whispered to her.

She took off her bracelets and rings as I unzipped the back of her dress, letting the material fall to the floor. It left her completely bare in front of me. Slowly my hands encircled her waist, coming up to cup her breast as I slowly ran my fingers across the adornments she had pierced there.

"It was not a good day," she stated, reaching for a cloth to take her makeup off. "I wanted today to be perfect. I had wanted to actually be here when you arrived. Take you dining. Show you off to everyone. Yet, do you know what ended up stopping me? Bureaucracy. Damn bureaucracy. I am about ready to take the Knowings name in complete vain and kill them all."

"I doubt the Knowing would care," I told her gently, pressing my lips to her shoulder.

"Oh, they would. Believe me they would. Bastards don't want anything to do with them to be tarnished. Hence why they cast out so many of their kind."

When her face was free of makeup, she turned in the circle of my arms, grabbing me by the back of my neck and bringing me in for a fierce kiss. I felt her fangs slit against the old scabs on the inside of my mouth as she sucked my bottom lip, moaning as my blood hit her tongue. When she was finished, I was dizzy, aroused, and desperately trying to figure out if this is what she needed or if this was her way of distracting me from her needs.

"I'm sorry," she said gently.

"No, I like those sorts of kisses," I told her.

"Not for that," she said, voice dipping deeper. "But now that I do know that I will have to spoil you a bit. What I am sorry for, is not taking in your request to be together. I thought this would all suit you but I forget that you are sickeningly sentimental at times and just want to cuddle in front of the fire."

I refrained from saying that was what she wanted to do. At least when she was being sickeningly sentimental'.

"I want to be in bed with you," I told her. "And I want to be crammed in together. Forced to lay practically on top of each other."

"How romantic," she sneered.

"You know it is." I laced my hand in hers. "But, I also want to do whatever you had planned. Because I know you and you probably thought about all this meticulously."

Belladonna never did anything half assed or the spur of the moment. She was a control freak if I ever met one. Despite her only inviting me to this a week ago, I knew she probably had booked the place three months in advance.

"That was all ruined do to someone named Ryohl."

"Well, fuck Rhyohl then."

Her face twisted in utter disgust. "Not even if you paid me."

Tugging me over to the bed, she threw me on it, crawling over me to strip me of my own clothes. Her tongue followed each inch of skin exposed as she hummed against me, nipping small little scratches across my belly to bring the blood to the surface. When I was naked and panting, she pulled me to her, the two of us curled in the middle of the very big bed.

"Better?" she asked.

"No, because now I'm horny."

She nuzzled against my neck, placing a thigh between my legs. "That was the point," she purred.

"But I want to do something for you." Bella enjoyed sex. I knew she did. But it didn't let her unwind like it did me.

"How about," she whispered, "I take care of you. And then, you can sit and read to me for a while."

I felt my heart melt. "Did you bring the book we were reading?"

"It's in the nightstand."

Reaching up, I ran my fingers through her hair. "I would love that." Like this, she looked so much softer. So much more of the woman I got to know rather than the one she gave to everyone else. I loved this version of her. I felt privileged that she trusted me enough to see her.

"Then lie back, dear heart. And let me have some fun."

And really, who was I to complain?

### [March Short Stories](#)

[Mar 5, 2024](#)

What are we wanting to read this month?

Individual stories about the RO's and the MC

Poly stories and minor romance stories (i.e Pen)

3-4 part Caliban story

141 votes total

### [After Dark Content](#)

[Mar 7, 2024](#)

Hey guys,

I had made a post on Tumblr a while ago for some NSFW asks that I would answer here on Patreon. I didn't really get any of them so I haven't posted yet. And I get it, not everyone wants to out their kinks. LOL!

Just letting you all know that it may not be something that comes to fruition. Also, I am sorry if anyone's got deleted that was sent. I was recently under a bit of a cyber attack where someone thought it would be funny to sexually harass me. Because you know, internet is fun like that. I was deleting them without reading while I was figuring out who they were so I could block them fully. So I am sorry if one of your questions was deleted in the process.



[Gabriel - Pets](#)

[Mar 11, 2024](#)



“Thank you for coming.”

Gabriel was waiting for me in the front lobby of the precinct. The cavern had still not recovered from the recent storm and water dripped down the cave walls into small, fenced off puddles. Tysi, at the front desk, was ducking under an umbrella and trying very hard not to glare at their supervisor as they were forced to work under this condition. They locked eyes with me, as if to plead for me to do something. If anyone had the Warden’s ear, it was the Market.

“You said it was urgent,” I answered, looking back at Gabriel. “Is everything okay?” It was rare that he had me meet him here. I had been back to the prisoner caves several times, of course. To deliver food. To meet him for a date. To remind him that we even had a date. But it was all on my terms. Given our first meeting.

“It is most certainly not,” he said. There were stress lines around his eyes. Something had happened that had not only caught him off guard, but had put him at a general loss. An uncertainty that felt odd for Gabriel.

Reaching out, I took his hand and squeezed it tightly. “It’ll be okay. We’ll get through this together.”

I watched as he swallowed, squeezing my hand briefly in return. Then, he pushed open the door to the long corridors that led to the cells, leading me through.



The cells were far emptier now than when I had first arrived at the market. The individuals that truly were meant to be here were not kept on the upper levels either. Too much of an uprising risk.

We came to his office quick enough but instead of going in, he stopped just outside the door. He turned to me, his face a mask of stern superiority. This is what I liked to call his Warden face. The no nonsense one that demanded everyone listen.

"I will need you to take caution," he said gently. "I know you and I know that you will want to help. But what is in there, is an enemy. You need to harden your heart. Do you understand?"

I felt a small jolt of fear. "Gabriel, whatever it is, we will deal with it together." I scooted closer, cupping his cheek. He leaned into my touch.

"I just do not want you to get hurt," he whispered. "But I find myself at an utter loss. This is not a thing I have ever dealt with before."

"I will be careful." I tried to pour as much reassurance into my words as possible. Willing him to trust me.

He was reluctant. Whatever was on the other side had scared him. I braced myself as he turned away from me, taking out his skeleton key and opening the door.

The office was thrashed. A chair was turned over and looked as if it had been chewed on while the papers on Gabriel's desk were scattered everywhere. There was a foul smell coming from within that reminded me of the sewers. Along with the broken lamp tipped to the side and the way the overhead lantern flickered, the entire place screamed of grave danger.

"Where is it?" I whispered as the two of us slipped inside. Gabriel shut the door behind us.

"Just under the desk."

I approached with caution, sorely wishing I had a weapon of some sort. I took comfort in the fact that behind me, Gabriel had drawn his sword. There was a shuffle under the desk. Something scurried further into the dark shadows. As I kneeled, I braced myself.

There before me was a creature. Wet nose gleaming in the broken light. Eyes large and brown, staring at me from beneath... furred paws and floppy ears.

I paused.

"Gabriel."

"Yes."

"This is a puppy."

"Yes."

Right. Okay. "So where is the threat?"

When I looked over my shoulder, he was not looking at me. He was staring at the dog beneath his desk. Cornered. "Right there."

"Is there something about this puppy that I need to know?" I asked. "Does it turn into a demon? Is it poisonous? Will it eat me alive?"

"I am unsure. We must take caution."

"Oh, for fucks sake, Gabriel." I crouched down even further, looking at the small little floppy eared mess. The dog was muddy and looked scared out of its mind. Which, to be fair, I had been in the same situation as it had. Being trapped in an unknown environment with Gabriel Caine did not breed comfort and understanding.

"Hi, little one," I whispered. "Come on. I'm not going to hurt you." I held out my hand, waiting for the dog to sniff it. They took a cursory scuttle forward, pressing their nose to my fingers before tentatively licking my fingers. "There you go," I smiled.

"Be careful," Gabriel snapped behind me. "You do not know what the creature is capable of."

I rolled my eyes, reaching in and pulling the dog out from beneath the desk. The poor thing was caked in mud, wet and shivering. "They are not a beast, Gabriel. It looks like they got caught up in the storm."

"You do not know that."

"Gabriel," I laughed. "Their heart is racing in fear. They're not here to take down the market."

"You do not know their intentions. This animal is clearly not paper."

No. The dog was warm and as I cuddled them closer, they tried to burrow in the crook of my neck. They were real. Which was an anomaly in the market. But I highly doubted it was here for anything nefarious.

"We need to get them food and water. And warm them up." I told him, already exiting the office. "Do you want me to take them to your place or mine? Never mind. I don't know why I asked. I'll be taking them to mine."

"You most certainly will not." The puppy whimpered as Gabriel raised his voice.

"I will. Because you will try to kill the thing the second it barks." I turned and stared up at Gabriel. "It's a dog. A very normal and scared dog." There was confusion written all across Gabriel's face at this. As if he couldn't understand what I was seeing. "Normal puppies," I continued, "are not evil. They are just babies. Pets in other realms. And this little one, is lost. So we will take care of it."

"I do not think—"

"It's a good idea. Yes. I know." I pulled the puppy up to my face however, taking their paw and waving it at Gabriel. "But look how cute they are."

Gabriel looked entirely unamused.

"Do not blame me if it kills you in your sleep."

"I won't," I grinned. "Now. Go get me some puppy food. Water. A leash. A bed."

"It does not need a bed."

I held the dog up. "*She* does need a bed. A cute one too. Not just a generic pillow. If you look at it and don't like it, that's the one I want you to buy." We had reached the front office by now, the dog licking my face as it obviously agreed I was much better than the silly man that had trapped her in his office.

"You are not keeping this dog," he demanded.

"Uh huh." I turned to Tysi. "Can you help the Warden get a list together of things to take care of a puppy?"

"A puppy?" Their eyes went bright. "Oh! How cute! And lucky. You know if you find a real animal it's considered a gift from the fates?"

"It is not."

I rolled my lips, trying to hide my amusement. "That's exactly what I thought too." Turning, I winked at Gabriel. "Muffin and I will see you in an hour."

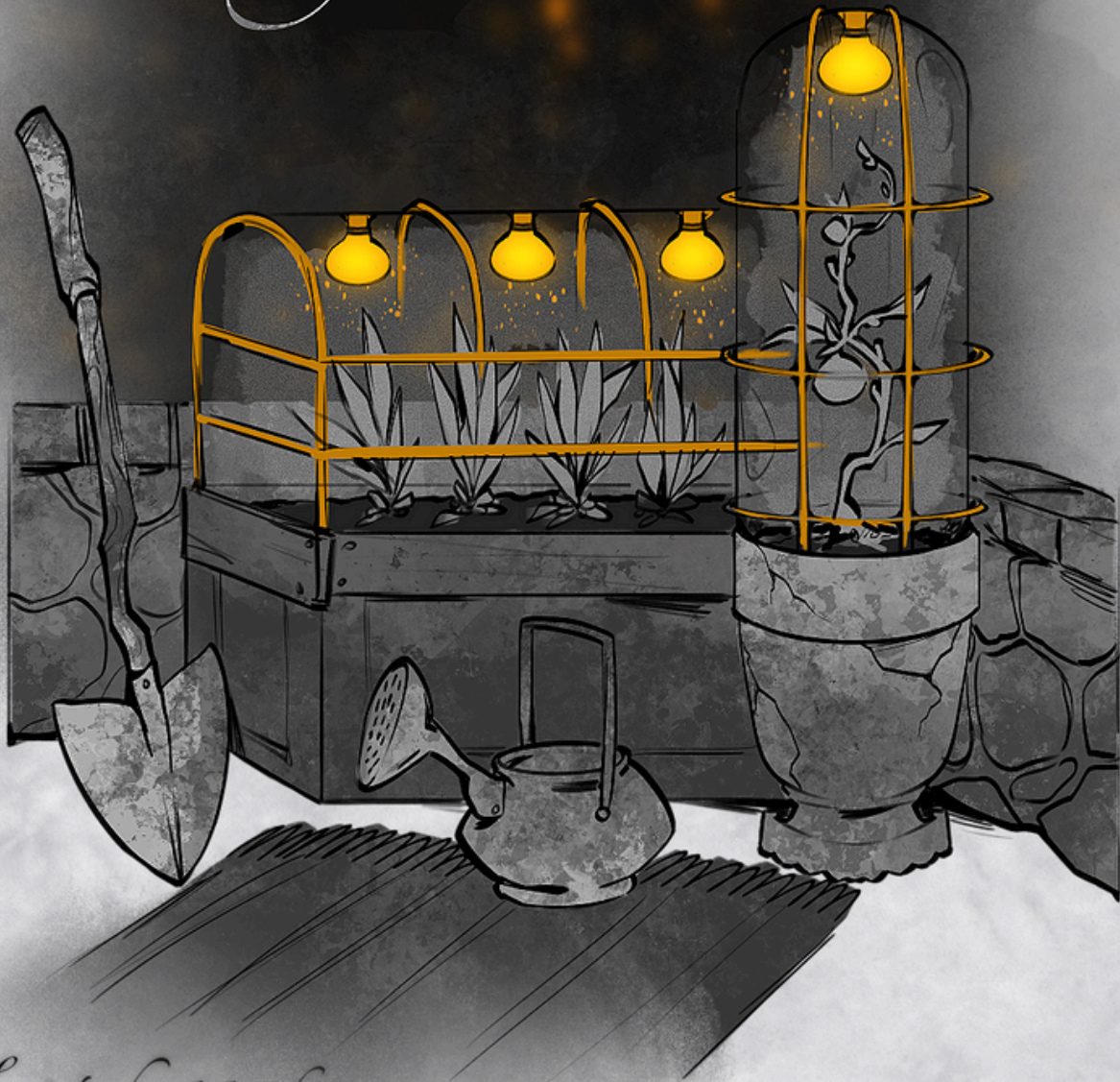
"Do not name it," he practically roared.

"Say bye to daddy, Muffin," I sang. I could hear his protest even when I was halfway across the market.

[Lore - Agriculture](#)

[Mar 11, 2024](#)

# Agriculture



## *The Night Market*

The roofs that look over the market are set in several tiers. Children claim that they were once considered the giant's steps for ancient beings present within the market long before anyone walked the streets. The roofs span across the Night Market, lanterns hung between their gaps, each building rising higher and higher with an effort to reach the stars. Stacked upon each other in haphazard tilts, the buildings have been constructed in a way to leave small rooftop ledges where the majority of the market's fresh produce are grown. Due to the lack of light within the Night Market, vegetable gardens are oftentimes built on higher rooftops to be nourished by the moon and stars. Special lanterns are



hooked up to create heat for year round growth, but the plants have adapted to the dark and the lights that they reach for above.

The individuals who own the rooftops with the vegetable gardens are among the market elite. It is assumed that they have silent control over the commerce within the realm, setting the price for produce. No one building has a monopoly on a singular type of crop, leaving the owners to try to outbid the other rooftop owners, giving the best prices to the market stalls below to become the top agricultural seller. This does not leave them to be incredibly wealthy, but it does give them immense power. The rooftop owners with the best prices, have the ability to price the other rooftop gardens out of business. After a few are knocked out, their own prices can skyrocket, as they have very little competition then.

Most plants are considered cold crops and night plants now. Having evolved into a product that needs very little maintenance. There was a blight in the early days of the market, where the lanterns went out. Without the fresh produce, half the population died. Rich and poor were not spared. Since then, issues arise every few lifetimes. Several extreme factions try to target the gardens for total destruction. Others, for market clout. Whoever owns the rooftops, owns the market.

The bean family is the most abundant crop within the market. The stocks twist and curl over market walls, climbing ladders to curl around the moon. But berries are the most sought after crop. Hardly ever able to grow in abundance and becoming incredibly hard to keep growing year after year.

It cannot be traced, but some accounts claim that the birds were all replaced with paper birds in order to protect the plants. This increased the bug population and prompted farmers to kill the bug population as well and replace with synthetic magic bugs and wild life.

[Mal - Pets](#)

[Mar 15, 2024](#)



I woke early in the morning, my head groggy from a late night where I learned how to make dumplings. Hazel had a big family dinner coming up and Malcolm, in typical Malcolm fashion, was going to outdo her. So, starting late yesterday afternoon, we started making dumplings. A task that I assumed was only going to take us a few hours. When it became late at night and we were still stuffing pockets of dough, I was starting to regret my choice of volunteering to help Malcolm. He had a crazed look in his eyes as we completed the fourth pan and I finally bowed out. Because there was no reason to make that many dumplings. None at all. I should have known I was in for it when Milo had laughed upon learning my offer to help. He of course didn't show up to help us.

Stumbling to the kitchen, I glanced around the apartment, half expecting that Malcolm would still be there, stuffing dumplings. He was nowhere to be found and I hoped that he was not running out to get more supplies.

Starting the kettle, I rubbed the sleep from my eyes. The kitchen was immaculate, because Mal would never leave it dirty, and I had a momentary feeling of guilt as I realized I had crashed and left him with it all. I would make an extra big pot of tea. Share it with him when he got home. And—

I jumped back as I opened the cabinet door.

Inside, were three orange kittens. They stared at me with crystal blue eyes, one raising their paw to bat at me. As if I was the one who disturbed them by opening the door.

"I don't think you belong in there," I told them.

The front door opened as Malcolm came in, a bag under his arm. "Ah," he paused. "You found the triplets."

"I did." The kettle began bubbling by my side. "Why are you keeping cats in your cupboard?"

"Because I plan to eat them."

I whipped around, staring at him. He had that small smile to his face. The one that said he was fucking with me.

He set the bag down on the counter, coming over to me and scooping up the three kittens, holding them in his arms. "They were outside last night. Poor little things somehow found their way into the tunnels. I couldn't just leave them out there."

"So you put them in a cabinet?"

"No, they put themselves in the cabinet and refused to come out." He placed them on the ground where one of them immediately shot out, running into the kitchen island. "I'm thinking of naming that one Milo."

I snorted a little, imagining Milo's face at having a cat named after him. "You can't seriously be thinking of keeping them."

"And why not?" he asked with a raised brow. "Got something against kittens?"

"No. Nothing against kittens but you can't just adopt three cats that show up at your door. Don't you think that's suspicious."

"Very suspicious," he said. "Especially because they aren't paper kittens. Which means, if I let them wander around out there, someone is going to find them, and then that little joke about eating them is going to look like a blessing compared with what is done to that."

"What?" I looked down at the orange furbabies. The three of them started to roll around with each other.

"Lamplight, animals, *real* animals, are not here in the market for a reason. They are such an anomaly now that people take them and force them to breed. Others keep them locked up as some sort of status symbol. Not to mention the ones who will kill them for sacrifice. Or take their souls to consume for their own."

"Consume what now?"

"It's an old practice. It used to be something hunters did to honor the dead. But it's become perverted now." He glanced down at the kittens. "So yeah. I'm probably keeping these ones. Until they decide they want to move on."

I bent down, holding my hands out for them to sniff. The little one, Milo, came up and bumped their head against my fingers, purring. "And how will you know if they want to move on?"

"Animals have a funny way of communicating. They go where they're needed."

I picked the cat up, nuzzling them to my face. "And why do you think they were needed here?"

"To stop me from making another eight pans of dumplings."

"Eight pans? Mal."

He held up a hand. "I know. I know. I may have a problem."



"You and Hazel's food wars are a bit intense. I mean, we benefit from them but still, is there something there that needs to be talked about."

He shrugged. "We were children that weren't loved by our mother, who had no father figures, or in my case, second mother figure. We were forced to grow up fast. Hazel has a boat load of trauma surrounding needing to please people and then the second something goes wrong in her life she crumbles like paper. And I may be emotionally closed off because if I showed my emotions as a young teen, it manifested into beating the shit out of people and hurting them beyond repair. So, we get a little petty when it comes to food."

I stood, holding kitten Milo close. There was no change in Malcolm's face as he spoke but I didn't think I had heard him talk that much in one breath before. Reaching out, I cupped his face, feeling the way his jaw was tight against the palm of my hand.

"I'm sorry that happened to you," I told him.

"It's done," he said. "Over. Not really a thing to dwell on any further."

"Mal," I said softly. "Dealing with the past isn't dwelling. You understand that right?" He said nothing, eyes focused on the kitten instead. As if it were his lifeline. The other two were currently running around our feet. They had certainly come where they were needed. "You used to talk to me," I whispered. "Back when I was the lights. Why can't you now?"

His shoulders dropped as he leaned forward, pressing his forehead to mine, his fingers coming out to bury within the kitten's fur. "Give me time, Lamplight. Just give me time."

In my arms, kitten Milo hissed at him, making him crack a smile.

"Alright," he said. "Let's get these little ones fed. And then we are taking the dumplings to Hazel and eating our body weight in food."

"Are we bringing the children?" I asked, as the kittens began to mew at the sound of the cat food.

"Billows would never forgive us."

"It would make Milo's night if we pissed off that cat," I pointed out.

Malcolm set the food down for the three of them, listening as they tore into the kibble. "Nah," he said. "I think these little ones are something I'm going to selfishly just keep for a bit. Something for me." He wrapped an arm around me. "And you."

Little kitten Milo fell face first into the food and rolled.

"Yeah, that's definitely a Milo," I laughed. Turning, I pressed a kiss to his shoulder. "And next time you try to get me to make this many dumplings, I'll absolutely be distracting you with more cats."

"We'll run a menagerie," he said.

"Would that be so bad?"

He placed a kiss on my temple. "With you? No."

[Milo - Pets](#)

[Mar 18, 2024](#)



The tap at my window came early in the morning. When I was still groggy from a night's sleep, only just waking and fixing something to help me start my day and enter the world. Pulling back the curtains, I jumped. Milo's face was practically pressed to the glass as he bounced up and down, trying to keep the cold from creeping into his bones. Flinging open the window, I tilted my head to the side in inquiry.

"Did I wake you?" His cheeks were pink from the cold, freckles popping out against the bridge of his nose.

"I just got up. Is everything okay?"

"I need a favor."

Milo didn't really ask for favors. In fact, Milo never really asked for anything. Stepping aside, I motioned for him to climb into the room. I still didn't have a front door. Mainly because it delighted me to watch Milo try and clamber his way through the window.

When he was inside, he turned and closed the window himself, drawing the curtains to keep in the heat. He stomped his feet on the ground, getting some feeling back in them. I couldn't help but notice the thick coat he wore, the zipper halfway up his chest.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"Nothings wrong," he assured me. "At least I don't think. I do have to go away for a bit. Maybe about a week. There's someone in the Outlands I need to go talk to."

I frowned. "Should I be concerned?"

"I'll let you know. Right now it's just someone who has supposed information about lanterns and constructs and Gatekeeper stuff. It's kind of more a reconnaissance thing. Just to try and get us better armed with what you are. Or what I am."

I didn't like these little missions he had been going on but I did understand the need for them. At the very least, it gave us something to go off of. "Alright," I said slowly.

"But here's the thing." He looked nervous. His eyes were shifting around the room and his movements were jerky. "I need to ask a favor of you while I'm gone and I know it might be a bit of an inconvenience but I really don't know what else to do."

"Milo," I started. "You can ask me anything. If there's some way I can help, you know I'm going to do it."

He nodded. "Right. Okay. Well." He reached into his jacket, pulling something out. At first, I thought it was a discarded piece of old fur. A rag of some sort that he'd maybe used for cleaning. But then I saw the tail. "Can you watch Sherman?"

It was the rat. The damn rat that had nibbled at my feet when I had spent the night, was there. In his arms. Looking at me with its beady little black eyes.

"I would ask Malcolm but he would say no," Milo started quickly. "And Hazel has Billows so there's no way I would trust Sherman there. And Feebus would actually kill him. I'm not even joking. He would take one look at this little guy and throw him against the wall. But I can't just leave him for a week."

"You said that you didn't have a pet rat," I accused him. "When I asked you about it you assured me that he did not belong to you."

"He doesn't," Milo protested. "I have more respect for him than that. You can't just own an animal. It's immoral."

"That's what you choose to have a moral high ground about?"

"Someone has to! Sherman can't speak and defend himself!" Sherman squeaked at that, protesting the sentiment.

"I am not having that rat run around my apartment for a week!"

Milo cuddled the little creature closer, covering its entire head with the palm of his hand. "Calling it a rat is incredibly offensive."

"No it's not. Because that's what it is. A rat. And you promised me that you were going to rid your place of rats."

"I did. But Sherman and I have bonded. This little guy has got me through a lot."

"Milo."

He sighed, taking Sherman and placing him within a small box that I kept by the window to collect wet scarves and mittens. Sherman snuggled down, declaring that his new home. When Milo approached me, it was with one of his patented Milo looks. The one where he gave me the puppy dog eyes. Pouted out his lip just slightly. And swayed towards me in that way that said his entire focus was on me alone.

"Darlin'," he murmured. "Please?" He wrapped his arms around me, pulling his coat to envelope part of me as well. Gently he swayed the two of us back and forth. "Please please please? I have no one else to watch him. Who's going to give him his morning cheese?"

"I knew you were feeding him." I buried my head against his chest. I knew I was going to do it. Because it was Milo and he was cute when he asked for things. That, and the man didn't really have much in his life he found important. For some reason, this rat had fallen into the very narrow category. "Fine," I muttered. "But after a week, if you are not home, I'll throw the thing into the streets." I wouldn't. But I needed to make some sort of threat. Just so Milo didn't get distracted and spent another week out there on his little self proclaimed journeys.

"Have I told you lately what a caring and perfect cosmic being you are?" he asked. "How I admire you. How I look at you and go 'gosh, I'm glad I'm not the Night Market because that's way too much pressure but I'm super glad I get to see them naked'?"

I smacked his arm, half heartedly shoving him away. His laughter filled the room, trickling down my spine as he pulled me closer. We tussled for a minute before we both fell to the bed. Milo rolled, bracing himself above me.

"Seriously," he whispered. "Thank you. He's getting too old to come with me."

"Of course you've taken the rat with you on your trips."

"He's a great business partner." Leaning down, he brushed his lips against mine. "Can I ask another favor?"

"You're pushing it," I warned.

"You think you could give me a send off?" He dropped his hips down, rolling them against mine.

"Watch your rat and sleep with you?" I asked. "You get one or the other."

“Sorry, Sherman,” he called over his shoulder as he grabbed me by the hips and rolled me. “You are on your own.”

I laughed as he flipped us so I sat astride him. His hair was messy and his eyes amber bright. And for the first time in a long while, Milo looked happy. I couldn’t resist it, of course. At the very least, I needed to send him out with something to come back to. Bending forward, I took his lips against my own, watching as his eyes fluttered shut.

“So sensitive,” I murmured to him.

“Only for you,” he said seriously. “All I am is for you.”

I cupped his cheek, running a thumb along the path of his freckles. “Stay for the morning,” I demanded.

Wrapping me up tight, he nodded. And in the small basket near the door, Sherman squeaked before settling down for a long nap.

[Night Market After Dark](#)

[Mar 19, 2024](#)



A/N: All stories are 18+

We will be following the NSFW ABC's. Starting with the letter A. After Sex

**Milo-** Chest heaving, Milo laid there, staring up at the ceiling while sweat dried on his skin. He was still half hard, his cock sticky against his thigh, while a nice bruise was forming from where he had been

sucked to an inch of his life. I was particularly proud of the way he moaned when he came. It was deep and guttural and he looked surprised that such a noise could even come out of his mouth.

Rolling over, he stared at me.

“Am I being punished?” he grinned. Leaning forward, he placed his hand between my legs, fingers seeking out every sensitive inch of me. “Not that I mind.”

“You’re still speaking. I obviously didn’t do a good enough job.” I shifted away as a shiver rolled through me. Too much, far too soon. His eyes were still dark and his skin splotchy from exertion. “Need more?” I asked. I cut off anything he was about to say when I grabbed his cock and squeezed. A gasp shot through the room as he laid back, eyes fluttering shut. “Oh,” I laughed. “Good boy, Milo.”

He huffed out a laugh as his hips arched up. But he knew enough not to speak again.

**Belladonna:** “Really, dear heart. I think you could go one more time.”

The ropes were tight. They had yet to break my skin but I could feel my fingers tingling. Thick straps of leather were wrapped across my chest and thighs in a crisscross fashion, leaving me spread open and bare to her attention.

“Bella, I don’t—” The sound of the flogger cracked through the air, whipping across my already red ass.

“Mistress,” she corrected. “I shouldn’t have to tell you again.”

“Mistress,” I said with a swallow, feeling my body ache for her. “I don’t know if I can cum again.”

“No?” she asked, circling me. “Not even if it meant having me?”

I felt my hips pulse upwards. “Have you?”

Leaning forward, she licked a line up the side of my face, sinking her fangs into the soft skin of my shoulder. She gave three pulls before rearing back, licking her lips. “Cum for me again. Be good for me. And then, I’ll let you do anything you want to my body.”

I sucked in a breath. “How can I say no to that?”

She smirked. “You can’t.”

**Gabriel:** “Was that satisfactory?”

I was almost positive I wasn’t going to be able to move. Gabriel was kneeling by me, looking concerned. Never mind that he had just had my legs over his shoulders and had been fucking me with wild abandon. I told him tonight to treat me with the same degree of attention he did for his patrols. And now I wasn’t going to be able to walk for a week.

"It was satisfactory," I panted, feeling my heart calm down.

"I believe I could do several things better next time," he said. "Perhaps we should go again tomorrow morning and take notes."

"Gabriel," I laughed. "You will not be taking notes on our sex life."

"Are you sure?" He scooted closer, running a hand up and down my belly, swirling his fingers within our combined release. "Because I think my note taking was rather beneficial this time around."

"You took notes?" I gasped as his hands began to knead my flesh.

"Yes. For instance," he leaned forward, draping his body across my own. "I learned last time that you enjoy it when I do this." He rubbed his hardening cock against the seam of my thigh, leaving a sticky trail across my skin. "Do you like when I mark you?"

"I do," I said, shaking slightly.

He smiled against my skin. "I will add that in my notes."

**Hazel:** I watched as Hazel slipped from bed, taking one of her cotton robes and slipping it over her shoulders. I caught her hand before she stepped away, tugging at her lightly. Her hair was wild around her shoulders, her cheeks still flushed, while the smell of sex permeated the air.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Getting snacks," she said with a smile. "You made me work up an appetite."

"Did I?" I tugged at the sash of her robe, pulling it open. Her breasts were laid bare to me. Her nipples puffy and still coated in spit. "You sure I can't convince you for another round?"

She raised a brow at me. "Are you hungry?"

My stomach was growling. "I mean, yes but—"

A blush spread across her cheeks, along with a wicked grin. "Then let me give you something to eat." I felt a heat pool in my belly as she crawled back onto the bed, sliding up my chest. Thick thighs parted as she kneeled over my waiting lips. "Eat up, honey," she said, lowering herself onto my face.

### [Chapter Three](#)

[Mar 25, 2024](#)



The time is finally here!

Alright, I will admit it now. This chapter almost killed me. I am happy with how it turned out but damn was my personal life a lot of stop and go for writing. So, I hope you all enjoy it. There are a lot of different paths and choices. And as always, thank you so much for your support.

Link: <https://the-night-market.itch.io/the-night-market-book-2>

Code: Thr33Ch@p

[Belladonna - Pets](#)

[Mar 29, 2024](#)

Belladonna

“What. Is that.” It did not come out as a question so much as a horrified squeak from me as I stared at what Belladonna was currently curled up against. It wasn’t so much that she even had an animal, though that was odd to see all on its own, but more so, the situation in which she now had it. I had come to Bella tonight, with the understanding that she was waiting for me. And when I opened the door, she was naked in bed, surrounded by plum silk sheets. I was ready to join her, already beginning to strip myself of my clothes.

Yet, there, nestled on the sheets next to her, was a teal, fuzzy little creature, who was purring loudly.

“I do not actually know,” Belladonna said with a bit of curiosity. “Even more strange is how it got in here.”

I took another step forward. “It was just here?”

“Beneath the sheets. This adorable little bundle got fresh with me by accident.”

I raised a brow to her. She was calling it adorable. A term of endearment that not even I was often equated to. “Why are you not more suspicious?”

“Oh, I’m incredibly suspicious.” Flinging the sheets aside, she rose from bed, walking over to get her robe. The one that was lace and completely see through. Somehow it made her sexier. “I am almost certain someone wants me to be lulled into a false sense of security. But it’s not that creature’s fault. I mean, just look at it.”

Its talons were kneading across the bed, tearing up the silks.

"It's ruining your bed."

"It is," she said with a small smile.

It was the wistfulness in her voice that made me do a double take. "Wait, are you a secret pet person?"

At that, her mouth twisted into a frown. "Of course not. Animals are disgusting. They smell. They are dumb. They have accidents everywhere. There is literally no use for them other than for food and since I don't eat meat, they have even less of a use for me."

"Yet that one is sitting on your bed, making a home there."

"Well, dear heart," she sighed. "It's not like I can just toss it out into the market. That is not a paper animal. Do you know the amount of chaos it might cause? I already had a duchess assassinated this morning. I do not need to add more to the imbalance."

"You what?"

She waved me away with a roll of her eyes. "Don't you worry. I will be taking care of it."

"No. The Duchess, Belladonna. Why did you have someone assassinated?"

"Oh. Because they were refusing a political trade. So I got rid of them and hung their body outside the home of their predecessor. I think they will be much more amenable to making deals."

She walked across the room towards her vanity, going through her night time routine. Brushing out her long locks, taking off her makeup. Meanwhile the creature made a little trilling sound as it rose from the bed, giving me a better look at it. It had wide set eyes that made up half of its head along with teal fur that led down into a pointed tail that flared out into a spade. Its legs were short and its body wasn't particularly long, but it was round in shape. Then again, that could have just been the fur.

The animal stretched as it hopped down from the bed and sauntered over to Bella. It curled around her bare legs, bumping against her like a cat would. That is, until it decided it was not gaining its desired results. So it opened its mouth wide, producing large, python like fangs, and sunk its teeth into Bella's ankle

Belladonna didn't hiss in pain. She didn't even flinch. Instead, she looked down at the creature, sucking her blood, and sighed loudly. "There is not much you'll be getting there. I was supposed to feed tonight and you've interrupted it."

"Okay, no. It cannot feed on you." I needed to draw a line somewhere. Walking over, I picked the creature up by the scruff, tapping it on the nose until its fangs released her. A trickle of blood from twin holes raced delicately down Belladonna's ankle.

"That's a bit hypocritical," she said.

"You need blood to survive," I pointed out.

"Little one might as well." Setting down her brush, she turned to look at the two of us. "Oh, you've angered it," she laughed. Sure enough, the creature looked murderous. And that murderous rage was directed towards me. "Darling, we will still have fun tonight. We will just need to wait until the baby goes to bed."

"You're contemplating keeping it, aren't you."

"Absolutely. To have the very thing sent here to kill me as my favorite little companion? Revenge is far too sweet."

"This thing could still kill you."

She laughed loudly then, standing up to wrap her arms around me. "It is very cute when you are concerned. You should do that more often." Her own fangs grazed against me, her lips brushing against the pulse of my neck. I began to melt into her arms, feeling that overwhelming smell of Bella washing over me. Leading me to bliss.

And then the creature's fangs sunk into my ankle. And it *hurt*.

"Ow! What the fuck?"

Bella cooed as she bent down, scooping it into her arms. "Oh, it's jealous," she said. The moment she held the being close, it cuddled up to her, tossing me a dispassionate look. "Did dear heart make you mad, my little kumquat?"

"Bella, you have got to be kidding me." The creature was giving me the look that I'm sure every one of her clients gave when they saw her out with someone else. That sense of possession they all had, thinking that somehow I was the reason for the threat keeping them apart.

"I'm going to have to name her," she said. "Maybe Poison. Or Hemlock."

"You can't keep her."

"And yet I'm going to." Turning, she walked back over to the bed, offering the creature her finger to nibble on. "Now, dear heart, come here. I thought you and I were spending time with each other."

"Hemlock will eat me in the middle of the night."

"Oh, no she won't. She might try but we'll just train her. Honestly, I love this for us. It's like our first purchase together as a couple. Instead of a coffee table we got a furry little friend."

“Bella–”

Her eyes snapped to mine. “On the bed. Now.”

I was compelled to follow. As I always was. I nearly tripped over my own two feet to get to her.

“Now,” she said. “You two need to play nice.” She pushed me down to lay on the bed, putting Hemlock on top of me. “And neither of you are going to move until you do.”

I nearly panicked. “Where are you going?” I asked.

She leaned against the headboard. “I will be right here. Getting myself off.” Her hands slowly trailed down her belly before going between her thighs. “And if you are both polite, I’ll let you participate, my heart. But if either of you step out of line, it’s out into the garden with you both.”

She groaned loudly as her fingers disappeared and I had to catch my own moan behind my teeth.

And as heavy breathing filled the room along with small, heated moans, I looked back at Hemlock. She had fallen asleep, mouth partially open. Her fur turning purple just beneath her eyes.

I sighed, closing my eyes. “Fuck my life.” Belladonna gave a throaty laugh of agreement.

[Hazel - pets](#)

[Mar 31, 2024](#)

The morning was unseasonably cold. There was something about this year that had produced far more chilly mornings than I had been used to. Getting out of bed had been a chore that neither Hazel nor I were a fan of. Especially when most mornings, we woke up together, curled against each other's naked bodies. It was hit or miss which one of us would push the other out of bed first. Some mornings she would be far more responsible and toss the quilts from us to force us downstairs. Other mornings, I would cool my feet outside of the blankets and then press them to her thighs until she shrieked and ran from the bed.

This morning, however, she was not even in bed. I woke to the chill, the wisps all huddled together on the ceiling for warmth. But no Hazel.

Wrapping a blanket around myself, I rose from bed, shuffling out of the bedroom. There was a strange sound coming from the fireplace. A soft snuffling and scratching motion combined. Walking a little further

in, I peered over the sofa. A small black and green chicken was pacing inside the hearth where the wood should have been. It looked disgruntled, a few of its feathers falling from its tail.

"Hazel?" I asked. Because it wouldn't be out of the realm of possibility for her to have accidentally transformed into a chicken, would it? I hurried towards the fireplace, kneeling down in front of it. The chicken stopped, looking at me with familiar hazel eyes. The same eyes that looked back at me each morning and each evening before going to bed.

"We'll fix this," I assured her, trying to not let panic enter my voice. "I will not let you stay a chicken. I promise that—"

"Um, hi?"

I turned around so hard that I fell on my butt. Hazel was standing in the doorway, her arms full of wood. "I thought you were a chicken."

"I can see that," she grinned a little. "I can see the likeness. Also, that's not a chicken." Walking over to the wall, she placed the wood down in the crate.

"What is it?"

"A dragon who wants to be a chicken. Or maybe a phoenix."

The chicken not chicken clucked, pecking at the stone floor. "Okay, what is it doing in the fireplace?" Given what Hazel had occasionally done with animals, it was cause for concern.

"It was something my mother used to do," she said. "When we were cold during the winters, she'd bring in a dragon for the fireplace. We had a family pet named Kipper. She would sit inside the hearth and breathe on the logs. Her tails would fan the flames and every time it got even the least bit cold, she would breathe more heat into the room."

Hazel pulled a small pouch from her apron, walking over to the hearth and spreading a little grain on the floor.

"Malcolm and I had a game when we were young. We used to see how far Kipper could shoot fireballs without lighting the house on fire. After about two rounds, though, I would get scared and hide behind Mal and close my eyes really tight. Then Mal would narrate everything Kipper was doing, including flying around the living room and dropping fireballs onto the carpet."

I looked around for scorch marks.

"It actually sounds like a nice memory from childhood." Hazel claimed she had many but from what I had heard, I wouldn't consider most of them on the side of joyful.

"It is," she smiled.

“Do I dare ask what happened to Kipper?”

Her face looked a little crestfallen at that. “Probably not.”

Standing, she brushed the ash from her skirts beginning to stack the wood. The chicken began pecking at her, getting irritated at her little environment getting disturbed.

“So why the chicken?”

“Dragon chick,” Hazel said. “It’s going to do the same thing as Kipper.”

“How?”

“You’ll see,” she sang.

When she had the wood stacked, she sat back. The chicken looked completely happy just pecking away at their food now. But little by little, I noticed it. The tips of the chicken's wings began to glow. They started at a cold black and slowly began to edge out into orange and then red. I could feel a strange amount of heat emanating from the fireplace then and as I looked down at the food that the chicken was eating, I realized that with each peck, it gave a small spark. Popping as it went down the chickens throat.

“Uh, Hazel...?”

The chicken suddenly exploded. Bursting into a lick of flames and igniting the wood. I stumbled back in horror as the last “bacaw” sounded through the room. With wide eyes I looked at Hazel who was simply humming to herself and tossing more wood onto the fire.

When things calmed down, I was left with nothing but a pile of wood, food, and ember colored feathers.

“Hazel, you cannot just kill an animal like that!”

Hazel looked confused for a moment before she began laughing. “Oh, no. No no no. That’s not... just watching.”

I turned back to the flames hesitantly, seeing nothing but logs and orange heat. But then, something began to shift. Deep within the embers, I saw dripping magma begin to form. Then a peep sounded as a small black chicken jumped from the fire. Hazel scooped it up in her hands and cuddled it close.

“Kipper didn't do this but that’s because mother had her in a spell and was enslaving her. I thought this little chickee would be happy to be reborn, though. When they’re stuck in their form for too long, they get achy.”

“So it’s okay?”

"Of course." She handed the chicken to me. It was small and soft and peeped in my palms. "See?" she whispered, curling closer. "The chicken gives its life to keep us warm and in return, we take the baby it's reborn into and give it love."

"And if we don't do this?"

"They die," she said. "It's within their nature for a rebirth. We just were helping it along."

The chicken nuzzled close. "Can we keep it?"

"Yes," Hazel grinned. "I want an entire coup of them in fact. We'll call it the dragons den."

As the chicken cuddled close, I felt the heat from the strong flames of the fire. The air smelled a bit like fried chicken but it wasn't entirely a bad smell. Leaning back against the couch, I wrapped an arm around Hazel and let the chicken begin hopping around.

"I'm glad I'm here for this," I told her honestly. To be a part of her eccentricities.

Hazel looked up at me with love in her eyes. "I'm glad you're here too."

[NM After Dark - Bottom or Top](#)

[Apr 5, 2024](#)

**Milo** - "Bottom or top." We were sitting at a bar, taking shots, when the question came out. I didn't know if I should feel embarrassed that I asked it, or simply just blame it on the drinks.

Milo, however, snorted, chasing his shot with a beer. "You know the answer to that."

"No. I know how you are with me. Or were with me. But, we have realized now that it was all a ruse."

He pointed a lit cigarette at me. "Not a ruse."

"Whatever. Bottom or top. What's your actual preference now that we are getting to know each other again."

"Switch," he said with a shrug.

"So which situation gets you in the mood for what?"



I shouldn't have asked. We were in a public place. And Milo took far too much delight in situations such as this. Scooting his chair closer to mine, he got near enough for me to feel his breath hot on my neck.

"See, it can go two ways for me. Sometimes, I like lying there, being split open. Moaning into the sheets as I'm unraveled inch by fucking inch. Cum dripping from my cock." He grinned, running his nose along the line of my throat, licking the salt from my skin. "Other times, I just want to sink into something nice and tight. Feel those walls clench around me while I lose myself. Fuck someone so hard and so good that they can't remember their name."

I swallowed. "That's all very specific," I told him.

He grinned against my skin. "Want a demonstration, darlin'?"

**Belladonna** - "Bottom or top." Belladonna was lounging in the hot spring, her head tipped back on one of the heated rocks. I was kneeling next to her, my hand making small patterns in the water.

"Are we playing a game, dear heart?"

"I'm curious how you are," I told her. "You follow my preferences for the most part. What are yours?"

"Neither," she said with a shrug.

"What do you mean?"

I heard the water shift around me as she turned a little. "Are you really so naive that you think of things in such black and white fashion? When you have a true lover, there is no bottom or top. There is only falling into each other." She scooted closer, placing one hand between my legs as she guided one of mine between hers. She arched her back as she pushed two of my fingers inside of herself, slowly beginning to rock against my palm. "Do you consider this bottoming for me?" she asked. "When I'm in control but clearly submissive. Or is this topping?"

I couldn't possibly be expected to answer with what her own fingers were doing. Or the way her walls clenched around me.

Bella grinned, coming to straddle my lap, the hardened points of her nipples dragging against my bare skin. "Really, my heart. We shouldn't think in labels. Now, sit back and enjoy me, alright?"

**Gabriel** - "Bottom or top." Mainly, I was asking because it was delightful to watch Gabriel squirm. I whispered it to him in the middle of a briefing. It was being given by one of his lead officers. We were leaning against the wall in the back.

"Bottom or top for what?" he asked quietly.

"When fucking, bottom or top?"

He shot me a glare, clearly letting me know that now was not the time to indulge in such things. He was working after all. That, and Gabriel was a bit of a prude when it came to sex.

"Answer the question," I said with a slight grin, scooting closer to him. I wondered if I could reach around and rub my hand against his front without anyone noticing.

"Absolutely not."

I mean, if he wasn't going to play along, it seemed like the thing to do. Pushing away from the wall, I walked past him to go to his other side, squeezing him through the cotton of his trousers as I went. He caught my wrist, yanking me away from him.

"Answer the question," I repeated with a grin.

He leaned down so his eyes were level with me. "I will display myself to you however you wish," he said earnestly. "It makes no difference to me. But if you attempt something like this again, I will withhold sex from you."

I raised my brow. "You would not."

Leaning forward, he brushed his lips quickly against mine before pushing me away. "Just try me." He then walked forward towards the front of the room like the dutiful little soldier he was.

I grinned. Tonight was going to be fun.

**Hazel** - "Bottom or top." Hazel was covered in flour, humming as she danced around the kitchen making muffins.

"Bottom," she called, shaking her behind a bit. "I've got too nice of an ass for it to be doing all the work of a top."

I laughed at her, coming up behind her to wrap my arms around her waist. She snuggled back against me, her hips rubbing against me in deep circles. "But I like watching these when you top," I told her, bringing my hands up to cup each of her breasts. I felt her arch in my hands as I ran a thumb across the hardened points of her breasts.

"Fine," she said quickly. "Top. But only when you guide me."

"Hands are busy," I murmured. She gasped loudly as I pinched and rolled each nipple, getting a thigh between her own. She began grinding herself against my leg, the wet heat of her core drenching me. "No panties today?" I asked.

"Never while baking. It gets too hot."

"Good." She squealed as I lifted her onto the counter and pushed her skirts up. The muffins ended up burning while I feasted between her thighs.

## [Post Chapter Three - Milo/Mal](#)

[Apr 8, 2024](#)

**A/N:** This will be post the secret scene in Chapter Three. If you have not gotten it on a romanced Milo route, I would go find it first.

The streets opened up into wide swaths of broken pavement as both Milo and Mal burst from the tavern. It was a little out of the way spot that was located inside a storm drain and that ran in an overgrown grass river out into the streets. Crumbling walls and flickering candles made a makeshift path back to the the functioning districts.

“Artisan Alley, yeah?” Milo was pushing his sweaty hair from his face, trying to sober up. The taste of whisky was still heavy on his lips. “Why they decided to live there is beyond me.”

“Better than an abandoned distillery,” Malcolm was saying. The music faded from the bar behind them. There was an eeriness to the market that lived between the pockets of life littered through the realm. It was unnatural. The market was dying in slow and gasping breaths but no one wanted to do anything about it. “You actually going to tell Lamplight what you did?” Malcolm asked as they turned a corner. The grimoire. Lucinda. All of the ins and outs of a plan that had been formed with lies told for generations.

Milo side eyed him. “No, Mal. I’m just gonna go there and stare at them for a bit. Drool on myself and then ask them to forgive me for using them for some nefarious plot. Of course I’m going to tell them what’s going on.”

“Never know with you.” They were plunged into darkness, the paper moon from above floating downwards in flaky little peels. It littered the ground like snow.

“You know, I got a bone to pick with you,” Milo started, clearly still feeling the effects of alcohol. “I get what I did. I really do. But you need to back off.”

“Back off?” Malcolm’s brows rose as they both fell in line next to each other.

“We were together before you decided to rise from the dead.” Milo stumbled over his own feet, grasping onto Malcolm’s arm for a moment to steady himself. “We had something going on.”

Malcolm snorted. “Afraid I’m moving in on your territory, Button?”

“You’re not? With all the ‘Lamplights’ you toss their way? Please. You reek of desperation. Go take a trip to the Pleasure District like everyone else, Mal, and leave them alone.”

There was a small smile twitching at the corner of Malcolm's lips. It infuriated Milo the more it seemed to grow. Like this was all a game for Malcolm. "It's funny that you think you get a say in any of that," Malcolm said, clearly amused.

"We were together for fucking months!"

"And you thought they were going to be a rock," Malcolm replied bluntly.. "So, you'll excuse me if I don't take your 'relationship' seriously."

The green lights that bordered Artisan Alley were in the distance. A strange and sickly beacon at the edge of the market.

"Admit it," Milo sneered. "Admit that you like *Lamplight*." He spat the nickname mockingly.

Turning, Malcolm began to walk backwards, nonchalantly meeting Milo's eyes. "I do," he said without hesitation.

It wasn't as if it came as a surprise. Milo knew Malcolm well enough to know when he was developing a crush. He had hoped that Mal might try to hide it though. At least a little bit. "You trying to take them from me?"

Malcolm's laughter rang out loud and clear through the empty streets. "What's there to take, Milo? You ignored them for months. You sat and wept by their grave and then ghosted them the second they came back. A bad habit you are picking up, by the way. Then, you saw them again and what? Cowered in a corner? Turned your sad puppy eyes on them? Collapsed into yourself because you did something wrong, never once trying to adequately apologize or have a raw conversation with them."

"Fuck you," Milo growled, fists clenching at his side.

"Ah, the unintelligent insult for the masses. The one said when you have nothing concrete to say." Malcolm turned, shaking his head. "You love them? Start acting like it."

Malcolm was getting ahead of him now. His movements confident and quick. Milo had always hated that about him. The way he just oozed this sort of vivacity during an argument. Like he somehow had the superior high ground. "And what about you?" he called out. "You going to start acting like it too? This a competition?"

"I'm already acting like it, Milo. Have for a long time. Catch up."

Artisan Alley opened up before them. Malcolm pretended not to notice the way Milo was cursing the rest of the way there and if he heard any of Milo's petty jabs, he ignored them. It served to work Milo up even further and by the time they had reached the apartment at the end of the alley, Milo was gearing up for a full on rage.

Except, the window was open. The apartment was dark. And the empty window box looked as if it had been yanked out.

Malcolm immediately climbed in, calling for Lamplight but there was no answer. The apartment remained empty and cold with little sign of life.

When he crawled back out, Milo was already smoking. "Where are they?" he mumbled around the cigarette.

"I don't know."

Milo nodded, his foot tapping incessantly as he sucked a long pull of smoke into his lungs. "We need to find them." It was said with the kind of urgency that said Milo was about two bad decisions away from doing something really stupid.

"Milo, calm down, alright? I'm sure they just went out for a walk."

"Right," he said with a nod. "Of course. A walk."

Malcolm spotted it though. The way Milo's fingers twitched. The way he was already reaching for another cigarette. Pulling the lit one from his mouth, Malcolm stamped it out beneath his feet.

"Hey," Malcolm said, grabbing Milo's wrist before he could grab another one. "We'll find them, okay? Lamplight isn't lost. Just exploring."

"Exploring." Milo swallowed thickly. "As an incorporeal being, in a market that they can't control, with a witch out there, potentially looking to end their existence. *Fuck*. Yeah. We should just convince ourselves that this is fine. Wonder if that grave is opening back up again? Maybe we should skip on down there and pay it a little visit."

When Milo went to shove by him, Malcolm pushed him back against the wall. There was little force behind it but Milo had always taken direction well. Milo stood there, as if pinned, his breathing coming in uncontrollable gasps.

Malcolm planted a hand on either side of his head, trapping him if he decided to run. "Why did you fall in love with them?" he asked.

"What the hell? Why are you asking me this?"

"Because you are panicking. And I'm bringing you back to the things that matter. Why did you fall in love with Lamplight?"

Milo's eyes fluttered. Two high points of heat pricked his cheeks as he scratched idly at his jeans. "I— I don't know."

"You do. Say it. Say it so they can hear you."

"They can't fucking hear me, Mal! The lights are dead!"

Malcolm pressed himself closer, forcing the issue. "Say it," he demanded.

Milo closed his eyes. Slowly, he conjured the Night Market into his mind. The rock that he was supposed to hold in his hand and instead, the person that had unknowingly brought Milo back to a life that he was learning to love once again.

"They were the first person I didn't feel empty around." Milo let out one long line of breath, uttering the confession as if it pained him to admit. "It was a game in the beginning. I didn't believe any of it was true. And then one day, I realized that when I laughed, it wasn't hollow. When I danced, it was because I wanted to. I didn't want to forget who I was with them. Instead, I wanted to find out who I could be. I wanted to sing, and play in the rain. To lay down and enjoy their body." He swallowed. "I wanted to make them happy and was excited to do it."

Something unraveled within Milo. A strange sort of tension that had been winding up as time went on. When he cracked open his eyes he expected to see mockery on Malcolm's face. Instead, there was only a soft expression of understanding.

"Your turn," Milo croaked out.

Malcolm smiled. "They listened without judgment. I could say whatever I wanted without feeling like I was wrong. Like I was lesser. I felt seen and heard and that was before they were even walking these streets."

Milo banged his head back against the wall, his knees knocking against Malcolm's. "Great, we've both been sappy about the same person. Now what?"

Behind them, someone cleared their throat. It was Herald.

"I'm assuming you two haven't heard?"

Both Milo and Malcolm turned to him. "Heard what?" Malcolm asked. He reached out and took Milo's hand, bracing himself for the worst.

[To all my members, free and paid](#)

[Apr 10, 2024](#)

Hello everybody!

I've decided with Patreon's new free feature that it seemed kind of silly not to post all the lore for everyone. I already post all the art on Tumblr for everyone to see. I have gone through and unlocked all

lore posts for everyone and also added them to a collection so they are easily found. They are all also tagged under "lore".

Enjoy!

Zinnia

## [Chapter Four](#)

[Apr 12, 2024](#)

Guess what?

Chapter Four is done. :)

Logically, this one is way shorter. However, I think this one packs a punch and I am so excited about it that I cannot wait until next month to post.

So, head on over to the Patreon link, put in the password below, and enjoy. :)

<https://the-night-market.itch.io/the-night-market-book-2>

Password: Luc1ndaCh@p4

## [Hazel Post Chapter Three](#)

[Apr 15, 2024](#)

The front gate was stuck most of the time. Hazel couldn't ever remember it being like that before but in recent months, it required more and more effort to push through. The winding branches locked together in a steely embrace, keeping Hazel out. Even after a simple walk down the alleyway, collecting water from the fountain, she would have to cut her way back through upon return. Hazel hated it. It felt as if her house was turning against her. She would have to take more time to give it some extra attention. Life had just been uncharacteristically busy as of late.

"Mother?" she called out, pushing and pulling on the gate. "The gate is closed again."



There was a blast and a slight hiss as the wood around the gated bars recoiled. Hazel saw the burning green embers of her family's magic singe the very ends of the sticks. She gasped as she stumbled back, one hand to her mouth, the other reaching out as if to touch the gate.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, hearing their dying wails. "I wish you would stop this. You know how she is."

The branches didn't answer. And really, why would they.

Coming through the gate, Hazel went in search of her mother. The day was cooling but Lucinda kept the property burning bright. Small pyres had been erected across the garden and back field. Lucinda said the smoke would keep the evil spirits away. From the time Hazel was little, her mother had warned her and Malcolm of the fox spirits that lived at the edge of the woods. It was said they would come for them one day, stealing their innocence. Hazel had done her due diligence to keep them away but when Lucinda had returned, she said that the woods were littered with their burrows.

The screams that pierced the air that night still echoed in Hazel's ears.

"Mother?" she called out again. "Are you out here?"

"In the garden." Lucinda's voice never raised. She always spoke as if she were right by Hazel's ear.

Rounding the corner, she spotted her mother in the basil patch where she was planting hemlock between the established plots. Their leaves were far larger than the herbs and would overtake everything within the moon cycle.

"Did our other hemlock patch die?" Hazel asked curiously.

"Of course not. You simply don't have enough of it. That's all." Lucinda rose from where she was kneeling, brushing the dirt from her skirts. "Where were you? You rushed from here in quite the tizzy."

A line formed between Hazel's brow. The star field was still swirling in her mind as she watched an individual that she didn't know walk into the darkness. She couldn't describe it. The overwhelming feeling that she was needed. She just had to get to them. Set her eyes upon theirs and make sure they were okay.

"I went to see a friend," she explained. It felt odd on her lips. Friend wasn't quite the word for who she had sought out.

"A friend?" Lucinda's arched brows shot up elegantly. "I thought you said you've been alone through these years, my dear. I do hope that you are not associating with that Next child again."

"No, mother," Hazel said quickly. "Of course not." Milo Next had been her abuser for years. She just hadn't seen it until now. "This was... well, I don't really know who they are. I just know that I'm supposed to be near them. Like our lives are entwined."

The two of them went towards the back of the garden where a pile of bones still burned. Without hesitation, Hazel knelt down in front of it, taking a small knife and cutting her palm. Her blood sizzled over the various skulls.

“Your lives are entwined and yet you have never met them?” Lucinda asked.

“I understand how it sounds but I had a vision.”

Lucina placed a few small femurs from her pocket onto the pyre. “You do not have visions, my daughter. It is not within your scope of powers.”

Hazel deflated a little. “I— I know that. But, I don’t know how else to describe it. They were in trouble. Or what I perceived as trouble. I just knew I needed to go to them. Everything in me screamed to be by their side and hold their hand.”

“Hold their hand?” Lucinda laughed. “Child, are you sure this was not some silly romantic dream?”

Reaching her bloody hand into the fire, Hazel let the flames lick her open wound. She hissed as the heat swirled around her, sinking into her veins. Her skin bubbled and peeled, dripping down to plaster over the smallest skull. When she pulled it back, she breathed across her wounded flesh with a gasp of pain. Almost instantly, her skin began to grow back.

“I suppose it could have been a dream,” she conceded after a long moment.

Lucinda reached forward, brushing the hair from Hazel’s eyes. Her fingers were sharp. They had rarely offered the kind of comfort Hazel dreamed a mothers would. “You always had a lot of those.”

This was different, however. This was... Hazel couldn’t describe it. The warmth she felt. The feeling of soft hands and lazy mornings. The way they looked back at her, imploring her to please just look back at them with the same gaze.

“Mother,” she began softly. “Is it possible to know someone without actually knowing them?”

Hazel didn’t want to look up. She could feel Lucinda’s gaze upon her and was certain it was a look full of shameless judgment. It was the same one she had received most of her life when she said something out of line. But Lucinda was not one to speak to a bowed head. She hated when Hazel hid from her own stupidity. Lucinda had always taught her children to take their punishment with their head held high.

Slowly, she lifted her gaze. Lucinda stared back at her. Pale face framed by wisps of grey and black streaked hair. Her eyes were darker than Hazel remembered from childhood. Full of power and wisdom that she had spent death collecting.

“Hazel.” It was a rare moment when her mother actually used her given name. “I implore you to simply be happy, my daughter. Be happy with the things you have. You have done this to yourself more times than I can count. Looking for fantasy will only cause you heartache.”

Hazel felt tears prick the corners of her eyes. How many times had Hazel gone off in search of that next best thing. Looked for someone or something to fill the ache that had been carved into her chest. The emptiness. It had only gotten worse when Lucinda had died. But Hazel had an opportunity. A second chance at a life she thought she had lost.

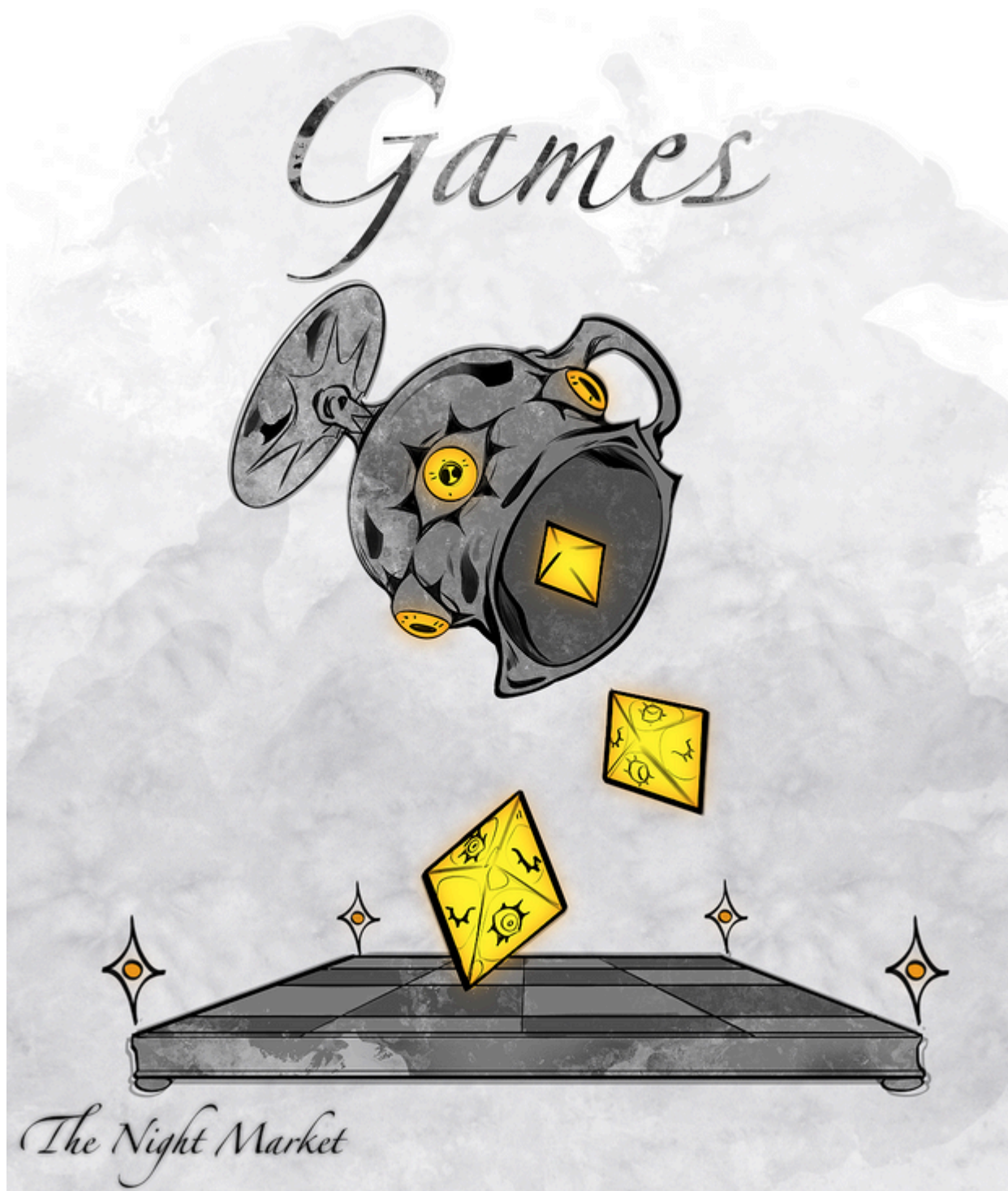
Why was she so intent on throwing it away?

"Oh, mother," she flung herself at Lucinda, feeling her brittle arms wrap around her. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she sobbed.

Lucinda petted her hair and held her close. "It's alright," she hushed her. "I told you. You are just lost, my darling. But I will help find you. A stranger is not going to solve your emptiness."

Hazel nodded. "But you will."

Tipping Hazel's chin upwards, Lucinda smiled down at her daughter. "Yes," she said. "I will."



[Lore - Games](#)

[Apr 15, 2024](#)

Recreation throughout the Night Market varies but gaming halls are abundant throughout the realm. While the games themselves are varied, there is a tradition of passing on cards that is widely popular. Cards hold an old form of magic in them that has yet to be dispelled and most families have a few decks that they keep as prized possessions, displayed within their homes as talking points during large gatherings.

Decks are passed on from previous generations, collecting essence from players and storing them within the cards themselves. Cards can take on an identity of their own, shifting and changing through time, procuring rules and oftentimes rebelling against players that are not following them. In gambling dens, luck oftentimes is dependent on which deck is being dealt. Cheats and liars are far more prosperous if they manage to find a deck that belongs to a long line of grifters.

The magic that is contained within these cards can be used only if the deck is destroyed. But to destroy a deck of cards is a taboo act. The destruction is seen as a destruction of the family line. Pieces of an individual's soul are siphoned into a deck each time they play. A long played deck that is destroyed can cause irrevocable harm to the owner. Due to this, games of cards are often monitored. They have yet to be outlawed but are on the watch list of the Velvet Guard.

Currently, the only games that have been banned are games including cursed sets of dice. Dice were found to be a far more immediate and potent version of cards, siphoning off big swaths of life from whoever lost at their rolls. Within the more elite clubs, a good hand at cards will get you an invitation to a dice room. Games of dice have been known to obliterate a soul, however, and even when giving someone a proper burial, their clocks to return to the Night Market cease to tick. Due to that, there is a large superstition around dice that deems them to be signs of misfortune to most.

The Den of the Five use dice to also display their hits, letting people know which victim is next on their ever growing list.

### [Post Chapter Three - Belladonna](#)

[Apr 19, 2024](#)

Belladonna ached. It was the type of ache that was bone deep and stripped her of every mask she held so dear. Seeing her dear heart again had been harder than she expected. The effort it took to stand. To *pretend*. Her legs shook and her heart raced and yet she could do nothing but keep her carefully crafted control front and present as she gazed upon the one person she dreamed of at night. There was no room for mistakes. No room for a single slip up. Because the second Belladonna let anything slip, that was going to be the end.

She just had to hold on a little longer.

“Why did you go out?”

Gadora burst into the room full of fiery anger. In her younger years, Bella would have admired such an entrance. Especially into a Baron's chambers. It was the type of spectacle that she once had done.

Today, it just made her feel tired. Old even.

"You knew you were in no state," Gadora continued, stomping around the room. "Yet you went anyway without a single mention of it. I had half the Pleasure District looking for you."

Belladonna lowered herself onto the lounge, the velvet beneath scratchy and needing replaced. It suddenly felt like burlap, rubbing her skin raw and blotchy.. "You sent whores looking for me? Did they get distracted along the way because I saw none of them."

Gadora stopped, taking a deep breath and releasing it through her nose. "This is not funny."

"Neither is your attitude. Check it." She may have been in a weakened state but she was still a Baron. She was still Belladonna Malady. No one spoke to her in such a way.

"I only mean—"

"May I remind you that you are a subordinate?" Belladonna snapped. Gadora was starting to get too comfortable. It had happened before. Someone getting too close. Thinking they were a part of a life that they couldn't even dream having. Yet, with Gadora, it wasn't like she could just send her away. But she could threaten. "I could send you right back down to the pits, you know. Gabriel and the Guard may have forgotten about them but I have not. I will leave you there to rot if you cross me again."

"I understand, m'lady," she murmured. Though they were words spoken through gritted teeth.

The anger went out of Belladonna in a rush, leaving her arms trembling as she collapsed fully onto the lounge. She didn't protest as Gadora came over, lifting her legs and situating her more comfortably.

"Gadora," she whispered. "I'm sorry."

The woman placed a blanket over her, shaking her head. "You have strained yourself. There is a Baron meeting in a matter of a week. You cannot show up there looking like this. There are hundreds that are ready to pounce. They are looking for a weakness in you, Mistress, and you are making it all too easy to find."

Closing her eyes, Belladonna breathed through her nose. She just needed a few moments. A way to center herself again. She had tried feeding earlier but blood turned to ash on her tongue. It congealed in her stomach. It left her hungrier than ever before.

"I was attacked," she said, hissing through her teeth. "I went to the Star Sanctuary because I got word that my heart popped up there and low and behold, I was followed. Again. I thought you were going to take care of them."

Gadora walked towards a cabinet, rummaging around inside. The familiar clink of bottles and the metal click of a lock turning made Belladonna turn to her side. Away from the woman. She hated this part of the day.



"I did take care of them," Gadora was saying. "I did as you asked. I always do as you ask." The cabinet slammed shut as the woman walked back over, the settee depressing as she sat down next to her mistress. "It doesn't mean that more won't come. They are endless."

Wordlessly, Belladonna held out her arm, letting it rest in Gadora's lap. She felt the prick of a needle and the cold rush of blood as it was shot into her veins. A coppery tang filled her mouth as her stomach collapsed in on itself for a moment, begging for nourishment. But the moment passed and euphoria blessedly ran through her once more.

"How much do we have left?" she asked, eyes half lidded.

"You do not need to worry about it."

"Gadora, do not make me compel you for the truth." Her voice was slurred and soft around the edges. It was always a bit hard to speak after a treatment.

"Not much more," Gadora said, wrapping a lace bandage around Belladonna's arm. "But I will get more. It should not be hard. I just don't know who to entrust you with while I am gone."

"I can take after myself," Bella giggled. Was that her voice coming from her mouth? She sounded so young. Like Madeline. Yet, that girl had died so long ago.

"Today proved that you cannot." Gadora rose, cleaning up the few little bottles that she had out. "I'll look into it. Come up with a solution. Maybe we can take you someplace safe while I am gone. Or hire someone to look after you."

"Hire the Guard," Bella laughed. "I'm sure they are trustworthy. I helped put the Warden in position, after all. They owe me."

Gadora glared. "You aren't supposed to say those things."

"What? That I got him his seat of power? That I pulled strings to keep lesser men from doing evils? Will it taint my imagine, Gadora?"

"Yes."

Belladonna rolled her eyes and let them shut fully. "Fuck you," she said before bursting out into a fit of giggles. The blanket was pulled high up on her chin. "Fuck you and your love for me."

Gadora sighed. "Yes, mistress. Whatever you say."

[Post Chapter Three - Gabriel](#)

[Apr 22, 2024](#)

The altar was placed amidst a star field with a glittering cloak of silver dripping from each corner. In front, Gabriel kneeled. He had not been to prayer in so long. Forsaken by the Knowing, he had felt undeserving of such a thing. How could he pray to the very ones that had given him so many chances in life? It was his fault he was here. He of course knew this. How many chances had the Celestial parent given him and how many times had he only greeted it all with utter disappointment. Gabriel had resigned himself to the knowledge that the rest of his days he would still spend in the Knowings service. Yet, he would never fully receive the Knowing's love again.

And then it happened.

The days had bled together after the ball. Gabriel had worked to try and keep the market intact. Tirelessly, he had searched through the rubble and the heat and kept looking into the fog in case he had misunderstood what he had seen before. Because their body couldn't have been in his arms. It just couldn't.

And when things began to settle and he was forced to go home, he curled up on his bed and wept. Wept because yet again, he was not good enough. He had never been good enough. What a fool he had been to think that he could save the realm. Love them into staying alive.

It was then that he received the light. The message gave him the words that he had longed to hear for so long. The ones he never thought he deserved. It was time to come home.

It had been bestowed upon him in a blinding vision. The ceiling of his small bedroom was no longer his own. A swirling bit of beyond, beckoning him.

But the gates were still locked. They still barred him from entry.

Gabriel knew then what he had to do. Avoid temptation. Avoid all the things that could keep him from being a celestial. In the upcoming days he would be tested more than he ever had been before and he would succeed.

So when they came to him, the Night Market, he didn't say anything. When they continued to appear, he tried to ignore them fully. He felt shameful when he had finally broken but he had remained true. They were not real. A demon. Temptation. Something that wished for him to fall even further.

He would not, however. The Knowing was counting on him.

"I beseech thee," he whispered, still kneeling. His entire body hurt as he kept himself still. Night after night he prayed with no answer. Yet, he knew he was being heard. "I offer you humbly the grace that was never mine. Bled from my own body. Given to you as a testament to my sorrow."

Silver grace pooled before him, dazzlingly. It dripped from long lines against his body. Open wounds. He had not been the one to give them this time. The streets had. But he didn't think he would withstand another cut.

"Is there more I need to do?" he was whispering. "More I must proclaim?"

There was silence for a long moment but Gabriel was used to that by now. Days sometimes passed without him speaking, leaving his voice red and raw when he finally did have to give an order.

But it was in the quiet that they always spoke. Pushing the words into his mind. Bestowing the gift only to him.

*Purge.*

He frowned. "Purge."

Purge was such an interesting word. Something he had been told time and again was not appropriate. Was controlling. Obsessive. An act only bestowed upon those that wished to dominate and control.

But where had forsaking such a thing as that really gotten him.

"Yes. I understand." And he did. So much of the Night Market was unclean. So much of it did not act in the eyes of the Knowing. The realm was a godless one. One that operated on a mockery of faith. Gabriel, if he truly wanted to return home, would need to do something grand. Something to prove that he was sorry and worthy of redemption.

"Purge," he said again.

He could do that. He would.

And he would start with the guard.

Because the guard had taken his time. It had distracted him. The guard was responsible for him walking away from what was important. Because of them, he hadn't protected the market like he should have. He had lost so much because of these unclean individuals who wanted nothing more than to plunge the entirety of their society into chaos.

The Night Market had died because there was no order. Because it was tainted.

And while they may be dead, he could still protect them. Starting with ignoring the demon of temptation.

And ending with scrubbing the streets clean.

[The Night Market After Dark](#)

[May 3, 2024](#)

Authors Note: NSFW work. Please only read if you are 18+

The prompt this month is C for Cum. (dear lord what is my life)

### **Belladonna -**

"More?" Bella whispered. She was behind me, hands between my legs. "Do you like that pet?"

"We are supposed to be having a serious conversation," I gasped. She had bombarded me the second I entered the room.

"Oh," she pouted, "is this not serious enough for you? Well, let's just take it up a notch, shall we?" Flipping me around, she tossed me to my back, slowly making her way down my body. The silver piercings she wore through each nipple made her breasts look puffy and swollen. The cool feel of metal against my skin and she slid them down my belly sent a shiver down my spine.

"How about," she whispered, "I just go in for a little taste instead." I saw the second her fangs came out, two pearl white points. My breath caught in my throat as I widened my thighs, feeling all the blood begin to pool just where she wanted it to. "Would you like that?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"Are you sure?" She ran a finger across me, slowly picking up a slick bit of moisture before popping her finger in her mouth and sucking it dry. I moaned loudly, flinging my head back. "Oh, my dear heart. You look flushed. Should we stop?"

"No!"

A sharp slap sounded against my thigh. "Manners," she said. "Now, say please, mistress. Please let me cum."

I couldn't breathe. As her fangs scraped against my skin I felt like I was going to black out. I tried to push myself against her face but she held me fast.

"Say it," she demanded.

"Please, mistress," I gasped. "Please let me cum."

Belladonna didn't answer. She never gave me permission. But at the first feel of her fangs in my thigh and the pull of her sucking against the sensitive skin, I felt myself tip overboard with a scream.

## **Gabriel -**

The frown upon Gabriel's face was not one that was out of place, given that he was sitting behind his desk, paperwork messed up in front of him. The fact that the paperwork, and his lower abdomen, was covered in sticky, white cum, was maybe a different story.

"I'm sorry," I laughed.

"I do not believe you are." His cock was still twitching against his belly.

"I didn't realize you were so close," I protested. I was kneeling in front of him, my jaw sore and spit soaking my own chin. I had maybe pulled off a little too soon which resulted in a certain spray getting literally all over the place. Including his uniform.

"I do not have a spare pair of trousers due to the last time this happened."

I bit the inside of my cheek. This was not funny. This was *really* not funny. "Right. That time was not an accident but this time completely was."

"Those reports on my desk are missive for personal security. How am I supposed to go back and ask them to redo their paperwork?"

Reaching forward, I wrapped my hand around his sensitive flesh. "You should probably just fulfill their request." He slapped my hand away, standing. He was a complete mess, the papers sticking together as if they were glued, and all I could think as I looked at him, was how much I loved making this buttoned up kind of man, extremely messy.

"We should probably go shower," I suggested.

He sighed, shoving himself back inside his pants. "Is that a demand?"

"Yes."

"Good, then in return, I will be making you scream as I take you from behind." Heat jolted through me as I watched him get hard again. "Please," he added. Because Gabriel, even covered in cum, was nothing but polite.

## **Milo -**

"Fuck!"

Milo gritted his teeth, clutching the headboard as he tried to pull away. I wrapped my legs around him tight, pulling him deeper inside me. I watched as his eyes fluttered, his face red with exertion.

“Fuck fuck fuck!” The headboard creaked as he hit it hard, hips snapping forward uncontrollably. When his body froze, a desperate moan escaping him, I held him tight. Warmth flooded me as he ground against me hard, before collapsing against my chest and panting into my neck. “Fuck,” he whimpered.

I laughed, carding my fingers through his hair. “That was unusual for you.” Milo rarely came that quick. He prided himself on being able to go for long periods of time and yet we had barely gotten started.

“Everything okay in there?”

Milo groaned into my neck at the sound of Mal’s voice. “Yeah, Milo just had some premature ejaculation.” The proceeding cackle from the kitchen had me smiling while it had Milo trying to dig himself deeper into my body.

“No, I didn’t cum. I’m gonna go again, alright? Just give me two seconds.” His cock fell out of me with a slippery pull. He was completely flaccid. “Maybe five seconds.”

“Milo, it’s okay. This sometimes happens.”

“Not to me,” he cried. “It’s just– it’s been a while.”

“It’s been about two days,” I pointed out, trying to keep my amusement to a minimum.

“Two days too long,” he grumbled. I could feel his breath start to even out, his body getting heavy against mine. “Just let me sleep for two minutes. Then I’ll ravish you. You won’t walk straight for at least a week.”

“Okay,” I said, patting him on the back. He held me like his own personal body pillow and was asleep within seconds.

## **Hazel -**

“What are you doing?”

Hazel jumped, turning around and greeting me with her curvaceous nude body. “Nothing,” she said quickly. Which clearly meant something.

“You weren’t in bed.” I had fallen asleep soon after a surprise round of lovemaking. The moon had been bright and Hazel had ground down on top of me with candles burning all around us. At some point, in the height of passion, I heard her chanting something. Before I could say anything, my pleasure heightened until I was bowed off the bed, screaming loud enough to send the wisps scattering. I had blacked out after that.

And now, Hazel was naked in front of a cauldron.

"Hazel," I said softly. "I'm kind of assuming you're doing some sort of witchy thing. And that's fine. Love that. But, uh—"

"I'm sorry," she broke. "I stole the essence of your orgasm to make a tonic. I thought it would be a great aphrodisiac for you and a way to save a part of you in case you wanted to have children one day. Not that we're going to have children. Not unless you want. But I wanted to save some and, well, I was going to put a little in your tea and my tea if you wanted to have some heightened pleasure. I wasn't going to sell it to anyone!"

I blinked at her.

"What?" It was the most used word in my vocabulary. Hazel had a way of just catching me off guard. Constantly.

"I know," she cried.

"Are you— What?"

"I was going to tell you before I doused you with your own..." she trailed off, blushing "Cum."

Slowly, I walked up to her, placing my hands on her shoulders. Maybe once I would have freaked out about this. But after years of her antics, I found them kind of charming at this point. "I don't want to drink my own anything," I told her solemnly. "And our sex life is fine."

"You promise?" she sniffled.

"Yes. You strange, strange woman."

"So you don't want to finish the ritual?"

I sighed. "How do you finish the ritual?"

"We get in the cauldron together and twine our naked bodies together until our pleasure is so pure and heightened that we feel the aftershocks for days."

I stared at her. We were finishing the ritual.

**Malcolm**

"You don't like dirty talk, do you."

Malcolm looked up from the stove where he had a kettle of tea boiling. "Random question of the day, huh Lamplight?"

I shrugged. "Not really. I just want to make sure I'm not crossing any boundaries. And considering that I've been with Milo and I know how much that man talks..."



“Ah,” he said with a knowing smile, taking the kettle from the stove. “So you want to know how I handled it when I was in bed with Mr. Chatty Gabby for most of my youth.”

“Yes, actually,” I laughed. “It seems odd to me.”

He poured two cups of tea, walking over to me and handing me one. I sat at the little bar in the kitchenette, the rising steam from the green tea swirling between us. Sitting next to me, he turned, bumping his knees against mine.

“Here’s the thing,” he said. “Sex is... different for me. It’s more about my partner. Getting to know them in a way that they wouldn’t necessarily show to others. And I’m not talking about a quick fuck.” His fingers began slowly tracing small circles against my knee, traveling up and down my thigh in feather light touches.

“One night stands and the bullshit that a lot of the younger crowd does, not something that interests me. What I find sexy is seeing someone unravel.” His voice went soft and smooth, dipping down into that warm honey tone that made me weak in the knees. “I want to be completely consumed by the moment. I don’t like sex just for a release. I like sex for the all consuming passion that is there. That out of control moment where you don’t know if you are going to live or die. You don’t need words for that. I think there is something far more superior about connecting with someone through touch. Sensation.” Reaching up, his hand threaded up through my hair, cupping the back of my skull. “So no, while I don’t care if dirty talk is involved, it’s what comes when I can make you non verbal, that I far more appreciate.”

I swallowed, my throat suddenly dry.

“Drink your tea, Lamplight.”

[Post Chapter Four - Belladonna](#)

[May 6, 2024](#)

They were alive.

It was the singular thought that dominated her mind as she walked back towards the cathedral with the grimoire in hand. Of course, Belladonna already knew this. She had seen her love before now. Had talked to them. But this was different. It was as if their presence had finally slotted into place and now Belladonna could only think of how she could make them corporeal again. Give solidity to a fading light.

Fucking Milo Next and his antics. Messing around with a grimoire that should have been burned and scattered to the void. Not even Bella would touch that book for a spell. She would study it, learn all she could from it, and then she would make sure it could never be opened again.

Stepping underneath an old awning, Bella sniffed the air. Rotten peaches permeated the walls, coating the stone with a sticky flesh that breathed that fermented fruit into the world. No one was coming to clean up this area of the market. No one cared enough to. When goblins were the very ones attacking and eating the inner walls of the realm, the desire to help and rebuild was hard to muster.

Ground gems lined the streets, embedding into the cracks with a glittering hue. They crunched under her feet as she navigated her way through the broken alleys and through storm drains that were thick with sludge.

Pim's shop had not survived. Nothing but the stairs leading to his establishment stood any longer. But he had done what he could, set up a small table, and began to rebuild.

"My lady Malady," he greeted, bowing with a flourish as she approached. "I'm afraid the kind of gems that are your favorite are no longer available."

She hummed a bit, running her fingers along the slick bark of a tree that had not been there before. "No. I suppose business is not well."

"It is enough to get by."

The goblin hobbled over to her, one of his ears flat against the side of his head. She noticed a limp as he used the table to steady himself. Blood was heavy in the air. "What happened?"

He waved her off with leathery withered hands. "A scuffle. Now, what can I do for you today if you are not in the market for gems?"

She set the book down onto the counter and slid it towards him.

To Pim's credit, he did not flinch. Though, he very well should have. The power radiating off the tome was potent, the binding of the book made of goblin flesh and old magic that was long ago deemed too dangerous for this world. Out of everyone in the market, however, Belladonna only held a few with the highest esteem. And when it came to curses, Pim was the one to talk to.

"I need to know how to get the lanterns back on. And I'm almost certain this book holds the key."

"It's a cipher system, is it not?"

Belladonna nodded. "I can read it just fine but I am unsure what type of mechanism is in place for the reader. I have a suspicion this book has triggered quite a bit without anyone's knowledge but the author."

"Could be. Could be." Wrapping his hands in cloth, Pim reached out, flipping the book open. He examined it for a moment, running his fingers along the edges of each page. "It's harmless, now. Reading it at least is. Though, I can't attest to what the spells can actually do."

"What do you mean?"

He closed the book, tossing aside the wraps into a burn barrel with other debris. "There was a soul in there before. I can see the empty spot in which it waited."

Bella's eyes darkened. "How powerful of a soul."

"More powerful than I think you'd like. Long story short, you should be able to view the book, without issue, but as always, be careful of whatever spells you read from it."

She looked down at it. So the soul of Lucinda Albright had been in Milo's hands for years on end. There was a small bit of satisfaction from that. Lucinda was known to think most of the market was beneath her but a special hatred had been saved for someone like Milo. It almost made up for the waste of space that Milo was to know that Lucinda had to endure whatever riveting conversation he had regaled her with over the years.

"Is there a way to trap the soul back into the grimoire?"

"Perhaps. Though, that will take sacrifice. Usually soul bonding is not done lightly."

"I don't care about the pain that comes along with it."

"We are not speaking of pain, m'lady. We are speaking of unspeakable sacrifices. Desolation so severe that there is very little recovery."

Devastation like an entire market street being burned, the occupants being burned with it and then trapped within their own personal hell.

Bella took the book, wrapping a binding around it until it disappeared from view.

"Alright, how can I help you, Pim."

There was a moment where Pim was going to wave her off but the whip of magic surrounded him as Belladonna compelled the truth from his lips. "Continue to come get jewels," he said.

"Come to the chapel," she urged. "Set up shop where you are to be appreciated."

"I am a goblin. I am not appreciated anywhere while my kind are running around the streets, eating the very land we live on."

"I can protect you."

Leaning forward, he sniffed her. "You can barely protect yourself. You need to feed."

"I have."

He looked at her evenly. "You need a specific feed. A heart feed."

The bristle of emotion that overtook her elongated her face, morphing her into the monster that lived beneath pristine skin. She breathed through her nose, pulling back. "Working on it."

She pulled far more gold from her pocket than was necessary and placed it on the counter. "A meeting is happening for all the Barons soon. I'll be putting a motion forward for restoration."

"I will not hold my breath," Pim said, already turning back to his 'shop'.

"You shouldn't. I hear you can pass out from that." Belladonna gave him a grim little smile, the two of them nodding at each other as they wished the other goodbye.

It went without saying that they desperately hoped to see each other again.

#### [Post Chapter Four - Milo](#)

[May 10, 2024](#)

A dripping ember fell to the front porch, burning bright for a moment before being scuffed out under a boot. Milo leaned against the chapel door, watching the smoke rise from the cigarette and feeling the burn in his lungs. He had needed a moment. Just one to get himself together. Down in the basement, Malcolm and 'Lamplight' sat. The two of them huddled together, whispering words of comfort.

Fuck them.

Filling his lungs with smoke, Milo closed his eyes, holding his breath. He could feel the tears prick behind his eyes as he breathed out through his nose. A dragon's fire curling from his nostrils. It was too much. It was all too much.

The two people down in the basement were his world. Even now. Even when he was not theirs. They were his everything and he didn't know how to reach out and tell them just that.

And then Neve.

Neve.

What was he supposed to do with that?

He remembered very little of his mother. The smell of apples. Soft, strawberry blonde hair. The way she would hum to him at night. But then it had all stopped and it was replaced with the blunt end of his fathers hands. Milo had never known why.

When he came to live in the Night Market, he was small. Just some dirty, freckled faced kid against the world. The first day he was here, Neve fed him. Saw him trying to steal from one of the vendors, walked over, nabbed him by the wrist and dragged him kicking and screaming to her stall. She gave him fried bananas with cinnamon and hot cocoa. That night he slept beneath her stall.

The years went on and he continued to go back to her. Over and over he would find her. She would feed him. Give him something warm to drink. But most of all, she would listen. He imagined that was what a mother should be. When he asked her once if she had any children she said she did but never expanded on it. He had hoped endlessly that she would ask him one day to be hers. She never did.

Banging his head against the wall, he sighed.

Could he really be this stupid? Did he just not see the signs? Were there signs? Maybe this was nothing more than another red herring. If it wasn't, there was a moment for Neve where she had to weigh a lie against the love of a child and she chose the lie. It made Milo sick to think about.

The door opened behind him and Milo moved to make room. He was expecting Malcolm. Or Night. All three of them were going to go to the Fates. But the door opened and closed with no one passing through. Just a soft chill. Milo frowned, looking around for the spirit. The graveyard was quiet, despite its earlier activity. But there was a small vibration that buzzed across his hip.

Looking down, he watched as his keys began to shake. The jangle of metal against each other began to sound.

"Fuck," he hissed. "Not now." He unclipped the ring from his belt, trying to find the key that was making all the racket. "Stop. You're just hurting yourself."

The market couldn't open gates on its own now. They couldn't just open to other realms and invite everyone in. But apparently, that didn't stop them from trying and opening up a gate themselves. Milo had a suspicion it was the spirits. Taliesin perhaps using them to do his bidding still. Or maybe it was the Night Market. Still trying to reach through and save the downtrodden. Either way, it needed to not happen.

The key was ripped from his keyring and thrown off to the side in a bush of dead hydrangeas. Milo hopped off the porch, watching as it sunk into the ground, a swirling mass beginning to form as a door began to glimmer before him.

Taking out his pen knife, Milo sliced open his hand, waiting for the exact moment that the door formed. He felt the pain cut through him, a mere sting, really. But when the door solidified and he slammed his

bloody palm against it, he gritted his teeth together to keep from screaming. He felt it then as his own magic fought the magic that was trying to break through. It ripped at his skin, taking bits and pieces of him. Flaying him alive. He knew it was nothing more than the top layer. Maybe the second. But it was still being shredded from his bones. The only way to close the door, to fight the essence of whatever was breaking through, was to sacrifice the essence of him.

How anyone wanted to be the Gatekeeper was beyond him.

The door shuddered beneath his grip, slowly beginning to fade away. It cracked loudly in protest, and in a promise to try again. But it reversed. Slowly disappearing from view until it was nothing more than a key on the ground. Nothing more to it. Just something inanimate.

Quickly, Milo pulled a handkerchief from his back pocket, wrapping his bloody hand. His body ached, head pounding as the fatigue set against him.

The front door of the chapel opened again, this time without him hearing it. "You ready?"

His eyes snapped up. Night. His Night. There was no way they were the ones doing this. They wouldn't hurt him. He had to believe that they wouldn't hurt him.

Someone in this world had to not hurt him.

"Ready," he said, straightening and pushing dirt over the key.

Malcolm stepped out behind them, waving goodbye at someone through the window. Milo silently begged him not to look his way.

"You alright?"

*Shit.* He would tell them. He would have to tell both of them. He couldn't make the mistake again of not sharing what was going on. The world was already going to shit anyway, what could possibly go wrong with telling them that he had to take strips of flesh to close the doors in order to keep the world from ripping apart?

"Milo?" Night attempted.

He looked up, mouth agape and dry. "I— Let's go."

Neither of them moved. Because they both knew him by now. He had to give them something more. Why couldn't he speak and give them something more? What was wrong with him?

"Button." It was said softly. Sternly.

Milo looked up, not at Malcolm, but the dark eyes he had watched close nearly six moons ago. He begged them. Silently. *Please believe me.*

"We better get moving," Night said, looking down at their feet. "Sooner we figure all this out, the sooner we can have some of the conversations we need to."

They moved past me. Down the steps and onto the graveyard path.

Milo reached out to try and take their hand but stopped when he remembered it would go right through.

#### [Post Chapter Four Gabriel](#)

[May 17, 2024](#)

The moon was beautiful, hanging high in the sky and singing to the stars. Silver glowing embers fell from it like rain, rolling across the ocean of night sky and disappearing into the cosmic lights that appeared only once every few moons. Gabriel loved the sky when it was like this. There was such peace that hung above.

*"Can you hear me, Warden?"*

He hummed. The stars were talking again. Playing. Skipping from planet to planet. A smile stretched across his face. What a beautiful world. There were too many who took the world for granted. The beauty that could come from just stopping and observing their surroundings. Life had gotten far too fast for the likes of such pleasures. Gabriel himself had forgotten the sheer euphoria of just looking at the sky.

*"What even happened? You are covered in blood! They're all dead, Warden. All of them!"*

Laughter bubbled from his throat. Once, when he still lived within the Knowing's embrace, he had sat upon the wisps of a hymn and watched the souls born from the clouds. They were so small then. Little tiny specks of glimmer that emerged with such hope and life. Gabriel wondered how they were all doing. Undoubtedly they had gone on to do such great things.

Such great great things.

He would too. Very soon, he would add himself to that list. His name would be one of the eternal songs throughout the realm.

*"That's not his blood. I don't see a scratch on him. I— I think— oh... oh no."*

The Knowing had a mantra. One that everyone lived by. You had to get dirty to do good. It was taught to them from the time they emerged but it was only something put into practice when becoming a soldier.



Gabriel hadn't thought he wanted to be a soldier. It wasn't on his path. But now he could see that the Knowing had other plans for him.

He felt to become this.

It filled him with such joy to know he was not cast out for wrongdoing, but to make him stronger. He simply had to pass his trial to come back home.

*"What did you do? What happened?"*

*"None of them are alive. There's fifteen.... Twenty? I— it's Serene and... oh by the gods. Falon. Falon's dead as well."*

*"Warden!"*

Rolling to his side, Gabriel rose to his feet. There were people standing in front of him. Three of them, just standing in the middle of a star of bodies. Reaching out, he placed a hand on the nearest one's shoulder. Some new recruit. Another one of the nameless that had trained under him. He felt marginally guilty for not taking him and countless others under his wing.

"It's okay," he told them calmly. "All will make sense soon enough."

The man looked at him with bewildered eyes. "Warden, what happened? Were you attacked? Were they?"

Gabriel shook his head with a small chuckle. "They needed to be purged. But that's okay. They are within the embrace of the Knowing. They will be reprocessed and given a second chance."

"His sword," the whisper came from their right. "It's dripping."

Gabriel turned to the voice, a young woman with slicked back hair and horror in her eyes. "Yes," he nodded. "They will be honored. I will wipe their blood in the ocean."

"You did this?"

With a final pat to the man's shoulder, he turned. He had things to do. Others that needed purged. So many unclean souls and it was his job to take them and give them new purpose. It was what the Knowing had sent him here for. He had been a fool to believe that he had been cast aside. So many years had been wasted, thinking that he was unloved. When in reality, he was the most loved of all.

"Warden, don't you walk away. You are under arrest by name of the Velvet Guard."

Gabriel stopped. There was a sigh that was singing in his chest. A whisper in his ear. He thought they were clean. He had felt their aurora and they had felt insignificant. But the Knowing was saying different now. But that was okay. One day, they would see. Sometimes, a life was worth sacrificing for the better of the world.

Gripping his sword, he turned, raising it as he looked at the three guards. "May peace be upon you." Before they could react, he lunged forward.

#### [Post Chapter Four - Malcolm](#)

[May 17, 2024](#)

When Malcolm was about six, he had a nightmare. He dreamt he had been ripped from his mothers arms and stolen by a witch. When he woke, he could feel it still. The way his mother had tried to hold onto him. The bruises that had bloomed on his tiny arms as she tried to keep him curled against her chest. Her screams still echoed in his ears and when the witch had gotten her claws into him, she had ripped him away from love and safety and warmth, plunging him into a sticky green darkness.

He had woken Lucinda that night, telling her of the tale. Crying and shuddering because he thought someone was going to take him from her. But when he had tried to crawl into her bed, he felt nothing but cold.

After lying still for several minutes, she had simply sent him back to bed, telling it it was a dream. One he should not speak of again.

Sitting within Victor Frankenstein's home, Malcolm remembered the nightmare vividly now. He couldn't recall the face of the woman who had given birth to him. He had always been told he had two mothers, but Lucinda was the only one who was alive now. She was the one who raised him and therefore, the only mother he had known.

Over the years he had tried to fill in the gaps of the other woman but he was certain that it was just his own mind creating memories where there were none. He wasn't sure the moment even existed. But all he could think now was that the wrong mother had come back.

"Here." A gruff voice came from his right. When he looked up, he saw Marie. The doctors... assistant? He wasn't sure what exactly her role was here other than to intimidate some of the more unruly patients. She was holding a syringe though and looking at him expectantly. "If you wish to keep your form, you need to start taking your supplements again."

Malcolm raised a brow. "Who says I haven't?"

"Me." She walked forward, sticking the needle in his arm. He hissed a little as the cool treatment seeped into his veins. "Come back here every three moons, please. And I have a list of others you will need to

make contact with in case you do not wish to come here for treatments. The ones you probably saw when you were alive are dead now.”

Malcolm rubbed at his arm. “You’re very blunt.”

“Yes.”

“I can appreciate that.” Malcolm felt tired. Far more tired than he thought he had any right to be. But he also couldn’t remember a full night’s sleep since coming back. Now, with the idea of Lucinda around, he wasn’t sure if he’d ever be able to sleep again. The fear of her coming into his home was far too real. And the fact that Hazel was stuck in her clutches, filled him with a sickness.

“I do not know if I should be telling you this because of the ethical questions that arise, but I could provide you with a poison to stab Lucinda Albright with.”

Malcolm startled at that, looking at Marie as if she may be joking. “I– uh– my mother doesn’t go down easily.”

“No. But it would make her suffer.” She paused, frowning. “And do not say mother. She is not your mother. The ones who are privileged with that title are the individuals who love and care for their children. She does not love you.”

Malcolm didn’t know if he should laugh or tell this woman to leave. Though in the end, it was more telling to him that he didn’t disagree with her. “Thankfully I’ve already processed that or this moment might actually hurt.”

“The truth should be stated far more than it actually is. People are foolish to believe that softening their tone achieves anything.”

Malcolm nodded. Maybe they all needed eye patch wearing, no nonsense women in their lives. “I’ll pass on the poison for now. But I may take you up on the offer later. When I know it won’t somehow power her up.”

It was a thought that looked as if it had crossed Marie’s mind as well because she didn’t seem to think this an illogical request. “Bring your sister to me for rehabilitation,” she said without a preamble.

“You think it’s that bad?”

“If you do not then you are more hung up on the nuclear myth of what a family is than I thought.” She was disposing of the syringe, placing it in a metal container that would later be put with the rest of the hazardous materials. “Your sister is being held hostage by a woman who selfishly only looks to her own means. Just because she birthed her does not mean that there is any form of affection there.”

“Marie, you just really get to the point, huh.”

“Yes.”

“I have someone I would like you to talk to,” he murmured.

“The one you speak of is out on the porch, pouting. I do not wish to waste my time with them.”

Malcolm snorted. Yeah, that sounded like Milo. “How’s Lamplight?”

“The Night Market is dehydrated and will need far more electrolytes injected into them. We have started pumping it into the land as a sort of experiment to see if we can treat the body's afflictions through the realm. Victor believes that we have to fix the overall health of the beings in the realm to fix the Night Market as a whole.”

“And what do you think?”

“I think that is sentimental experimental science. The construct shouldn’t exist. That is why it is sick.” It was said as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. Yet, all Malcolm could think about was what was actually under that eyepatch.

“But what about the market as a realm? They are sick too.”

“They are growing,” Marie said firmly. “Growing pains happen. And I believe they are being attacked.”

“They are,” Malcolm agreed.

“Then why are we saying it is a sickness as opposed to what it actually is. Murder.”

The intensity of which Marie said that last word made the hair on Malcolm’s arms stand. There was just something about her. Whether she was speaking out of her ass or not was hard to tell.

“Marie, you are a very succinct woman. I appreciate that.”

“Appreciate that more when you come back for more treatment. You do not go through back alley surgeries only to let it all go to hell when you are comfortable in life.”

“You know my past?” he wasn’t sure how he liked that. But Marie never said anything further. Because Victor was calling, singing out for tea. She disappeared from the room without another word, leaving Malcolm on his own.

Lucinda Albright didn’t deserve the title of mother. For as crazy and slightly invasive as Marie seemed, she was right on one thing. Lucinda was not his mother. That was reserved for the woman who had tried to protect him from her. Wherever she may rest now.

[May 24, 2024](#)

Welcome to me being an incredibly overwhelmed panda!

Seriously, I made this vow to myself about two years ago that life was going to be lived with intention. More time with my family. Working in my yard. Writing. Reading. It made life busier, not slower.

Chapter Five is very much in the works. I should be importing the rest of it to twine today and then sending it off to the betas. From there, it just is a matter of how many mistakes I made. And let me tell you, if you ever feel you are making too many mistakes in writing, just talk to my betas. I have a wonderful penchant for using words that don't make sense for the sentence or just completely repeating entire paragraphs. :)

This chapter should help set us out on a journey outside of the market. It's getting everything set up for going and trying to get these lights back on.

Now, most of you might wonder, does Zinnia know where this tale is going? The answer is no. Absolutely not. So, let's go on this crazy journey together.

On a personal note, my oldest is graduating in the next two weeks so things are going to be crazy on my end. Sorry I've been absent from social media. There is a lot going on with her and there is still a lot of really harsh medical situations with family members we are trying to navigate. It's a very happy and sad time over here. I thank all of you for your patience and your support.

Hope everyone is gearing up for a wonderful June!

Zinnia

[Post Chapter Short - Hazel](#)

[May 27, 2024](#)

Under an ochre sky sat a girl. Lost to her own thoughts and unsuccessfully hiding from her pain. An unusual state for someone so loved but the child still hid. How could they not when monsters lurked from the darkest corners and there was a witch within the home. Hazel always thought it funny that she ran across this girl. Just rocking in the middle of a desolate field. Why didn't the girl move? Why didn't

she at least try to run? Each night the carnage would rain down like blood from bloated clouds and each night, the girl would sit and wait to be saved.

With a sigh, Hazel kept going. Working around the girl. She would not be her savior. It wasn't her job. Besides, the girl frightened her. She held too much pain. And pain like that was not something to be repaired. It twisted and contorted, consuming until there was nothing left but a malnourished bag of bones that wept bitterly for love that could never be had. So Hazel continued picking her berries, gathering her herbs. She continued wishing that the animals would come to see her. And she ignored the girl.

Even when her weeping reached a crescendo and her heart began thundering through the field, Hazel ignored the girl.

Her own hands were stained with berry juice, red and dripping. The coppery tang of the raspberries was particularly strong today. The girl for some reason hated this the most. Hazel couldn't control the amount of juice that got on her fingers and didn't understand why the girl even cared. It was ridiculous really. Blood from fruit was such a natural thing.

*"Please stop. Please, please stop. This isn't us."*

Hazel began humming, drowning out the desperation. All that showed was weakness. A harmonic approach to life was the only way to survive and the girl's words were nothing but a discordant note. If Hazel didn't have to pick berries, she would have left. The girl was extra loud today for some reason. And the berries were ever so sweet.

*"Those people... all those people. Please, let me out. I have to get out. We could save them. We could..."*

"Shut up!" Hazel screamed, putting her hands over her ears. She was so loud. So unnecessarily loud.

*"We need to do the right thing!"*

The right thing. Hazel was doing the right thing. She was picking the berries. Harvesting the sage. She was living her life of solitude so no one could hear her ever again. Because that's all people did. They hurt and they went away and they left her again and again and again... why did they leave her so much? Why didn't they love her enough to stay?

The blood from the berries stained her nails, rotting beneath the beds and blackening the pads of her fingers.

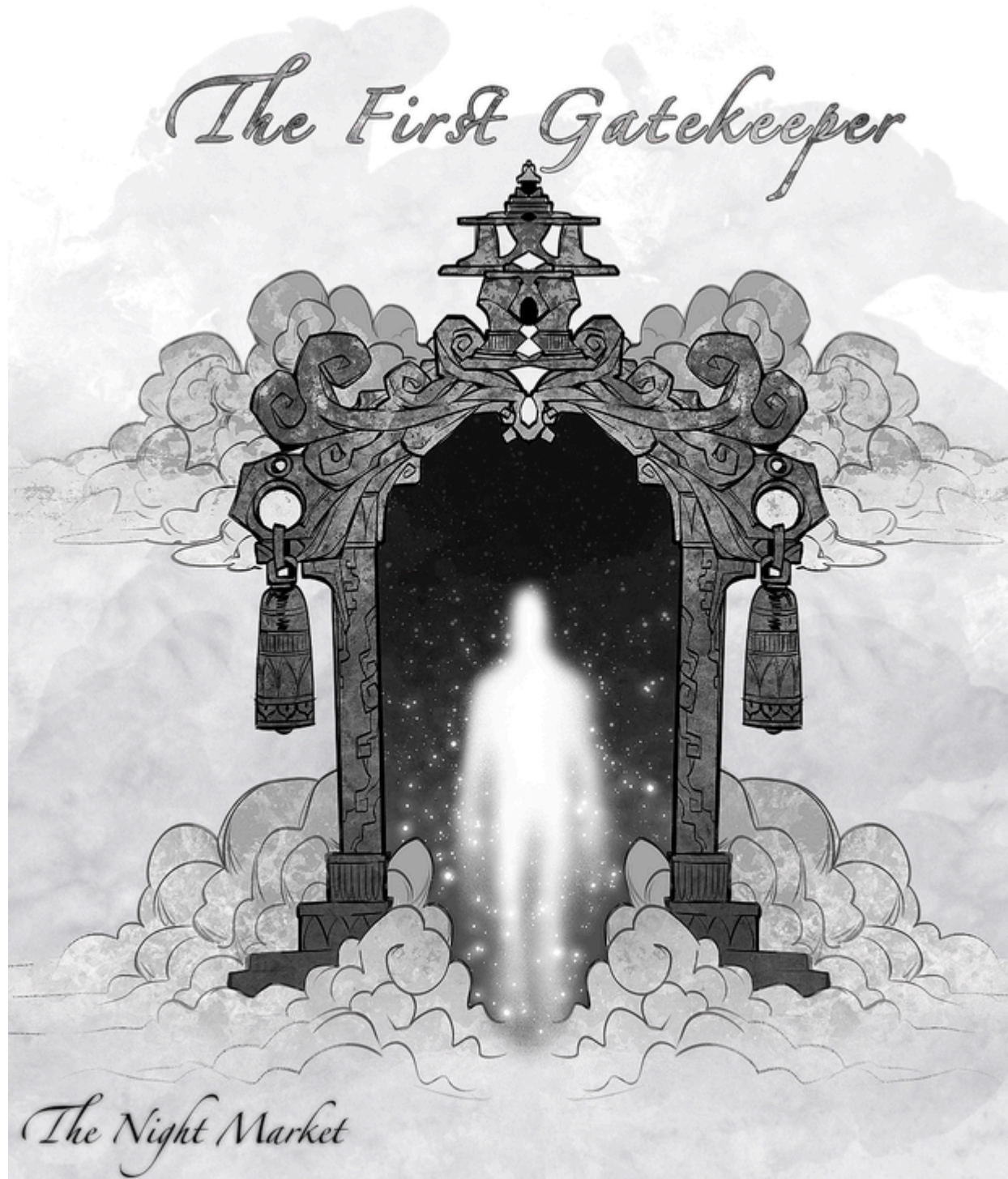
*"Please. Just let me out."*

Hazel rose from where she had curled herself into a ball by the bushes. She glanced back at the girl with the tanned skin and heartbroken eyes.



"You made your choice," she hissed. Gathering her basket, she went to leave. The child could cry on her own.

That's all she was good for after all.



[The First Gatekeeper](#)

[May 27, 2024](#)



Note: Created originally for Vickypink

Very little is known about the first Gatekeeper. The initial recording of one dates back to the time of the Ancients. Some speculate that the Gatekeeper was born in response to the Ancient's ways, coming to fruition to keep the more powerful ones in check. Though what that entailed is not detailed in any of the writings, leaving some to wonder if they were purposefully forgotten.

The first gate was opened inside of a lantern, however, and was shut soon after. It used to be a sight of pilgrimage for the people of the market. Hundreds gathering far and wide to lay down offerings at the gate opening. This is a tradition that has been forgotten and the sight of the first gate is unknown.

The tradition of keeping the job of the Gatekeeper shrouded in mystery has been in place since the dawn of its existence, but the Gatekeeper was a name that was passed around far more frequently. Sometimes in fear. Other times with the thoughts that they held the keys to the knowledge of the universe. The very idea of a Gatekeeper became more of a figure head in some circles. While others believed them to be a myth. Most agree that several individuals claimed to have the job but it is unknown if they all shared the power that came with it.

No one knows how many Gatekeepers have preceded the first or how the first died. But whispers of them still linger through the market. Like a story of old. Never quite forgotten. It is said that the first Gatekeeper is still out there, holding a single master key to the market. The repercussions of such an idea are not well received.



[Jun 3, 2024](#)

Surprise!

It is here! Welcome to Chapter Five. The chapter that feels like it has so many splits that my brain wanted to explode. This is the last chapter before we head out of the Night Market proper. Enjoy some moments with your RO's, dive further into the madness with Gabriel, and get to talk to Hazel a bit more.

Thank you for all your support. Be on the lookout for post chapter five shorts this month. They should be interesting. :)

Link: <https://the-night-market.itch.io/the-night-market-book-2>

Password: %ch@pSpl1t

[Post Chapter Five - Gabriel](#)

[Jun 10, 2024](#)

The longevity of a single speck of dust was a span of time that superseded most elements. Tell anyone this, and they would most likely disagree. But life within the embrace of the Knowing was different. It defied the logic of the lesser beings and created a series of rules that broke through the constriction of time. It allowed for a single breath to be limitless. For the span of joy to be so all consuming that the world and its intricacies became lost.

Gabriel missed that.

When he had fallen, life looked dull. It hurt. Each breath was a stab through the chest. Every time he opened his eyes he was reminded of falling. This world and everything around it was outside the Knowing's embrace because it chose to be. They could have been living in eternal benediction and yet they chose to wallow within the filth. Within the muck. It had made Gabriel so unbelievably angry upon seeing it because he didn't have a choice. He could never go back.

Or so he had thought.

It had come to his attention that he was viewing it all wrong. That he did not have to succumb to the finality of falling from the embrace. The Knowing would always have open arms for him. He just had to prove that he was worthy of it. Just like everyone else, if he chose, as long as he *chose* to live within the Knowings demands, he could return. So many years had been spent not understanding this very simple rule. It had taken death for him to know that life was not as such.

“Son.”

His eyes were sticky. Lashes crusted together as he opened them. The room was split in two. On one side was the dark blues and aged seaspot wood of his old home with Reese. Back when he had stayed at the cottage during his younger years. And on the other half, was a bright white and sterile room with large windows and wafting curtains. Elias sat within the sun, his skin glittering and dusted with the cosmic energies of home. On the other side, Reese had spun a chair around, straddling it as he called out to Gabriel.

“You are both here,” Gabriel whispered.

Neither answered. Though he supposed it wasn’t a question.

“How are you feeling?” Elias asked.

“I am tired.” It hurt to swallow for some reason. There was a pain just below his sternum. Several more throughout the rest of his body. He couldn’t identify the reasons.

“You cut quite a swath through the market,” Reese was saying. “You’re probably more than tired.”

“I needed to purge.” Why was it that no one seemed to understand this? Purging was what they did. Get rid of the unclean. Rolling his head to Elias, he sighed. “You understand this, don’t you? Everything here is disgusting. It does not belong.”

Elias looked at him sadly. “I understand,” he said. “I do. I just wish you didn’t.”

“Gabriel, you need to knock this shit off. Don’t go down that path, boy. It’s what hurt Elias and it’s going to hurt you. Madness lies within that destruction.”

Gabriel didn’t really think Reese should be speaking of such things with Elias right there but they always had been an enigma. Sighing, he leaned his head back on the pillow. “It’s my way home. If I show the Knowing how I am committed to making the world in their image, they will embrace me again.”

“That’s fucking bullshit and you know it.”

“Oh, Gabriel.”

Gabriel felt himself smile. There was such a familiarity to the way their words overlapped with each other. He found it comforting. So many nights had been spent listening to them. They liked to play cards

at the kitchen table. Reese would get frustrated with how Elias would play and Elias would soothe him out of his misery. To get there, however, there was always a lot of talking over the other one.

"It'll be alright," Gabriel murmured. "I know it will. Once this world is purged, I will swim out into the ocean and let the Knowing take me."

"The Deep will get you much sooner, boy. The Knowing doesn't give two shits about you. You swim out there, and you're going to die. This time for good."

Elias's sigh accompanied Reese's words. Surely he didn't agree with him. "Gabriel, I have been looking for a way back into the Knowing's arms for years. It is a fool's game," he confessed. "With everything I have done, I have never come close. I have been teaching the Knowing's ways for years. If anyone was going to be re-embraced, it would have been me."

Gabriel frowned. "No. You butcher people. You do not understand."

Reese rubbed a hand across his face. "I don't need to understand to see that you're being affected by the madness.'

"I wasn't talking to you," Gabriel snapped.

Reese just stared at him for a prolonged moment, but didn't seem all that surprised. "Right."

Gabriel looked back towards Elias. "You have augmented people. You have tried to make them into the image of the Knowing. But you can never mend a person's soul. You can never scrub them clean. I am simply ridding everyone of those people. I am banishing them forever."

"I know," Elias sighed. "I just never did have a penchant for killing."

"You are a good man," Gabriel said, trying to reach out and pat his hand. He couldn't touch him. "You are a good, good man."

From the other side, Reese rose. He stepped towards the bed, placing a heavy hand on Gabriel's shoulder. "Get some more sleep. We'll talk about this in the morning."

"Will you both be going to play games?" Gabriel yawned.

Both fathers looked at him sadly. No doubt also remembering a time when their lives had been so much more rich with love and family.

"Get some rest," Reese said, a shadowed look over his face. Meanwhile, Elias just stared at him. "I'll stay until you fall asleep first."

The cosmic dust continued to swirl in Gabriel's mind. And one day, he would be home to see it first hand.

[Jun 14, 2024](#)

D - Dirty Secret

**Belladonna -**

"You what?"

"What?" Belladonna looked at me innocently from her position at the vanity. A dark glass of wine was in hand as she swirled it within her glass. "You asked what my fantasy was and I told you."

"I asked what your dirty secret was," I clarified. "You gave that up so easily."

Belladonna smiled slightly. "Oh, but I'm not finished," she murmured. "Like I said, I would love nothing more than to watch you with another. Spread the two of you out over a bed together, position your bodies, watching the way you two groan and sweat."

She crawled onto the bed, wine still in hand. "You want to watch me with someone else?"

She hummed an affirmative. "Of course I do. I want them to mark you. Fuck you so hard that your eyes cross. Then," she said, tipping the wine to my lips until I swallowed. The burst of grapes slid down my throat, warming me on the way down. "When they are all done, I would kill them right in front of you."

I spit out my wine. "You what?"

She nipped at my lips, lapping at the spilled burgundy dripping down my chin. "I would take them before their orgasm stopped and I would break their neck for touching you. And then I would lick my way up your body and suck a new mark into every bit of reddened skin until you knew nothing but my name."

I felt my heart slam against my chest, not having realized how much of a turnon that would be.

"No one touches you," she hissed, holding my chin within her fingers. "No. One."

**Gabriel -**

The door to Gabriel's apartment was open. No one would dare break into the Warden's house. Or at least, it was what he believed. I had gotten so used to it being unlocked, that I just walked in now. I wanted to surprise him today. Grab him a change of clothes and meet him at work to take him on a date.

A soft moan greeted me as I walked inside though, giving me pause. Tipping my head, I listened closely. There was a low grunt and the wet slap of skin coming from the living room.

There was only a small wall that separated the foyer from the other room as as I stepped around it, I saw Gabriel. He was sitting on the chair, legs spread wide, pants discarded neatly upon the couch. My breath caught at the sight of his cock. Thick and veiny. Darker at the tip. It was glistening with precum, a bead of it dripping down the side before his fingers caught it and spread it downwards as he pulled the skin taught.

He whispered my name. It was so quiet I barely caught it but it was still there. It wound against me, pooling in the pit of my stomach.

He lifted his hips then, arching into his own hand. It was then I caught something shiny just below him. I swallowed thickly as I heard a soft buzz, watching as a glistening cock came in and out of his ass. I raised my brow, watching as sweat poured down his cheeks, wetting the hair at his temples.

His breaths came in deeper pants, his lips parting in a gasp, as his fingers tightened against him, tugging at himself with a harsh flick of his wrist. Then he stopped. Pulling his hand off, he placed it on the arms of the chair and squeezed. His cock bobbed in front of him, angry and erect. Meanwhile, he pumped his hips a few more times, fucking himself harshly before standing, pulling the toy out, and walking over to his pants. He pulled them on with a straight face, shoving his erection into his trousers and then belting his sword.

When he turned to me, he froze.

"Hi," I told him.

He had no words. I probably should have said something sooner but... it was honestly hot.

"I- I sometimes like to do this during my lunch break," he murmured. "It helps me focus."

"Staying uncomfortably hard keeps you focused?"

"Yes."

Walking over to him, I reached out, cupping him through his trousers. "Then let me help with that."

**Milo -**

"Do you even have a dirty secret?" I laughed, flopping on the bed next to Milo. His clothes were discarded to one side, his freckled skin on display.

"Nope," he said with a pop of his lips. "Sex is dirty, but it shouldn't be secret."

"Oh, come on," I said, rolling to my side. "You have to have something that you enjoy that you get embarrassed about. A fantasy. A position?"

Rolling over on top of me, he bracketed his arms on either side of my head. "Darlin', you know me. Why would I be embarrassed about what I do under the sheets?"

"Milo, I don't think you do most things under the sheets. You don't even have sheets."

"Shh," he teased, rocking his hips against my own. "No dirty secrets here. I enjoy being controlled during sex. I enjoy pounding into a warm and tight body." He pulled me close. "I like having someone get on their knees and suck me off in a back alley. I like someone tying me up and spanking my ass. When a man admits that he happily will take a dildo or enjoys getting told what to do, what else is there that could be so secretive?"

"I don't know. Maybe the lace panties you have in your bedside table."

He froze. "You've seen those?"

"I have." I trailed a hand down his back, dipping between the cheeks of his ass. "Want to model them for me?"

**Hazel -**

"I just thought that maybe— you know— if you wanted..." Hazel stood before me, twisting her hands in her skirts, a crimson blush high on her cheeks.

"You want to tie me up?"

"Only if you want to," she said quickly.

"We've done that before," I told her. I wasn't sure why she was so nervous about it all. It wasn't as if we hadn't done some kinky things before.

"No. I know. I— it's— don't worry about it." Her head ducked down, like she was ready to run away.

"Hazel, it's fine. I wouldn't mind doing that again. You don't need to be embar—" Vines shot out from the wall, curling down from the large hanging baskets in the corner of our room before snaking around my body and holding me tight. My clothes were slowly removed, slippering vines pushing and pulling until I was hanging from the ceilings, limbs spread and completely on display.

I looked at Hazel.

Her eyes were black as she licked her lips. "Oh," she breathed. "You're even prettier than I thought you'd be."

A vine snaked up, tickling the inside of my thigh and pinching at my chest.

I gasped loudly.



Hazel walked up to me, her eyes lingering on the way the vines cupped around my groin, slithering back and forth. "I'm going to just watch for a while," she told me politely. "And then, we'll have some real fun."

My head tilted back as the plants tightened around me and I heard Hazel emit a needy groan.

## **Malcolm -**

"Does it hurt?"

I widened my thighs, my skin burning beneath his touch. "No," I whispered, feeling the way Malcolm's fingers pressed into my inner thighs. Leaning down, he blew lightly over my skin, causing goosebumps to rise.

"Good," he murmured. Dipping the needle into the pot of ink, he brought it back to my skin, slowly drawing a thick line against me. I felt my core tighten, my body shivering. "Just don't move."

His head was dipped down so low, lips brushing between my legs. I felt a bead of sweat fall from his temple, slipping across my inner thigh and soaking the sheet beneath me.

"Crook your leg for me?"

"Like this?"

He hummed, running a hand up my leg and spreading me wide. I was put on display for him as he slid up my body. I could feel the needle pressing against me, little pricks of pain tingling my body.

"You smell so good," he whispered against me. "Wet and warm." He slid a hand up my front, cupping me through my underwear. "Almost done," he said, pressing down a little to keep me still.

"Malcolm?" I gasped.

He rubbed me comfortingly. "Hush, Lamplight. I need to concentrate." His fingers twitched and rubbed, causing me to arch my back. The more I squirmed beneath him, the more he pressed, until I was crying out, my heart slamming against my chest. Malcolm lowered himself on either side of my thigh, rubbing himself against me while still teasing me. It was too much. With him so close, the bits of pain lingering against me and the way he moved, I couldn't do it anymore. I came with a sharp cry.

"There," Malcolm said with a small grin, sitting up. "It looks good."

I forgot that he was giving me a tattoo.

[Jun 14, 2024](#)

The lights clicked off leaving the room in a soft evening glow. A single lamp shown from the kitchen and one more was positioned near the archway that separated the living room from the bedroom. Quietly, Malcolm went about, lighting a few candles, giving the room a warm bit of ambience. Lamplight was sleeping in his bed and for the first time, Malcolm felt some of his tension ease. Having two out of the three people that mattered to him, under one roof, gave him a kind of peace that he couldn't often describe. Now they just needed Hazel here.

Quietly, he grabbed his keys, stepping out into the back garden. The planter boxes that Hazel had helped make when he first moved in sat dead now. The flowers that had once grown were still standing but now were hollowed out husks. Life had continued without him while he was gone. The bright blooming garden he had once sat in with his sister was a brown and rotting scrap of land now. And Malcolm didn't know the first thing about fixing it.

Sitting down on his bench, he sighed. Glancing back through the arched doors, he could see Milo pretending to sleep on the couch. Yet another situation he would have to deal with soon. More than likely, he needed to stop dragging his feet and instigate a conversation between him and Milo. Between him and Lamplight. Possibly between all three of them. It just never felt like the right time. Even telling Lamplight that he loved them felt strained for the moment. A trauma response.

Maybe he was just overthinking it.

Drawing a few sigils into the dirt, the windows darkened giving both him privacy out in the garden, and Milo privacy inside. He stared down at his keys. Little ones he had kept from his time as a Gatekeeper. They had been his emergency keys. The ones he kept here in the apartment in case he got trapped. He could still feel the charge within them but had no way of unlocking them.

And he would rather die trying than go inside and ask Milo to unlock one for him. Which in reality, should say something about the level of tension between the two of them.

Sitting back on the bench, he tipped his eyes up to the false sky he had installed. A blushing pink that felt warm and a series of wispy clouds that looked like the softest space to rest his head.

"You know, I thought things would be different with you back. Like the world would rejoice. I didn't expect the world to be sleeping in your bed."

Malcolm snorted a little at the familiar voice. "You should have shut the door," he said. There was a waterfall in the corner of his garden. Made of abalone shells and barely any higher than his waist. But the depths of the pool were vast. So when he opened his eyes to find a wild mass of jet black hair and the coral tones of Kamille staring back at him, he wasn't surprised.

"I would never shut the door on you, Malcolm." Kamille twisted her arms to rest against the pool's flagstone side, her ebony skin glistening in the pink light. "Besides, I wanted to keep an eye on your place. If I shut the door, I would have locked myself off from this side of the realm completely."

The Deep was cut off. It had been since the lanterns had gone out. Except, it seemed that Kamille kept one backdoor. She always had been one of the more clever Barons.

"You look sad, Malcolm," she mused. The gills on the side of her face fluttered, beckoning him forward. With great effort, he stood once more, tiredly making his way to sit by the pool. "Oh, Malcolm," sighed Kamille. "You are not taking care of yourself."

Malcolm laughed a little, the self deprecating tone sitting uncomfortably around them. "Believe it or not, I am trying. Today was just a bit much. My mother is back and she's done a number on Hazel again. And I think that she may have done a number on me."

Kamille frowned. "You are afraid Lucinda has cursed you somehow."

"I haven't seen Hazel in nearly three months. I can almost guarantee it."

The water lapped around Kamille's bare arms, beading against her skin and falling like dew into the ground around them. There were no plants this time to benefit from the nourishment.

"The lamps are still out," Kamille stated. "Your mother is up to her tricks again. And the market is still dying. Any word of Taliesin Hynsin."

Malcolm shook his head.

"It sounds like there is much going on involving the people you love. Are you naive enough to think it's not all connected."

"Of course not. I just can't figure out how to tie them together. And it's frustrating. Far more frustrating that I can show."

"Malcolm Albright. Always keeping it together. Never letting go of control. I've told you this before but it bears repeating it seems. That will kill you."

"I've already died."

"And do you think this world could take another death from you?" she asked with a raised brow. "You have a Gatekeeper that has come into his full powers this time and would most likely not let it stand as he did before. Not to mention that the persona of the Night Market slowly falling in love with you. Those two together would be unstoppable in yanking you from the grave."

"Lamplight is not in love with me."

Kamille smiled softly at him. "Lamplight. Yes."

"I'm not going there with you." Kamille was arguably his best friend. But Malcolm still had lines with her. Barriers he wouldn't let her cross.

The amusement was rolling off of Kamille in little waves, forming into little seashells that pebbled against the ground before sprouting into brightly colored crabs that skittered across the garden. "You don't have to, Albright. You don't have to." She then reached out, placing her jeweled fingers upon his own. "I have another request. One that is a bit more serious in nature."

"About my mother, I presume."

"And Taliesin." Malcolm looked at her, his eyes darkening. That thing roaming around Lamplight had yet to be something he had come to terms with. "Inform me of their movements. Each and every one. I have a suspicion someone is moving chess pieces and we are too small to see the bigger picture. An outside perspective may be helpful. That, and someone that the market thinks is gone, should be in the background, helping everything develop."

Malcolm eyed her suspiciously. "I'm not keeping this from the people involved."

"I more meant keep it from the people we are against."

"I can do that."

"Then," Kamille said, dipping further down into the water. "We are on the same page. Now, please go get some rest. The world can wait for you to sleep." She disappeared, never one to say goodbye, leaving only a bubbling mass rippling beneath the water's surface and an army of crabs.

The world could wait for him to sleep.

Malcolm wasn't sure he agreed with the sentiment.

[Post Chapter Five - Milo](#)

[Jun 17, 2024](#)

A/N This one may feel as if it does not have an ending. But that is because it is going to lead directly into chapter six when it comes out.

Milo had gotten good at faking sleep. There was a rhythm to his breathing that he had to master years ago. A way in which he relaxed his body. It was something he picked up as a child when Feebus had

tried to demand that he stay home at night for his own safety. He'd fake sleep when Feebus did his rounds and then he'd sneak out through the upper window.

Tonight, he did it to try and get out of a conversation.

Which made him feel like shit in the end.

There was something Milo was coming to understand about himself. He was terrible at speaking. A weird kind of revelation to come to given who he actually was but when it came to trying to speak about anything of importance, he failed.

Opening his eyes, he looked around the now dim room. The kitchen was now clean, the gramophone had stopped, and Milo was alone. Sitting up, he scrubbed a hand across his face, letting out a shaky breath. Why was he even here? The last place he should have been was inside Malcolm's apartment, talking to... talking to Malcolm's lamplight. Malcolm's.

"Fuck."

He placed his head in his hands.

It was stupid, really. This idea that Lamplight belonged to anyone. Or that Malcolm had won some age old contest where he got the love story and Milo got shut out in the cold. It was so ridiculous to look at it in any sort of way that Milo himself should have just laughed about it all. But in the dead of night? Well, who had ever thought clearly in the dead of night.

Standing, he went into the kitchen, looking for something to drink. Malcolm didn't touch alcohol usually so he doubted he would find much. Rummaging through the cabinets would be a momentary distraction that he couldn't pass up. But, when he touched one of the cabinets, he felt something rip at the inside of his chest. It peeled away layers of muscle and skin, leaving him standing there, flayed and raw. Initially, he tried to fight the waves of confusion and pain but now, he let it wash over him before pushing his own magic back into the cracks.

Then there was nothing.

"Fuck fuck fuck." Another gate had tried to open. Another bit of the world trying to rip off this band aid that was holding it together. Every day Milo felt the pull become stronger. The power he funneled into trying to keep everything shut was a molten weight against him. But he couldn't let the world open back up again. He... he couldn't.

Leaning forward, he rested his head on the counter.

Could he?

Was there a reason he was keeping the world shut off because the world was actually dying? Was this what was fixing the Night Market? That's what he had been told. But the other things he had been told

turned out to be a pawn in another person's game. He hadn't even looked into the claims. He had just gone along with it. Accepting it all at face value.

No. No, that wasn't true either. He could *feel* it. He could feel the way the Market screamed each time a gate opened. They were in agony. But they kept sacrificing themselves for the greater good. To help those who had nowhere else to go. No one could go through that much pain and survive. And near the end, the frequencies in which the gates were opening, didn't allow for much of a chance to heal.

He could sacrifice himself, however. Turns out, that might be somewhat of an option. He just needed to do it slowly. Take bits of himself to patch up the doors and give them time to close. It would kill him in the end and someone else would become the Gatekeeper but if it was Mal then maybe....

He banged his head on the counter.

He needed to get out of here. Run. Just get away from the people that made him want to care. He wasn't supposed to fucking care. He didn't want to care. He didn't want to care. He didn't want to care...

"Milo?"

He startled, turning around at the voice. Lamplight. The Market. The individual he loved more than he thought he was capable of.

"Sorry. Did I wake you?"

They shook their head. "No. I was getting up to get some water. Were you..." Going to run. They woke up because they felt him about to run. It was a little known thing between Market and Gatekeeper. Intention was normally shared.

"Yeah," he admitted. Because what was the point in trying to lie. Distracting from the truth had gotten him here.

"Why?"

Milo swallowed. "Because I'm scared."

"Oh." It wasn't said with particular surprise. Just a weak kind of understanding. But then— "Do me a favor. Just don't."

"Don't be scared?" he laughed.

"Don't leave."

Milo didn't think he could do that. In the history of things, he was never one to be able to keep his promises. Like father, like son, he'd say.

But looking at them in the dim of the room, seeing the black fathomless eyes where the lanterns should be, he wanted to be better.

Turning, he walked back to the sofa, sitting down. It was the same one that had been in this apartment from the day Malcolm moved in. Milo might have even helped move it.

"Listen," he didn't turn around at the sound of their voice. Part of him wondered if they were really even here. "I know that you are trying to be honest. No tricks. No work arounds. I know you are trying. I want you to know that I see that."

He nodded, feeling the hair on the back of his neck stand. Why did everything hurt?

"And I want you to know that I appreciate it. After everything that has happened, I appreciate it more than you'll ever know. Because you killed me, Milo. You took advantage of me. You used me. And then you killed me."

Every muscle in his back stiffened as he felt them coming closer. They were so close now, pressed to the back of the couch and breathing down his neck.

"Do you think being honest, putting in the minimal amount of effort you are, is going to save you though? Make me love you again?"

"No," he whispered.

"No," the voice mocked. "You're having a constant pity party, Milo. Oh, poor Gatekeeper. Had to kill someone and now they don't love me back. Pathetic. You're pathetic. And when I am able to rip open a gate in this world, you're going to need to skin yourself alive to make me whole again. That's what you deserve. That's the effort you can give me. Not this meaningless thing where you only tell me one word truths."

"I'm sorry," Milo gasped, feeling the pain pierce his chest again. "I'm sorry." Hands wrapped around him from behind, long talons reaching into his chest and pulling until the bones underneath snapped. Until his heart was exposed.

"Aw," the taunting voice said. "Look at you. A black and shriveled heart. Just like dad. He'd be so proud of his boy."

The scream that ripped through Milo was one of a child's. That of the little boy with the broken hand that hid in the rain from the monsters. He was tiny and freckled again. Scared and confused. The only thing he had ever been able to do was scream.

But as long as he was screaming, he was still alive.



[Jun 26, 2024](#)

### **A/N This is for if you used the key at Lucinda's**

The streets sprawled out into a cobblestone gray expanse of broken clutter and derelict memories. Hazel pitched forward, squeezing herself through a hole in the wall. Her chest was too tight and magic crackled at her fingertips, turning the skin there a muddy black. Gone was the rich tone of the hands she used to know and instead decay slowly crawled forth, reminding her of the abomination she was becoming.

Tripping, she barely caught herself before tumbling forward into the slick of the streets. She didn't recognize this part of the market; a realization that sent her heart pounding even further. Vaguely, she remembered a time when she had refused to even leave the apothecary. Hell bent on staying inside the safety of her walls, letting customers and friends come to her. Foraging for her own food instead of going to the market. But now, she couldn't quite remember why that was. There were a lot of things lately that she couldn't seem to remember. And she knew she needed to be concerned about that. Who wouldn't be? But every time she mustered up the ability to care it slipped away like grains of sand.

"Hazel?"

She jumped, eyes searching the dark. Sharp teeth glowed from the depths, past where the candlelight could reach. They were pointed and made of pearl, a set of long talons emerging through the darkness, to reach for her.

"M-Malachi?"

A man stepped forward. Aqua hair like spun yarn falling over his shoulders while a set of violet eyes stared back at her. "What are you doing here?" His broad shoulders cast a wide shadow against the wall, tapering down into a narrow set of hips.

Hazel looked around. "I don't even know where here is."

"Near one of the Deep passages," the man rumbled. "There's an old well back there that leads down to the Baron's castle. Supposed to be blocked off but I broke it open."

"Right." Hazel hadn't a clue what he was really talking about. The idea of the Deep sent a shiver down her spine though. Instinctually, she did not like it there.

"You in trouble?" Malachi asked. He towered over Hazel, a long tale curling behind him, forming into a spade at the end.

"No. Yes. I— I am pretty sure my brother kidnapped me."

Malachi's eyes narrowed to mere slits, knuckles cracking at his side. "Where is he? I'll talk to him."

"No!" Hazel raised her hands up, ready to physically stop him. "No. It's not— he just— Him and my mother..."

"I don't care what his excuse is. You don't treat a lady like that."

"You're a literal dragon. I am sure you've done something very similar in your item."

He grunted, lips curling in a snarl. Though he did not deny it.

Dropping her hands, she sighed. "My family is complicated. My brother assumes my mother is controlling me. And I think he's been brainwashed. He's been traveling with someone that thinks they are in love with me."

"Are they?"

Hazel paused. "I think they think they are." She didn't detect a lie from them. She just couldn't understand how someone she had never met could look at her with such passion and such eagerness. It's what she always imagined falling in love would be like.

"But you don't know them."

She couldn't quite say that. There was something familiar about the stranger with the bottomless eyes. Something that Hazel wanted to fall into. But that didn't make sense. Hazel was used to lapses in her memory but forgetting an entire person felt like a much larger problem.

"Come on," Malachi said at her silence. A silence that spoke volumes. "I'll walk you home. Streets aren't safe anymore."

"Why not? I mean, I know why not. But have they gotten worse?" She looked around, expecting someone to jump from the shadows.

"Warden's gone on a killing spree."

"Gabriel?" That did startle Hazel While Gabriel Caine was not a warm man, she didn't see him as a cold blooded killer either.

Malachi shrugged. "Might be his name. Who cares. This place is probably better without him. Or any authority."

"Don't you come from an authoritarian family?"

"Why you lookin' so much into my past?" he growled.

"You've literally told me all this, Malachi," Hazel said with a sigh. He was one of her long-time customers. Having come to the Night Market to try and find his sister. Dropped in a world without his magic, fluctuating between his human form and dragon form without any warning. It had taken months to get the shift under control and quite a few tonics. Most of which she had to send down to the Deep.

"Whatever." Malachi gestured for her to start walking, the two of them heading down the street. The candles were out here. No one had come to relight them. Hazel wondered if anyone ever would. "Got to ask. You think there's a possibility you're being controlled?"

"By my mother?"

"By anyone."

Hazel thought about it for a long while. The inconsistencies. The blood that she had to wash from her clothes. The way she couldn't remember days at a time. "I think something really bad happened," she whispered. "And I think I don't want to remember it."

The lights up ahead burst green before guttering out.

"Fair enough," Malachi said. "Fair enough."

Behind them, stood answers. Hazel was certain of it. But she still walked forward.

[Post Chapter Five - Belladonna](#)

[Jun 26, 2024](#)

Reese had never kept the cleanest of houses. There was always more clutter than Belladonna knew what to do with. Yet, the amount of items that littered the cottage now, felt almost like a slap to the face. An on purpose kind of degradation that he instigated to fill the ones who left him with guilt. Picking up an old wine bottle, Belladonna ran her fingers across the layers of dust. Maybe she was projecting. Then again, she would never doubt Reese to be that petty.

"What are you looking for, kiddo?"

She had heard him of course. Most of the night he had been pacing. Tossing and turning. Checking on Gabriel. It was a true testament to how tired her dear heart was. They still remained asleep on the couch, arm tucked under their head, blanket pulled up and under their chin.

Belladonna wanted to take them away and lock them in the cathedral with her forever.

"A sign," she said, setting the bottle aside. "Thought I would try and read it in the dust motes."

"Prophecies aren't in things like that. That's for tea leaves or some shit." He walked next to her, reaching over his shoulder to grab a bottle of whisky. Pulling the cork, he spat it somewhere towards the direction of his sink.

"How drunk are you?"

"Not enough." He took a swig of the bottle before offering it to her. Her nose wrinkled as she shook her head. Reese just shrugged before kicking open his kitchen door, letting in a gust of the cool night air. Belladonna listened for a moment, expecting to hear the fireflies singing. She supposed there wasn't a lot to sing about now.

Following him outside, she found him in the old gazebo. The one he had begrudgingly built for Elias. He was sitting on the old swing, leaving just enough room for Belladonna to join him. With a sigh, she lowered herself down, holding her hand out for the whisky.

He smiled at her as he handed it over. "Knew you'd come around."

She then upturned it and tipped it into the rose bushes.

Reese's answering glare was far sharper than he normally turned on her. But this was clearly a man who wanted to forget. All his typical vices were not doing the job. Keeping eye contact with her, he reached into his leather jacket, pulling a small flask out. It didn't sound that full.

"You going to tell me why you are so attached to that being in there."

Belladonna rolled her eyes. "That 'being' has a name."

"Don't want to learn it."

Belladonna rolled her eyes. "You better. They are my heart mate."

"Heart mate? Bullshit they are. You don't even know what that is."

"Why?" she raised a brow. "Because I wasn't here constantly, listening to you and Elias speak of your bond? I didn't see what it did when you two were separated? Please, Reese. I am far more intelligent than you seem to be giving me credit for. I recognized the signs a while ago and then when they were obliterated, it felt like my spine was being ripped through my eyes."

Reese side eyed her. "Which would be why you burned part of the market?"

"Probably. Or it was just time."

Reese didn't seem all that surprised as he took another drink from his flask. Who hadn't, in this world, killed or burned part of it. It was becoming much more of a rarity to find a pure soul these days. "I would have done worse. I have done worse."

"I wanted to," Belladonna confessed. "But let's face it. I knew they were going to come back eventually. They're the Night Market. And as stupid as I think that Gatekeeper's entire existence is, he did save the Night Market. I just didn't think they would come back incorporeal. That's been inconvenient."

"Elias is still alive and I would burn the world for him. Even now."

A pang of guilt hit her. She should tell him. Let him know that this was all a ruse. That the reason they separated was nothing more than another lie. But she couldn't make the words come. "Elias would enjoy you causing destruction. My dearest Night would not."

"You never know what someone enjoys when it's done in the name of love. People can get pretty sick and twisted."

The smell of whisky made Bella's stomach roll. She really wished it would settle. She would love nothing more than to drink herself into oblivion and slip away for a while. "I burned down three districts. Killed twenty seven people. And took down the church of the Knowing."

"That was you?" Bella couldn't tell if he was impressed or the slightest bit saddened by the entire ordeal..

"That was me. No one was allowed to infer with what was to come. Especially if it meant that my love would be delayed in their return."

"Next time you go after anything that has to do with the Knowing, you tell me. Stop taking on that shit alone."

"If they become much more of a problem I might just send you after them."

The two of them sat in compatible silence for a long moment, listening to the sound of the creek and the way the water rushed over rocks. Long nights used to be spent here. Though, Elias and Gabriel had been by their sides then too.

"Did it have to be the Night Market?" Reese asked.

Leaning her head on the man's shoulder, she sighed a little, looking back at the house. "The heart wants what the heart wants. You know that."

Another long drink from his flask. This time until it was empty. "I know, kiddo. I know."

## [Beach Day - Milo](#)

[Jul 5, 2024](#)

Rain fell from the lanterns in a torrential gust of sweet smelling wind and sea. I squinted my eyes, trying to figure out just where it was that Milo had sent me and was kicking myself for my insistence on meeting him as opposed to just going with him earlier in the morning. Slinging my bag higher upon my shoulder, I squinted towards the maze of rocks ahead of me. He had told me the third left from the right. Now that I was here, though, the third left from the right made the kind of sense that didn't.

Trudging through the wet sand, I told myself I would give it five more minutes. If I couldn't find this place in that amount of time, then I was going home. The storm on the horizon was brewing and I was almost certain the waves were twice as big as they normally were. Not to mention, I didn't even know where 'this place' was. Because Milo being Milo, he gave little to no indication of what I was supposed to be looking for other than telling me I would just know it when I saw it.

My feet stuck in the sand, the Deep trying to suck me in. There was no part of me that wished to go visit Kamille today. Maybe Pen but they weren't often home. They tended to like the night sky, high above the lanterns when it was rainy like this. Claiming that the depths of the ocean were eerily dark during a storm.

When I turned the corner, I nearly stumbled into an old wooden sign, covered in sand. It read *"Three lefts from the right"*.

"You've got to be kidding me," I muttered. Looking up, I saw only a rock face in front of me, but there was a small fissure, the size of which got bigger the closer I got to it. By the time I was right in front of it, I felt my jaw drop open. Just on the other side, was a bright stretch of beach. Golden grains of sand shimmered in the nearly white gaze of the sun up above. Crystalline blue waves lapped gently against the shore and pretty red and white umbrellas dotted the beach. Behind me, the storm was picking up but right in front of me, was an idyllic little swath of land and sea. A section, I might add, that had Milo shirtless and lounging, his face tilted towards the sun.

Stepping through, I felt the heat immediately. The water across my skin began to sizzle from me, my clothes drying instantaneously. I could still see the dark gloom behind me but in the face of coconuts and the sweet smell of hibiscus, I couldn't find myself to even care.

"You made it!"

Milo popped to his feet as he jogged over to me. He wore a ridiculously tight pair of red shorts, his skin a light shade of bronze beneath the sun. The freckles across his shoulders and his chest were standing out more, pink beginning to brighten his arms as the sun took its toll. When he reached me, he picked me up, twirling me around before setting me back down into the sand.

"You have to take your shoes off," he grinned. He was breathless with excitement, his hands wandering over my sides and dancing across my ribs. "It hurts like a bitch if you stand too long in the sun but I like to think of it as a game of hot coals or something."

"Why would you take your shoes off then?" I laughed, having not seen him like this in a long while.

"Because it feels exhilarating." With his head dipped towards me, I could smell the sunscreen across him and the faint scent of some sort of beer. He was grinning wide, his eyes lit with joy as he reached down to hold my hand. "Come on. I want to show you something."

"Milo," I laughed as he dragged me across the beach. I dropped my bag, hearing it thump against the ground. His hand was warm within mine, slick with sweat.

"No, come 'ere. Look!" He stopped right at the edge of a tide pool, coming up behind me and wrapping his arms around my waist. "Just look at it."

The tide pool was shallow with bits of peach coral wrapping around purple starfish. Little green anemones swayed and flowed within the bubbling ripples and silver dollar fish swam in and out, jutting between grass and rock formations.

"I've never seen anything like them," he whispered to me. "Freaky little things."

I laughed, kicking my shoes off like he wanted me to and dipping my toes in the water. "That's what freaks you out? Fish?"

"Bears. Bears freak me out," he said seriously. "But, there are no bears here."

"You are an enigma, Milo Next."

"And you," he bent at the knees a little, his lips trailing across the juncture of my neck. "Are wearing entirely too many clothes."

"The last time we had sex on the beach, you complained that you had sand in your crevices for days."

"I came prepared," he said, nipping at the back of my ear. "I put an anti sand charm on. Got it off a peddler down in the bogs. They gave it to me for a kiss and a freckle."

"Meaning?"

"I gave them an old candy wrapper I found and a bit of seaweed and they gave me the charm."



I turned in his arms, seeing the amusement color his cheeks. Milo was happy here. Actually happy. Away from the areas of the market that bogged him down. The responsibility that had creased the corners of his eyes. Here, with me, he was relaxed. Giddy even. I wanted to bottle it up forever.

“You know that charm is probably just a hunk of copper, right? If I was that peddler I would have been insulted by your offerings and given you a rock.”

“I have good experiences with things that are supposed to be rocks.” He backed me up until I was sitting on a little boulder, my legs spread to provide him for some room. Reaching up, I ran my hands through his mat of curls.

“We also have good experiences with skinny dipping,” I told him.

He looked startled at the suggestion before bouncing up and down on the balls of his feet. “Yeah?” He was asking. His fingers kneading my hips. “Could we?” Such boyish charm. Anticipation over something so simple and yet something he greeted each time as if it were brand new. I envied him for that. His ability to fall into each experience with wild abandon.

“Yeah,” I told him, my voice soft as I cupped his cheek.

He smiled at me, turning to kiss my palm. “After, I want to rub suntan lotion on your back and watch you in the sun for a while. It’s a private beach so you don’t have to worry about anyone lookin’. I got it for the entire day.”

“I would like that, Milo. I really would.”

Picking me up, he held me to him tight, the sun bouncing off him and making the mess of his hair light up with strands of honey. “Then, let’s get these clothes off of ya, darlin’. I want to make a mess of you.”

Taking his face in my hands, I leaned down and kissed him soundly. Predictably, he melted into my touch, groaning against my lips.

“Love you,” he murmured.

“Love you, too.”

[Night Market After Dark E - Experience \(NSFW\)](#)

[Jul 5, 2024](#)

**Belladonna** - "One thing. I just want one thing that you've never done before. I want to be your first in something."

Bella looked at me with a touch of amusement. The concept of a 'first' for her was not something she was used to. Not anymore. "My heart, I have done everything under the proverbial sun. Nothing quite shocks me anymore. I dare say it would shock you if I went into what I have been paid to do. Especially during my early years."

"Probably," I agreed. "But, I'm not talking about what you've done to others. I'm talking about things done to you."

That put a stop to her. The wine glass she had been holding was halfway to her lips as she raised a brow. It was a challenge of sorts. Or her trying to tell me that I was treading too close to unwanted territory. Because Belladonna was something of an enigma. She enjoyed sex as long as she was giving it to others. But she became very cold when the topic of something being done to her arose.

"And what, pray tell, are you wanting to do to me?"

I cleared my throat. "I just— I was thinking maybe something that no one else has done. So you have no association with a client. If you don't like it, I'll stop immediately," I told her. The last thing I wanted to do was make her uncomfortable. Become a part of the slew of clients that had turned her off of her own pleasure nearly completely.

Setting her wine glass aside, she leaned back in her seat a little, tapping her fingers against the table. There was a far off look on her face as she raced through her thoughts to find something palatable. I could see the moment the idea hit her.

"Sex is a production," she said. "It is a performance in which I set the scene." There were candles. Silk sheets. Sparkling water for after. "I have never had sex randomly. It is always calculated. Usually instigated by me."

Standing, I walked up to her, moving aside the small table with her wine. Without comment, I sank to my knees, sliding my hands up her legs, beneath her skirt, and parting them. I could smell her. The silk panties she wore did little to hide her from me.

"Are you going to take charge, my muse?" I could hear her laughter but see the hesitation beneath her words. But, she wasn't pulling away.

I yanked her forward so she slid down in the chair, pulling her legs over my shoulders. I could see the surprise on her face then, along with the intrigue. "Quit talking," I told her. "It's my turn."

Slipping a finger beneath her panties, I sunk one deep within her. She was cold on the inside, and somehow, impossibly wet. I felt her walls clench around me as she bucked beneath my hand. When I looked up at her, gauging her interest, she had her head thrown back and one hand coming up to play with the piercing hooked through one hardened nipple. Quickly, I snatched it away.

"I said, my turn."

Her eyes were dark and her expression murderous. As I leaned forward to push another finger within her, I knew I was playing with fire.

## **Gabriel**

Shoving his hips against the wall, I swallowed him to the root. My knees scraped against the dirty cobblestone, the smell of sex and sweat heavy in the air.

Gabriel's hand came down, cupping the back of my skull as he hissed at the sensation. "We are in public," he growled.

I mumbled something around him, none of it intelligible as my mouth was stuffed full. I had taken him down a dark alley, just out of sight of his patrol route, and had proceeded to unbuckle his belt. The poor man hadn't realized what it was I was even attempting and just stood there flabbergasted until I sunk to my knees.

As his hips started bucking forward, I hummed around him. "We cannot— you mustn't..."

I didn't listen. Reaching between his legs I grabbed his balls, rolling them around in my hand and testing their weight. They were heavy with lack of release.

He muttered something like 'unethical' before he shot down my throat.

I milked him until he was soft in my mouth and my lips were sticky. Pulling off, I looked up at him. His hair was disheveled, the fronts curling in front of his eyes, and his eyes were pure silver.

"That was..."

I only grinned at him. "I know."

## **Hazel**

Hazel had her head thrown back in ecstasy, her wrists tied together and looped around my neck as she arched her back. She sat on my lap, legs spread as we swung back and forth on the little wooden swing hanging over the creek. Our toes were dipped in the water as I fucked her roughly, listening to her scream.

"That's it," I whispered to her. "Cum again for me."

She bucked against me, eyes tucked away behind her blindfold. I had led her down to the creek and told her to close her eyes. There, I stripped her, placing one of her woven scarfs across her eyes before leading her into the water. I had been bringing her pleasure ever since, feeling wave after wave course through her.

"Can't," she whimpered.

"You can." She said she had never been tied up before. Never been allowed not to touch. As a whole, Hazel's sexual experiences were mainly with herself. I wanted to bring out every bit of kink I could with her.

"Please," she begged. She begged for more. For it rougher. For me to never let it stop. I redoubled my efforts, fucking her with hard little slaps, hearing her mewl in pleasure.

When she came, my voice rang through the trees, several shocks of magic popping through the water. Her body fell against me boneless as she panted in relief.

"Again?" she asked after a long moment, her own release dripping down both our legs.

"Always," I told her.

## **Milo**

I pushed the ring low down on his cock, watching his dick jump at the sensation. Milo was lying on the flat of his back, his face twisting in somewhat discomfort.

"Does it hurt?" I asked curiously. I trailed my nail up the underside, tracing across the vein.

"It feels strange." He shifted a bit. "I don't really see how it's supposed to do anything."

"You are very excitable," I told him. "And sometimes, I need you not to be excitable. This helps with that."

"You love when I'm excitable," he protested. Reaching down, he ran his hand against the base of the ring. "Why is it rubber? What is wrong with people that they would make this thing rubber? It's gonna pull out all my hair."

I laughed a little, crawling closer to him. Gently, I wrapped my arms around him from behind, tucking my chin against his neck. "Get yourself off for me," I whispered. I could feel his heart jump under my hand and his breathing change. "I want to watch you."

"You want a show then let me take it off," he frowned. He was already gripping himself. His rings dragging across the soft head and down the shaft.

I nosed along the back of his ear, one hand coming down to knead at his ass. "Or, I could time you. See if you can beat your record."

He perked up at that. "Got get the stopwatch."

[Jul 9, 2024](#)

"Look at it," Hazel shrieked

We were standing among the waves, the sun overhead beating down on us. Hazel was bouncing waist deep in the ocean, flinging her arms back and forth and sending glittering streams of water high into the sky to rain back down. She twisted, looking at me over her shoulder, her hair highlighted with a golden tone. We had come here for a small vacation two days ago and what was supposed to be a day trip, now had us sleeping on the beach and counting the stars each night.

"You have to come in further," she was calling to me. "The waves are so strong!" The glee that wrapped around her words had me itching to hold her. To hear her laugh echo around us. She had been predictably nervous to come anywhere new. But when we had stepped through the crack in the beachside cliffs and she stuck her toes in the white sand, she couldn't help her pure delight. Getting her out of the water had been a chore that I gave up on until it became imperative that we eat. And even then, I was prone to simply bringing her mangos and coconuts that she could enjoy while playing in the waves.

"Would you get over here," she called out to me, giggling as she was nearly knocked over. I waded my way out towards her, reaching her just as another wave pelted her from behind. I caught her before she could go tumbling into the undertow, holding her firmly against my chest. She smelled like coconut and salt. I wanted to bottle that and her joy up forever.

"You see any dolphins yet?"

Lifting her arm, she pointed a few yards out where we could hear some chittering. No sooner had I spoken, did two jump out of the water in a display of finesse before diving back below. It had been a gift from the selkies. They had been sending sea creatures up to entertain us all day.

"We need to find something to bring to Bardle and Kai soon," she murmured, leaning back against me. "Maybe a few new hats. Or one of those little umbrellas."

"What are they going to do with a parasol?" I laughed. "There's no sun down where they guard."

"That's not the point. They like to be fancy. And fancy people need lace umbrellas." She tipped her head back to look up at me, grinning broadly.

This carefree version of Hazel was quickly becoming an addiction. The way she moved against me, the ease of her smile. There was a sensuality to it that I didn't often see back home. She swayed her hips

from side to side, content to exist in her swimsuit, the sand from the beach dotting her skin. At night, she would untie the green threads that held her top on, bathing naked in the moonlight.

"We will get them fancy umbrellas," I promised, kissing her on the shoulder and feeling the heat of her skin sear my lips.

Turning, she hopped up into my arms, wiggling until my hands laced beneath her bottom and she was flush to me. "I want to go deeper," she said. Given her height, she didn't trust herself going out too far.

Slowly, I walked the two of us out until we were nothing more than heads bobbing in the water. The waves were not as harsh here and the water was far cooler. Looking down, I could see bits of coral reef creeping near our toes.

"I never want to go home," she whispered to me.

I raised a brow to her. "Would you really give it all up? The shop. The customers. The garden. All of it for this?"

She pushed herself up, her breasts grazing against my chest until she could look down upon me. "I want to start a new shop here. One where I can sell coconuts. And sip fruity drinks all day." Holding her arms out, she tipped her head back, the golden rays from the sun darkening her skin. "We could swim with the mermaids. Trade seashells to the locals. And make love in the sand each night."

She yelped as I pulled her close to me, unable to resist the draw of her skin. Her lips. Pressing myself against her, I kissed her deeply, licking the sweet taste of papaya from her tongue. "I'd do anything for you," I whispered. "My island queen."

Hazel's laugh was giddy. "Then that settles it. We will be island royalty. We must talk to the selkies and have them set up our throne." She frowned a little in concern. "But we are going to be good and kind rulers. Give to people. Not take too much. And hold big cookouts for everyone at least once a week."

"Of course."

She hugged me tightly, the smile returning. "It'll be paradise," she whispered in my ear.

I didn't know if she was joking. Maybe there was some truth to her words. But as I stood with her, safe and warm in my arms, the ocean rocking us back and forth, I didn't care. Because all that mattered was that we had each other. We existed together under the light of an enchanted sun.

[Beach Day - Gabriel](#)

[Jul 12, 2024](#)

The waves lapped against the shore in a gentle lull, the sun high in the sky and scorching the sand a bright white. The wind sent a cool breeze our way, lingering against the salt and sweat that coated our skin. It was enough to keep us comfortable under the awning of an umbrella. Or it was enough to keep me cool at least.

Gabriel had yet to take off his uniform. In the height of the day, he was sitting in dark navy pants and coat, not even unbuttoning the collar. At least he had taken his gloves off. Though, I was unsure how that was going to do anything but deepen the scars that were already there.

"It is illogical," he stated. There was perspiration on his brow and the gel from his hair had worn off, leaving soft curls down around his face and ears.

"Sandcastles are not illogical. They are fun," I pointed out to him.

He was staring at the structure in front of me. I had taken a few old buckets and cups from my house, bringing them with us. He had been utterly confused when I pulled them out and started building and it hadn't gotten any better since.

"That structure will fall."

"Of course it will," I laughed. "When the tide comes in it'll go back down to the Deep."

He glanced towards the ocean as if he expected Kamille to rise up and snatch the sandcastle from me. "Then what is the point of building it if it's not going to be a lasting structure?"

I blinked at him over my shoulder. "For fun?"

Somehow, that always got to him. Fun. The one word I truly believed he didn't understand. Despite the time we had spent together, I wasn't sure what Gabriel did for fun. To relax. Other than sometimes sipping wine and staring out at the ocean. But I was not convinced that it was actually 'fun' for him.

"That wall will need to move out if you wish to have it accurate," he stated.

I glanced down at my makeshift castle. Several pillars stood tall with little windows and scalloped edges scratched into them. I had a mote on the outside and an inner wall surrounding the spires. I wanted to put a guillotine in the courtyard but didn't know how I could make it with sand.

"I'm not going for accuracy."

"You need to build it to be defensible," he stated. "And if you have only that small mote in between the sea and the wall, then you are going to have a crumbling castle with the first good wave that comes your way." Scooting over, he began pushing sand closer, gathering wet clumps and pouring it inside. "If you have a double outer wall with a second secret mote in between the walls, however, you'll have a



better fighting chance against the opposition. The first wall will be taken but it will act as a barrier and thus save the rest of the Keep. Let me show you.”

I was nearly pushed out of the way as his brow furrowed and he began to build the sandcastle. I watched as his fingers deftly formed another wall, adding a few archery towers. For a man who didn’t see the point of sandcastles, he was very intent on making the fiction world as strong as possible when it came to the seat.

“We should gather seashells,” he told me. “They can act as sandbags.”

“For the sand?”

“Precisely.”

Reaching out, I took his hand in mine, giving it a gentle squeeze. When he turned to me, he almost looked startled. As if he couldn’t understand how he had gotten to this point of taking over construction. He scooted back a bit.

“Apologies,” he murmured. “I did not mean to take this from you. Forgive me.”

“Gabriel,” I grinned. “It’s okay. I like when you get passionate.”

He sat back as if embarrassed. “I am not passionate about such silly things.”

“You are passionate about construction, it seems. I’m pretty sure if I gave you a bottle you’d have a ship built within it by the afternoon.”

He looked at me perplexed. “Why on earth would you build a ship within a bottle? That is highly inefficient”

I shook my head. Standing, I reached out my hand to him, helping pull him to his feet. “Would you like to go get some sea shells for defense?”

Gabriel looked at me and then back at the castle. “Driftwood as well.”

That night, as the tide came in, our structure did not stand the onslaught. He gave a valiant effort but in the end, the Deep was too strong. Gabriel sat behind me, his arms wrapped around me. He grunted in dismay, beginning to whisper all the ways our next sandcastle would be better. That it would stand once more. I leaned back into his chest, feeling the way his fingers laced together across my stomach and sighed. I never wanted to leave this moment.

[Jul 12, 2024](#)

A/N: Warning: Rough sex. Takes place in an AU version of the Night Market

The bell rang over the shop door, a pleasant little jangle coursing through the room to signal the arrival of a customer. Hazel popped up from behind the front counter, her smile bright.

"Welcome to the Apothecary! How can I..." Her smile soon rolled into trepidation. "Oh. Hi."

A chilly wind brushed Hazel's curls aside, sending a shiver down her spine. The smart click of heels echoed across the pine wood floor, sending her heart beating wildly.

"You've been avoiding me," Belladonna tsked at her. The woman walked across the room, her pale skin on display. She wore a sheer lace dress that shifted with the light, hiding just enough of herself from prying eyes. "Why is that, my little witch?"

"Bella. I mean, Mistress Malady. Bella. I... I'm not avoiding you." Hazel's cheeks turned peach as she stumbled over her words. "I've been busy?"

"Oh," Bella pouted, sauntering towards her. Hazel's eyes caught on the way her hips swayed. The way the material shifted across her. "You've been busy, have you? How quaint." Stepping around the counter, she tipped her head to the side, her long crimson hair falling over one shoulder in waves. "I must say, I am a bit disappointed in that response. I thought I made it clear you were never too busy for me."

Hazel swallowed thickly. "You did. You very much did but," she bit her bottom lip. "I've been doing everything you've asked of me. Eating when I need to." The lie cut across the room as Belladonna grabbed her by her hips, lifting her up onto the counter.

"Have you? You're looking a little thin. I don't think you're eating enough."

Hazel dipped her head down, her own hair hiding her eyes behind a mass of kinky waves. "I've been trying," she murmured.

"And how about my other rules?" Belladonna asked. "Have you been trying there as well?" A pale hand began to slide up Hazel thigh, reaching under the layers of her skirts. Slowly, Hazel parted her legs, allowing the woman access. Two fingers slipped inside her without warning, making Hazel gasp, her back arching as she reached behind herself to hold onto the edge of the counter. Belladonna purred in satisfaction. "Good girl," she rumbled. "You've kept yourself wet for me."

"Yes, mistress," Hazel whimpered.

"Has anyone else received your pleasure?" She began pumping her fingers in and out, her thumb running across the bundle of nerves. Hazel was so responsive. Bella found she most enjoyed all the ways she could make the woman moan with even the slightest touch.

"No," Hazel gasped. "This is for you. Only for you."

Belladonna stepped forward, her other hand coming up to deftly begin untying the front of Hazel's tunic. The shirt was low cut and as the strings came undone, the blouse fell open, revealing two plump breasts. The likes of which heaved with each breath Hazel took.

"You may get yourself out of trouble yet," Belladonna murmured. Leaning forward, she sucked a pert nipple into her mouth, her tongue flicking across the tight bud. Hazel cried out, bringing her legs up to rest her feet on the counter, giving Belladonna more room.

Fangs extending, Belladonna sunk them into the soft areola, sucking deeply at the pulse of blood. She pulled off after two pulls, examining her work. The dark skin was engorged and flecked with blood. The very sight of it was pleasing enough for Bella to add a third finger.

"Please, mistress," Hazel gasped. "I need more."

"I'll tell you what you need," Bella drawled. "And right now, you have been naughty. While I am happy you have kept yourself ready for me, you still have not been eating. I can't abide by that."

"I'll eat," she said. "I swear to you I will. I'll do anything you want." Hazel's entire body was flush, sweat beginning to pool on her brow. Around them, the candles began to flicker, the soft hue of them turning a deep green.

"Anything?" Bella asked.

"Anything."

Pulling her fingers out, Bella brought them to Hazel's lips. "Suck."

Without hesitation, Hazel enclosed her lips around the three digits, moaning wantonly at the musky taste. Bella took her by the chin, fucking her mouth with her fingers roughly. Spit and drool began dripping from Hazel's lips, running down her chin.

"So pretty," Belladonna cooed, eyes burning bright "You take me so very well."

Hazel opened her eyes, looking up at her through her lashes. Her eyes were black and full of need as she widened her legs further, moving her hips in small circles in hopes of gaining Bella's attention back to where she truly needed it.

Belladonna grinned. "Do you need me, little witch? Do you need my fingers back down there? My tongue? Or," she leaned in close, licking the sweat from her cheeks. "Do you need me to grow a cock

for you? Fuck you hard and fast? Would you like it if a woman was able to take you? Make you beg? Make you cum until you don't know your own name.” She pulled her fingers out with a wet pop, grabbing Hazel's throat instead. “Answer me.”

Hazel gasped loudly, crying out as her body tensed up and shook. Her eyes rolled back in her head, hips bucking off the counter. As warmth gushed between her legs, Belladonna grinned at her in satisfaction, only then loosening her grip.

“Good girl. So very good for me. My dear sweet, Hazel.”

Hazel's skin was flush with orgasm, her cheeks wet with tears. “I'm sorry,” she whispered. “I'll eat. I promise I'll eat.”

“You will,” Belladonna said. “You'll do so now, in fact.”

Pulling her hips forward, Belladonna wrapped Hazel's thighs around herself before tipping her head to the side. Hazel stared at her for a long moment, her fangs extending downwards as she ran her tongue across the points.

When she didn't move forward, Bella blinked at her. “Something you are waiting for, my dear?”

The green flame within the room burned brighter, whispers from the shadowy corners chanting. The lace of Belladonna's gown slipped away as shadows began wrapping around her instead.

“I want to bring you pleasure,” Hazel said shyly. “I'll still eat but... it's only fair.”

Something in Bella's eyes softened as she looked at her beautiful little bog witch. So much power contained inside such soft curves. “Are you asking for permission?”

“Yes.” She was looking at Bella hopefully.

Leaning forward, Belladonna captured her mouth with her own, tracing her tongue against the seam of her lips before sliding it wetly against her own. It was all the permission Hazel needed. The shadows came together at Hazel's command, slipping between Belladonna's legs to play. She gasped a little, surging forward and taking more of Hazel, bending her back. Meanwhile, the shadows pumped in and out of her, tightening around her clit and vibrating.

When Belladonna pulled back with a hiss, Hazel lunged forward, sinking her fangs into the milky white skin that was exposed to her. The piercings along Belladonna nipples cut in her own chest, opening back up the wound upon her breast. But Hazel only growled as she jerked Bella forward, taking deep sucking pulls from her and feeling her orgasm begin to swell again.

“That's it,” Bella gasped, petting the back of Hazel's hair. She locked her legs as the shadows fucked her, slithering inside of her and reaching every spot of pleasure. Her body burned as Hazel laved at her throat, taking from her in such carnal need. When her own orgasm burst across her, she merely tipped

her head back, ripping Hazel's from her by the roots of her hair. Blood spilled down over her chest, dripping in rivulets down the flat of her belly. Her body shook, convulsing as she pushed Hazel downwards, shoving her face between her legs.

"Take it," she demanded. "Take all of it."

Hazel's tongue came out, licking at the wet lips and sucking on the oversensitive clit. With her own hand, she reached down, fucking herself harshly on her own fingers, crying out against Bella's cunt as she came once more.

When Hazel pulled back, her face was wet with Bella's juices and her body was smeared in blood in several places. Belladonna was completely put back together again, as if nothing had happened. No blood. Lace dress in place. Hair perfectly coiffed.

She reached down, running her fingers across the mess of Hazel's body. "Go clean yourself up," she whispered. "And remember to never go without a feeding again. Do you understand?"

Hazel blinked at her, eyes fully black. "Yes, mistress."

"Good girl," Bella whispered, leaning down to nip at her lips. "My good, dirty girl."

She was gone in a flurry of bat wings, leaving Hazel still kneeling on the ground, shaking with aftershocks.

[Beach Day - Malcolm Albright](#)

[Jul 16, 2024](#)

The shells were half buried, hiding in the sand from nimble fingers and chilly waves. Occasionally, a blue or coral glint would catch the light, giving away their hiding spot. It was then that we would begin meandering towards it, deciding if it was good enough for the collection we had been hoarding.

"Why this form," Malcolm was asking. The evening was coming upon us. A cooler dip from the harsh midday sun. "When you chose to come down and join us in the realm of the living, why did you choose the body you did?"

We paused. He crouched down, digging a scalloped edged shell from beneath the sand. It was chipped in the corner and yet somehow struck me as absolutely perfect.

"What?" I teased. "Don't like what you see?"

A chuckle escaped him as he dusted the grains of sand from the seashell, his lips curling into a small smirk. "You know that is not true. Stop fishing for compliments."

"Compliments go a long way to getting what you want." Not that I would ever deny Malcolm. We both knew that the man was my weakness. Even back when I was nothing more than a light in the dark..

"You've gotten what you've wanted," he chided. "Several times over today, if I recall."

I laughed loudly. Malcolm's penchant for delivering his words with such a dry cadence never ceased to delight me.

"I'm curious," he said, standing and tucking the seashell away. "As someone who has changed their form a bit, why did you choose this one?" He gestured to my body, his eyes following the lines that he knew so well.

Reaching down, I threaded my fingers through his own as we continued to walk along the beach. "I'm not sure there is an exact reason," I confessed to him. "Mostly, I think that I chose the kinds of things I admired. Someone who was able bodied enough to traverse the world. A form that was adept at keeping up with others. Hands that could hold and give comfort. Ears that listened."

There was something about my words that spoke to Malcolm. He had always been a person that consumed whoever he was speaking with. His gaze formed in such a way that it felt as if there was no one else in the entire world.

"And everything else?" he asked, gesturing to my hair. The color of my skin. The bridge of my nose.

"Fashion," I laughed. "Different little features to try on and change when I see fit." The waves lapped against our feet, covering our already pruney toes. "Would you mind?" I asked him. "If I changed the way I looked every few years?"

"No," he said, the sun catching the line of his jaw. "Who am I to judge? Besides, looks mean very little."

"Let me guess. It's what's on the inside that counts?"

"The inside is a series of organs and intestinal tubes. We're all the same there," he shrugged. I noticed how he turned his face up to the setting sun. He was not a man who was supposed to live in the dark.

"No, for me, it's how a person conducts themselves. That's what matters."

"How so?"

"Well," he tugged at my hand, leading me over to a bent coconut tree. The two of us hopped up on the leaning trunk, feet skimming the beach. "Someone that conducts themselves morally. Ethically. I tend to have more respect for them. Someone who conducts themselves without reproach? Probably not going to give a lot of time to."

"You sound like you've had experience with that."

"I was that," he confessed. "I was someone who went out into the world and caused harm and felt no remorse. I took what I wanted. Said what I wanted. I didn't care who it hurt or the lives it may alter. I only looked out for myself. And even when I knew I was wrong. Even when the evidence was right in front of me, I dug my heels in and made others feel lesser just so I wouldn't have to admit to making a mistake."

I could see it. The hint of fire behind his eyes. The self hatred for a person he had been so long ago and yet couldn't seem to shake. "You're not him anymore," I said softly.

Lifting my hand, he brushed his lips to my knuckles. "I know that," he whispered. "And I make sure to remind myself of that. But, that is why I also don't care what you look like. Grow a second head. Have scales for skin. Look like the most basic person in all the realm. It will never matter to me how you look, Lamplight. It will only matter who you are. And I've got to say, I really like who you are."

"I really like who you are too, Mal."

When his arm wrapped around me, I leaned in. The warmth and protection he so readily gave made me almost dizzy with affection for him. I wondered if he knew. If the sentiments he gave me he believed for himself. Because I loved him. I loved him like he was the air I breathed. Malcolm spoke frequently about how I had saved him. Time and time again I was his guide in the dark. But I wondered if he knew how much he saved me. Just by enacting such simple acceptance.

Leaning forward, I captured his lips against mine, licking the salt from his lips. He sighed against me, his hand splaying against my back, pulling me close and refusing to let go. I felt his tongue come out to trace against my own, softly exploring and taking his time.

Beneath the setting sun, we sat. Exploring each other. Understanding who the other had grown to be. And in the dying light, I clung to him, silently letting him know just how precious he truly was.

[Beach Day - Belladonna](#)

[Jul 22, 2024](#)

The lace parasol cast intricate shadows upon the ground, dotting the white sand with shaded bits of fractal light. The ocean waves were lapping gently and the sound of distant seagulls became a background to the late afternoon. Belladonna sat mainly in the shadows, having had her fill beneath the parasol. She took cover now in the cool shadow of a boulder, her legs crossed beneath her with a permanent scowl on her face.



"We can go home," I told her not for the first time. Why she had wanted to come out here was beyond me. The discomfort she felt poured off of her and any activity that we could partake in would either be done with her as a voyeur or after the sun finally set.

"I do not wish to go home," she parroted. It was done with the same tone it had been spoken each time she asked.

"You're not having fun."

"I am enjoying every second of this," she snapped. 'It is you who are not partaking in any of the activities planned. Perhaps you are the one who is not having fun.'

I raised a brow towards her. "I know you enjoy gaslighting people when you are upset but I really am worried about you out here in the sun. I'm not sure what you are trying to prove."

"I'm not trying to prove anything."

"Then let us go home," I urged. I had visions of her bursting into ash in front of me. A slow and painful death that left her indiscernible from the sand beneath our feet. The fact that she wasn't concerned with that and looked more annoyed at the sun, gave me a surging amount of anxiety that I didn't know I could feel.

"Dear heart, come here."

And like a moth to the flame, I did as she said, scooting close to her and leaving a displaced edge of sand around us.

Pushing me against the rock wall, Belladonna did something I was not used to. She leaned against me. Taking a blanket, I wrapped it around me before promptly wrapping my arms around her. It covered the top half of her bikini clad body and a decent amount of her legs.

"Do you feel better, my great protector?" she laughed.

"Yes."

"Then hush." She snuggled back into me. "The sun will be setting soon and that is why we are here."

It hit me then. Living in the Night Market allowed for very little exposure to light. A safety measure that every vampire loved but overall, not something that was sorely missed given that most occupants had never seen the sun before. But Bella? Bella was born in the sun. She grew up on a farm, playing in wheat fields. She let her skin darken each year, spotted with sunspots and freckles. She bathed naked in the streams and warmed herself on rocks.

"How long has it been since you've seen the sun?"

She was silent for a long moment, staring at the burning orb through the shield of diffused light. "I don't even remember," she whispered. "I can still feel it, however. The way it used to dry the sweat on the back of my neck after walking home from church. The smell of it as the grass dried out for the season."

"You don't talk of home much." I knew how important it had been to her. How much she still idealized a world that was long gone.

"It hurts to do so at times," she told me. "And I am very aware that my memory is probably not the brutal reality of it. I have read books from my world. Historic texts about the time I lived in. I don't think I could exist in such a place now. They didn't take kindly to strong women, it seems."

"I can't imagine you being anything but strong."

"I was— I was softer, I think. Quiet. I tried to do what was expected of me. What the church wished of me. And there was a lot of comfort in that."

"I'm sensing a 'but'."

Her lips curled up in that secret grin that I loved. "But, there were the nights I snuck out at night to go dancing at the local tavern with the boys coming in from the shipyard. And perhaps an evening or more was spent with the barmaid in the back storeroom."

"Why Belladonna Malady," I laughed. "You deviant you."

"You know what the funny thing is? I didn't even do anything," she huffed, almost in regret. "Oh a few of them got their hands up my skirts but mostly, it was the thrill of the chase. The hunt, if you will."

"So not much has changed." She pinched me on the leg, the pad of her thumb soothing the offense.

Tipping her head back, she rested it on my shoulder. "Did you know that I was unaware of what sunlight does to vampires? I was turned and no one told me. Why would they in a world such as it is. Then, one day, I found an enchantment. Just a nondescript little medallion to hang in the wood that would cast sunlight into the room. I nearly died."

I held her tighter then, trying to rid myself of the flash of memory I saw. The smell of burnt flesh and the way she screamed as ash poured from her, swirling on the ground. How she hid under the bed for an entire day until someone found her.

"I miss it so much," she whispered.

"We can do this more often if you like. As long as we are safe." I didn't want to tempt fate. In fact, I wanted to take her far away from this dance of death she was teasing. Her body felt weaker in my arms with each passing hour.

"Perhaps," she said lightly. "For now, I would just appreciate watching the sunset. I've never done this before."

I frowned. "I thought you said—"

"Let me correct myself. I've never watched the sunset in the arms of the person I love." She craned her neck towards me, a smirk on her face. She knew what she was doing. She knew what those words would do to me. "Would you care to experience this with me, my heart?"

I brushed the hair from her face, my lips meeting the chilly feel of her own. "Everyday for the rest of my life."

She grinned, her fangs slicing into my bottom lip. "Which, if I have anything to do with, will be forever." Settling back against me, she pulled the blanket tighter around us. It was sweltering in the sun but Bella's body cooled my own while I warmed hers. Neither of us moved as the sun made its journey through the sky. And when it finally began to set, Belladonna allowed me to wrap myself around her further, taking her with the dying rays of the day reflected in her eyes.

[Beach Day - Milo/Mal](#)

[Jul 24, 2024](#)

The ball hit the sound with a dull thunk, accompanied by a triumphant yell from Milo as he did a victory lap around the net. I watched his bare feet slap against the ground, coated with sand. Meanwhile, Malcolm stood, hands on his hips as he observed Milo with a bemused smile.

"Ladies and gentlemen," Milo called out to the singular crowd of me. "Today we have a fine specimen for your viewing pleasure. Sir Milo Next! Direct to you from the fae lands where he has taken gold in volleyball the last eight seasons. They say he is unstoppable. The savant among his kind. The Unbeatable Next they call him. When he enters a room, the crowd goes wild!"

On cue, I began cheering for him, laughing as he bowed to his imaginary audience.

"That was one point, Button. You are still trailing behind," Malcolm said.

Milo ran back to his side of the net, taking position again. "Nervous, Mal. Shakin' in those proverbial boots of yours? I get it. I would to. It's not every day you get to see this amount of gorgeous man meat."

Malcolm rolled his eyes, grabbing the ball. "That does not sound as sexy as you think it does." Before Milo could catch it, Malcolm spiked the ball over the net, scoring another point on Milo. He smirked at

the man. "Where's your talk now, man meat?"

"Careful, Mal. You are upsetting your Lamplight. I can see it. They are crying with how cruel you are."

Malcolm looked my way. I gave him a small wave. "Oh yeah. They look really broken up."

"I'm crying on the inside," I told him. "Just too ashamed to show it."

Milo pointed at me as if to say 'see!'. Meanwhile, Malcolm just shook his head and got ready for Milo to serve.

The two of them had been at it for most of the afternoon. The second we got to the beach, Milo and I had run into the water, laughing as the waves beat against us and Malcolm got lunch ready. I then spent the afternoon lounging against Malcolm as we munched on sandwiches and juicy fruits. I was pretty sure I had dozed off at some point. My eyes closed as I lounged in the warmth of the sun and the way Malcolm's skin smelled of coconut. When I had woken, it was to the feel of Milo's lips trailing down my skin as he blocked the sun with his body and explored my body.

After, he had popped up with far more energy than anyone should be gifted with, claiming I needed sunscreen. Malcolm had taken the bottle from him, saying he would get my back. And then the fight had pursued. A fight that ended in them betting on who got to lather me up, wagering the privilege in a game of volleyball. Never mind that at this point, the sun was on the other side of the rocks and I didn't need my back reapplied. I wasn't going to protest against two shirtless men displaying themselves in such a way beneath a hot sun.

Milo gained another point or two and acted predictably but Malcolm was the same stoic calm that he always was in the face of Milo. The other man could hardly ever get a rise out of him and it had the desired result of making Milo grind his teeth.

"Last point," I declared to the two of them. Milo suddenly wasn't laughing as much anymore. I could see the redness on his cheeks. His curls matted down with sweat. It was Malcolm's serve. He held the ball in his hand, looking at Milo with a sense of mocking pity. I could feel Milo's anger actually rising.

"Now, Button. We could just call it. You could forfeit and save yourself from humiliation. In fact, I'll even let you lather up Lamplight."

Milo's eyes narrowed. "What's the catch?"

"No catch," he said. "You just would have to say that Malcolm Albright is the greatest volleyball player of all time. And that you suck."

Milo replied by flipping him off. "Serve, you son of a whore."

Malcolm winked, taking position. I watched as the beads of sweat traced the lines of his faded scars. How his eyes darkened because while he would never admit it, Malcolm had a competitive streak a mile

long and needed to beat Milo at this game for the sole purpose of the other man never having bragging rights.

I held my breath as I watched the two of them. Their skin tanned beneath the sun. The gold in Milo's hair catching the light. The bronze undertones of Malcolm's skin making him look like a god. I was not afraid to admit that I was distracted when the final serve was given. Though, I wasn't surprised at the result. There was no way in hell that Malcolm was going to be able to let Milo win.

Milo gave a valiant effort. He hit the ball back and forth, diving and spraying sand all around. He nearly had it too but his dive was just slightly off. He fell an inch too short, falling into the sand with a thud.

I clapped loudly, whistling and cheering as Malcolm walked over to Milo, holding out his hand. Milo rolled to his back, glaring.

"Cheat," he told him.

Malcolm cocked his head to the side. "Aw, come now. Don't be a sore loser." He reached down, yanking Milo to his feet. The two of them were covered in sand. "Don't want Lamplight to see that oh so ugly side of you, do you?"

"Darlin'," he called out. "Is it alright with you if we break up with this asshole?"

"No," I called out. "I kind of like him."

Milo sighed.

I knew they were both running on testosterone fueled energy. That there was a slight undercurrent of irritation whenever they interacted with each other. But I also knew they loved each other. Their love just came a little easy with me rather than each other.

"Go on then, Mal. Rub oil on their back."

I cleared my throat. "Actually," I said. "I'm not really into the entire thing of being a prize. That was kind of you two making that decision without consulting me." They both looked equally horrified. Suddenly realizing what they had done. "So, I think it is only fair that I decide the prize now. For the real winner, that is. Which is me."

It was not what they expected. Malcolm raised a brow and Milo for a moment looked like he was going to protest but then the idea of getting his lips on Mal hit and he was smiling.

"Damn, darlin'. That's one hell of a punishment."

"I know," I said solemnly. "Now kiss."

Malcolm snorted in laughter. "That is punishment."

Milo was kicking his feet in the sand. "Do we have to?"

Standing, I walked up to the two of them. I could feel the arousal within Milo already and hear the thud of Malcolm's heart. I moved myself behind Milo, wrapping my arms around his waist, one hand trailing down to play with the waistband of his shorts.

"Now, Milo," I murmured. "You lost. Take your punishment fair and square, okay?"

He sucked in a breath as my hand slipped beneath the waistband of his shorts. "Okay."

I watched over Milo's shoulder as Malcolm took two steps forward. Reaching out, he cupped Milo's face, his thumb dragging down across Milo's bottom lip. His eyes were locked on mine though. Tonight, Milo was ours. Ours to love. Ours to play with. And he was going to be ours without a single complaint.

I nodded my head towards Malcolm.

Gently, I cupped Milo's half hard cock in my hand, feeling the weight of it in my palm, just as Malcolm swallowed his gasp. Between us, Milo shuddered, pressing into my hand as he let Malcolm's tongue lick lewdly inside the corners of his mouth. Milo's hand reached back to wrap around me, trying to grip me tight. I ran my nail along his slit, sucking a bruise into the freckled skin of his back.

"Say it, Milo," Malcolm murmured against him.

"Say what?" he gasped.

I laughed against his skin. "Say that you lost," I told him. "Humility is good for you." I squeezed him tight, reveling in the hiss that escaped him.

"I— I uh—" His entire body stiffened. With Malcolm in front of him and me behind him, he was lost in a haze of lust. But, he was still Milo. "I will never lose," he gritted out. Turning, he grabbed me around the waist, flinging me over his shoulder and beginning to run towards the ocean. I laughed loudly, holding on so I would fall. "They are mine, Malcolm Albright! You want them, come rescue them from the sea."

As we splashed in the water, I could hear Malcolm laughing on the shore. I could smell Milo's skin. Feel the way he surrounded me and the way that he held me. As he set me down, the waves crashing around my hips, I looked up at him.

"You know you're not escaping what Malcolm and I have planned for you, right?"

He grinned. "What do I need to do to convince you to change sides?"

Scooting up close, I rolled my hips against his. "I bet we could figure something out."

[Update](#)

[Aug 4, 2024](#)

Just wanted to let everyone know that Patreon content is going to be a little later this month. Mostly because Chapter Six is being beta'd right now and I want to put that out and then do the post chapter stories for the month. Don't worry, I have not forgotten about you all! I just and trying to get the next chapter all put together for you. :)

[Chapter Six - Early Access](#)

[Aug 8, 2024](#)

It is finally here! Chapter Six is out! Welcome to the Outlands. I cannot wait to hear what you all think of this one. So much of this chapter was written and then rewritten but I think I finally came up with the direction I want this book to go.

Let me know what you all think and as always, enjoy!

Link: <https://the-night-market.itch.io/the-night-market-book-2>

Password: Out!@nd\$

[Chapter Six Bug](#)

[Aug 9, 2024](#)

For the life of me, I do not know why some of you are getting a bug that won't let you proceed to chapter six. So, I have added a cheat sheet in there to input some of the choices that I suspect are causing the problem. Please clear your cache and cookies on your computer, and try again.

I am sorry for the confusion.

Zinnia

[Update](#)



[Aug 19, 2024](#)

I am so sorry I have not been posting the promised Patreon shorts. I will be doing so today and tomorrow. My stepfather wound back up in the hospital and I had to go down and help my mother in another state. In total, we have been gone for close to two weeks and have drove nearly 30 hours with two kids packed into a tiny car. It's been a lot.

For anyone that is still dealing with an issue in chapter six, please delete your save file, delete your cookies and browser history, start over, and proceed from there. Twine updated in the last month and it has screwed everyone's coding up. If you are still having problems after that, please contact me.

[Post Chapter Six - Hazel](#)

[Aug 19, 2024](#)

There was a tree that was situated on the other side of a large stone wall. Even with the shifting of the market, the wall had somehow stayed, as if to protect the tree from any of the dangers that now wandered. Hazel silently thanked the luck that had befallen said tree. She had been certain that it would be destroyed along with everything else. The market was looking more and more like a stranger these days. She loathed to admit that it left her feeling empty.

The apothecary had been decidedly slower so when the morning dawned and Hazel yet again found herself with no orders, she had decided to wander.. To try and help where she could. When she found herself near the large tree with the gnarled branches that reached high above the broken lanterns, she stopped. She used to come here with Milo. With... she used to come here a lot. To look out over the realm. To watch the people dance during the lantern festival. To gain perspective. So when she found herself climbing the tree, it was really no surprise. The deep branches had always offered a certain solitude that the apothecary could not. Hazel was convinced that the tree itself was imbued with magic.

Settling, she pulled her messenger back from around her shoulder and hung it from one of the branches. She leaned against the branch, swearing she could feel a pair of arms wrap around her. A memory perhaps. The feel and smell of a person who had once loved her. Hazel enjoyed seeing them in her dreams and wondered if they actually existed. Or if her mind was just running away with her again.

There was a small flutter above her and a slight creak to the branches above. It caught Hazel's attention only moments after she had perched on her own branch. Peering upwards, Hazel pushed her hair from

her eyes. A man sat above her, his lanky frame situated upon the branch and his long coattails draped behind him.

"Hello," he greeted. Pale blue eyes stared down at her.

Hazel couldn't help the small laugh that escaped her. The man himself looked somewhat amused. A chance meeting on the boughs of a tree. "Hello. I wasn't aware anyone else was here."

"Just got here," the man said. "Don't suppose I could come share a branch with you."

Hazel scooted over, motioning for him to join her. She watched as he twisted his body around, holding onto the branch before expertly dropping next to her. This close, Hazel could see the sharp bones of his fingers and the shimmer of magic that coated him.

As he settled, he looked out over the market, his eyes growing a bit wide as he surveyed the surroundings. He let out a low whistle. "Lights are out," he observed.

"They have been for a bit."

"Thought they would be back on by now," he said. "Guess I'm here a bit early." He had a strange way of speaking and Hazel wondered how he even got here. The gates were closed. But the magic on him was far more potent than what usually hid within the streets. Power thrummed with every breath and Hazel was almost certain she could see different forms of him, shifting across various branches of the tree.

"What are you doing up here?" he asked. Then, quickly, he waved his hands. "Never mind. Don't tell me. Sorry about that. I forget sometimes that people aren't just automatically willing to tell a stranger a story."

The thought that she should be nervous hadn't even crossed her mind. Which, she could acknowledge was a stark difference to the years before but she couldn't pinpoint what had changed.

"Are you a traveler?" she asked him.

"You could say that. Try to be at least. Sometimes it doesn't work out."

"You have a lot of magic on you."

He looked at her out of the side of his eye with a coy smile. "So do you."

At that, Hazel looked at her hands. They were stained black at the tips now. The beds of her nails looking charred. "Do I? I can't always see it. I— Can you tell if it's mine?"

The man turned to get a good look at her, taking a moment to study her. Hazel waited with baited breath. His words shouldn't matter. She knew this. But, she had no one else to talk to anymore.

"Most of it," he finally concluded. "The big parts are. Little bits here and there are not yours, though. Yours adjacent, maybe? Demonic and something other."

"Demonic?" Hazel frowned. "Are you sure?"

"Oh yeah. I know my demons. Believe you me."

Hazel assumed the something 'other' was her mother. She wondered if the woman had reached out to another to help control her this time around. Though she didn't see Lucinda dealing with demons. She had always had a disdain for them. The fact that Hazel could even recall that was a revelation all in itself.

"Sorry," he winced. "I do that sometimes."

"Do what?" She didn't think she had said it outloud.

"I make magic go a little awry. Things can get mixed up around me. See, I exist in several different timelines at once. Normally, not a big deal here in the Night Market. But it can mix with some of the more potent magics. Almost like one magic doesn't like the other. I think I just pushed something out of your mind that wasn't supposed to be pushed, Though, looks like maybe you'll be a bit more free thinking now. At least until you leave this tree."

Hazel blinked at him. "I think my mother is trying to control me," she said bluntly.

The man hissed. "Have some experience in that one. My sympathies."

"I haven't been able to even say that outloud."

"Glad I can help."

But the second she left this tree, it would be gone. What help was it really if clarity only came when she was high above the world, away from it all. She had stumbled across the tree. Had practically forgotten about it. There was something in her that had led her to the branches but would it do it again?

"I don't suppose you want to follow me around for the foreseeable future," she whispered.

The man gave her a soft smile. "I'm afraid my time here is pretty limited. I shouldn't even be here, if we're being honest."

Hazel swallowed thickly, feeling the tears well in her eyes.

"Oh. Oh no. Nononono. Don't cry. I— Okay. What if I do something for you. Uh. This tree. You feel good at this tree right?"

Tears were running down her face now, heaving sobs threatening to break her chest apart. She was being puppeteered yet again and she had a suspicion she had allowed it. All because there was a pain

somewhere inside her that she hadn't wanted to face.

"Here." There was a harsh snap and a burst of magic. "Come back to this tree." He pressed a stick in her hand. Just a small offshoot that he had snapped. "I'm going to get an earful for doing that but let's face it, I'm a sucker for tears. Plus, I have a feeling this might help an old friend out."

Hazel curled her fingers around the stick, feeling the foreign magic pulse around her fingers. "How will it protect me? Will it keep me clear headed?"

"No. But it will make you remember this tree. And if you can hold onto that, you can come back here. Following that nagging feeling of leaving the stove on. Then when you get here, you can soak up the magic more. Hopefully remember."

"But how?" she asked with a shake of her head.

"Because this tree doesn't like to see pain. And you, little witchly, are in a lot of pain."

The tears fell more rapidly but Hazel clutched the branch and held it to her heart. She didn't want to feel any of this. But she also didn't want to give Lucinda the satisfaction of playing the games she did when her and Malcolm were little. She had to get Malcolm here as well. Wash him clean of the magic that she was certain was on him as well.

"Thank you," she whispered, wiping her eyes.

The man gave her a pained smile. "It's not a lot. I know. But, I do hope it helps." he was kicking his feet back and forth. Clearly ready to leave.

Hazel waved him away. "Go. You said you were here for something. I'm sorry for keeping you."

"No! No, don't worry about it. I just— yeah. I only got a limited time here and... well. Another story, perhaps." Standing, he looked down at her. "I hope things work out for you, Hazel. I really really do. You seem sweet. And sweet people don't get enough help in life."

She looked up at him. "I never caught your name."

He grinned, giving her a wink. "Caliban." With a burst of feathers, the man turned into a raven, swooping down from the tree branches and into the dark.

Hazel followed his form for as long as she could. "Thank you, Caliban." The stick was clenched tightly in her hands, the tree singing to her from behind.

[Aug 21, 2024](#)

“Who are you?”

Gabriel had opened his eyes, taking a long moment to come back to himself. It had been a gamble, as of late, whether or not he knew where he was. Most of the time he woke feeling as if his head was stuffed full of the screams of the damned. A constant nagging beat down on him, asking, compelling, saying please until his ears bled. His sleep was never a restful one. His night thoughts were filled with the orders from the Knowing and their weariness for not working fast enough.

When Gabriel opened his eyes this time around, he saw the clear shape of a man in the shadows. Perhaps another hallucination. Maybe it was another messenger coming to tell him of his next assignment. Yet, a pair of familiar blue eyes sought him out upon his question. The same ones that he often had seen peeking at him from behind the bars of a cell.

“Caliban Odinson?”

Calbina winced. “Ravenson. Not claiming that parentage.”

“Your papers say different.”

“Ah, but you see?” The man leaned forward from out of the dark, pale skin looking a bit more worn from the last time Gabriel had seen him. “I’m not a market resident. Heard I caused some problems the last time I was here. Whenever that was. Best if we just kind of keep my visit to ourselves, Warden.”

Caliban had always been a particular nuisance that had tired Gabriel far more than any other prisoner. That old weariness came wafting back as he sunk back into his pillows, fighting the urge to fall back asleep. But Caliban had always been a bit of the annoying sort.

“So, you’ve got yourself kind of in a pickle, huh Warden? Knocking on the door of the conspiracy theorist. Finding religion once more. Is this your midlife crisis? Do you even have a midlife?”

“I should arrest you,” Gabriel sneered.

Caliban scooted his chair back an inch. “If you get out of bed I’ll letcha do it.” Gabriel couldn’t move. They both knew this. But Caliban was always one to press a little further.

“What do you want, Ravenson? I hear I am no longer the Warden. I can’t help you out of trouble at the moment.”

“Not here to get help from you. I’m here to provide help *for* you.”

Gabriel nearly laughed. It couldn't shake past his chest, however. 'What help could you possibly provide?'

"A way back to the Knowing."

At that, Gabriel paused. The voices in his head were even curious as to what the trickster had up his sleeve. "You are not part of the Knowing," he said suspiciously.

"Aren't we all part of the Knowing?" Caliban asked. "We may call it different names but in the end, we all have a Knowing. A cosmic daddy that has screwed us and yet we so desperately want to impress."

"Get out."

Caliban put his hands up. "Sorry. I'm a bitter one today. Missing out on a village party. Have you ever been to a Viking soiree? The food? The drink? There's nothing like it. Plus, my kid is performing tonight. Would really like not to be late."

"You have a child?"

"I hear I have four," he said with a shrug. "Some are born. Some are not. Depends on the timeline. But we aren't talking about the fact that I'm repopulating the world with the wonders of my genes. We are talking about you. And the Knowing. You want back in, I have the way."

It felt too easy. The Knowing was about suffering. It was about bringing yourself to the brink until there was nothing left and then and only then, would the Knowing save you. If they did not, it was because you had not suffered enough. It was because one could not endure.

Yet, even Gabriel was curious.

"Not that I plan to take your advice but I do wish to hear your blasphemy simply so I know how to refute your claims."

Caliban smiled. "Your note of confidence has always given me such joy." His face grew serious though, a grave certainty crossing his eyes. "Kill them," he said.

Gabriel froze. "Who?"

"All of them. I've received the message, Gabriel. Everyone. You were on the right path the other day with what you did. Now it is time to continue. Kill all of them. Every officer you have. The people within Artisan Alley. The Albrights. Reese. Elias. Belladonna. Kill the Night Market."

Kill the Night Market. The very being he was trying to save. The only person he had ever truly loved. Not because of obligation or out of some sense of duty and belonging. But actually loved.

"What you did the other day was only the beginning. The Knowing wishes for you to do more. To slaughter them all and cleanse this land." He laughed loudly, spreading his hands. "It's what I'm doing,

after all. Ragnarok is upon us and I am doing what my gods demand. It is time for you to come to the call and be the dutiful soldier you have always tried to be.”

There was a manic glaze in Caliban’s eyes and Gabriel could see it. The way the trees burned back where he was from. The world crumbled as the cosmic bridge that stretched across the realms fell into the sea. The screams of the dying echoed all around as pleas of mercy were written across Caliban’s skin. And in front of it all, he stood. The enforcer. Leader of the charge. All for his god.

His god.

Not the Knowing. Caliban’s god.

“The Knowing does not partake in the same rituals that your gods do,” he stated.

Caliban rolled his eyes. “Really? Are you still holding onto the idea that yours is a separate entity? It’s not. It’s Odin. Zeus. All of them. They are one in the same.”

“They are not.”

“Believe what you want but we still have a call for action.” Standing, Caliban looked at him. “If you want to get back into the Knowing’s embrace, I would advise following the call. I certainly have. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve got a world to end.” He clucked his tongue at him as he exited the room. Leaving Gabriel reeling.

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The door to the cottage clicked shut leaving both Caliban and Reese to stand by the old waterwheel.

“Did it work?” Reese asked. He stood shoulder to shoulder with the man. Elbows brushing.

“Gabriel Caine has always hated me,” Caliban snorted. “So if I say I’m doing one thing because the gods have told me so, he’s bound to do the opposite.”

“But did he buy it?” Reese demanded.

“I showed him what I was doing back home. The destruction. I showed him the calling. He knows that I’m at least telling the truth.”

Reese turned to him then, watching the shudder run through him. “The fuck?”

“No,” Caliban protested. “It’s not the reality I live in. But it is a reality. I don’t really know which one but there is a version of me out there somewhere who is still Odin’s whipping boy. Who snapped. Who helped Loki bring about Ragnarok and took it as my own fight. I can see it. And I am avoiding it. But that doesn’t mean Gabriel needs to know that.”

Reese scratched his chin, shaking his head a little. “You are a crafty little fucker,” he told him.



"You miss me. Face it." There was a small smile of familiarity at the corners of Caliban's eyes. He had never thought he would be back here, let alone as an equal to Reese.

"I can show you how much I miss you, if you want," Reese suggested. His hand brushed against Caliban's.

Caliban laughed a little, cheeks turning pink. "Nah. Thanks, but I'll take an eternal raincheck on that. I'm an honest man now."

Reese snorted. "That's got to be a lie. You run from everything."

"Not anymore. I found something that was worth staying for." He looked at him, swallowing thickly at what he knew was ahead of the man who had taken him in. "I hope your son is okay. If I can help in any other way—"

Reese raised his hand. "You've done enough. Thank you for coming."

"I'll always come, Reese. I owe you."

"You don't owe me shit, Caliban. Get that the fuck out of your head now." And despite it all, Reese still stepped forward, taking Caliban by the back of the head before pulling him forward and pressing a searing kiss against his mouth.

When they pulled away, Caliban blinked at him in surprise. "Did you just...?"

"I don't need it anymore. Take back your life, alright?"

Tears welled up in his eyes. Long ago a promise had been made. A way for Reese to hold Caliban close and keep him at heel. But now, it was gone. Just like that. "Thank you."

"Yeah, you won't be thanking me when those partners of yours realize you have another man's spit on your lips."

"They'll deal when they realize you've given me a fraction of my soul."

Reese turned back to the house, looking at the window that led to Gabriel's room. "Don't come back, Cal."

A flutter of wings sounded behind him and as Reese entered the house, a caw echoed on the wind.

[Aug 26, 2024](#)

The card hit the tin can with the barest noise. Small little plinks continued to bounce down the alleyway until they found a new home somewhere amidst another game. Around and around the sounds all went, skittering through the market until they themselves got bored.

"You're an idiot."

Milo flicked another card and looked down at the girl next to him. Washed out blond hair that once would have had hints of red. A complete mop that flowed ethereally around wide eyes and a perfectly puckered mouth. "You're an idiot," he said back.

She sighed, rolling her eyes at him. "I'm a child. What's your excuse?" Snatching up a few cards, she threw them, hitting the can. "I'm also winning."

Milo grumbled something under his breath. Ever. The ghost outside his front door. The one who he had failed. Another mark on the ever growing list of mistakes he needed to own up to.

"Why aren't you with them?" she asked. They were sitting on a crate near the fisherman's quarry. The catch was coming in for the morning. Milo had noticed Ever liked hanging out down here lately. He suspected she was hoping a new ship would come in carrying in a father that had long since abandoned her.

"They didn't want me to come," he said with a shrug.

"So? You should have gone anyway. A big romantic gesture."

Milo had thought about it. He had walked about a mile in the dark, following them until he realized he might be a bit of a creeper. That and he was disrespecting boundaries.

"I don't think it would be the *right* romantic gesture," he tried to reason with the small girl.

"You need to do some sort of romantic gesture. You fucked up."

"Hey," he snapped at her. "Knock that shit off. You don't get to say those words yet."

Ever huffed a little sight, but clearly still respected Milo enough to begrudgingly listen. "What about flowers? You think you could bring them flowers? I read it in all the storybooks. When the guy is dumb, he brings flowers."

Milo's nose wrinkled and another card landed near the tin can. "Do you think flowers are enough? I mean, there's not really a bouquet that says "hey, sorry I attempted to take your life. Intentions were good when I thought you were a rock but probably got muddled when you actually became sentient'."

Ever shrugged. "Daisies are always a nice choice."

"I don't think it works like that." Milo had been wracking his brain. A gesture wasn't going to fix it. He at least was wise enough to not believe the forever child about that. But, he did feel he needed to do something. Something to tell them that he was not only sorry, but that he wasn't going to do it again. That his allegiance, his life, his heart, was theirs. "Maybe I could just cover Artisan Alley with flowers?" he put out there hopefully.

"Oh," Ever clapped her hands. "How pretty! I would like to see that."

Milo's shoulders slumped. It was a stupid idea. No amount of flowers was going to fix it. Only time. He just felt like he didn't have it.

"I don't like seeing you sad," Ever said after a long moment. "You've been sad a lot lately."

"I did some stupid things," he said bluntly. "I didn't trust again and it screwed me. I wouldn't say that I'm sad, I'm more angry at myself."

"It's okay to be angry at yourself," she said. "I get angry all the time at myself. Especially when I can't manifest correctly."

Perspective. Milo hated it because it slapped him in the face constantly. "That's not your fault, Never Ever. Those are the cards you've been dealt in life and let's face it, you've been doing great at working with what you have. I mean, you're out of the alley now."

"I think that was Hazel's doing."

Milo tipped his head to the side. "Why do you say that?"

"She sacrificed a ton of spirits. It did something to the veil. Broke some of the boundaries a bit. That's how I got out."

To bring Malcolm back. Hazel had done the unthinkable. No one had gotten out of the last year without blood on their hands.

"Milo," Ever's voice was small. "I'm worried."

"About what?"

The girl shifted making the crate creak ominously beneath them. "The world feels different. Everything feels different."

"Bad different?"

"I don't know. But I don't feel comfortable."

Milo wanted to open a door. If he thought he could send Ever through to a world where she would survive, where her ghostly spirit could find an actual family, he would. He would happily give her the life she wasn't having here. But if he sent her away, he was no better than his mother. His father. He was getting rid of an inconvenience. The fact just remained, that he needed to do better.

"Why don't you come home with me?" he asked.

"Because I'm trying to find dad, silly."

Dad. Milo's gut twisted and the anger flared in him with a snap. Behind them, the candles guttered out.

"Milo!" Ever yelled.

"Shit. Sorry. Sorry." He got up, relighting them manually, digging out a cigarette at the same time. "Sorry. I didn't— Ever, just come home. You shouldn't be wandering the market alone." He no longer remembered how old she was. Time in the market always moves at a nonlinear pace. But, she still looked like a child. Had only a handful of experiences to her name.

"I like wandering the market," she said with a small kick of her legs. "I spent too long being able to do nothing. I'm not going back."

"Then come and go as you please but just come home."

"The distillery smells."

"I'll clean it."

"It has rats."

"Friends," he corrected.

"Milo, I don't like it there. It's a prison. Not a home."

And to that, Milo couldn't actually argue. It was no place for a child. And no place for a girl who was dead and trying to hold on to the vestiges of life.

"No, you're right. I'm sorry. You're... you could come to the Star Sanctuary. I could talk to Estelle and—"

Ever was gone. With a blink, she simply was no longer there. Milo didn't know if she had pushed herself again. If she had simply grown tired. Or if she had left because she didn't want to have the conversation with him. Or maybe she was never there at all.

Looking down at the alleyway, he saw the litter of cards. With a sigh, he began picking them up, tucking them deep in his pocket for when he found her again. She would pop back up and he would spend time with her. And maybe, in the meantime, he could buy some flowers. Romantic gesture and all that.

At least it was something.

## [Malcolm - Post Chapter Six](#)

[Aug 26, 2024](#)

“Sloppy.”

In the last hour, Malcolm had drawn four separate spells around gateways that were still partially open. Ones that previous Gatekeepers have made and never closed. Milo, Malcolm was assuming, was partially responsible for this. And even if he wasn't, he would have known they were here. Some of these looked as if they had been open for a long time. A few years at least. And Milo didn't do anything about it.

Neither had Malcolm when he was Gatekeeper but he was more pissed at Milo for life in general and therefore was going to blame him for even the smallest inconvenience. At least in his head.

“How can I help you?”

Malcolm stopped at a small grove of burnt trees. The bark was black and pieces of glass protruded like stepping stones around the base. Hollowed out lanterns lay on the ground, a chain looping through a heavy hook near the apex of the orb.

“How much for a night?” Malcolm asked.

The man looked like he was in desperate need of a meal and was eyeing Malcolm in a way that suggested he hadn't had anyone ask for pricing for quite some time. “How many occupants?”

“I'd need two lanterns.”

The man nodded, looking around at the offered rooms. “What will you give me?”

Malcolm took three sketches from inside his jacket pocket. Small maps that he had memorized. Ways into the market proper for worse men than him to use and steal from the overtly rich.

The innkeeper raised a brow. “With that info, I'll give you a credit for more than one night here.”

“Good. Because I don't know when we'll be going back home.” Their short trip was clearly not going to be that. Malcolm thought they'd be lucky if they even thought about going home tomorrow.

"You can have the two pods over there. With the teal glass." They looked to be some of the only ones fully intact.

"Thanks."

Malcolm took the crank the man handed him before moving to the larger of the two orbs. He pocketed Deucalions. Of course he would offer that Lamplight have the smaller room to themselves but he hoped his sleeping companion tonight was not their tour guide.

Putting the crank in, he pulled himself slowly upwards towards the tree lines. After so long without the lights, it looked strange now to see them dotting across the horizon. Malcolm hadn't realized how much he missed them. Though, this small trip had put a lot into perspective. His inability to deal with the fact that life had passed him by these last ten years. The loss of his sister. The return of his mother.

Lamplight.

Milo.

The Gatekeeper role that he so desperately missed. He hadn't realized how much he had tied up in that identity until he saw Milo wearing it. Badly, he might add.

*"Fucking take it back if you miss it so much!"*

*"Don't be melodramatic."*

*"I'm being serious. Take it. Kill me. At least then I'd be free from this fucking curse you put on me. I didn't fucking want this job, Malcolm. I would give it back to you in a second if I could."*

Malcolm winced. Such a disregard for his life. A Gatekeeper couldn't do that. They valued life, even theirs, above anything. But Milo hated his role so thoroughly that he was willing to take the risk of never coming back.

The lantern reached the tops of the trees, swinging a little. Malcolm sat in the middle of the pod, looking out over the city to see if he could spot Lamplight. The city was far more vast than he had realized however. It was filled with dipping curves and deadends that lead to beautiful murals. The artist in him itched to explore. To hide away somewhere and draw until he forgot the world around him. It was a luxury he had once partook in when the world became too much. But he wondered if he was too old for such things now.

Leaning back against the cool glass he thought of his predicament. The lover he once had versus the one he hoped to gain. The intertwining lives of the two of them. The unspoken dance that was happening in their day to day. He had to play it all carefully. Slowly. The baggage that was slammed between them was not easy to unpack.

But oh did he want to.

There was beauty in what was happening to them right now. Malcolm was tired and he questioned how they were going to handle it all, but it was such a vibrant display of life that he felt his heart sing. And for once, Lamplight was here. He could talk to them. Share his thoughts and his dreams. Express his fears.

So why hadn't he.

Malcolm's eyes traveled across the City of Lost Lanterns, out towards the darkness of the Outlands. Towards the Market Proper.

Milo was somewhere in those walls. Waiting for them to return home. Most likely pacing and wondering what was happening out here between his ex lovers. Malcolm took a perverse joy from that. And if he were a lesser man, he would have made a move here. Came to his Lamplight and opened his heart. Just so he could show Milo that he fucked up more than he'd ever know.

Malcolm hit his head back against the glass.

Lamplight, however, didn't deserve that. Petty competition that would never end was not something he would ever put on them. He loved them too deeply for that.

So, Malcolm would wait. He would wait forever if he had to. Because the Night Market was worth it.

[Milo/Mal/MC](#)

[Sep 13, 2024](#)

"Eventually, we are going to have to have a normal date."

Malcolm's fingers walked up and down my spine as I spoke. They paused occasionally, rubbing at small blemishes or a particular knob against my back. My shirt was rucked up high to allow his hands to wander. "This is normal," he said.

Shifting, I turned to look at him. We both lay on our belly's, a fishing pole propped up somewhere near our feet. We were sated from a good meal and a long hike, during which Milo mainly kept swearing we were going to be attacked by bears.

"It started off normal," I told Malcolm. "And then it got weird."

There was a loud whoop from within the water, proving my point. Milo had predictably gotten bored of fishing about five seconds after we started and had searched out things to do. This inevitably led to him taking off both his socks, tying them together, and then fastening them around his head like a



sweatband of some sort. It wasn't long before he got a stick and then began "foraging" through the woods. Occasionally, Malcolm and I had heard him talking to himself. Narrating his own personal documentary as he rummaged through the brush, looking for berries and squirrels.

Looking out at the river now, we spotted him at the top of a waterfall. He had disappeared about an hour ago, missing lunch, and had instead presumably climbed to the top of the ridge. He lost his shirt and pants somewhere along the way and stood there in all his freckled glory, in only his underwear. The socks were still tied around his head.

"What?" Malcolm flattened his palm against my back, the warmth of it seeping through my skin. "This isn't normal for you?"

Milo was now waving his stick in the air, singing something at the top of his lungs and sending birds scattering from the tree tops.

Rolling closer to Malcolm, I tucked myself against him, idly wondering how long it was going to be until Milo jumped. "Has he been drinking?"

"Not a lick," Mal responded, wrapping himself around me. "Drunk Milo is lazy."

I sighed. "So he's doing it again."

"Hopefully he's just bored. Fishing isn't something he enjoys. Or, you know, being outdoors in general."

It was refreshing, if we really thought about it. When was the last time any of us had the luxury to be bored? To allow ourselves such frivolity as fishing and a picnic. The broadleaf banana leaves hung above us, offering a dappled canopy from the open night sky. The river ran on perfect pitch as it rushed over the smooth stones that made up its bed. And even the shore was soft. A bed of lush moss offering the perfect place to lay in the humid evening heat.

"Hey," Mal whispered. "Can I run an idea by you?"

Turning in his arms, I looked up at him, my nose brushing against his. I couldn't help but lean forward, pressing my lips against his own for a single moment. "Do it quick before mountain man comes back."

Sitting up, Malcolm reached for his pack. He kept one arm around me, practically pulling me into his lap. "I wanted to show you something." He took his sketch book from the bag he had slung over his shoulder on our journey here, placing it into my own lap and gesturing for me to open it.

With our heads ducked together, I slowly cracked the spine, the smell of charcoal faintly wafting towards me. Upon each page, small sketches were revealed. Nothing I hadn't seen before. Drawings of hands, a few small sketches of animals and plants. But as I progressed, Malcolm's work began to change. Suddenly, there were pictures of me. Ones of me laughing. Others of me sleeping. One of me standing on my tiptoes as I reached for the stars. And above me, was a miasma of gray swirling sky. A monochromatic world that somehow looked alive the longer I stared at it.

"Malcolm," I breathed, not knowing what else to say.

"There's an art show coming up. I wanted to maybe feature this one. But, seeing as it's based on you in more ways than one, I wanted to ask permission first."

I wanted to touch the paper. Run my fingers over it and feel the lines of it. It looked so real. Like home.

"Of course you can," I told him.

The smile that broke across his face was wide and genuine. None of the half smirks I usually got or the dark and sultry stares. This was one of pure joy. Leaning forward, he kissed me. Cupping the side of my jaw, he pulled me forward, cradling me against him with such endearing gratitude.

"Thank you," he whispered.

"I will be coming to the show," I told him. You can't keep me from it this time."

"I wouldn't dream of it." He moved in closer then, tipping my face to the side and angling me in such a way that he could gain control. Slowly, he began pressing against me, his tongue tracing a line against my lips as he began kissing me in earnest. His hands began to wander.

A splash sounded before we could get too far, causing both of us to break away. Our heads pressed against each other and Malcolm's laugh was far more irritated by the interruption than one of wry amusement.

"He's here," Malcolm sang.

I snorted in laughter before pulling away.

Out of the depths of the river, Milo emerged. Drops of crystalline water dripped down his chest, highlighting each line of muscle. He was shaking his head like a dog, sending water flying everywhere. I couldn't help but notice how he stood just out of reach so that if the water droplets did hit us, Malcolm couldn't grab him in retaliation.

"Did you have fun?" I asked him.

His grin was wide, his amber eyes dancing with joy. "I am a survival expert," he proclaimed. "No individual can beat my skills. I saw a mountain and I conquered. I slew the beast of the woods with my bare hands. And I built a log cabin using the tools that nature provided for me. I am victorious."

Malcolm simply stared at him, not amused. "You're starving, aren't you."

"Gods yes." Milo stumbled forward, flopping onto the moss bed with us and grabbing at his plate of food. Malcolm stood, walking away from the wet lump, while I stared at Milo in astonishment for somehow consuming an entire fish filet in two bites. "Did he show you?" Milo's eyes were darting towards the sketchbook.

"You've seen them?"

"I snooped," he said with a shrug. "There was a time his sketchbooks were filled with indecent pictures of me, you know."

"Yeah," Malcolm agreed. "And then I realized that wasn't art." He dropped a blanket around Milo's shoulders, wrapping his arms around him and capturing him in a layer of warmth. "You're freezing," he chided, plastering himself against Milo's back to help warm him. He planted a small kiss against the man's cheek.

"Good thing we have the log cabin to take you too and get you all warmed up," I teased Milo.

He shook his head. "It burned down. Tragic accident really. Couldn't be helped."

I piled two more fish filets onto Milo's plate. Then, I turned to the small stone pit I had built earlier. Leaning down, I whispered to the land, pulling the heat from the core of the realm to create a small spark. Within moments, we had a blazing fire.

"That's still unfairly cool," Milo muttered under his breath. I laughed a little at the awe in his voice. I had caught him more than once spying on me while I experimented with my abilities. Milo's curious nature was boundless when it came to me.

"So I was thinking we would sleep out here tonight," I told the two of them. Malcolm was wrestling the sock sweatband from Milo's head, pushing Milo's curls to stand at odd angles. "It's warm enough and we have nowhere to really be."

Malcolm, still holding onto Milo and now rubbing his hands up and down his arms, looked excited over the prospect. "I'll catch some more fish for breakfast since the bottomless pit here is going to eat everything. I packed the two of you kafe, too, just in case." He winked at me. Sometimes I felt like him and I shared the same thoughts. Enmeshed together in such a way that we didn't know where one ended and the other began.

"I'll go get some firewood for us," Milo volunteered. As he made to jump up, however, Malcolm held him firmly.

"We don't need firewood," I told Milo. "I can get enough heat from beneath the ground to sustain us. Plus, it's not that cold."

"Then some more moss. Make a more comfortable bed."

Again, he tried to wiggle away and again, Malcolm tightened his grip.

An odd thing had taken place since the three of us started our journey together. One that I had not expected from Milo. He did not know how to exist in a relationship. Let alone exist in a relationship with more than one person. Milo was used to flings. Picking up men and women at bars and bringing them

home for a night of fun.. Sometimes they wouldn't even make it home and would conduct their tryst in the shadows of the alleys. Sometimes he would see them again. Most of the time he would wish them well and go about his day. Even when he and Malcolm were together, he treated Mal like a prolonged fling. And the moment it got complicated between them, he picked a fight so Malcolm would tell him to leave. They were all fights repeated from his usual arsenal. He didn't want to be tied down. That he loved many and for someone to peg him as a one guy kind of man, was unjust. Unfair. That he had needs Malcolm couldn't always fulfill

And then, one day, I decided to walk the cobbled streets instead of being a voyeur to the fights that I could see breeding such resentment. Born from pure fear.

Somewhere along the way, Milo fell in love. Maybe he had loved Malcolm before but had been good at compartmentalizing it. Or maybe he just realized that Malcolm would put up with his bullshit. That his self esteem was low enough to accept Milo back over and over again. The second I stepped into the picture, Milo had to change, however. Not because I demanded it and not because Malcolm had grown into his own. But because he genuinely wanted to be with us. But despite this, old habits die hard and the past had lashed too many scars against his skin. Even now, when Milo was in a situation where it was just the three of us, he looked for every excuse to go off on his own.

I scooted closer to him, the light of the fire dancing across his face and reflecting in his eyes. Slowly, I reached up and cupped his cheek.

"How can someone so brave be so afraid of being loved?" I asked him.

He stiffened and I could see his mind racing. Both Malcolm and I stayed quiet, letting the fire crackle behind us and the river play its song. When Milo finally relaxed, he pushed his cheek against my hand and closed his eyes.

"Sorry. I didn't realize I was doing it again."

From behind him, Malcolm loosened his hold, but pushed Milo a little forward so he was perfectly sandwiched between him and I. "Button, you had the afternoon. No one is asking you to stay by our side all day. But now it is time for us, okay? Do you need a reminder?"

Milo nodded slowly, lashes sweeping across his cheek as he refused to open his eyes.

I took his hand in mine. "Love does not have to look like everyone else's," I told him. "It does not need to resemble any one thing. You are loved, Milo Next. We want you here. And we want to be yours for as long as you'll have us."

Opening his eyes he rolled them at me. "Of course I'm going to have you two forever."

Malcolm pinched him a little, causing Milo to yelp. "Then stop being weird and stay here with us so we can love you."

Occasionally, Milo just needed a reminder. He needed to be held and his body needed to remember that he was somewhere safe. That angry hands were not going to be turned towards him if he did something wrong. And that forgiveness could always be found. And while he didn't understand why or how, Malcolm and I had made it our own personal mission to do that for him. To at least let our lost boy know that he was loved.

As the fire continued to dance around us, I pulled Milo from Malcolm's arms, the two of us lying down next to each other. Milo took the edge of the blanket and folded it over me as well.

"You two want kafe?" Mal asked, already digging in the bag.

"Yes please," I said.

Malcolm peered at him. "You gonna cook it right."

With a put out sigh, Malcolm leaned forward, stealing a kiss from Milo. He breathed in deeply, pouring every inch of himself into the man in my arms. As Malcolm pulled away, he flicked Milo on the elbow. "Shut up," he told him.

Milo chuckled before burying himself against me again, wrapping his entire body around me.

One day he would understand. As I lay in his arms I knew without a doubt that one day, he would forgive himself. One day he would realize that not everything was his fault. But until then, Malcolm and I would hold him up. And whether Milo realized it or not, he held us up just as strong.

[IOS increase](#)

[Sep 16, 2024](#)

As I'm sure some of you are aware, Apple is going to start charging more to use their app to access Patreon subscriptions. This is taking more money away from me, without really a choice. So, unfortunately, I will be increasing prices on IOS subscriptions by 30%. Most creators will be following suit.

My suggestion is to not autopay Patreon through Apple. Just set it up to come from your card or your paypal. That will save the fee.

Here is the exact notification we were all sent, explaining what is happening.

**Apple's requirements**

As we [first announced last year](#), Apple is requiring that Patreon use their in-app purchasing system and remove all other billing systems from the Patreon iOS app by November 2024.

This has two major consequences for creators:

- Apple will be applying their **30% App Store fee to all new memberships purchased in the Patreon iOS app**, in addition to anything bought in your Patreon shop.
- Any creator currently on first-of-the-month or per-creation billing plans will have to **switch over to subscription billing to continue earning in the iOS app**, because that's the only billing type Apple's in-app purchase system supports.

Before we go any further, we want to be crystal clear about one thing: **Apple's fee will not impact your existing members**. It will only affect new memberships purchased in the iOS app from November onward.

[Bella/Gabriel/MC](#)

[Sep 17, 2024](#)

"This is disgusting. Abysmal. Absolutely absurd. I am going to tear it all down."

Despite the threatening words, I didn't rush into my apartment. It wasn't the first time Belladonna had threatened bodily harm to where I lived. It was no secret that she hated it and maybe even slightly resented the fact that I was not moving into one of her perfectly designed condos.

"You will not be touching a thing in this house."

I smiled a little to myself at the voice rivaling her own. Gabriel was of course with her. He had taken the week off at my request and Belladonna's demand and had mainly been spending his time bouncing back and forth between the two of us. Belladonna had several different Baron related issues she needed him to look at and I simply just missed him. So it worked out all around.

"Gabriel, I know that you have more taste than this," Belladonna protested. "We are doing dear heart a favor. Perhaps if we get the ball rolling, there will be a dawning realization over how offensive these surroundings truly are."

"You are a snob, Bells," Gabriel said, delivering what I knew was meant to be an insult with a monotone pitch.

"I strive to be that every day," she answered him. "Now come help me throw this couch out the window. I would use a door but of course, dear heart still refuses to get one."

It was then that I made my presence known. Climbing through said window. Belladonna looked immediately irritated that I was doing so and did little to hide her thoughts on it. "You are not some bird, dear heart. Get a front door."

Gabriel frowned next to her. "Is this all because you have some odd thing about birds?"

She didn't even bother to answer him. In all honesty, Belladonna rarely did.

Walking up to her, I leaned in for a kiss, feeling her chilly lips on mine. She grabbed the back of my head, yanking me forward, kissing me until my heart sped up before yanking my head almost painfully to the right so she could take a small sip from my neck.

"Bella," I gasped. "If you are hungry..."

She pulled away. A drop of my blood staining the corner of her mouth. "Gabriel and I were just speaking of how we were going to rearrange the apartment."

Gabriel, who was standing slightly behind her, shook his head no.

"We were thinking we would do away with these sofas first. I can have two beautiful velvet settees here within the hour. Then the curtains."

"I don't have curtains," I told her, rubbing at my neck. It was more of a pleasurable wound than a painful one.

"Exactly. And we of course are going to get rid of this artwork."

Gabriel stepped forward then. "I got most of this artwork." Gabriel had bought me beautiful pieces through the last year. Things he had found from local artists. Ones that had been able to showcase their work at the new gallery that was opening in Artisan Alley.

Despite his protest, Belladonna did not look impressed. "It shows, dear."

As she began wandering around the room, looking for other things to critique, I stepped up to Gabriel. "Hi," I whispered to him. Leaning forward, I kissed him softly, feeling the way his hand drifted down to sit at my hip. He pulled out a handkerchief and dabbed at my neck.

"I was going to arrest her for breaking into your place," he told me in all seriousness. "But that would mean I would be going back to work and I didn't want to break that promise to you."

"That's oddly sweet."



“Thank you.”

Lacing my hand within his own, I led Gabriel over to the kitchen table. It was one of the pieces we had picked up from the fleamarket sales up on the hill. One place that both Gabriel and Belladonna agreed that they hated, but Gabriel refused to let me go alone.

“You know she’ll be getting rid of this too.”

“She’ll be getting rid of nothing,” I told him. “If she wants to send me new furniture items, I’ll make them work in here. Or, I’ll put them down at the co-op center.”

Gabriel’s eyes ticked towards Belladonna’s form, and then back to me. “You are brave.”

I squeezed his hand. “I have to with being with the two of you.”

“Dear heart? Do you understand that your towels are practically sandpaper?” Belladonna had wandered into the bathroom.

“That you can replace,” I called back to her. I did like luxurious towels. Turning back to Gabriel, I scooted my chair closer to his. “So, tell me how your time with Bella has been. You two getting along okay?”

“Her books are abysmal,” he said, almost like he couldn’t wait to share. “The woman does not understand how to keep her paperwork in order which is insulting.”

I laughed a little, leaning my head against Gabriel’s shoulder. Their relationship had taken an interesting turn through the last year. Rarely was it physical between the two of them unless I was involved. But there was a deep affection. A friendship that bordered occasionally on romantic. Their acts of love included menial tasks for each other, however. And they both bitched about each other’s competence in those area’s like it was their favorite pastime.

“I think she’s just been busy,” I told him. “You know how Bella is. She prefers talking over bookwork.”

“No, she prefers reading her books over doing any of them. I don’t understand how one of the most powerful individuals in the market can be so negligent.” Sighing, he wrapped his arm around my shoulder, pulling me close. It had taken years for him to get to the point of instigating affection. Unless, of course, one of us was in danger. “I believe we do need to fortify your window. I am not happy with how easily Belladonna broke in.”

“She has a key. She didn’t break in. She just wanted you to think she did.” Belladonna had practically demanded a key when I refused to move. She said it was so she could get to me when the rats ate my corpse one evening. She felt bad enough about it afterward that she sent me four dozen roses.

“Still. I will have several officers here tomorrow and we will make sure there are far better security measures taken here. I do not trust the people in this alley.”

"The Velvet Guard is not allowed in the alley," I reminded him. Kimber had only lifted the ban for three people, Gabriel being one of them.

"Which, I will be having another discussion with her about. If an incident happens here, we need to be available."

"The literal market lives here," I teased. "I think she feels fine."

His face twisted into a frown. It was an old argument between us. He wasn't the only one who wasn't happy with my living situation.

"Alright," Belladonna's voice came from behind us. In three easy steps, she was around the table, placing a silk scarf down on the chair so she could sit down. "I have several things coming here. Although, it would be far easier if we just moved you someplace nicer. The amount it will take to make this place livable is truly not financially responsible."

"I like my home, Bella," I told her. It was one of the only things I refused to move on for her.

"Yes, but are you thinking clearly?"

"Bells," Gabriel warned.

She held up her hands. "My apologies, dear heart. This place simply makes me stressed. I might even have a gray hair. Now, what are we speaking of, and do you have a decent tea service in here? Or did Sawyer steal it at some point during his visit here."

Gabriel stood with a sigh. "I will get it."

"We were just talking about your bookkeeping," I told her, watching for any indication that this was a sore subject for her. Sometimes she was grateful for Gabriel's help. Other times, she swore he was out to kill her.

Belladonna was not one to often roll her eyes but she did at this. "Please. Is he complaining to you about that again? Really. Has he told you that he didn't eat yesterday because he was so consumed in that bookwork?" She twisted in her chair to stare at him with a self-satisfied smirk.

He looked stricken. "You said you wouldn't tell."

"Then you shouldn't complain about the bookwork."

"Gabriel, you need to be eating better," I admonished. "I have a few sandwiches in the refrigerator—"

"I am fine."

"Eat," I told him. This was not a road we were going to be heading down again and I had no problems hounding him until he had a proper meal.

With indignation that rivaled Belladonna's own, Gabriel turned to the refrigerator and did as he was told.

"Really. He's like a child sometimes. Don't forget the sugar, my pet," she called over her shoulder.

While Gabriel got the tea service together, Belladonna began regaling me about her work. Something about several of the Barons not paying their taxes and how someone tried to sabotage the Book District. Which then made the Barons there declare war on several people.

"Are you taking care of yourself?" I asked when she was done.

"Of course I am."

I narrowed my eyes at her. How many times had I come upon her sleeping standing up? Hiding behind one of her books so she could have some peace? How many nights had I lay with her in bed, feeling her body against mine as she released all her frustration from the day?

"Bella," I started. "Don't make Gabriel rat you out."

"I slept in the same room as him last night," she said as if this would cause my concern to vanish. "Not in the same bed of course. He's an abysmal sleeping partner. He's like the dead. Lying there. Still and cold."

"Yes," Gabriel said. "I am the one who is like the dead."

"Both of you," I admonished. "Stop."

Belladonna got up with a flourish, rounding the table to take Gabriel's spot. "I'm sorry, dear heart. I know it vexes you when Gabriel is like this." Gabriel was setting the tea service down in front of us and she tried to give him a small smile to show that she was teasing.

As Gabriel poured our tea, I looked between the two of them. "I have a proposition."

Belladonna sipped at her tea, raising a brow above the rim. "Oh?"

"I will let you replace one thing in this room—"

"The sofas," she said before I could finish.

"I will let you replace one thing in this room," i repeated, "if the two of you stay here with me tonight. So Gabriel can eat. So you can sleep. And so I can have you both here at the same time instead of this constant coming and going the three of us do."

Gabriel wasn't going to answer first. He never did. It was up to Belladonna to make the decision. And with the way she was looking, I had a feeling that not even a new sofa was enough to sweeten this deal.

"How about we stay at the Inn or—"

"No," I said. "Here. You will take off your fancy clothes and let your hair down, Bella. Gabriel will cook us dinner. And I will light a fire for you."

"So you will have me walking around naked?" she asked with a wry smirk.

"No. You can wear one of my shirts. I have oversized ones that will look more like dresses on you."

She looked horrified at the prospect. "You wish for me to wear a T-shirt dress? Dear heart, I love you with every fiber of my being but you are asking quite a lot from me at this moment."

"A t-shirt dress and to stay the night? Some would say those are quite normal things for a couple," I mused. At this point, I was quite aware of Belladonna's elitist ways. I took little offense to it. Most of the time she just needed to make it known to anyone who could hear how much she protested something before caving. Because in the end, Belladonna loved me more than any material item. She would wear a burlap sack if she thought it would make me happy. Not that she would ever admit it.

"Steak tonight," Gabriel said from across the table. "Something high in iron so Belladonna can have her dinner later."

I nodded. "Red wine, too," I told him.

"I will have it delivered from Kimber's shop. She is quite good at getting groceries here in a prompt manner."

"I love that the two of you have decided this for me," Belladonna drawled. Her fingers were tapping irritably against her teacup. "I believe the two of you just want to see me in subpar clothing."

"If you do not wear the nightshirt," Gabriel said. "I will. It sounds rather cozy."

I grinned broadly at Gabriel from across the table. This was why I loved him. "I think you'd look quite fetching in it."

He nodded his head solemnly. "Thank you."

Belladonna nearly growled in frustration, slamming her teacup down. "Fine. I will do as you ask. But you need a new bed."

"You got me a new bed when I first moved in."

"And I want another one."

"New sheets and a comforter, perhaps," Gabriel said in way of compromise. The look she shot him from across the table said he would pay for that suggestion later.

"Fine," she said through gritted teeth. "But let me make something clear. You both get tonight and tonight only. After tonight, I will be returning to work. We will go back to arguing about this abysmal little apartment, and I will be sending several beautiful hand carved faucets to replace the generic ones you have here."

"Deal," I told her.

It was instantaneous. She reached behind her to where her hairpins were and pulled them out one by one. Then, she shook her hair out, kicking off her heels and rising. She was stripping her dress off, letting it slip down her shoulders to reveal the expanse of her creamy back and her tattoos. Looking over her shoulder, she smiled coyly at me.

"Will you help me pick a shirt out?" she asked me.

I had rose from my seat and was halfway across the room already

"Oh, and Gabriel? Put a steak on for me as well. Rare, please."

"Of course, Bells."

"And order you some of those cheese tarts you enjoy so much. My treat to you."

I ran my hands along her sides as I approached, running my lips across her shoulder blade. "Do I get a treat, too?" I asked.

Her throaty laugh sent shivers down my spine. "Come into the bedroom and find out."

Gabriel was humming in the kitchen as he began to prepare dinner, while I watched Belladonna walk away, her hips swaying tantalizingly. In the end, I knew I had won. But if Belladonna looked at me now and said she was going to replace everything in my apartment, I wouldn't resist. I would do anything for moments like this.

"Coming, dear heart?" she cooed.

"Better listen to her," Gabriel said from the kitchen. "You know how she gets."

I did. And oh how I was looking forward to every second of it.

[Hazel - A look at her younger years](#)

[Sep 27, 2024](#)

There was a certain amount of isolation that came with who Hazel was. From the time she could walk, she had been put to work in her mother's shop, carrying bundles of herbs back and forth, climbing up on the counters, and making tonics. Malcolm had already decided the type of person their mother was, and had mostly found a way to stay outside and out of her view until dinner. Hazel, however, wanted to help. She asked most days. And Lucinda took that as a sign that she finally had a daughter who was just like her.

At first, Hazel didn't think much of it. She still ran around the market with Malcolm when she got the chance. She had met Milo and struck up a friendship with him. And she had a wonderful little cat that wouldn't leave her side. But as she grew older, life became more isolating. It became unfulfilling. Though, that was all something she wouldn't admit to herself for years to come.

"I'm telling you, we should all get a house together. Somewhere far away in the market. Above some of the food stalls. I'll steal breakfast every morning." Milo was fifteen and gangly, his hair wild around his face. Sitting up on the ledge of the current rooftop they were on, his feet dangled over one side.

"I'm happy where I'm at," Hazel tried to tell him. She felt almost compelled to do so. To defend her mother. Malcolm certainly wasn't going to.

"Is that why you were crying when I picked you up today?" Malcolm was drawing in the corner, his long hair hanging lank around him. He was angrier these days. Hunching over his notepad and trying to scribble away the rest of the world.

Milo looked at Hazel with obviously concern. "You were crying? I'll kill her, Haze. I will."

"I wasn't crying." She was. But not for the reasons they probably thought. Most likely, they assumed Lucinda. They always assumed Lucinda. And maybe that was for the best. After all, they had their secrets, why couldn't she have hers.

"Your eyes were red, and you had stains on the front of your blouse." Malcolm tore the page from his sketchbook and tossed it over the side of the building.

If Hazel was closer, she would have tried to catch it.

"What did Lucinda do now?" Hopping off the ledge, Milo came to sit with her on the blanket. His knuckles were bruised, one of them split open. Hazel wondered how many fights Malcolm and him were getting into when they left her at night.

"She's been good," Hazel tried to argue. "It's been a productive month at the shop, and so she's been really happy lately. I think next moon she's going to let me try to brew some of my own tonics." Hazel had a few in mind. Nothing too big. Just ones to help with anxiety. Overcoming fear. She had been after

Lucinda for close to a year to offer something mild to the clientele. So far, her mother only dealt in curses.

"She's never going to let you," Malcolm muttered.

As Hazel deflated, Milo shot her brother a look. "Would you fuck off? Just because you're bitter doesn't mean you have to infect your sister with it."

Malcolm only raised his middle finger in response before going back and furiously drawing on a fresh sheet of paper.

Hazel stared down at her lap. A grey kitten was curled there, purring loudly. She took Mr. Billows with her everywhere now. Mostly because she was afraid of leaving him home alone. He hadn't seemed to get much bigger over the years, which Hazel never questioned, but it did make it harder for Hazel to leave him.

"I think it's really cool that you want to do that," Milo told her. "You could help a lot of people."

Hazel sniffed a little. "Yeah. I— I think it would honestly go really well. And maybe we could get some of the curses off the shelves. Some of them are so old I don't think they're all that effective anymore."

"You're going to make a really good shop owner one day."

"If mom will let me have the shop."

Milo scooted closer, wrapping his arm around her. When Mr. Billows growled, he stuck his tongue out at the cat. "Start your own damn shop. I'll help you, you know. I'll build it with my own two hands if I have to."

"Yeah. Maybe." She picked at Mr. Billow's collar.

"Are you okay? You've seemed a little off this week."

She was fine. Of course she was fine. There were so many people in the world that were worse off than her. Who was Hazel to complain that she was completely invisible and that no one ever saw her and that she would probably live with her mother forever and never find love and—

"Whoa," Milo curled her closer. "You're doing that panic breathing thing. Slow down."

Hazel hadn't even realized she had been doing it. Swallowing thickly, she looked down, realizing she was gripping the cat. Milo, in turn, was gripping her.

"What's up, sis?" Milo asked. He shot a look over at Malcolm, but he seemed to be absorbed in what he was doing.

"I," she swallowed thickly. "I met someone."



Milo stiffened at her side. "Oh?"

"Don't."

"I didn't say anything," he protested.

The idea of Hazel dating someone always sent Malcolm into a tizzy. And for a while, Milo seemed to take great joy out of teasing her if she even remotely thought someone was cute. She hadn't wanted to tell them for that exact reason.

"You will, though. And I'll let you know it already hasn't worked out."

Milo's face softened at that. "I'm sorry," he said, somewhat genuinely. "What happened?"

For a moment, Hazel wasn't going to tell him. For a moment, she was going to be strong and say it was none of his business. But instead, she flung herself forward, burying her face into Mr. Billow's fur. The cat squirmed.

"They don't even know I exist!" she cried.

Out of all the responses, that wasn't what Milo had expected. "They? More than one? Or they as in not male or female they."

She shrugged. "I don't know. I never got close enough to figure it out. And I'm certainly not going to ask."

"Wait. Hazel. Where did you even see this person?"

"A few times in the market. I can't describe it, Milo. I just felt an instant connection with them. My heart started racing, and my entire body felt flush. I— I think things at night."

"Okay, you don't need to go that far."

"But I do!" she yelled. "Okay, maybe I don't. Is it creepy that I'm having lustful thoughts about a stranger?"

From across the roof, Malcolm shifted. He had been diligently trying not to listen to anything the two of them were saying. An impossibility given the volume of their voices.

"I uh— I don't think... lust isn't..." Milo's cheeks were pink. "Okay, this is weird to talk to you about."

"You tell me about your sexual conquests all the time."

"Yeah. But they are at least people I've introduced myself to." Upon seeing the embarrassment on Hazel's cheeks, he scooted back a little, rubbing a hand across his face. "Okay, look. Why don't you just go up to this person, yeah? Introduce yourself."

Hazel had never once in her life been able to accomplish something as dangerous as that. Outside of Milo and Malcolm, she didn't really talk to anyone that wasn't a customer. To go up to a stranger felt unattainable. Like she was doing something wrong.

"It's okay," she said with defeat. "I'm sure it's not important anyway."

That seemed to get Milo. Because whenever Hazel got down on herself in this kind of situation, he saw a little too much of himself at the moment. "No. You know what? We are going to find this they and introduce you two."

From the corner, Malcolm rolled his eyes but continued to say nothing.

"What do they look like?" he asked.

Hazel thought about it for a long moment. A simple question in the end, but one that she found she couldn't quite grasp. "They are wonderful," she said quietly. "They have the stars in their eyes. They seem to shift with the waves of time. Eternal, even."

"That's not a descriptor," Malcolm finally piped up, putting aside his paper.

Hazel huffed. "I don't really know, okay? They just... it's a feeling. An all encompassing feeling. Like being embraced by the night sky."

"Done." Milo said.

"What?"

He was standing, getting ready to jump off the side of the roof. "I'm going to go find them for you."

"Milo, you can't just—" but he was gone. Because Milo Next was nothing but efficient. At least until he got bored.

Hazel sighed, cuddling her cat closer. There was a part of her that hoped. Maybe Milo could find the nameless person. Maybe she would get a chance to learn their name. To say hello. To feel their hand in hers.

"You realize you'll have to leave mom, right?"

She looked up. Malcolm's face was twisted in cruelty. One born from a lifetime of never having anything good come his way.

"What do you mean?"

"If you find someone to love. You'll have to leave mom. She'll never let you go."

Hazel shifted uncomfortably. She didn't want to talk about Lucinda. "Why do you care? I thought you didn't believe in love."

"I don't. But you are idealistic. You do. So I'm just stating to you, that this might be best left to a dream. Because you won't leave mom. You'll always find an excuse to stay."

In her lap, Billows rumbled with a growl. "I can have both," Hazel whispered.

Malcolm snorted in laughter. "Yeah. Sure you can."

"Look, I know that mom was mean to you and I get that you think yourself undeserving of love or whatever, but that's not me. I am deserving of it."

"Then why won't you leave the shop without Milo or I," he shot back. "You've isolated yourself. You've chosen to be her *daughter* over yourself. Don't pretend like someone coming into your life is going to sweep you off your feet. You'll sabotage it just like you do everything else if it means having to stand up to our mother."

Hazel shot to her feet, feeling the tears prick her eyes. Billows was full on hissing down, claws digging into Hazel's shoulder. "You are just a lonely individual, Malcolm. That's all. Don't take your hatred out on me."

He grabbed at his sketchbook, his face a mask of anger as he flipped open to a new page. "Go find your starry night, Hazel. Tell me how that goes. I'm sure mom would love to have them over for dinner."

Hazel felt the tears fall as she left the rooftop. He was right. It was the little voice in her head that kept telling her that he was absolutely right. She wasn't strong enough to go off on her own. She wasn't even good enough to attract anyone. What would it matter if Milo found this person by some miracle? Hazel wouldn't talk to them. She knew she wouldn't.

Coming down the edge of the stairs, she held Billows close, crying into his fur. Loneliness was a vast and empty void. Hazel had seen people come into the shop day in and day out with the same look in their eyes. The emptiness in their chest. She wanted to help them. She wanted to help them because she knew what it was like to be them.

But how could she help anyone when she couldn't even say hello to a stranger?

As Hazel sat and cried under the dim lights of the market, she thought about her brother's words. He just didn't get it. Someone had to be there for their mother. Lucinda was tough but she wasn't all bad. Most of her spirals could be explained. Hazel was certain she could have love and still have her family. That one day the dream would be obtainable.

She was certain.

Above her, the lights flickered and Hazel felt her heart sink.

She was lying.

[Merripen](#)

[Sep 28, 2024](#)

“Death is never a good thing.”

“I take offense to that.” Merripen sat upon a star, their feet dangling off the pointed side. The night was particularly black that evening. The deep robes adorning their body blended in with the pitch sky, creating small fissures of midnight clouds. If one was to look closely enough, a sea of other universes, other worlds and reality, could be seen within the folds of those robes.

“You don’t have the job yet.” Night sat next to them. An outline that floated around the cosmos, created from specks of stardust and discarded bits of moon. Merripen liked to change their friend's form based on a whim. It irritated Night to no end. Though, they were the one who refused a form. Pen suspected their friend would be an ever changing being prone to flights of whim.

“Ah, but you see? It is not a job. It is a way of life.” Merripen couldn’t help but roll their eyes at the mission statement. It had been the same sentiment that had been written upon their crib upon birth. When Father Time decided that he needed to create a being to usher through the vast amounts of departed souls. An oversight, in Pen’s opinion. Why on earth would anyone create life without first thinking of death?

Kicking at a bit of rubble floating past, Pen sighed the deep and put out sigh that only a young soul could create. Night brushed against their cheek, a constant reminder of a comforting presence.

“Do you think I will be loved, old friend?” Pen asked. Night was their only companion. For years, Pen had roamed the vast emptiness alone. The only purpose bestowed upon them a fate that had yet to be written.

“What do you mean?”

“If death is never a good thing, it goes to reason that I will be feared. That the very sound of my name will shake foundations to their core. And I have to wonder if there is ever room for love in such a title.”

Night swept down, beginning to braid stars into Merripen’s hair. Such pretty fingers, Pen thought. They were lucky to have such a friend to care.

"I think," Night continued. "That life is messy. That there is no clear answer to it all. And that while death can be feared, while it can cause pain, I think it can also cause relief." A chilled hand swept across Pen's face. "Death is not to be feared for creatures like you and I," they reminded Pen. "And in the end, shouldn't that matter more."

"People matter, dear Night."

"Do they?"

"I think so. I hope so."

Night looked downwards, as if to search out these people that they should care more for. Curiosity was all that was bestowed upon them, however. A kind of nagging little thought that Pen couldn't have known would birth into something far grander than either of them could comprehend.

"Mercy," Night finally whispered. "Maybe that's what you offer instead. A mercy, my dear friend. You do not offer an end. You offer kindness."

Pen tipped their head into Night's hold. "Will," they said. "I will offer kindness."

"You offer kindness to me already."

"That's because you are my only friend."

A sigh sounded against their ear. "Oh, Pen."

Sitting up straight, Pen bristled a little, displacing the stars around them. "Now, now. None of that. It wasn't meant to be a melancholy statement. Just a simple one of fact. And maybe one to bring out when I need you to feel sorry for me," they tried to joke. It fell flat. Somewhere, Pen was almost certain a world exploded due to their embarrassment.

Night fluttered around them before settling down behind Pen on the curve of the star. A moonbeam formed their outline, solidifying them against Pen's back. "I love you," they whispered against Pen's ear.

Pen felt a shiver and the deep need to turn and never let Night go.

"Promise to love me forever," they told Night. "Promise because I'm a selfish being and I could not bear for you to turn away from me."

"I would never turn away from you."

Pen looked down at the world forming. Father Time and his daughters. The swirling mass that would become the center of everything. Pen feared that the promise was nothing more than an empty note that would be forgotten. Night never had been one to understand the weight of their statements.

Reaching up, Pen grasped Night's hand, stars intermingling with the necrotic tissue of their hand. "Run away with me," they said. "Let us no longer be Night and Death. Let us choose names that we adore. Let us play together forever. Let us not be confined to the trappings of our destiny. Please, Night."

Night laughed in their ear. "And where would we go?"

"Anywhere. Nowhere. Wouldn't that be an adventure?"

"Oh, I love adventures! Shall we go now? Run away forever?"

Oh, the naivety. It was with a sinking sensation that Pen knew Night didn't understand. How could they? They didn't see the people that struggled within the worlds created. They were not there for final moments of pain. They played among the stars and looked at the rest of the worlds like beautiful little baubles stuck behind sea colored glass. Night didn't know what Pen was asking. And it made Pen feel all the more lonely.

"Pen?" Night called to them, already dancing around the universe. "Pen, come play."

Pen looked out for a moment, watching as the stars skipped and Night used them to skate across a sea of obsidian glass. For one awful moment, Pen choked on the crushing reality of their situation. The job that waited for them to reap the mourning souls. The consciousness far more advanced than the spirit that beckoned them forth now. It felt insurmountable.

But Pen did what they always did. They stood up tall and straight, an invisible line lifting them like a puppet on a string. Then, they took Night's hand. Because they would always take Night's hand. And they played among the stars.

[Belladonna - Homecoming](#)

[Oct 4, 2024](#)

A/N: The theme this month is Homecoming. The MC coming back to an RO after a long time apart. From here forward, in short stories, MC will be referred to as Night with they pronouns. Just so we can encompass everything.

"Unacceptable." The blood pooling on the floor was nowhere near congealing. It sat in a slick red puddle, leading towards a rust-colored smear. Belladonna sighed, rivulets of life dripping from her skin as she stood surrounded by four intruders, all in various states of death. One man still gasped for life,

his throat making small bubbling noises as he gurgled for air. He was the most annoying out of all of them. The audacity to still live. At least the second one died quickly.

Most of the time, Belladonna relished in the kill, but today she didn't have time for it. Her dear heart was coming home after so very long away, and Belladonna had planned to greet them with open arms and a night of passion. Now, she had to clean up this mess. Kicking the body closest to her, she growled in frustration.

"You just had to attack today," she hissed. "You couldn't have done this yesterday? The day before? Today is the day you chose to take vengeance." Leaning down, she pulled the body up by the back of the skull, a clump of hair catching in one of her rings. "When you inevitably come back, you remember one thing and one thing only. Timing is everything. Work on that before I kill you again."

Dropping the man, she stepped over his prone form, hearing the last dying gurgles from behind her. She rolled her eyes at the dramatics of it all. It was pathetic.

Heading towards her room, she went to go get cleaned up. Maybe she could divert her dear heart's attention. This was simply the study, after all. Belladonna could possibly just lead them up to the bedroom. Or perhaps the parlor. Dear heart loved the parlor.

But the day was not going the way that it should have, and the doorbell rang with a prismatic chime, catching Belladonna in her tracks.

"Fuck," she whispered.

Her lace dress was soaked, blood drying to her skin in intricate patterns. There was no way she would be able to hide this. Unless....

Shucking off her clothes, she kicked them to the side, looking around frantically for one of the silks that she had around her house. Snagging a black robe, she cinched it around her waist, rubbing the blood into her skin. Then, she took the ends of her hair, twisting it up to the back of her head and slicking the rest back into a sleek bun.

The door rang again.

With a deep breath, she closed her eyes, gaining her composure. Then, she took three steps towards the door and opened it. Her heart skipped at the sight of her love. So many months had gone by without them by her side. So many sleepless nights where Belladonna reached out for them. Of course, she would never say that. Needing someone was not what Belladonna Malady did.

"Dear heart," she sighed. Stepping forward, she reached out with her blood-red nails, trailing a finger down the side of their face. "You look lovely. How was the trip back?"

Stepping into the room, Night was all smiles. There was a look in their eyes that was filled with excitement. Curiosity. Traveling the cosmos had brought a new sense of joy to them that Belladonna



had severely missed. And while the time apart was always hard, it did wonders to bring Night into the present.

"I've missed you," they said. "I know I'm a little early, but I couldn't wait and..." their eyes caught on Belladonna's hair. "Is that...?"

Bella tipped her head to the side, feigning innocence. "Is that what, my heart?"

"Is that blood?"

Belladonna frowned, looking down at her body as if to look for the drops Night was referring to. As if Bella couldn't feel a bit of viscera just dripping down her face. Then, she allowed a look of amusement to come over her face as she reached up and touching her temple.

"Hair dye," she laughed. "Hair dye, my heart. Blood. Really? My darling, you know I never take kills around you. I was simply a bit late in freshening up. I was going to take a shower, in fact. You should put your things in the room and join me." She put on her best sultry smile.

"I was hoping you would ask that," Night grinned. They took a step towards the study, their bag in their hand. "I'm just going to put this in the study. I got you some new books and—"

"No!"

Night stopped, back tensing as they slowly turned towards me. Bella couldn't remember the last time she had spoken to them with unwanted panic.

"I mean," Bella stepped forward. "I missed you. Put your bag right there and come up with me."

There was a silence in the room. One that coursed upwards towards the vaulted ceilings and consumed the room.

"That is definitely blood."

"It is not."

"It is."

"Why would I lie to you?"

"I don't know. But I can smell the buckets of blood from here and since you don't want me to go into the parlor I'd say that there are a couple of dead bodies in there."

Bella was never one to play a game for long. So instead, she sighed, stomping across the room and flinging open the door. It was a poor choice since most of them still looked towards the door with glazed, wide open eyes.

"They attacked me," she told Night.

Immediately, Night was by her side, running their hands over her. "Are you okay? What happened?"

Bella sighed, more irritated than anything else. "A few months ago I overheard two men in the market making lewd comments about you. So I followed them down an alley and killed them. Apparently, they rose from their grave with a vengeance and brought some friends with them this time around to try and finish the job. Idiots."

Night looked into the study and then back at Bella. Slowly, they shut the door, blocking the bodies from view. "So are they going to rise again?"

"Probably. I look forward to knowing how stupid they are the next time around. I didn't even break a sweat today. I was simply irritated because it has marred your homecoming."

"Right," they said slowly.

Then, the scent of blood disappeared. There was a slight shaking within the room and then it was just gone. Belladonna frowned and looked back at the shut door before slowly pushing it open. The study was clean. The displaced books back in place, and there was nothing more than a few skull trophies now lining the wall.

A slow curl of a smile came over Belladonna's face. "I like the new wall art," she said.

"I thought you might. Now, what was that about a shower?"

Taking her dear heart's hand, Belladonna leaned forward, pressing her lips to theirs and kissing them with a ferocity unmatched. Night grinned against her. And the two of them headed upstairs, together, while the souls of the attackers dissipated into nothing.

[Personalized Stories](#)

[Oct 4, 2024](#)

To the people at the Baron tier this month for personalized stories, I will be in contact soon. :) I can't wait to read your thoughts.



[Malcoolm - NSFW](#)

[Oct 5, 2024](#)

[Gabriel - Homecoming](#)

[Oct 7, 2024](#)

He was supposed to have been home three hours ago. Home to a place where an entire five-course meal was being delivered. Where he had bought a new dining table. Where he had wine breathing on the counter. Music would play softly in the background and candles would be lit with a soft and flickering glow. When the door opened, he would take his beloved into his arms for the first time in months, and whisper to them how much he longed for their presence in his bed. Then, the two of them would walk to the bedroom, tangled among each other, and lay with each other until their passions ran their course. Gabriel would then feed his beloved Night by hand from the meal that was still heated by magic.

But instead, Gabriel was in the middle of a dirty alley, where a family of moles had taken to war with the family of voles across the way. It was a literal bloodbath and was blocking one of the main roads through the market. Currently, his underling was taking statements, while several other members of the Velvet Guard were having to keep the mole and vole war at bay.

Gabriel had a headache.

“Warden,” officer Niles came bounding up to him, concern etched all over his face. “There is indication that these individuals might have magic contraband. Which most likely started the war.”

Gabriel rubbed a hand across his face. “Which kind of magic contraband?”

“Perhaps the ones that was reported stolen from the alchemy district? We are still cataloging it all.”

Gabriel was more irritated than relieved over finding the source of yet another week long paperwork mess. This was the last place that he wanted to be. “Anything else?”

“I— no. I don’t think so. Do you wish for me to take them all into custody. Or burn it all down.”

Several of the little voles screeched in anger over the suggestion. “No,” Gabriel said tiredly. “Neither situation. Give them a warning.”

“A warning, Warden?”

Gabriel hadn’t given out a warning in at least four years. He was not known to do such a thing. But he had places to be.

“Can you take care of this, officer Niles?”

“I...” Officer Niles flinched as a fight broke out behind him. One of the other guards seemed to be handling it. “If you believe I can, yes.”

Gabriel put a gloved hand to the Officer's shoulder. "Good. Take care of it then. I expect a report in the morning."

"Yes, sir!" Niles saluted. There was a mini explosion that happened behind him but Gabriel refused to turn around. He was already far too late.

Rushing through the market, he tried to make it home. Taking only the less traveled paths, he silently muttered a prayer to the Knowing that no one would see him. If he could just get home, he might still be able to salvage this. Maybe he would have time to at least get the candles lit. Or, turn on the lights. Something.

"Warden?"

Silently, Gabriel cursed. He could just pretend like he didn't hear. He could just keep going and hope that the situation wasn't too severe.

"Warden, please! I'm stuck."

Gabriel stopped, still not turning around. "How stuck?"

There was a long moment of silence as the person was trying to process the question. "Moderate stuck?"

Gabriel hated his life. Because of course, moderate stuck was an issue. Moderate stuck could turn into severely stuck, and then that was going to become a much bigger problem that would keep him up most of the night.

Turning, he spotted locked eyes with the woman who had called out to him. Her cream-colored horns curled upwards and had gotten tangled in the strings of lanterns up above. Lines of thin wire were wrapped around each angular jut of the horn while a paper lantern was torn in shreds.

"It is a market offense to break a lantern." Walking forward, Gabriel stared at the rounded pink eyes of the woman in front of him. She was about a foot taller and looked as if she had recently been crying.

"I know," she whispered. "I really do but I didn't mean it. The lanterns were just so much lower here. I avoid the streets with the drooping lanterns, but they must have dropped with the last rain. I didn't know, Warden. I just didn't know."

Gabriel had a choice. He could untangle this individual and move on with his day, letting a criminal loose in the street. Or, he could prosecute them to the full extent of the law and understand that he wasn't getting home any time soon.

He should prosecute. He should take this woman by the horns and march her down to the caves and toss away the key to her cell for inconveniencing him. And there was a time he probably would have



done that in the name of the law. But, he had nothing then. He had no home that he enjoyed. No one to greet him at night. He had no one that he cared about.

With a put upon sigh, he reached up, gesturing for the woman to bend her head down slightly. He took the loops of wire and slipped them from her antlers, gently taking the broken lantern in his hand.

"Are you going to arrest me?" the woman said as she straightened.

"No. Just be more careful next time." He took the lantern, holding it under his arm. "Now go."

"Thank you," the woman said. She clopped away down the alley, making sure to duck her head the entire time.

Gabriel picked up his pace as he continued his way home, keeping his head down. The broken lantern was under his arm, a piece of contraband that he was sure would burn up in his grasp somehow. When he turned the corner to his own street, he breathed a sigh of relief. He would put the broken lantern in his spare room and fix it in the morning. Rehang it as well. No one would know and if anyone came upon him, he would just say that he found the lantern that way. The last few years had turned Gabriel into a degenerate.

His relief was short-lived, however, when he saw the gathering of people, two doors down from his own. Mrs. Bleasedale and her bingo club. It wasn't often that Gabriel felt true fear, but upon seeing the white curls of Mrs. Bleasedale and her gang of gamblers, he felt a shiver go down his spine. But he just needed to keep walking. He just needed to get to his door. It looked as if they were all chattering anyway about the latest market gossip. He should be able to—

"Mr. Caine! Yoo-hoo! Mr. Caine!" Gabriel grit his teeth together, keeping his head ducked. Maybe they would think they had got the wrong person. It was a short-lived belief as Mrs. Bleasedale grabbed him by the arm. "Mr. Caine, you are looking rather fine this evening. Care to join us for our bingo group?"

Gabriel turned to the woman. She was short and squat and had enough wrinkles to suggest that she may be older than the Knowing. However, she didn't seem to care. No fewer than six love letters had been written to him in her flowery handwriting.

"I am busy, Mrs. Bleasedale. It has been a long day."

The woman around her all tittered in laughter, speaking behind their hands.

"Oh, come now, Mr. Caine. Join us. A strapping young man like you deserves to be out and about. We never see you do anything but work. Come, let me take care of you tonight. Entertain a couple of old bitties like us."

All Gabriel could think is that his love was going to walk down the street any moment. See him surrounded by all these women. And what would they think then?

"I really do need to go. Maybe next time."

"Jeanie, let him go," one of the other women said. "He might have a hot date waiting for him."

Mrs. Bleasdales grip tightened on Gabriel. "A date? Why, Mr. Caine, is that true?"

Gabriel looked longingly at the door. "Of course not, Mrs. Bleasedale. But I do need to go. And detaining an individual is a crime."

The woman's eyes lit up. "Is it?"

"Yes. Don't make me arrest you."

The women all laughed but did let him go. Gabriel took the opportunity to run into the house.

He closed the door behind the gaggle of cackling women, back against the wall. He didn't know how long he had but he was sure he could do something to make Night's return special. The magic chaffing dishes for the food could be re-charged. He could like a candle or two. Still put on music.

"Mrs. Bleasedale, huh?"

Gabriel's eyes snapped open.

Before him, the table was set, a candelabra burning bright. A soft lilt of something classical was weaving in the background. And Night. Night stood there, a glass of wine in hand, staring at Gabriel with a bemused smile.

"You're here," he breathed.

"For about two hours. Work rough today?" They walked over to him, leaning in to kiss him gently on the lips. Gabriel felt himself melt at that. The day's duties slipping away. When Night handed him a glass of wine, he felt a warmth bloom in his chest.

"I missed you," he told them.

Night smiled, reaching up to run their fingers through his hair, shaking the curls loose from the slicked back style he always wore it in. "I can tell. I got here right as the caterers did. A house cleaner too. You did all this for me?"

"I wanted your homecoming to be special."

"Gabriel, sandwiches at the office would be special to me."

"Not good enough for you."

"Sometimes I don't think you believe anything is good enough for me."



"It is not," he told them. "You should be given life on a platter after everything you've gone through." His arms wrapped around them, pulling them close. Night smelled of lantern oil and something citrus. Gabriel often rolled over and smelled their pillow at night just to remember them. "You should not have had to set up dinner on your own. I am sorry."

"I saw Mrs. Bleasedale and know your day was going to go to hell. And I also see you have a broken lantern in your hand?" They were trying not to laugh. "What happened?"

Sitting down, Gabriel told them of their day. Starting with the mafia warfare between the mole and the voles, to breaking his vows and untangling the woman around the lanterns, to Mrs. Bleasedale nearly grabbing his ass. By the time he was finished, a filled plate was in front of him along with a fresh glass of wine.

Gabriel frowned. "I need to be taking care of you."

"Good. So eat a good meal and then take me to bed."

"That was part of the plan. But I will have to make sure you are taken care of first. Let me do something for you."

Night got up, sitting closer to Gabriel. "You silly, silly man. Taking care of yourself is taking care of me. I need you to understand that. This is a partnership. We take care of each other. Just because you didn't have dinner on the table doesn't mean that you didn't take care of me. In fact, I'm a little offended. Dinner is my thing. I bring it to you."

"I was trying to turn the tables."

Leaning down, Night kissed him sweetly. "Eat," they said. "And tell me how much you love me. Then take me to bed, let me sleep, and get me breakfast in the morning."

Taking Night by the hips, he pulled them into his lap. "Done," he whispered. "But promise me something?"

"Anything," Night said.

"Do not tell Mrs. Bleasedale that we are together. I am afraid she will burn down my apartment."

Night glanced towards the window. "Oh, I don't know. I think I'm going to go join bingo now. Mrs. Bleasedale sounds like a fun lady." Night shrieked as Gabriel stood, slinging them over his shoulder. He had ate his meal. He had drank his wine. And he was going to be damned if Mrs. Bleasedale was going to take up any more of his time.

He was going to take care of his love now. The way they deserved.

[Oct 11, 2024](#)

The door closed with a snap, leaving Milo sweaty and heaving for breath. He leaned against the unassuming jet of air. Still solid enough to keep him afloat as the magic diminished. It was a small tear, really. One that shouldn't have been an issue. That is, it wouldn't have been if it had been anywhere normal. But the door had opened seven feet off the ground above a lake, and Milo had very little time to react. And when Milo was given very little time to react, he didn't think clearly. So, he had opened another door to reach through to the first door, and stood on a boulder to put his hand through and slice open his palm enough to close said door. Then he had to close the door he had opened by slicing open his other palm. And then he realized he had done it wrong and ended up slicing open his calf because he thought that might produce better blood. He may have had a bit of blood loss at this point, and simply wasn't thinking clearly. That, and he hadn't slept in three days.

The thing about dating the Night Market was this; Milo felt complete. Like he had a space and a home when he had never had one before. But when that space and home decided to take little trips to the stars, to say that Milo felt out of sorts was an understatement. Of course, he would never say this to them. Because the last thing Milo wanted to do was be any sort of inconvenience. It was an active goal in Milo Next's life to make the Night Market as happy as can be. An eternal repentance, he liked to think of it. Despite having been forgiven years ago.

"Just had to open today, did ya? Just had to be all 'hey Gatekeep. You know what's fun? Tearing a hole in your partner's otherworldly body. Hahaha, let's do that.'" Collapsing onto the boulder, Milo flopped back and looked up at the stars. Pen was probably up there laughing at him. Prick.

With his leg sore and both of his palms sluggishly oozing blood, Milo took a moment to gather himself. Only five more days. Five more days and his Night would be home. And at some point in there he would probably pass out from exhaustion, right? A body couldn't just sustain itself on no sleep and crap food. Throw a little bit of gin in the mix and the cravings for nicotine, and it was a self-destructive bomb if there ever was one. In fact, he thought maybe it would be a good idea to just lay down now. Sleep for twenty minutes, if he could. Because if he tried to walk home now, he'd wake up, and it would be an entire ordeal and of course he'd have to go for the fifth of whiskey that was sitting on his counter and—

"You're an idiot."

Milo blinked. He was no longer looking at the starfield. In fact, he wasn't outside at all. He was in a warm and cozy bed, surrounded by blankets, looking up at paper lanterns strewn across a whitewashed ceiling.

And Night was right in front of him.

“Hi, darlin’.”

“Hi,” they smiled. “You realize you passed out, right?”

“I do now. Did you carry me all the way back here? Would have liked to see that. Not often I get to be the damsel in distress.”

“Pen carried you.”

Milo frowned at that. Of course Pen did. Because Pen made it their life mission to show Milo how precarious his position was in Nights life. Going out of their way to make sure Milo looked weak. That he was seen as unworthy. That he shouldn’t be the gatekeeper and—

Night cupped his cheek, leaning forward and kissing the frown lines. “Stop.” They always did know when his mind was spiraling. There was a sharp tug against Milo’s chest where a matching scar had been etched.

He swallowed, looking at them sheepishly. “Haven’t slept much,” he explained. “Pesky intrusive thoughts, darlin’. That’s all.” Shifting, he sat up a little, taking in his surroundings. The house was mostly dark with the occasional flickering light submerged in different colored silk scarves. Far homier than where Milo usually laid his head to rest. “Thought you weren’t supposed to be home for another few days. I was going to have a big thing for you planned and everything.”

“Were you?” They raised a brow. Best intentions, but Milo struggled with follow through.

“Okay. So it wasn’t going to be big, but I was going to take you dancing and then ravish you until I couldn’t keep my eyes open anymore.”

“Given that you’re not sleeping, that would last what? Five minutes?”

“Psh. Three. Tops.” Reaching out with what he now realized were bandaged hands, he gently guided Night into bed with him. Situating them under the covers, he threw the comforter up over both of their heads, snuggling in close. “Tell me about your trip.”

“It was nice. The stars miss me.”

“I saw the flashes of light in the sky. Looked like quite the soirée.” Down below, the market had partied. They lit their annual lanterns and sent them towards the stars, constructing their shrines for the ancients, while some of the dead chose to rise and come back home. It was a night of chaos and debauchery, and usually one of Milo’s favorite.

But he kept looking up. Kept searching out the small winks of light that he knew was Night. And honestly, his heart felt far more full from that than a random rut in a back alley somewhere.

Milo Next may have turned disgustingly love sick, and he was waiting for someone in the market to take out a billboard and mock him for it. Hell, at this point, he might just take one out for himself.

"There was a bit of a homecoming, but I don't know a lot of them. The sky was lonely when I was growing up. This is all new. All of them look at me as some sort of god."

"That's a bad thing?" He asked.

"An uncomfortable thing. Especially when they hear that said god would rather relinquish power and come frolic down in what they consider to be the desolate bowls of the realm."

"We need to get that on a shirt," Milo snickered. He pulled Night close, snuggling towards them. "Did you get to play many games?"

"Not as much as I wanted. I had to come home early because a certain boyfriend of mine wasn't coping too well." When Milo winced, they scooted closer, running a heated hand down the side of his arm. "I didn't mean it like that. I was joking. In poor taste."

He squirmed a little. "I know. I just hate when you have to cut things short because of me. I don't like being 'that guy'."

"You physically can't handle it, Milo. That isn't your fault. We knew what we were getting into all those years ago." Didn't make it any better and honestly, sometimes Milo forgot. Choosing instead to believe that he just wasn't strong enough. "Maybe next time you should come with me?"

That perked him up. "Yeah?"

"Why not? It'd be nice for you to see my home."

Rolling so he was on top of them, bracing his hands on either side, he grinned, hair flopping in his face. "We could stay for however long you want. I'd charm the stardust off of everyone there. Fix dinners. Dance. Play games. You tell me and I'll do it."

There was a spark of affection that took place across Night's eyes. Milo knew they missed home badly, but being away from the market was sometimes impossible. But if he could go with them, he could help. He could soothe the worries that Night was making a foolhardy mistake. Breathe vibrancy back into the sky. And most of all, he could put Night at ease. It was possibly the best gift he would be able to give.

"Let me rest for a few days, and then we'll think of a way to do it," Night conceded.

Milo leaned forward, pressing his forehead to theirs. "I'm going to frolic naked in the sky," he promised. "Give everyone a real show."

"I'd like to watch that."

"Then it's done. Just for you, darlin'." Then, more seriously. "Anything for you."

They wrapped their arms around him. "I know, Milo. I know."

[Update](#)

[Oct 21, 2024](#)

Hello everyone,

As some of you have heard, my stepfather has lost his battle with cancer. It has put a dark marker on this last year. I learned of his diagnosis almost a year to the day he passed. On our part, we are not doing well. I have four children that are processing losing their grandfather, while I myself am processing losing a father. Some moments are okay. Others I can't breathe. I guess that's normal.

A lot of you have personalized stories this month. I am going to try and get to them in the next few days. I do not want to shirk on what I promised. Going forward, I most likely am going to put out the promised Patreon content for the Night Market, but otherwise take a break. This story deals with death and loss and I can't write it at the moment. I will eventually, but not today. And while I would love to just disappear for a while, let's face it, bills don't let you do that.

Thank you for your support and your understanding. I hear your requests to rest and know that I am in the best way I know how.

Love,

Zinnia

[Malcolm - Homecoming](#)

[Oct 27, 2024](#)

Malcolm had two rules. Never come home to a house in disarray. And never enter a cold home. The latter rule was created after he came back from the grave. The chill that crept in felt like being stuck underground or wandering the back alley's, internally screaming for someone to save him. So now, he refused to allow the cold to seep in anywhere. Especially when it came to someone important.

Inside Lamplight's home, he lit the last of the candles, feeling the heat from the flames weaving around the room. He had brought a small camp stove to place in the corner, stacking a fresh pile of wood by it. The bed was made up with that thick comforter they preferred, soup was bubbling on the stove, and a large bouquet of greens and delicate white flowers sat in the middle of the table. Now, Malcolm just had to wait. A feat that Malcolm actually was not all that good at, despite the calm he often projected to the world.

Lamplight had been gone for nearly the full cycle of a moon. Gone to visit the source of their power and to spend some time with Pen. It was a vacation that Malcolm had urged them to go on, but the second they left the market, he could feel the cold again. It crept in slowly, causing him to wear an extra sweater and rub his arms occasionally. Within three days he found himself pacing, looking up at the lights and wishing he could just hear their voice. After a week, he woke up shivering and realized that he perhaps did not do well without them. And wasn't that just something that was unfortunate, given the state of their lives.

So, when the window opened and Lamplight crawled through, Malcolm felt his heart leap, and the tension bleed from his chest. While he was a big proponent of living his own life, the main reason they had not moved in together, he was all too aware that the life he had made with them was something special. Something he feared would slip from his grasp with a moment's notice. It was a terrifying change of pace that he didn't think he would ever get used to.

"Hey, Lamplight," he whispered, voice a little gruff. "Welcome home."

They looked up at him with some surprise. Though it quickly faded. The likelihood of Malcolm allowing them to set foot in the market without immediately coming to their side, was not low in odds.

Closing the window behind them, Lamplight walked further into the room, taking in the homey atmosphere. "You didn't have to do all this," they said. Though, Malcolm felt warmth bloom in him at the look on their face. He had a feeling they appreciated the lack of cold just as much as he did.

"I have dinner almost ready. A bottle of wine. A large carafe of kafe. And the explicit request of everyone within Artisan Alley to leave you alone for at least twenty-four hours. Which means Kimber will be at the door tomorrow morning with baked goods and Sawyer will most likely be outside your window just on principal."

Lamplight laughed. "Turner will be respectful," they pointed out.

"Turner practically threw a clock at my head for coming and speaking with him. I'd say he is hyper fixated on his new shipment." Stepping forward, Malcolm took the bag from their shoulder, setting it aside before folding them into his arms. He felt the last of the tension drift away from him. "I missed you," he whispered against the shell of their ear. He felt their hands come up, sliding under his shirt to press flat palms against his back.

"I missed you, too."

Malcolm felt tears prick his eyes as his throat threatened to close up on him. He wasn't willing to let them go. Not yet. It wasn't until that moment that he realized how on edge he had felt without them. Like a piece of himself had been drifting further and further away. But now that they were back, the world was drifting towards color and the lights were a bit bright. And the warmth, oh the warmth, it spread through him like wildfire.

"You alright?" they asked softly.

He nodded against their shoulder, gathering the pieces of himself that had been flung apart. When he pulled away, he gave them a watery smile. One in which they returned, cupping his cheek.

"You know," he laughed. "I never thought I would be the guy to miss his partner as much as I did."

"I could feel it," they said softly. "Your longing. I almost came home several times."

"No," he said with a frown, turning to kiss the palm of their hand. "I wouldn't have liked that. It was important for you to reconnect with your higher self. And Pen has been trying to get you to come see them for a long time. This trip was good for you, Lamplight."

"But you missed me."

"I will always miss you. And remember what we talked about? Two things can be true at once. I can miss you terribly and still want you to take time for you. I think the entire ordeal shocked me. I hadn't expected to feel like I did."

They did not look satisfied with his answer and Malcolm knew that it was going to be a stubborn battle between them the next time they had to go home. But tonight, it could be left at that.

"Come on," he said. "You need a good home cooked meal. And I want to hear everything about your trip. The lanterns are brighter. A few new ones are popping up in the Outlands."

They bounced a little on their feet before sitting down at the table, watching Malcolm intently go around the kitchen, serving them a bowl of soup and a hearty glass of wine.

"It was strange," they told him. "Pen and I worked a lot on trying to control the flow of energy between this body and the higher one. I was hoping you would notice the lights, though. I sent them for you."

"I noticed," he smiled. "I ended up falling asleep on a rooftop terrace just to watch them."

"I tried to shift the colors. I was thinking for this year's Renewal Festival I would try and make them all change color at once. Symbolic of the new calendar year starting."

"Do you think that would be too much for you down here?"

"I don't know. I have time to figure it all out. I'm excited though. I have so many plans. Getting in touch with myself has been easier than I anticipated, and I'm actually excited to try new things. Change up the



world a little.”

“That’s fantastic, Lamplight.”

A concerned look grew across their face then. Setting their soup aside, they rounded the table, scooting Malcolm’s chair out and straddling their lap. “I don’t like leaving you,” they said seriously. “It feels like something is ripped from me.”

He smiled at her sadly. “Byproduct of being in love, I would suppose.”

“Byproduct of being tied together.” They sighed. There was really nothing they could do. Lamplight could perhaps take him with them the next time, but Malcolm’s place was not there. It was down in the Market, protecting what they had made together. “Thank you,” Lamplight said finally.

“For what?”

“For keeping it warm in here. It was cold up near the stars. I... It’s hard to be cold like that.” Malcolm felt them shudder in his arms. Brushing his fingers at the base of their neck, he nodded, kissing the corner of their mouth gently.

“Come to bed with me,” he requested.

Lamplight pulled back, forehead resting against his own. “You’ll stay?”

“Until you kick me out.”

If possible, their hold tightened further around Malcolm. “I don’t think I could ever ask you to leave,” they whispered to him. And Malcolm knew, he knew, that they would both eventually need their space. That they had their own lives. But tonight, he wanted to indulge. To be the kind of man that couldn’t live without them. So, he carried them to bed, wrapping himself tight around a familiar body. And for once, he vowed to himself to never let go. Because the simple fact was, he didn’t have to.

[Hazel - Homecoming](#)

[Oct 28, 2024](#)

Hazel rolled to the side of the bed, out of breath, sweat drying sticky on her tanned skin. She looked up towards her ceiling, watching the way the waxy vines continued to creep out through the open window while large dripping blossoms breathed upon the vine. A faint dusting of nectar had settled all across her

room, coating her dresser and reading chair with gold dust. Pushing her hair from her face, she sucked in a deep breath, laughing a bit.

"I will have to get out the pruning shears," she commented. This was not the first time plants had sprouted after intimacy, but it normally was not this expansive.

"Your ceiling looks like a jungle," Night said from her side. A hand reached out, tracing down between her breasts to settle on her belly. "I don't think I've ever seen it like that before."

"It's been awhile," Hazel grinned. Turning her head on the pillow, she looked at her lover, her own eyes black still with desire. "Welcome home."

"It was quite the welcoming," they laughed.

Hazel hadn't said a word as they walked through the front door of the apothecary. Instead, she had rushed to them, jumping into their arms and pressing her lips to theirs. While she had an entire meal awaiting them and soft candlelight flickering for a romantic evening, it had all gone out the window the second she had seen them.

"I did make soup," she offered. "And muffins. A few pies too." And by a few she meant there was a half a dozen cooling in the kitchen.

Night laughed, rolling over to gather her in their arms. "We can eat it all when I can feel my limbs again."

Hazel's eyes widened. "Did I hurt you?"

"No. It just was that good."

She settled a little then, content in the knowledge that she had made them go non-verbal and loose. Her own body was still buzzing with their union but that had more to do with the magic still thrumming through her. With the edge of her foot, she kicked up the quilt, pulling it up and over them. The night breeze trickled in front the window and the wisps sang sweetly in their tree.

"I'm sorry for attacking you," she blushed. "It really wasn't my intention. I just saw you and thought to myself that I might die if I spent another second without your lips on mine." Ducking her head, she nuzzled against their neck. "And I missed the taste of you."

"I am never going to complain about that, Hazel. We are just going to need to invest in some shears when I take long trips. Or hire a gardener. I don't know how much more the house can handle this." As if on cue, the house itself groaned.

At that, Hazel perked up though and Night had to wonder how she could have so much energy. "Oh, we could have sex in the back field next time. I've been meaning to get out there and plant. It would be kind of sweet to have an entire grove created from our lovemaking." She could already see it. Lush and

verdant green trees. A field of white daisies and sweet smelling honeysuckle. She could create a small bed of moss out there to lay on and perhaps put a bench or two there.

"You are planning our sex grove, aren't you."

Her eyes widened and, if possible, her blush grew deeper. "Maybe."

They laughed loudly, rolling her into their arms before settling her on top of them. Hazel's legs fell on either side of their hips. "It would be pretty," she protested. "And a wonderful symbol of us. You know that sex magic is the most potent magic out there, right?"

"I did not."

Hazel rolled her hips against them. "Oh, yes. People think it's blood, but really, sex is one of the most dangerous components of any ritual. I bet those plants would last for years to come. In fact, we could make a ritual of it all on its own. Go out there once a month. Make love under the full moon. And with you being the Night Market, I'm sure it would be even more potent."

"You're serious."

"Yes," she began bouncing a little, the slick from her thighs rubbing against their skin. "The plants and our love would protect our home. We could train the trees. Keep some chickens back there. It would be the start of something new. In fact, we could build our home back there."

"I don't know how I feel about inviting people to the palace we literally created with sex."

Hazel actually hadn't thought of that. "Okay, so we maybe don't have our home home there. It could be our private home, but our entertaining home would still be here. We could maybe make a bridge between the two and..."

Night surged up, stopping them by pressing their lips to hers. Hazel groaned wantonly, her tongue slipping out to taste the seam of their lips. Above them, the flowers pulsed. Feeling the heat in her belly begin to grow again, Hazel breathed deeply.

When they pulled away, Night's eyes were equally dark. "Would you like me to demonstrate some more magic to you?" Hazel asked coyly.

Night swallowed, kneading the swell of her hips. "You know, maybe we should. I don't think I was paying the appropriate amount of attention last time." Hazel's laughter filled the air as Night flipped her, hitching her hips up high, her legs wrapping around Night's own. "And I am an eager student," they grinned.

"I always did say that learning was incredibly important."

The vines came down around them as their bodies began to move together, cocooning them from the wisps prying eyes. Soft moans filled the room as hitching breaths made small blossoms of pink and gold wake upon the vine. And as the heat frose from their intertwined bodies, outside, little hills formed, coated in lilac, the stocks of which were reaching for the house. Anyone that walked by would think the garden witch at the end of the lane, was up to not good again.

Yet, the reality was far from the truth. Though, Hazel wasn't too keen on correcting the rumor. Not just yet, at least. Right now, she had other plans.

### [Pen's Story - The beginning](#)

[Nov 11, 2024](#)

Stardust bounced across the sky in skipping jumps that fell to the ground in a multicolored puddle of ink. Pen stood at the edge of the cliffside, fists clenching at their side. Pinks and blues and soft glittering purples dripped down into the void, swept away to somewhere far off to make galaxies he would never see. Pen kicked at a rock by their foot. The kind that had worked its way towards the cosmos in hopes of becoming a cornerstone of a world not yet awakened. With one fell swoop, Pen shifted its fate.

And wasn't that just the crux of it all.

Flopping down, they put their feet over the edge, kicking back and forth, and watched the dust swirl around them. Destiny was one of those tropes that was hard to take stock in. This nebulous idea where life was preset. Pen believed that the ones who called for the word used it as a way to not face the consequences of their actions. One could not possibility be upset if this was destiny's will, right?

They snorted. Oh, how easy it was to just let a delusion rule life.

"You look sad."

Pen startled, looking around them. The voice came from nowhere and everywhere at once. A voice so childlike that it matched their own. But they could see no others floating about. Other than father, Pen had been alone for the short amount of his life.

"Are you sad?"

Again, it came from nowhere. But the one trait that had been instilled in them, the one they actually agreed with, was that an individual should always answer a question posed to them.

"I'm not sad," Pen said, still looking around. "Disappointed, maybe. Confused. Absolutely angry. But not sad."

Wind brushed against their cheek. "Why aren't you sad?"

Pen frowned. Such a funny way to ask a question. "I— I'm just not?"

"But you're crying."

A hand formed in the stardust, reaching out to brush against their face. A wet trail stuck to the wavering fingers, opening a rift into another galaxy. It was so small that the rift would ultimately heal as if it were nothing more than a scratch. But for a minute, Pen saw an escape. Or maybe, they just didn't want to admit that they were crying to this formless creature.

"Is that what tears are?" they asked. Pen had heard of the concept before. There was a vague memory where they thought they remembered their parents shedding these tears. But Pen couldn't quite remember. Maybe it had been a dream.

"Your tears look special," the voice said. "Or, I think. I'm not sure if I've ever seen tears before. Or others before. Not in a body."

Pen looked around, the wind now twirling around them in a dancing embrace. "What are you?"

There was a puff of air. Laughter. "I don't know."

"Are you new?"

"Perhaps."

Pen frowned, trying to recall if there had ever been stories that their father had told. Perhaps of visitors. "Are you from here?"

"I don't know."

"How do you not know?" Pen's voice was more curious than anything else. This odd little creature, flitting about, who seems so curious with them.

"I don't know," the voice giggled. Pen found it absolutely charming. They didn't think they had heard a sound quite like it before.

"Do you have a name? Or a form?" The hand had dissipated after wiping their tears. Pen had a new urge to just see who this was they were talking to.

"Maybe? I could? What a fun series of questions this is."

"I'm glad you think so."

"My turn! My turn!" A gust whipped by them, sitting at Pen's side. "Did someone hurt you?"

The light in Pen's thoughts went out. Hurt. What a funny little word. Were creatures like them allowed to be hurt?

"No," they said. "Not on purpose at least. I think... I think I'm supposed to be growing up."

"That sounds like a nasty word."

"Two words, actually," Pen commented. "But I am told it's a part of life."

"Life." A burst of color shot across the stars, cascading downwards to form a path of multicolored ice. It formed little crystalline steps up towards the rest of the stars. "Life," the voice repeated. "What is that?"

Pen tipped their head towards where they thought the voice was coming from. "It's living," they said simply. How were they supposed to explain life to someone who didn't know the basic concept of it all? "I guess it's a series of actions."

"Oh! Like flitting through the air?"

Pen could have sworn that he saw something flip in front of him. "Well, yes. But it's more. It's also emotions? How we react to everything that happens in the world and to us. I'm... I'm not explaining it well. Life is different for others."

"What is life like for you?"

Pen didn't know. Life for Pen was supposed to be to serve. It was what reapers did and if Pen was supposed to be Death one day, was life even an option? "I don't think I'm supposed to have a life, actually."

"Oh." The world went a bit darker. "That is sad."

"Yeah."

Pen had fought. They had spoken to Death and said that this was not the path for them. And what got to Pen the most, was that Death did not even disregard Pen's words. Instead, Death looked at Pen sadly, his own child, and told Pen that he wished he could change the future.

"Well, what if I become life for you?"

Pen stopped. "Huh?"

"I could do it. I could become life. And then you could watch me."

"I don't know if that's..."

“Oh, what fun life would be!”

Pen didn't have the heart. As the world began to shift around them, they knew that the little creature was trying in the only way it could understand. It was creating hope. An emotion that was lacking around them.

Curling their knees to their chest, Pen watched as the creature laughed and skipped across the stars, a small outline of something on the horizon. And Pen just ducked their head onto their knees, and felt something slip down their face once more.

[Pen - Part 2](#)

[Nov 12, 2024](#)

The room had always been intimidating. There were large pillars that stretched high up towards the sky, disappearing into the black and gold lights. Planets were birthed and destroyed above, thousands of light-years away, sharing their last bits of life to anyone who may have needed it. The palace would receive it all, eventually. Bottling it up to keep a record of those who were lost. Never truly letting those worlds die.

Echoes of the dead shrouded the room, congregating within the corners, surroundings small pools of light. Pen had noticed that about the spirits. They liked the lights. It was the last vestiges of life that they clung to. Some would fade. Others would be reborn. While a fated few would stick around forever.

Stepping inside the room, Pen looked at the pools of spirits, fighting the urge to rub their arms vigorously. It wasn't that the cold was taking control, but there was a sense of emptiness to the air. That's what had always bothered them. Death felt empty.

“Merripen.”

The voice of their father boomed through the room. It echoed from high above, from where he sat on a throne that stretched into nothing. Father Death was sitting on the throne, head disappearing into a cloud of stardust. But upon seeing his child, he began to shrink. Arms and legs pulling inwards until he became just a bit taller than Pen, long black cloaks flowing around him. He walked up to Pen, embracing him.

“I have not seen you for a spell. Are you well?”



Pen leaned into the comfort of their father for a moment. The smell of peppermint and grave dirt was strong today. "I am. Did you just come in from the garden?"

Death smiled. The garden was the graveyards that they tended. Death loved them. Took care of them. Took long strolls within the tombstones, speaking to the restless souls that were trying to understand what had happened to them.

"I did. There is a wonderful new one that has formed in the world beyond. Intricate stones. The world expands to fit the capacity that is needed. It's genius really."

"Is this within Night?"

"Night. Yes. I do forget that you two play."

Play was not the word Pen would use. Not any longer. Pen had grown up. Was an adult now. Night was sometimes not but they came back to themselves when they saw how serious Pen had become. Time for play was lost in the past. Nothing more than fond memories that didn't belong in the world now.

"I'm glad the garden within that world is taking so well. I know you had some concern."

"A nexus point. It is an interesting concept, but one I am not opposed to. If it works, I think the spirits will be much happier."

With a hand on Pen's shoulder, Death lead them to a room off to the side. It was a much quieter area. One where there was a small koi pond, the water cascading over the side. Pen knew that the water connected down into the world. The sprites liked playing in it. Two large chairs appeared just at the pond's edge, wrapped in purple velvet. Death kicked off their shoes, Pen following, and before saying anything else, they both put their feet within the water.

"That hits the spot," Death sighed. Leaning backwards, the black robes cascaded all around, shifting into tendrils of shadow that billowed across the floors, seeking out others to envelop in their folds. He was quiet for a long moment, letting the soothing sounds of water cascade downwards, easing away the noise from the rest of the day.

Pen, however, sat stiffly.

"I assume you know why I called you here," Death started, cracking open an eye. Pen did. They were hoping that it wasn't going to be a conversation. "Have you thought about what I have told you?"

Pen shifted uncomfortably. It was all they had talked about. It was a sore spot in their mind that continued to hound them throughout their waking hours. "I don't have an answer for you." There was such shame in those words.

Sitting up, Death leaned forward, steepling bone fingers under his chin. "Is there anything I can do to answer your questions better? Help you with your decision."

"Is it a decision?" Pen had promised they would not be doing this. It was not supposed to be an argument. Yet, they felt the injustice and the unfairness of it all rise in their chest like an old wound.

"Mer," Death sighed.

"No. It's not a decision. You know this is not. You want me to take over the mantle of Death. You have no other children. If I don't do it, who will?"

"Your mother and I can always have another child."

"So I'm passing this off on some baby? One who may or may not want it?" Pen hadn't gotten a choice to be Death's heir. This child would be given the same fate.

"No," Death said patiently. "They would be given a choice. Just like you."

"And as the days go on, you keep the job longer and longer, and it is held over my head that I am the reason you cannot go and be with mom."

The words echoed throughout the room. They felt like a slap every time. Not taking over the mantle of Death meant shoving responsibility off on a poor soul yet to be born. Taking the mantle felt as if giving up any semblance of a life.

"Mer," Death began softly. "I am not asking you to make a decision at this moment. It is a big one. And I am not pressuring you."

"But you miss mom."

"I miss her more than anything. But, I also care for my child just as much. And if you are not ready for me to leave, I won't."

Pen reeled back. "It has nothing to do with that." It was responsibility Pen shied away from. The thought of forcing this onto another. It was not the fear of their father leaving. Pen didn't believe in fear.

Leaning forward, Death reached out, taking their child's hand. There was light in the skull face, hidden beneath the hood. Pen wondered what their father actually looked like. Vague images from birth were all they had to cling to.

"I love you," Death said. "I will love you even after these robes are shed from my body. And if that is never, then so be it."

Pen felt tears slip down their cheeks. "That's not fair," they whispered.

"Perhaps. But when we chose to bring you into this world, your mother and I swore that this would be the path we would take. You came before us. And you will always come before us."

Pen felt their chest crack. Like the gnawing paws of destiny were splitting open their chest and clawing their way inside. "I want to answer you," they said softly.

"And you will." Death patted their hand. "Just not today."

Pen leaned forward, pressing their head against their clasped hands. And Death did not move. Instead, the world paused for a long moment in order for the younger reaper to cry. And Death held the rest of the spirits at bay to give them the space to do so.

### [Pen - Part 3](#)

[Nov 18, 2024](#)

"How'd it go?"

Light flickered in front of Pen before assembling into a small body that could sit at the edge of the stars. Night had yet to choose a real form to settle on. Most of the time, they forgot to settle on one at all.

Pen looked up, pushing hair from their own face, feeling the tacky feel of stardust against their cheeks. They should have known that Night would be nearby. Rarely did they let Pen get far. And when Pen's emotions flowed from them, wrapping through the cosmos in echoing cries, Night reached out for them, grabbing on to whatever they could reach. So of course, when Pen was leaving Death, Night took the opportunity to step forward.

"It went," Pen responded.

Night jumped from the star, little golden ripples appearing beneath their feet as they bounded downwards to stand next to Pen. They were bigger now. Their body growing and stretching to try and match Pen's height. Rarely did they stay in any one form for more than a few moments. Night struggled to keep hold of images still. Either that, or they enjoyed the fluidity of something new.

"Are you sad?"

It was the same question from Night. The one that had been on their lips from the day they first came to Pen. Are you sad.

"No, Night," Pen said, their head hanging low. "I'm not sad."

"You look sad."

"I'm not sad," Pen snapped, this time, angry at Night's observation. Rubbing at their temples, Pen ground their teeth together. This wasn't Night's fault. This was no one's fault but Pen's own. "Dad was fine," Pen began. "Too fine. Always fine."

Night looked confused. "That's good, right?"

Reaching out, Pen pulled forward some of the stardust, shaping it into a settee for the two of them to sit. They pulled together some bits of floating rock, shaping them into cups and a teapot and with a flick of their fingers, Pen filled the kettle with milk from the depths of the horizon.

Happily, Night sat beside them, humming and waiting for the conversation to begin. Sometimes, their conversations lasted decades. Falling off before being picked back up eons later, as if only a breath had passed.

"How do I do it, Night?" Pen finally spoke. "My father is willing to have an entire other baby in order to give me a life."

"Oh, I love babies."

Night didn't know what a baby was. It was the response they gave when they were confused but wanted to feel like they were part of the world around them. Pen sometimes wondered if Night would ever be able to express what they wanted. What they felt.

"Maybe he just wants to go back and see my mom," Pen sighed.

"Mom?" Night looked around, scooting around entirely to look on the other side of the sofa. "Where is your mom?"

Pen poured the tea for both of them. It smelled sweet this evening. With just a tinge of regret. "Back home. She's only allowed to come see father once a year."

"What? Why?"

Something about the passage between their realms. Pen had never really understood it and had been angry that they had not been allowed to see their mother due to some rule that had been placed on their family by who knows what.

"She could die if she comes here. Her body can't be sustained in the sky. When she does come here for her annual trip, there is some sort of ritual that has to be done. It takes all year to charge it."

"But you said if there was a baby, your dad could go see her?"

Pen nodded. "If she is with child, they can come and go as they please. Until the baby is born."

"So why have they not had another child?"

"Because they wanted to put all their focus on me." It was yet another burden upon Pen's shoulders and one they had been forced to carry, whether they wanted to or not.

"Maybe they *should* have a baby then. It sounds like that's the happiest solution."

Pen used to beg for a brother or a sister. Someone to play with. Their parents had always patted Pen's head and told them to just wait and see what life brought. Life never brought a sibling. But it did bring Night. It eased the pain of not having more family. Especially when life was all about play.

"No, Night. It's not that simple. Having a child... that kid would grow up like me. Not having anyone to play with. Having to decide if they are going to give up everything to do this all over again."

"But maybe we could find the baby a baby Night to play with."

Pen handed them their tea, trying to smile. "They would be so lucky." It wasn't worth explaining to them. Not that Pen could really understand it either. Pen's own feelings about it all were far too volatile, and Night was the only pure thing around. Pen didn't want to taint it.

"So, what are you going to do?"

Pen sighed. "I don't know. I have been assured I do not need to make a decision. But... but he is so lonely, Night. He wanders the gardens by himself, with only the dead to speak to him. That is not a life. He needs companionship."

"Doesn't he have you?"

Pen flinched. There had been a time in Pen's life that they had tried to be that for their father. But soon, Death had gently pushed them out of the house. Letting them know that in no uncertain circumstances, a child was never supposed to be the parents constant companion.

"I'm not sure what would make this right," Pen finally whispered in response.

"Do you want to take the mantle of death?"

"Of course I don't. To be alone like that? To wander the world and take the ones who have died? I would only see my mother and father once a year for the rest of my life. I would have no one. I—"

Night's hand wrapped around Pen's. "You would have me. You would always have me."

Pen looked down at their wrapped fingers. The weight of it in their palm. Right or wrong, Pen wanted to cling to that. Because they could not imagine a life without their Night. They wished that they could give into that blatant hope that Night had. To trust so willingly would be such a wonderful thing.

"Whatever you decide, old friend, I will be here." Night's head rested upon Pen's shoulder. Pen watched as Night's fingers flickered against his. Between slim and feminine and strong and masculine. The weight and feel was always the same, however. A constant that they could actually rely on. Not the

uncertainty of their now future or the weight of their father's request. It left Pen wondering so much. Wanting so much. Maybe they could fall in love with Night. Keep them here. Unlike their mother, Night would stay. Their future would not be once a year. Children that they had would not be without. Their world would be one of togetherness. Of—

Pen closed their eyes.

“Thanks, Night.”

“You’re welcome, Pen.”

#### [Pen - Part 4](#)

[Nov 21, 2024](#)

When Death perished, Pen placed the robes over their shoulders. Slowly, they let them fall around their too narrow frame, shrouding them in a cold embrace. Their father had left without warning. There was a slight waver to the world as Death passed on but nothing to say it had been expected. Pen had been having dinner with him, laughing around the koi pond as the stars skipped down an iridescent slide. When Pen had turned to suggest they open the doors further to hear their laughter, he had simply been gone. The suddenness of it had taken their breath away. The snap that had taken him left Pen feeling small and far more confused than they assumed was necessary. After all, what was the reason? Death guided souls to their final resting place. No one was supposed to guide him. And while there had been nothing wrong with Death himself, the inevitable day that made everyone so very alive, still came. His body disappeared from Pen’s world before his laughter had even left the air.

Pen had screamed. After the initial panic had worn off, they had ran around the empty palace, looking for their child like some sort of scared child. It was a game. It had to be a game. Death was hiding, lurking around the corner to pull Pen into his arms and swing him around like he had when they were young. Death couldn’t just die. It was one of the unwavering verity’s of the world.

But the shadows had begun to gather. The spirits had started wandering forward and clinging onto Pen’s skin. Pen had shaken them away, shooing them so they would go back to their pools. But as Pen continued to stumble from room to room, screaming for their father, the spirits persisted. They dug their claws into Pen’s skin, holding Pen down and dragging them to the floor. Fear pooled deep within their gut as the spirits refused to let them breathe, and it was as if their life was being taken from them. Bit by bit, the plans Pen had so meticulously crafted began to slowly slip away. Consumed by the spirits of greed. Taken by the angry souls that wished to still be alive. The irony was, Pen understood them the most.

Pen fought. Hours. Days. Minutes. They didn't rightfully know. But they fought. At some point, they didn't remember what they were fighting for. Just that it needed to be done.

Yet, none of it mattered. Fate, the spirits, maybe even Death itself. That's who won. Pen was the rejected loser in the situation because no matter what they did, the mantle of death was still bestowed upon them.

It was a funny thing, really. Losing a parent. There was a consistency with having them around. One that provided this bubble that wasn't always apparent. But the second that parent was gone, the bubble was popped, and the air was sucked from the room.

Pen couldn't understand the world around them. Let alone what they were supposed to do. The only thing that kept echoing in their brain anymore was their father's last words.

"We need more koi for the pond."

Pen didn't know why, but they assumed that Death's passing should have been something profound. The idea of the first Reaper gone without a sound had a sort of sad note to it that felt terrifying if dwelled upon too long. It was an omen, at first. With bated breath, Pen had waited for the world to end. But it was just Pen's world, really. That was the thing in contention.

Sitting on the throne, Pen looked around. Already, the palace was changing. The spirits were taking over because Pen didn't have the energy to control them. They were forming new walls and little steps that led to nowhere. Pen let them. They didn't care. Nothing in this world was worth the energy to care. They didn't even bother to let themselves grow to the size of the throne itself. Instead, they stayed small. A child playing among daddy's things. The pointed hood was loose down the line of their back, dripping with power. One of the most coveted positions in the universe was now theirs and for the life and death of them, they couldn't understand why anyone would desire such a job.

When Night finally entered the room, there was a shift in the air. The spirits began whispering, receding to the edges of Pen's vision. Golden warmth chased away the blue chill of any of the more stubborn spirits, driving them back to their pools with a little nudge. In the back of Pen's mind, they knew that Night was doing their job for them. The spirits had always liked Night better. Mostly because Night allowed the spirits to be reborn. Most realms did not.

When the spirits quieted, a form sat down beside them. Just on the arm of the throne. A pair of arms wrapped around Pen's shoulder, pulling them close. But Pen only felt numb. They didn't bother to look. Whether this was a man or a woman didn't matter. There was no one else this could be but Night.

Their Night.

Their Night who had been gifted a realm and promptly had become obsessed with the occupants down below. Their Night, who had been enamored with life and the people walking through it with all the gusto and will of a soldier just trying to carry on. They couldn't stop. The call of the lights, the music, the smells of food. It took them away from Pen day after day.



Pen knew they would lose Night. Maybe not now. Maybe not even tomorrow. But eventually.

It hurt with the same amount of pain as the suddenness of losing their father.

But as Night held onto them, they couldn't let these thoughts prevail. Instead, they quieted their mind, letting each one bounce off of them with a resounding plink. The cloak continued to wrap around them, manacled them to destiny.

And Pen no longer fought.

"Merripen?" Night asked.

Pen didn't know how long they had sat in Night's arms. They had yet to feel warm. "Yes, old friend?"

There was hesitation. Like Night didn't want to ask the question. So when it came out, it was small and unsure.

"Are you sad?"

A tear shook through reality as moisture coated their cheek. "Yes."

[Short Stories](#)

[Dec 1, 2024](#)

Okay my Baron and Gatekeeper tiers! The start of the month is here. Make sure to send me your story requests.

Also, starting this month, I am going to start posting the short stories (with permission) on the Baron tier for all of you to read. Some of the stuff coming out of here has been so unique that I think it would be a cool collection to view.

[M!Pen/M!MC](#)

[Dec 1, 2024](#)

A/N: This is a longer story than most of the other shorts. The person who commissioned me is part of the Gatekeeper tier which means either two short stories, or one long one. This is between a male Pen and a male MC, during a somewhat present time in Book 2.

In every realm across the skies, there was always that spot. The one in which the lovers gathered, and clandestine meetings took place in secret. Some would consider it romantic. Others deceitful. But one thing remained true across all the variations of life across the cosmos.

Love.

When Ashaya had first come down, he hadn't understood love. Not fully, at least. It was around him in various forms. Couples holding hands. Small children running to their parents or guardians after a particularly long day of play. It was shown by a neighbor giving another food. By a stranger smiling at someone who needed kindness. From the elderly who still danced in the street while the young love looked on, wondering if it would be them one day. Ashaya saw it every time he stepped foot on the cobblestone paths. But he never quite understood it. That it could come in so many different forms and be so nuanced that no two loves were the same. It was complicated in a way that didn't seem real.

And then he had died.

Death was an awakening of sorts. A way to highlight just how potent love could be. He found it funny that Death was also his oldest and dearest friend. The very one that had tried to tell him not to go down to the market proper. That love did not need to be sought out in such a solid form. Pen had argued that love could be found in the stars just as well as it could in the dangerous streets of mortals. But Ashaya had not listened.

Convinced that he needed to learn such things for himself, Ashaya had hated his plan to walk among love. Pen couldn't possibly understand the plight because he was like all the other eternal beings out there. Unknowing to the pleasures that the mortals received from such an emotion and destined to live in misunderstanding. Ashaya felt like a fool now. Because looking back on it all, Pen knew. He knew what love was far better than Ashaya. And he loved Ashaya enough to let the mistake be made.

Kicking at a broken gemstone, Ashaya looked out across the courtyard. A garden had appeared and had become a beacon of hope in the otherwise dark. Large gem statues stretched up towards the tattered lanterns, emitting their own glow. It filled the surroundings with purple and azure and soft blush tones. There was a solemnity here that Ashaya equated to something like worship. Or maybe it was just a way to cope with what this once vibrant world had become.

Walking across the broken paths, Ashaya kept his head down. Locks of deep blue hair fell in front of his face, blending in with the world around him. He had taken inspiration from the sky when he had first appeared. It had served him well enough to keep himself hidden from the worst of perpetrators. Being an omniscient being was kind of like that. Little ticks and tricks were enacted with seemingly no reason and then later, it became so helpful that there was no way it could have been a mistake to begin with.

"Are you brooding?"

Ashaya felt a tug of a smile. Black boots fell in step alongside his own, the soles of which crushed the smaller gems beneath their feet, embedding it into the earthen floor.

"Is it the hair?" Ashaya asked. "I think it's the hair."

"It does give off a rather dower self reflective vibe." Pen was grinning next to him. All long lines and jovial face. Who would have thought that Death would be so happy. "I don't often see you in these parts."

Ashaya looked around, spying a few statues that were still being erected. He wondered who the artist was. And who the muse had been to inspire such beauty. "I didn't even know this district existed until recently. Has it been here long?"

"For a spell." Pen leaned in close enough for the scent of grave dirt to fill Ashaya's senses. It was shot through with fresh mint and lavender, creating the cool scent of midnight dreams. "That statue over there is new," he said. "Same as that one. But most of these have been within the market since before I even stepped foot here. They just move from time to time."

"I see. So we have walking statues to add to our list of beings here in the realm?"

"It would make a great brochure."

The two of them turned a corner, leading to a grove of gem grown trees. They sprouted from the ground and reached above the cobblestone walls, the leaves dripping from their boughs made of sparkling emeralds and dotted occasionally with ruby.

"The changing of the seasons," Pen said. "It's been a favorite of mine for a while."

Ashaya looked at him curiously. "I never knew that."

"You never asked," he said with a shrug and a small, sad smile. "Back when I was young, it meant that my mother was coming home to visit. When the seasons would change to the more colder tones, she would arrive to spend time with me and my father. I used to spend hours looking for those color changes in the potted plants we had around the palace."

Ashaya remembered the potted plants. They had remained dead after Pen's father passed. Only in the recent years had they began to rise up again, this time, woven with silver veins that lit up their dusky leaves.

"Why don't they come to visit any longer?" Ashaya asked. It had been a touchy subject for so many years, and then Ashaya had stopped thinking about it. Because no matter how it was spun, before this current form, before having a beating heart that actually felt, Ashaya was shallow and careless. Even more so with the ones that had stuck by his side.

"Can't," Pen said. "It was one of the first doors that had to close when you started getting sick."

Ashaya stopped. "What?"

"Oh, don't look at me like that. We had a discussion about this already. The doors to my palace use up far too much energy, and that energy is mostly taken from the Night Market itself. I wasn't going to siphon off more and more power from the realm when it was already growing thin. I'm not a little boy anymore. I don't need my mommy and daddy."

There was sadness there. Ashaya was sure he had heard the line before but had never detected it.

Reaching out, he took Pen's hand. The man seemed almost surprised by the action. A strange revelation given how touchy they were before. But ever since coming down here, he had been more distant. Something had shifted between them and while Ashaya felt it, he couldn't quite give a name to it yet. It felt like anticipation. Like he was just waiting for something to come.

"I'm sorry," he told Pen. "I'll get that fixed."

"Don't," he said, waving it off. Though he kept their hands linked. "There are so many other things that need to be fixed first. I am not top of that priority list."

Ashaya couldn't help but think about how Pen should be top of that priority list. And if he was really honest with himself, how Pen most of the time was factored in to most of Ashaya's decisions lately.

"Come on," Pen said, tugging on his hand. "No brooding. Either change your hair to get out of the funk or come with me. No other options."

"Where are we going?"

"Oh. That. I actually don't know," he laughed. "I was just trying to move past an awkward moment."

Turning to him, Ashaya widened his violet colored eyes, staring at Pen unblinking. Pen began shifting a little, looking around to see what it was that Ashaya was doing. That violet stare was so bright in the night that it nearly filled their surroundings with lavender light. A sign from the spirits, some would whisper. Pen just wanted to know why his friend was being creepy.

Finally, he relented. "Stop," he admonished. "I don't know what you're doing but stop."

Ashaya leaned forward. "I'm making it more awkward."

Pen laughed loudly, a hint of exasperated relief coming through. "Come off it." With a small shove, he broke Ashaya's gaze, and the two of them continued down the gemstone path together.

The market was rebuilding. Making itself. One by one, new districts were opening and appearing, uncovering ones that had long since been forgotten by time. There had been rejoicing amongst the older market goers as homesteads that had long been lost to the market began to appear again. Hope was beginning to swirl and while the lights were still out, change was on the horizon.

"Well, would you look at that," Pen muttered.

Ashaya looked up as they ducked under another one of the gemstone trees, the red tips of leaves seeping into the green. There was an old statue near a little river made to look like stars. It was of a small boy, barely old enough to understand what they were doing. For a moment, Ashaya was struck with a longing so hard that it nearly knocked him back. But then, he saw it.

It was Pen.

Or, how Ashaya remembered Pen to be. A youthful child with rounded cheeks and a smile that could light up the entire night sky. His hair was messy and slashed across his eyes. The black robes he wore looked as if they were spread out in a way to have him take flight. Ashaya followed the familiar lines he had not seen since long before his memory became shaky, tracing the arm that pointed upwards. There was a glittering cloud that shimmering just beyond his reached. But the statue looked as if it was ready to reach out and snatch it.

"It's me," Pen stated. Ashaya was still looking at the glitter, shifting from nothing to flickering brightness all at once. "And you."

Ashaya startled. "Me?"

"Yeah. It's how you used to come to me."

When Ashaya didn't have a form. Or couldn't decide on one. When the games became too interesting to keep up with a visage. This. This was what Ashaya had looked like. A swirling mass that zipped around Pen in game, caressing his cheeks with giggled laughter. Ashaya had nearly forgotten.

"Who do you think put this here?" he mused. There was delight in his eyes as he bounded up to the statue. He struck a pose, just like the boy, reaching for the essence of the Night Market's own form. A shiver ran through Ashaya as he touched it. "Ha! It's moving."

"I think it's me."

"We've established this."

"No," Ashaya shook his head, trying to gain bearing from such a gentle caress. "Like, it's an actual little bit of me."

Pen turned to Ashaya with confusion, wiggling his fingers around the inside of the specks of light. Ashaya gasped loudly, as if Pen had just played a tune down the cords of his spine.

Pen's hand dropped away, as he hopped down off the platform the statue had been on. "Did you put this here?" No one but the Night Market themselves, could really transfer essence. If that was a physical bit of Ashaya's higher body, he would have had to tuck it close and weave it into the world.

Closing his eyes, Ashaya tried to recall the memory. Of when this would have even been made. There were so many to sift through, however, now that he knew what he was looking for. Moments of when the realm had just formed. Before mortals walked the streets. Before the streets had even been set. When Ashaya had danced around, formless, but had made sure to make little hovels out of excitement to show his friend. Because if Ashaya was going to make a world, then Pen would need to be comfortable in it. There had been such dreams of the two of them, sharing a world together. A playground that was solely theirs. The bones of this world had been formed by Ashaya, but he had made sure to bend and weave them in a way that told Pen he was always welcome.

“Ashaya?”

Ashaya opened his eyes to find Pen standing right in front of them. A strange little look on his face.

“Sorry,” Ashaya breathed. “I was lost for a moment.”

Pen caught the way his eyes flicked over his shoulder. Looking at their childhood. “You know,” Pen started. With a wave of a hand, a bone colored bench formed, candles lighting by its side as a black velvet underlay wafted down around it. He took Ashaya by the hand, tugging them towards the seat. “I have wandered this realm of yours more times than I can count. Reaping bodies. Trying to discover the things that make it so appealing for many. And on my travels, I have uncovered many things.”

Sitting down, they were tucked close together, their shoulders touching. Ashaya could feel the coldness come from Death's form. He tried to offer some light in return.

“This world was woven with such intention. Pockets of dreams that were conjured by youth. Bits of castles created from stories once woven in play. Painted pictures of creatures that couldn't possibly exist outside the imagination. It has been a wonder to discover it all. Has filled me, and I am sure many others, with childlike splendor.”

Ashaya looked at him curiously, not sure where this was leading.

“When I was young, I looked at it all like a secret puzzle. Uncovering fragments of it. Wondering where the next would lead. Like a treasure hunt based inside a slowly unraveling world. Now, I see it for what it is?”

“And what is it?” Ashaya's voice was barely a whisper. As if Pen was weaving a spell that he didn't dare break.

“A letter, of sorts. Love written on a tapestry of bones that transcends what we know and is based more in indescribable feeling.”

Turning to Ashaya, Pen reached out, brushing some of that nighttime hair from their eyes. The touch was gentle. Hesitant.

“Thank you.”

"For what?" Ashaya swallowed.

"For making sure you could never forget our time together."

Ashaya looked over at the statue. A moment of their childhood frozen in time. It would serve as a memory of their love, no matter where they would go. "Is that what this is?"

Pen raised a brow. "Did you play with another Death when you were young?"

"Several," Ashaya quipped. "You were number four on the list."

"Ha ha." Pen leaned forward, pressing his head to Ashaya's. "I get it now," he whispered.

"Get what?" Ashaya didn't dare pull away. Touch had been so effortless when they were young. When had it become something taboo? Something more than just a sign of quick affection.

"Why you were consumed with learning what love may be."

Ashaya closed his eyes, just breathing Pen in. "You might have to explain that one to me."

"You needed a name for it. To understand what you were feeling."

"Are you confessing love for me?"

Pen only smiled. "Oh, no, old friend. You did that long ago with the monuments of me you tattooed into your skin."

"That sounds a bit creepy, when you put it that way."

A soft rumble of a chuckle rolled through the two of them as Pen found his amusement and held Ashaya close. "I'm Death. What do you expect?"

The two of them sat there for a while. Close together, breathing in the other's life. The statue of their younger selves played in a distant time, laughing loud and free, not yet encumbered by the burdens of life. Ashaya wanted to pull Pen closer. Wanted to feel him against his own chest and promise him that he would never leave again.

The words were stuck in his throat.

So, he allowed himself to be content. To sit with his oldest friend and breathe. And maybe, just maybe, that love letter that he had written, would be spoken outloud one day.



[Dec 1, 2024](#)

The clicking sound of her heels greeted me long before I watched her come around the corner. Belladonna had this way about her where she could intimidate anyone with just the sound of her footsteps. They echoed through the market, announcing her presence like a red carpet, and for anyone that did not know her, a sort of magic wove around them, filling them with equal parts awe and trepidation. I, however, knew better. I had come to know the sound of her footsteps. What each click meant. She was late today, and certainly irritated that that was the case. It would be in my benefit to hide my smile, despite thinking her irritation was cute. Belladonna had a rare amount of flaws and the occasional times she was late, she considered gigantic failures.

She appeared from around the corner, hair piled high off her neck with long tendrils of curls framing her angular face. Her eyes were bright with the light of fresh blood pumping through her veins, and her cheeks were flushed pink.

"My heart," she cooed, coming over to kiss my cheek. "Were you waiting long?"

"Not really," I told her, lacing my hand within her own. "Meeting run late?"

A tight line ran across her brow as she fought the childish urge to roll her eyes. One of Belladonna's favorite things to do and the very trait that still tied her to her younger, more human years. "Yes," she said. "My time was filled with boring details on how to make the vampire society care more about their roots and the thrill of the kill."

"You had a meeting about that?" We began walking down the alleyway, maneuvering through the series of mazes. The Baron life, it turned out, was not as glamorous as she thought it would be.

"It's been a series of five meetings," she told me. "Where a group of vampire elders and brainwashed fledglings all try to tell me that it is my responsibility as Baron to make sure that we do not lose sight of the old ways. That we must rise up against the guard and fight for our right to kill those wandering in the dark."

"It's constantly dark here."

"That was what I told them as well, but the irony of that was lost on them." She waved it all off. "Either way, they are all dead now."

I stopped, one foot stumbling in front of the other. "What now?"

She turned to me in obvious confusion. "They were keeping me from you. Did you really think I was going to let them live?"

"Bella, we have spoken of this. Killing people at random is not exactly something I should be hearing about."

"Why not? It shows my love to you." She tugged at me, continuing to walk. "Where are we even going? In all the proceedings, I haven't even asked."

Belladonna was always going to be Belladonna. While I had a deep love for the people of the market, it was within her nature to kill. And I supposed she was killing other vampires. Having any sort of jurisdiction on that didn't feel right.

With a sigh, I walked out in front of her, silently leading her down another long alleyway until we came to a small crack within the wall. Belladonna perked up as we approached, quietly scenting the surrounding air. I fought the urge to grin, knowing she smelled the old, bound leather and the pages of parchment.

"I thought I would do something special for you tonight," I told her. Then, moving forward, I pressed my hand to the crack, my fingers twitching against the brick. One by one, they began to move aside, stacking on top of each other and forming themselves into a large archway. The little gasp that Bella emitted from my side gave me an immense amount of satisfaction. Being able to give her a genuine, unplanned moment, after a long day, was exactly my desire.

She didn't wait for me. Stepping through the archway, she paused, turning to take it all in. Long tables were set up for as far as the eye could see, each of them piled high with books. Some tables were stacked high with the tomes, while others had rotating bookshelves with interchanging novels. Other areas had the books proudly on display, open to pages of interest and occasionally, a table would house an author, working vigorously on their next debut.

Coming up behind Bella, I placed my hands on her hips, leaning in close. "Buy anything," I told her. Hazel gave me a special bag that would be able to carry it all home.

"Is this the traveling bookmart?" she breathed. "It— it wasn't due to be here for another three moons." I could hear the reverence in her voice. She had mentioned that she had missed it for the last three years due to her duties and the goings-on in the market. There had been genuine sadness over it and I had vowed that the next time it came around, I wouldn't let her miss it again.

"This is when it was supposed to be here," I told her. "You just had so much on your plate, I think you forgot." Really, I was surprised I could pull this off at all, given how much she loved books. I thought she would have had this on her calendar and would have been dragging me along. But last night at dinner, when she went on about her meeting and nothing more, I realized that she would once again let the market come and go if I didn't say anything.

Looking over her shoulder, I saw the deep love within her gaze. That kind that said she was going to pay me back tenfold later tonight. "How many is too many?" she asked. I knew she would buy whatever she wanted, and she was more curious to hear my answer than anything else.

"You can never have too many books."

She smiled at me, flashing her fangs. "Good man."

And then she was off. I watched her began to wander the aisles, picking some up and feeling the ridges of their spine. The etching upon leather. Removing the dust jacket from some to see the quality inside, while simply buying others without even a thought. And each time she did, she came back to me with a coy little smile before slipping it inside the bag I carried.

After an hour or so, she began to calm, content with perusing instead of buying. Hooking her arm within my own and leaning her head on my shoulder. "I love the smell of books."

"I know." We were walking at a languid pace now, her body content against my own. "We don't have to leave any time soon."

She hummed a bit. "I am enjoying being in a place where no one sees me as the Baron." Most of the booksellers knew her, it turned out. But they knew her as Ms. Malady. Not the vampire Baron who would kill someone just to get out of the end of a meeting.

"Then we can stay. Find a place to sit, and maybe you can tell me what you've bought."

"Perhaps," she murmured.

I twisted my head, planting a kiss on the crown of her head. "Or," I said quietly. "We could go back home. I could light a fire for you, and then I could read to you tonight."

I felt her smile against me as she buried her head against my shoulder. "Are you spoiling me for a reason, my little muse."

"I'm spoiling you because you deserve it," I told her seriously. Stopping, I turned to her, tipping her chin up a little so she'd look me in the eyes. "And, because I enjoy spoiling you just as much as you enjoy spoiling me."

Her eyes flashed again, this time, that deep gold that told me she was pleased. "Then I would be a monster to take that away from you. Let us go, and I will take you up on that offer. And I demand that you rub my feet."

I looked down at the four-inch heels she wore, shaking my head a little. "I will be getting you practical shoes on our next date."

"And you will die." Leaning up, she kissed me on the lips, nipping at my bottom lip. I pulled her close then, letting my body heat seep into her. With her head tucked under mine, I held her close. I could feel her nails glide down my back, just on the other side of painful. "Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?"

"No one has ever done this for me," she told me seriously. I felt my stomach clench with the knowledge, and suddenly had the overwhelming desire to show her how much I loved her with little actions such as this.

"Then we'll have to do something like this more often," I told her gruffly.

She laughed a little, the feel of it rolling through my body. "You can't afford me, dear heart." It was an old joke. From far back when she wasn't a Baron. When she was an enigma of a woman who I had looked at with wide-eyed wonder.

"I think we've just proven that I can," I told her.

She didn't discredit it. She didn't even try. Holding her, I was overwhelmed with how far we had come. And I was desperate to see what our future would bring.

[Sick Bella / M!MC](#)

[Dec 1, 2024](#)

A wet cough rattled through the room, displacing the bedside table candle flame. Belladonna was a lump under a red velvet comforter, looking pale beneath the thick fabric. The fire was blazing in the hearth, pushing the room to just the other side of sweltering. Yet, Belladonna still shivered. Her eyes were sunk deep into her skull and her lips were bloodless.

"You need to eat," I told her. I wrung out a rag in the chilled basin of water next to me. A rune stone was carved at the bottom of the bowl, keeping it from heating. Long ago, I had discarded my shirt to try and keep comfortable in the heat. Belladonna had tried to give me an appreciative look but ended up just squinting at me due to the soreness of her eyes.

"I already ate," she grouched. It turned out, Bella was not great at resting. It was a suspicion I already had but when she became sick, the idea of it was unbearable to her. She suddenly became everything that would hinder her road to healing. Argumentative. Uncomfortable. In a constant state of agitation. Mostly, she used these traits as ways to hide how she was really feeling. But her body gave out on her soon after her cold started to make itself known, and now there was no denying how she felt. Her red hair stuck to her temple in a sweaty mass and I was never more thankful that she couldn't find the strength to rise and look in her enchanted mirror.

"You haven't," I told her upon her insistence that she had already eaten. "You sipped some blood about nine hours ago and then fell asleep."

“And?” she practically screeched. “It is sustenance. I put it in my body. Is that not consider food? Or is it simply that it is not up to your satisfaction?” Shifting around, she huffed out a breath. “Why is it so cold in here? Didn’t you put wood on the fire?”

I glanced over at the hearth. Not only were there several logs piled high within the stone confines, but the fireplace itself had been enchanted to keep the flames going no matter what. I could see the heat rolling off of the logs in shifting waves, along with feeling beads of sweat roll down the line of my spine.

“Do you want another blanket?” I asked.

“No, I don’t want another blanket. I want to be able to get up and do my job. You know that someone did this to me. And when I find them, I’m going to— I’m going to — I —” She sneezed loudly, curling in on herself

I waited for her to wipe her eyes, sniffing pathetically as she did so, before addressing her most recent complaint. “Someone made you sick?”

“I have not been sick in nearly two decades,” she protested. “It is clear to me that this is an attempt on my life. A way in which the world is after me. A slow grab for Baronhood that—” Another sneeze interjected her tirade, dismissing anything that could have been considered a point.

Reaching forward, I pushed some of the sweaty red locks out from her eyes, my fingers feeling the dry feverish skin of her forehead. “Bella, you are sick. It happens. Especially when people overwork themselves.”

“I’m not people.”

“Which is why it has taken two decades for your body to break down.” The water from the rag evaporated from her skin with each touch, forming little sizzling bubbles in the air. I knew very little about vampires during an illness but couldn’t question any of it now. Belladonna needed my calm more than anything else. Calm and sleep. “You can afford a few days of rest.”

She looked at me through slitted eyes and I had to wonder if she was plotting my demise. While she loved me, there was always that underlying knowledge that we both knew she could kill me and I would simply return. Strength was required to take care of Belladonna Malady. Mental fortitude was a must to take care of her while she was sick.

“This is not about money,” she said slowly. “This is about my title being unseated. Something I would think you would care about, given that you love me.”

I raised a brow to her. She knew she had gone too far with that one, but she was loath to admit it. “Want to think about what you just said?”

“No.”

"You should." Standing, I set aside the bowl and rag, going to her dresser and pulling out a small knife, I pushed it into my shirt sleeve so she could not see. Her vision had been swimming so much that I doubted she'd really focused on me.

"You cannot be mad about that observation." Her voice was nasally and her tone thin.

"I'm not mad."

"You are mad. Which is a poor thing to do to someone who is sick."

Sighing, I turned around, walking back to the bed. This time, I wedged myself next to her, gathering her body in my arms. She was far more frail than she should have been. Belladonna was a lot of sharp angles, but she had always felt plush and full in my arms.

"Stop," I told her softly, resting my forehead against the back of her head. She shifted against me irritably before curling herself backwards to try and suck some of my heat. "You are a terrible patient, you know that, right?"

"Maybe you are just a terrible caretaker."

I had the knife in my hand, making a thin line against my wrist. A thin stream of my blood bubbled from my skin, the smell of it hitting the air and perking her up a bit. Reaching around, I placed it against her lips. She snatched at my hand greedily, lapping up the slow trickle of blood with a groan.

"I get it," I whispered to her as she drank. I held her hair back, keeping it from falling into any of the sticky drops that may have escaped her lips. "But, Bella? Sometimes this just happens. It is not a reflection on you. It is not some plot from the rest of the world to dethrone you. It is just your body's way of telling you to slow down." She grunted a little in protest but continued to feed, her tongue working over the wound to open it a bit more. I felt a warm shiver roll down my spine and settle in my belly. In any other situation, this would have been the start of a pleasurable evening. I didn't like how small she felt against me.

"And while you are going to apparently fight me every second during this, I'm not going anywhere. You can stop pushing me away because it is not working." As if to prove a point, she shoved my arm away from her. The dramatic irony was not lost on me. Curling the blanket up and over the two of us, I held her close. For the first time since she had taken ill, she was not actively squirming to get away. "Are you going to rest now?" I asked.

I could feel her frown. I could also feel her exhaustion. "I am only giving this twenty-four hours. Which means it only gets about eighteen more hours, given that I've already been dealing with this for six." It had been more than six but I wasn't going to point that out to her.

"I don't think that's how colds wo—"

"If, this cold is not done within that time period, people will start dying. I will hunt down the bastard that did this to me and gut him. And you will help."

There was no point in arguing. It was mostly hot air, anyway. So, instead, I tried a new tactic. Laying us both down, I pulled the covers up over our heads, making a wall of heat. Then, I rolled her on top of me, cinching the blankets in tight. Reluctantly, she let me.

"We'll find them," I said, running a heated hand down her back. "Now get some sleep."

She melted against me, her eyes already heavy. I could hear the rattle in her lungs. But, right before she drifted off, she looked up at me. "You're not a bad caretaker," she amended.

I leaned forward, kissing her softly. "I know. But you're still a terrible patient."

She ended up falling asleep after rolling her eyes, but there was a smile still on her lips.

[Soft Gabriel /f!MC](#)

[Dec 1, 2024](#)

Dark mountainous escapes zoomed outside the glass windows as the tram wound its way up the mountain side, passing well lit homes set deep inside the cliff face and dark swatches where the shadows lived, and the lanterns did not dare touch. I bounced in my seat beside Gabriel, holding his hand as I pressed my face to the glass. The car itself was only big enough to fit about a dozen individuals, all of which were on their best behavior given that the Warden was sitting among them.

"Do you think we're almost there?" I whispered to him excitedly. I wasn't sure how long this ride was supposed to be. Part of me was anxious to get there, but the other part was enjoying cozying up in a small bench seat and watching the world go by.

"Soon," Gabriel said vaguely. It was doubtful he knew any better than I did. This entire excursion was out of his realm of comfort. The man was not an adventurer. He liked routine and structure, and so the fact that he agreed to the impromptu trip when we woke up this morning, spoke volumes of his affection for me. "Though, I will be talking to someone about this transportation. It is clearly not up to code."

The driver up front shifted in his seat, glancing at us through the mirror. He said nothing, however, as he pulled the levers and kept us winding up the hill.

"Oh, come now. It's not that bad." A little tight, but Gabriel stood well above six foot, so I was pretty sure anything was uncomfortable to him.



"It is not up to code," he dismissed. "And I am sure that the rails have not had a routine maintenance in some time." His face was twisting in that way that said he was going to work himself up into full Warden mode. Something I had come to see as a defense mechanism over the years.

Squeezing his hand, I twisted my body towards him. "How long has the market been here?" I asked, trying to take his mind off of rules and regulations.

"Two hundred and thirty-three years," he responded. "It was founded by the sprites that lived on the mountain peaks who became adept at growing specialty flowers. They would bring their blooms down for trade at the market proper, but their wings grew due heavy with the condensation and they became sick. So they set up the open air market on top of the cliff face and have been there ever since."

I raised my brow to him. "Are you sure you've never been here?"

"Never. I just did the proper research."

"I just asked you here this morning."

"And I made a few inquiries while you were in the bath."

Lights bloomed across his face, streaming in from the window. Several lanterns were starting to appear, creating little patches of brilliance in an inky night. I squirmed a little in my seat, knowing that we were close. I could already smell the roses and the faint hint of something minty as the air filter pumped in the fresh mountain air.

Gabriel's arm wrapped around me, pulling me close. "I do think this was a good idea," he told me, assuring me that he wanted to be here.

"Even if the regulations are wrong?"

He nodded firmly. "Yes. But we will fix that so we have an excuse to come back again."

The tram pulled up to the mountain stop and people began to rise, some of which looking all too eager to get away from law enforcement. The entire side of the tram opened, unfolding into a series of three steps. I hopped out as quickly as I could, knowing Gabriel would be behind me.

I sucked in a deep breath at the sight before me. Whereas the market spaces down below were draped in fabric, surrounded by steam, the flower market could not have been different. Large arches of ivy were strung up along each stall, while large copper buckets full of luscious blooms cascaded down past the lips of their containers to create rivers of color upon the ground. The smell hit me all at once. Clean and floral with just the vaguest bit of spice.

Next to me, Gabriel grabbed one of the available wicker baskets, slipping it over my arm. With a small bounce of pleasure, I took off into the venue. There was color as far as my eye could see, and I knew that even if I were to spend an entire afternoon here, I still would not see it all.

"A flower for the lady's hair?" A young girl bounded up to me, holding a large blush colored peony. Gabriel handed her a few coins and I bent down, so the girl could pin the bloom in my dark locks, winding the stem within my silver combs.

"Thank you," I told the girl. She giggled a little before rushing away.

When my gaze turned to Gabriel, I could see the heat in his eyes. I had seen it often as of late. It was the one he gave when he was hit with the types of emotions he still struggled to understand. I stood there, waiting for him to catch up, smiling gently up at him. When he reached his hand out to tuck a loose curly strand behind my ear, I caught his hand in mine.

"You are a vision," he breathed out to me.

I felt the blush paint the apples of my cheeks. The reverence in his voice soothed any worries I ever had. I hoped that I would be able to do the same for him.

"Come on," I said. "I want to fill this basket."

We wound through the moss covered paths, listening to the pixies giggling in the trees as they threw rose petals down upon the market goers. Large lanterns were strung high above the ivy stalls, tipped over to their side. There, blossoms of daisy's, hyacinth, fresh tulips and alstromeria, poured downwards to fall into a small koi pond. Children played at the water's edge, launching pine cone boats off into its depths and laughing as the frogs commandeered them for their own piracy needs.

I heard Gabriel snort by my side as one particular frog sank a rather large boat. When I looked at him, he was looking off to the side, hiding his smile, but I could see the amusement tugging at his lips.

"Alright, truth time," I said as we continued to walk. I picked up a few blooms as I went. "Favorite color."

"That is an arbitrary concept," he told me, his eyes lingering on a pair of lovers who were giggling mischievously in the corner. I tugged at him a little, reminding him that he was not on duty. He sighed. "Color choices can change on a whim. I have never taken stock of something being my favorite."

"And yet I do not see a single bright color in your house," I told him.

"Well, no. Yellows and pinks are garish."

"Hey," I laughed. "I happen to like those colors."

"And they suit you beautifully. They do not suit me."

"So," I wheedled. "Colors that do suit you are...?"

He looked around, trying to latch onto something. Gabriel was the kind of man that took his time, taking in his options before ever making a decision. Picking out new sheets at the house had been a week-long process.

"I like darker colors," he told me. "Blues, I believe. Not green. Silver, perhaps."

While he wasn't looking, I began plucking up stocks of blue delphinium and iris, along with silver leafed fern. "Those are nice color combinations. Anything else."

"I do not like red," he said firmly. "It also reminds me too much of work."

I paused. "Is that why you wear a blue uniform instead of the velvet guard one?"

"I do not look good in red."

I laughed loudly at that, not ever having realized that he had done such a thing due to his own snobbery. It somehow made him more endearing. "What about deep plums?" I asked. "Or burnt oranges?"

"No orange. Purple is perhaps okay. And I take back what I said about green. As long as it is a nice green. Like the color of herbs that Miss Hazel grows."

I nodded, sneaking more and more into my basket. It was the nice thing about Gabriel that he was somewhat oblivious to what I was doing.

"I would like to get you a bouquet while we are here," he told me solemnly. "But I am afraid I do not do well at putting things together. And I do not wish to offend your sensibilities."

"Gabriel, I don't think anything you can give me would 'offend' me."

"You were not a fan of the knife that I gave you last year."

"Well, no," I started slowly. "It was pretty. Very pretty, in fact. And I do use it to cut apples." Stopping, I turned towards him completely. "How about you let me take care of the flowers today, and you keep me safe. And find where we can eat some food."

"And that would be sufficient for you?"

"Yes," I laughed.

Leaning down, he kissed me. Right in the middle of the spring blooms, he pressed his lips to my, pulling my body against his own and bending me back. I felt my breath catch in my throat and my eyes flutter closed as I melted into his touch. When he pulled away, that hungry look was in his eyes again.

"You are gathering flowers for me, aren't you," he whispered.

I smiled against his lips. "I am." It was actually good to know he was more observant than I gave him credit for.

"Will you arrange them for me at home?"

"I would love to."

Kissing me again, this time more soft, he sighed against my lips. "I do not deserve you."

"You deserve the moon, Gabriel Caine. Or, at least the Night Market."

He righted himself, keeping his hand entwined within mine. He made no comment on my play on words, or the things he deserved, but he held me close. I watched his eyes as I picked blooms for his bouquet, making sure to pay special attention to the ones that he lingered upon. Several times he squeezed my hand, showing his affection the best he could, and each time I felt warmth spread through me.

As I gathered each bloom, I felt my love for him grow deeper. This taciturn man that was bound by rules and regulations, looked as if he softened with each flower I picked for him. And I had to wonder if anyone had ever done this for him before.

"Lyra," he said after a long moment. "I do not think I have enough containers for the amount of flowers you are picking."

I grinned. "Then it looks like we will be stopping by the glass district on the way home, huh?" I turned to him, blooms falling down around us, purples and deep greens swirling around on sweetly scented wind. And as we stood there, I felt the world stop. We were not the Warden and the Night Market at that moment. We were Gabriel and Lyra. And nothing had ever felt more right.

[Gabriel/f!MC A quiet morning](#)

[Dec 2, 2024](#)

Comfort was not the usual thought I had upon waking in the morning. Most mornings were a groggy slog to get downstairs and start the fire. The unnatural cold that had settled across the Night Market was a bit more concerning than I'd like to admit, but it was low on the list of things I needed to pay attention to. Yet, this morning, there was no cold that greeted me. No sound of the wisps running against the side windows. The faint smell of last night's fire did not linger in the air. Blearily, I opened my eyes, seeing the soft line of dark blue sheets and the swell of a pillow that I had grabbed in the middle of the night.

The evening before came back to me. The feel of Gabriel moving against me. The soft planes of his skin and the jagged raised scars where his wings used to be. I could still smell him on the sheets. Burying my head in his pillow, I breathed deeply, hiding a smile within the satin confines. There was a pleasant soreness about me and the brief thought of perhaps doing it all over again instead of leaving the house

today was a tempting thought. In the end, if I could convince Gabriel to stay in bed with me, it would be a feat all in itself. Part of me wondered if the man had snuck off to work already.

It was the soft clatter in the kitchen that roused me fully. The telling sounds of someone trying to be quiet filtered through the house. Looking around, I spied Gabriel's discarded shirt before slipping out of bed and tugging it over my head. It comically fell down past my knees. I took a moment to glance at myself in the mirror, noticing a few new red splotches on my neck and shoulders. Gabriel, it turned out, was a biter and I couldn't say that I minded. I tried to smooth down the matted areas of my pink hair, tucking the loose strands behind my braids. There was nothing I could do about the state of my eyes at this point. Other than perhaps trust Belladonna when she claimed she knew a guy. But that was most likely opening a door I did not want to walk down.

Exiting the room, I tiptoed down the hall, not wanting to announce my presence just yet. Gabriel's back was to me, his pants slung low on his tapered hips. The two wing scars he bore stuck out this morning. The puckered skin created jagged white raises against his otherwise dark skin. He was humming something to himself this morning. Eggs sizzled in the pan before him and a plate of fried bread was off to the side.

I leaned against the door frame, content with watching him. There was something so much different about him here. A relaxed nature I didn't think he often allowed himself to have. His hair had long since fallen out of the gel hold he had it in and black locks curled slightly above each of his ears.

Taking the pan off the stove, he turned to go to the ice chest, spying me in the doorway. He froze, pan of eggs in hand, as he blinked at me.

I smiled softly back at him. "Did you forget I was here?" I teased.

"Of course not." He set the pan of eggs aside and walked towards me. I had to crane my neck up to look at him as he settled a pair of warm hands on my hips. "You should be in bed."

"Oh?"

"Yes. I hear it is important after a night like ours, for the partner to sleep in."

I tipped my head to the side. "Are you suggesting I need to recover?"

"And hydrate."

I couldn't help but laugh a little at his serious tone. Something that became all the more pronounced as he frowned at me in complete confusion. I ended up scooting forward, pressing my face against his bare skin. In response, he wrapped his arms tighter around me.

"It smells good in here," I sighed. I was becoming obsessed with the feel of him beneath my fingertips. Tracing the lines of each muscle was something I felt I could get lost in for hours at a time. "I thought you didn't know how to cook."

"I do not know how to cook anything fancy," he claimed. "But, I can make eggs. And bread. Perhaps tea."

I nuzzled my face against him. "I know you know how to make tea."

"Not to Miss Hazel's specifications."

"To be fair, no one can make tea to Hazel's specifications." Pulling away from him, I let my hand slip inside his as he tugged me to the kitchen table. There, he pulled the chair out for me, sitting me down.

Within moments, I had a plate of eggs in front of me, bread, and a tall glass of juice. Eagerly, I stabbed the contents, realizing how hungry I actually was. There hadn't been a lot of time to eat yesterday, and once we got to Gabriel's house, we were a bit distracted by other things. Without asking, Gabriel stood and began making more eggs.

"Why do you not cook like this for yourself?" I asked. Gabriel was a known non eater, but I didn't think it was by choice.

He shrugged as he one-handed cracked a few more eggs, and I had to admit that it was slightly impressive. "I am usually in a rush in the morning hours."

"You barely sleep," I pointed out to him. "How can you be in a rush?"

"It is important to be on time for your job, Maeryn. I cannot set a good example to my colleagues and underlings if I am taking my time eating breakfast."

I pointed my fork at him. "Some would argue that you are setting a good example by proving that self-care is equally important as diligent time management."

His lips twisted up in that little way that said he clearly did not agree with me. "I do not know or trust these people you speak of." Flipping the burner off, he set down another plate of eggs in front of me, just as I was finished with mine.

"Aren't you going to eat?"

"I will," he said, getting himself a glass of juice.

I glanced back down at my eggs and his empty plate. "So why aren't you?"

He actually looked a bit sheepish at that. The cold glass was pressed between his palms and he was looking down at it with some amount of embarrassment that I couldn't quite place. "I like to drink a glass of juice in the morning before eating."

"Okay," I started slowly. There was something far more to it than that.

Gabriel sighed, taking a sip of his drink. "When I had first fallen, I had to learn how to eat. Or at least eat the food that was available here. I did not stomach it very well. However, Elias would sit with me every morning while Reese cooked, and we would have a glass of juice together. I hated the taste at first. Far too sweet for my liking. But it brought such joy to Elias, and soon I found that it was the ritual of the matter that I ended up enjoying the most. It was an example of family to me."

Reaching across the table, I rested my hand on his. His eyes lifted to meet mine and I offered him a gentle smile. "I think that's lovely," I told him. Relief flooded his face and the tension in his shoulders dropped a bit.

We finished the rest of breakfast in relative silence, exchanging a few pleasantries but mostly just enjoying each other's company. When I couldn't eat anymore, Gabriel stood. But instead of clearing away the dishes, he held out his hand.

"Stand, if you will," he beckoned.

I placed my hand in his, marveling at the contrast of our skin. His fingers curled around my own, helping me up before his arms went around me.

"Would you dance with me?" he asked.

I looked up at him. "There's no music."

"We shall make it," he assured me. "I have had a silly thought in my head since holding you for the first time, and I would like to make it true today."

Smiling, I molded my body to his. "You've wanted to dance with me that long? You should have just said something."

"The moment needed to be perfect," he murmured, leaning over to rest his cheek against the top of my head. "I needed this to be perfect."

And it was. As the two of us began to sway back and forth in the small kitchen, I couldn't think of anywhere else I'd rather be. Gabriel was warm against me, dirty dishes sat in the sink, and the scent of breakfast still lingered in the air. Both of us looked sleep addled and as I closed my eyes just to feel, I couldn't help but feel the coaxing tendrils of sleep try to beckon both of us back into bed. But instead, we swayed together. A soft hum came to my lips from a song that I had heard long ago. Gabriel tightened his hold against me, continuing to rock us back and forth.

Tomorrow would bring something different. It would bring strife and confusion and an ever mounting block of stress. Today, however. Today would bring this. A newfound comfort found in the arms of this man. It was more than enough.



[Dec 2, 2024](#)

A burst of fine fibers exploded into the air, raining down upon us in a configuration of red, pink and deep blue. There were a few curses interspersed with the commotion, along with quite a bit of laughter. When my eyes ticked over towards Milo's and Mal's, neither of them seemed concerned.

"Catarina, you put too much in the machine again?" Milo called out. I couldn't see to who he was even referring to, but heard a voice come through the puff of twine.

"Hush now, Milo Next. No one needs your sass today!"

There were a few calls as the surrounding individuals began to realize just who had stepped into the district and at such a lucky time. Suddenly, more than a dozen people were surrounding us, patting Milo on the back and sweeping him up in conversation. I squeezed Malcolm's hand tight, looking around at the new faces with a wide-eyed gaze. I was proud to admit it was only slightly tinged with apprehension.

"Come on." Malcolm tugged at me, getting me out of the midst of the crowd. "Milo's fan club is going to fawn over him for a minute. You and I can get a better idea of what we want to buy."

The invitation had come to Malcolm's house. Mostly, because there was no guarantee of where Milo would ever be and because my mailbox had a family of mice living in it, who had a tendency to take letters and make them into small beds. But, it was addressed to the three of us. There was to be a small gathering on the Eternal Staircase, located at a jazz club that had been closed for years. Why we got sent the invitation was beyond any of us, but Milo looked more than excited to go, and there was even a faint winding of interest in Malcolm's eyes. So, I had suggested we make an evening of it. Get ourselves some nicer clothes. Attend the event all together for one of the first official dates any of us had.

Milo had practically pushed us out of the house at dawn the next morning, buzzing with excitement. That excitement persisted as he continued to rapidly speak with the ones around him, leaving Malcolm and I to wander peacefully away.

The Fashion District was glitzy up top. Where the floating walkways swayed and the stalls were lined with gold. There was a flashy kind of brilliance to it all. But to me, the underbelly was where the true garments were made. The lower level of the district was a place that most did not venture, but now that I was here, I wondered if anyone realized what they were missing out on. Reams of fabric made up the walls of most of the shops, providing jagged barriers of patterned display.. Each stall boasted its own theme where ribbon and string were pulled from the canopies over head, allowing the shop vendors to sew beads and lace and leather all together upon soft spun garments.

Up top was made to seem expensive.

Down here, I realized, was where the real prizes were.

"This is phenomenal," I breathed. I couldn't help but reach out, running my fingers across various brass buttons. The possibilities here were endless.

"I always did like it down here more," Malcolm said, walking arm in arm with me. "Everyone is a lot more welcoming here. Warmer, too. And Milo is in his element with all of them."

Milo had grown up down here. After Feebus had taken him off the streets, he had slept beneath most of the garments for a time. Malcolm had told me he would still come down here some nights when he was missing home.

"Milo doesn't strike me as someone with a lot of fashion sense and finery," I told Malcolm.

"Oh, Lamplight. The man knows his clothes. He just doesn't care to show anyone, I suppose." We stopped at a stall where a woman was painstakingly weaving beads no bigger than a speck of dust, across a child size tunic. She looked up at us, signing something to Malcolm. He quickly signed back to her, causing her to grin before going back to her work. "She says to just let her know if we have any questions," he relayed to me.

"I didn't know you could sign."

He nodded. "I had to learn. There was a guy at the fight club Milo and I used to go to. He got jumped one night and hurt pretty bad. Couldn't speak after that. I helped him learn sign language. Mine is crude, but it gets me by." He reached out for a stretch of black silk fabric with shimmering paisley designs.

"You'd look good in this."

I ran my fingers across it, feeling the way it flowed like water beneath my touch. "How fancy are we supposed to be for this event?"

"Not sure. It was always a nicer venue. But I don't know what exactly we are walking into. Though, from my experience, you just wear the level of fancy that you are comfortable with."

"I don't know if I know what that is," I told him honestly.

"Well then, darlin'," an arm slung around me as Milo came walking back up. "You are in good hands."

I looked up at Milo, noticing the way his shaggy hair fell around his face. His cheeks were flushed and his eyes bright with delight. "Do you want to pick something out for me?" I asked.

"Nope," he said with a slight pop of his lips. "I want you to pick something out for yourself. And if it takes all day, then I will enjoy watching Malcolm get bored out of his mind. The man hates shopping."

Malcolm rolled his eyes. "I like shopping. I just don't like shopping with you."

“Hey,” Milo protested.

“What? You run around like an overexcited puppy. It’s exhausting.”

I grinned, reaching forward to the fabric that Malcolm had been looking at. “I do like this,” I said. “But maybe we could add something more to it?”

Milo nodded. “Could make a nice jacket, and then we can do something different for the pants. Leather shoes for sure. Some nice silver jewelry to go with it all?”

I could see the way Milo was nodding to himself, sizing me up and then looking back and the stalls while piecing it all together. “What about you?” I asked. “What are you planning on wearing?”

“Oh, uh—”

Malcolm came around my side, leaning in conspiratorially. But not once did he lower his voice enough to keep his words from Milo’s ears. “That’s the thing about Milo. He’ll pick things for you and I and then be content to go in what he’s wearing now.”

There was a series of gilded mirrors near us. They were set up in a small circle for a customer could see either side. Gathering some of the fabrics, I walked over to them, gesturing for both my lovers to follow.

“Alright, both of you stand still,” I demanded. Side by side, the two could not look more different. Malcolm’s dark tones compared to Milo’s freckled light. Mal’s almost black hair to the honey strands of Milo’s. I began draping fabric across both of them. Earth tones for Malcolm and more jeweled tones for Milo. Milo twirled and preened, putting on a show, while Malcolm thoughtful considered it all.

“I like the green,” Malcolm said.

Milo snorted. “Of course you do.” Then, turning to me, he held out a deep blue suit with gold embellishments. “What do you think of this? Jacket. Pants. No shirt.” He waggled his brows at me.

“I think you’d look stunning in it and make quite the scene on the dance floor.”

Milo pumped his fists in the air. “Perfect. Mal, you’re getting embellishments on yours. If Luke and I are fancied up, you have to be also.”

“By the lanterns, I hate when you get like this,” Malcolm muttered.

Milo walked towards him, crowding into his space and pressing his forehead against Mal’s. It sent Malcolm slightly off balance, leaving him to grab onto Milo to keep from falling. “You love it,” Milo muttered to him before spinning away. He came over to me, wrapping himself around me. It was a different side of Milo. One that had been lost to me for so long.

“You’re happy here,” I said, reaching up to take his hand and place a kiss against his signet ring.

“Nah,” he said. “It’s not here.”

There was something to his voice. Something so much more that he wanted to say. “Then what is it?”

“It’s you,” he said. “Him,” he motioned to Malcolm. “It’s feeling comfortable in my own skin. Being who I want to be.” He squeezed me tighter. “You gave that back to me. Do you know what that feels like, darlin’?”

As I looked at Mal and felt Milo tucked around me, my heart soared. “Yeah,” I said. “Yeah, I really do.” My voice was choked and suddenly I didn’t want to let Milo go. With my free hand, I reached out for Mal. He dropped the fabric and stepped forward, taking it.

We stood there for a moment, the three of us gathered close. I caught sight of us in the mirrors, catching the different angles and the different looks on our face. But overall, there was peace. The peace that only came with acceptance.

It felt like belonging.

It felt like home.

[Milo - Yule Traditions](#)

[Dec 4, 2024](#)

“We have a problem.”

Milo was standing in the middle of the room, his eyes wide with that certain ring of apprehension. “Let me guess. You caused it,” I teased.

He threw his hands up in the air, stomping forward. I had been sitting at the kitchen table, looking over a few of the photos we had taken during Hazel’s last dinner party. Most were blurry representations due to Milo’s inability to sit still. Especially while playing games.

“Probably.” He flung himself down onto the seat next to me, biting at the skin of his thumb as he waited for me to set aside what I was doing and attend to whatever he thought was dire. When I didn’t, he scooted the chair closer.

I didn’t look at him and instead tried to hide my smile. Milo could get manic at times, but he hated just stating what he needed. The entire process was a physical pain for him that had never dulled. “Darlin’,” he finally stated.

“Yes?”

“We. Have. A Problem.”

I shifted a few pictures to the side. “Then. Fix. It.”

“I am terrible at fixing problems!” A few of the photos went scattering at his wild hand gesture, and I gave him a pointed look. Quickly, he jumped up to gather them all again, ending up on his hands and knees as he snatched at the ones that had fallen to the floor. “I need your help,” he told me, crawling around on the ground. “Because, if I don’t have your help, I’m going to mess this up. Badly.”

When he popped up again, he hit his head on the table, hissing in pain. It was then that I decided to put him out of his misery. Sitting back in my chair, I looked at him, still sitting on the ground. The poor guy actually did look distraught.

“Is this a real problem?” I asked him.

“Yes.”

“A legitimate, you cannot take care of it on your own, you truly need help and are not just overreacting kind of problem?”

“Yes.” He tipped his head to the side. “Mostly.”

There it was. A little dent in the plan. “See, the last time you said that, we had run out of milk.”

“And it was a problem.”

“You don’t even drink milk, Milo.”

“Darlin’, please.” This time, he was on his knees, right by me. Hands coming out to rest on my thighs. “It’s real this time. Actually real. Kind of real. I mean, it’s real to me. You don’t necessarily need to help, I guess. But I want you to?”

I narrowed my eyes. Part of me thought I was about to get burned. “Alright, what is it.”

“I forgot about Yule. More specifically, I forgot about solstice.”

I cast my eyes to the side where we had a small little tree. It was strung up with dried oranges and cranberries, a few little pine cones tucked inside the boughs. “Am I missing something?” The entirety of the Night Market had been decorated. The Yule Cat had made its way through the streets. Kristus had put on her annual show of revelry and life threatening antics. Yule was well and truly here and no one had the luxury to forget, even if they wanted. I was exhausted at this point.

Milo, however, shook his head quickly, trying to rid himself of his panicked confusion. The words were all there but whatever he was trying to say sounded wrong in his head. “No. I know we haven’t forgotten

about Yule. Going to Hazel's. Getting presents. All that. I know. I forgot though... I forgot..." He looked... embarrassed. Each word a strain.

That, was more than a problem. It was a hill he was struggling to overcome.

Reaching out, I cupped his cheek, all forms of teasing now gone. "What did you forget?"

He couldn't quite meet my eyes. "I forgot about Modraniht."

I frowned. "I'm not familiar with that one."

He shifted his weight to the side, fingers clenching and unclenching at my sides. "It's about honoring your ancestors. Specifically your mother."

I felt my heart ache The boy who had only a handful of memories of a woman he couldn't even put a face towards. That was who was in front of me now. The only thing Milo had left of his mother was the necklace she had worn once. The one he had given to me.

"I know we said that we weren't going to do anything today," he stated quickly. I know that you are tired and supposed to be recouping. And you do not have to—"

I placed a finger to his lips. "What do we do?"

There was a copse of trees that bordered the graveyard and the Outlands. Tall pines grew and at this time of year, snow eternally fell. Milo and I soon found ourselves there, gathering small pine sprigs, digging up mushrooms, and collecting branches of holly. Our noses were red, cheeks crimson, and I was almost positive I couldn't feel my hands.

A night of remembrance, he had told me. A night to honor the lineage of a family through the maternal line. To acknowledge where we came from. The ones who had nurtured life. It could be done in many ways and I had a suspicion for the ones who celebrated it annually, there were traditions passed down through generations. Milo didn't have that but he was trying. Ever since his fae heritage came to light and he had another small piece of his mother returned to him, he had been trying to honor her far more than he ever did his father.

When Milo came up to me, he pulled me close, tucking me towards his body to share some of his warmth. The scratchiness of his coat brushed against my chin. I could feel the wetness sinking into my boots and the way the darkness settled around us even further. The wisps were out tonight, flitting among the trees and dotting them with soft blue dew. It set the forest in a ethereal glow. One that was backlit by the small lanterns him and I had set around our hunting area.

The forest was silent. The kind that banished the years sorrows for a single moment. I could hear Milo's heart beat against my own and felt the heavy gaze of winter looking down on us. The year had been long and mostly dark, but it had been a renewal as well. One that was needed in more ways than one.

"I don't remember you doing this before," I whispered to him. I knew we should take our spoils and get back to the indoors where we could light a fire and cook something warm. But for the moment, I couldn't find it in me to move from the solitude.

"I mostly have done it in secret," he confessed. "I remember my mother doing this. Making simmer pots. Creating little idols to hang on our door. After she was gone, I tried to once with my father." He did not speak of what happened then. Though the pain of it flashed across his eyes with a silent crack. "Then, when I came here, got older, I... forgot."

Forgot.

It was a word that hurt so much.

"You were just a boy."

"I was a shitty teen who thought that it was dumb to remember family traditions," he told me, the irritation he felt flowing through him. "I was young and naive and decided that where I came from didn't matter. They abandoned me. They never wanted a son. Why remember something so vile? It never did me any good. So I tried to forget. Buried it all down." I heard him swallow, his words thick with regret. "It's only been the last few years that I've started it again. Mostly on my own."

"You could have shared this with me," I told him. "And Hazel would be sure to honor this in whatever way you'd let her."

"I know," he said with a small shrug. "I just didn't know how, if that makes sense. It's been a secret for so long that it felt silly to put any stock into it." It was a belief. One of the only ones Milo may have had. I assumed there was a certain amount of awkwardness around being the man who believed in nothing and yet still hold this to be true. "When I do this," he continued, "it's like she isn't forgotten anymore. Like my mom is somewhere, watching me. Dumb, huh?"

"It's not dumb," I told him quickly. "You are honoring your ancestors. Dead or alive, you are remembering them. And how else do you live if it isn't through remembrance?"

He sighed, tucking his cold nose against my neck. Milo still hid from his emotions. Still hid from the things that were tough. But he hid within me now. "I wish I could remember her better," he whispered.

My hand slid up his back, going to tangle in the locks of his hair. "You said a simmer pot with all this?" He nodded. "And an idol?"

"Yeah. Like a wreath or a bundle of stuff put together. I don't really know. It always looked cool, though."

"Then that's what we go do," I told him. Taking his hand in mine, I smiled. Next year, I would be prepared. I would make sure this day was honored. This year, I would do whatever I could to put him at ease and let him know that his traditions mattered.



Picking up the basket, Milo looped it through his free arm. A few of the mushrooms fell out but he left them. Perhaps for the animals that were slowly trying to return to these woods. Perhaps as an offering. We left then, our feet making drifts through the snow as we silently talked all the way home.

And in the trees, something stirred. The wind picked up, dousing the lanterns we had left behind, the crisp smell of apples on the wind, following us home.

[Hazel - Tradition](#)

[Dec 13, 2024](#)

“Come on!”

When Hazel beckoned me forward that day, there was something magical in the air. A funny thing to observe, really, considering that we lived in a realm of magic and my girlfriend was a witch. But I supposed I wasn't really supposed to talk about that since the Velvet Guard still had this penchant about pretending all magic was evil unless it benefitted them. Taking Hazel's hand, I followed her blindly out through the back door, hearing the bang of the wooden barrier as it slammed against the rickety cottage. We took the three steps down into the garden, ran out through the garden gate, and headed into the back area of the property where the creek shot through the land and an old wooden swing still hung, waiting for the ghost of youth to come play.

“What are we doing?” I asked, not really caring what the answer would be. Hazel was infectious when she was this happy. When the giddiness took over, everyone in her surroundings couldn't help but feel a piece of the same joy.

“It's happening tonight,” she said. “It always happens around Yule. I don't know if it has to actually do with Yule or if it's because the longest night of the year is coming up.”

Stopping at the base of the hedge, the very one that separated her property and the burnt out alleyway beyond, Hazel searched around, finding little hand holds to start climbing upwards.

“Is the longest night of the year really a thing in a place called the Night Market?”

She stopped mid-climb, tipping her head to the side. ‘I hadn't really thought of it like that before. I guess people still observe it because it's what they did in other realms. Plus, the Yule Cat. Kind of hard to ignore Yule with Minnow roaming around.”

“The Yule Cat's name is Minnow?”

"Yes. The sweetest little kitty you'll ever find, too. I don't understand why everyone is afraid of him."

I could. The Yule Cat had a bad habit of eating people if they didn't exchange clothes as gifts during the festive season. It was a strange tradition that ended in demise almost every year, and yet we all still joyously partook in it. It was the one part of living that I didn't think I would ever really understand.

"Are you coming?"

She was halfway up the hedge when she called down to me, and I stepped forward to scramble after her. The brambles creaked beneath my feet, a few of the hollow stems cracking at the added weight. But surprisingly, the hedge mostly held. The two of us climbed up, pulling ourselves higher than I thought the hedge actually was. When I looked down, the ground was far, far away and the journey ahead was beginning to reach the lantern line. And then, the stars.

"Here." She reached out a hand for me when she got up to the top, her legs dangling over the side. Grasping her gloved hand, I let her pull me upwards, twisting myself around until I sat at the edge, mirroring her pose. At first, I saw nothing. There was the plume of smoke from her chimney beyond, and the small shine from the little hill house that her and Malcolm had built as children. But then, something flashed over head, snagging my attention upwards.

The sky was normally filled with stars. Little poked holes in a fabricated curtain. But here, I could see a tear. It wasn't anything big, but it was enough to see the flaps of torn fabric and the sky beyond. That was where my home originally had been. It felt like a lifetime ago now.

"Just wait," Hazel said. She still had a hold of my hand, clutching it within her own. When she scooted closer, her hips bumped against mine and I reached around her to hold her steady to my side. "Wait for it," she muttered again, looking at the sky in anticipation.

I thought I knew everything about the night sky. From years of being a strange form flitting among the cosmos, to wandering it with Pen. I was certain there was nothing more up there that could surprise me. But then a brilliant flash of green shot across the dark like lightening. Followed by a heavy stroke of purple and incandescent blue. I felt my breath catch in my throat as they began bleeding together, like brushstrokes from some cosmic painter.

"Do you see it?" Hazel asked.

I nodded to her. In all the years I had been up there, not once had I seen such colors. The vibrancy. The way they danced. I could almost hear the notes of a song that had long been lost, coming to life for one more night.

"What is it?" I asked her.

Hazel leaned her head on my shoulder and I could feel her smile course through her entire body. "I don't know. I found it when I was a child. By accident, of course. I was out here late one night, picking wild herbs, and I just happened to look up. I only ever see it this time of year."

"I've never seen it," I breathed.

"Isn't that funny? You, the entire world, still have things to discover."

I laughed a little. "I don't know if I should find that funny or if I should question my own attention to detail."

Hazel smacked me lightly before immediately trying to soothe away the pretend hurt. "No, don't think of it that way. I think there is wonder in still being able to discover something new. It is the proof that there is always something worth living for. Even when it's dark. We just have to open our eyes from the habitual depression to see it."

I raised a brow at her, looking down at the kinky head of hair and the dancing lights in her own soft gaze. "That's new," I told her.

She hummed a bit. "I've been doing a lot of thinking this holiday season. And I think I tend to see the bad more than the good. But pretend to see the good more than the bad. That is probably a problem."

"I don't know," I told her. Hazel had always just seen the world differently. I didn't know if it was a problem or just a grate against the conventional norm. "I think that you bring perspective. Not always ones that are helpful for you, but they are perspectives all the same."

She squeezed my hand tighter. "Well then, my new perspective is that it is okay to sometimes just be okay. The world isn't going to end because we aren't suffering."

I wasn't sure if I knew what she meant by that. Not at that moment, at least. But I knew that her body was a solid weight against mine and up above, a miracle was dancing across the sky. I wanted to hold onto her forever for that. I wanted to sit here and look up at this wonder and live in the moment of 'okay' that she spoke of. Maybe it was that magic that I had felt. Or maybe it was just her. But, I had no intention of moving.

"How long does it last?" I asked her.

"I'm not sure," she murmured. "I've never sat out here long enough to see."

I looked up again, watching green mix with purple and then swirl around in twirling ribbons to something other worldly. "Want to find out?"

She smiled impossibly brighter. "With you? Always."

[Malcolm - Tradition](#)

[Dec 13, 2024](#)

Malcolm was a homebody at heart. If asked, he would go anywhere, holding out a helping hand. This was the man who went to loud places with loved ones, willing to sit in the corner and smile while, whoever he was with, partook in the festivities. But ultimately, he was his most relaxed at home. Music playing softly in the background, the lights dimmed low, and normally, a wrought iron tea kettle bubbling on the stove. Tonight, however, he was the one to suggest we go somewhere different. Into the world for something other than a necessity. So, out of curiosity, I had gotten dressed and followed him out into the cold, casting him little sidelong looks as we wandered through unfamiliar alleys towards our destination.

"You can stop looking at me like that at any time," he said, a smile quirking at the edge of his lips.

My gaze ticked away. "Looking at you like what?"

"Like someone has replaced me. Like I'm a Malcolm shaped doll."

I laughed. "I don't think anyone could ever capture your likeness quite right." He seemed pleased at the response and continued walking forward, his steps confident but unrushed. "I'm just not used to seeing you like this."

"Walking?"

Reaching out, I flicked his arm. Tonight was one of his obstinate nights. I liked those, just as much as I liked any of the others. It signaled he was in a good mood. "No," I answered. "Gung ho about actually going somewhere."

"Didn't realize I was gung hoing it. I thought that was reserved for people with more than three expressions."

"Hush," I admonished. It had been a joke between us lately that he didn't emote. Not loudly, at least. Not like Hazel. "You normally like to stay home."

"I do." Looking upwards, he let out a puff of air, watching as his breath fogged above him before skittering away. "But tonight is special. It's the one night of the year I look forward to."

"You only look forward to one night of the year?"

"Yup. All the others are dismal." He snatched at my hand, holding it in his and squeezing it teasingly. "What I mean to say is that I know this night. It is unchanging. And may be one of the few traditions I have despite finding a deep comfort in having traditions."

I looked around the alleyway, trying to understand what tradition we were supposed to be partaking in. I hadn't heard him even speak of any sort of upcoming event. Malcolm had just gone through the last few

days like he normally did; nonchalant and predominantly silent.

"Okay, I'll bite," I told him. "What exactly are we doing tonight?"

"It took you longer than I thought," he grinned. "I thought you'd be asking questions the second I told you to get your coat on." I wanted to protest that I wasn't that impatient, but the fact was that I occasionally could make impatience into an art form. "We are going to go make lanterns," he said.

I gazed up at the ones above us, flickering with the threat of snow.

"Not those lanterns. Little ones that we put on the ground."

"Okay," I started slowly. I had questions, but I found that they were exacerbated as we rounded the corner. The world rained glitter, trickling down in shimmering dew drops into big vats of glue, while large reams of brown papers rolled forward like a fabric walkways. Satin ribbons lay curled like sleeping snakes. Bits and baubles bounced through the cracks in the cobblestone. And the air smelled heavily of pulp and candle wax. I stopped at the entrance of the alley, watching as adults and children alike were mingling between the different tables that were set up, gathering art supplies before sitting on the ground and beginning to craft small square lanterns. Among them, individuals were walking around with enchanted candles to put inside the lanterns when they were done.

"Every year," Malcolm began, "people have gathered to make lanterns. Some make it in honor of the Night Market itself, wanting to remember the light that the market has given to us. Others are remembering their own traditions back in their home realms. One of the more common stories is to create a light to guide weary travelers on the longest night of the year."

I tore my gaze away from the group of small children, all coloring on their papers bags with a little light shining inside. "What is your tradition?" I asked.

"I like making them for the weary travelers," he told me. "It's not a cultural thing for me, but I do know what it's like to be lost in the dark. So, I like making them and setting them at the edge of the market. The enchantments usually last all winter."

There were hundreds of lanterns being made. All in varying states of glitter and glue. Some of them were typical ones, put together by small children with the attention span of a shooting star. While others were methodically crafted, looking far more like pieces of art than little things to just put off to the side at night.

"Would you like to make one with me?" he asked.

I didn't think I had ever done anything artistic in my life. Compared to Malcolm's, I was sure my lantern was going to look like a bag that had been thrown up on. But he looked so hopeful. There was a shy sense of question in his eyes. Like he wasn't sure this was something I would enjoy. Sharing an intricate part of one's self always did have an edge of fear to it.

"I would love to," I told him firmly.

The two of us wandered for a good while, gathering ribbons and paper. Paints and pots of pigment. I took a large mug and dipped it into a glittered vat of glue, smiling as a little girl dipped her own hands in so she could peel off the excess once it dried. And then the two of us got to work. Malcolm explained to me that he had been doing this since he was a teen. Having stumbled across it one night after running from Lucinda's house. He had made twelve of them that evening. Placing them all over the market. Sometimes, he hid, just to see people smile as they passed them by.

"And this year?" I asked. "Are we putting ours on the outskirts still?"

"Anywhere you want, really. I just like to put them in places that feel like they could use a bit more hope. There is something about soft light that soothes the soul."

I smiled at him, watching the way his long fingers expertly worked. Malcolm's lantern was going to fall into the category of masterpiece. Mine fell into the category of somewhat adequate. But as I finished up my piece, and placed a candle inside, I knew it didn't matter. Because a few people were oohing and awing over my little glowing light. Malcolm was right, soft light and good intention did go a long way to bring joy to someone's evening.

"I have an idea of where I want to put them," I said.

Malcolm didn't ask. Instead, he gathered his own lantern, and followed me into the dark.

There were a few alleyways that led to Artisan Alley. All of them without the overhead lanterns that were strewn within the market proper. These alleys connected towards the graveyard and the Outlands and ended up being small passage ways that inspired fear in most. The lights within Artisan Alley and the warm smell of baked goods that bled from Kimber's bakery never seemed to meet the desolate corners. Contained inside their own district, they left the alleyways there cold and the joy beyond a hidden secret. It was there that I wanted to place light. To give safe passage to those who needed to find someplace they were welcome.

"I like that," Malcolm whispered. "Find solace in the place where misfits gather."

His arms were around me now as I leaned back against his chest. Our lanterns were two small beacons in the dark before us. "Is that what I am? A misfit?"

"Think we all are a little bit of a misfit," he confessed. "Some of us just reject it more than others."

"Do you?"

"Not anymore." He rested his chin on my shoulder, the heat of his breath tingling across the shell of my ear. "Besides, I'd rather be a misfit with you than conform to whatever is considered the norm here."

"I don't think there is such a thing," I laughed. That, I could at least be sure of. Even the ones that acted 'normal' were far from it. Instead prescribing to a term that had little to no meaning. "I like that we did this," I told him. "I want to come with you next year."

"You will," he told me.

I craned my neck back to look at him. "So sure of yourself, huh?"

Malcolm merely placed a kiss at the corner of my mouth. "With you, Lamplight? I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

[MC taking care of Mal](#)

[Dec 13, 2024](#)

A/N This is one of the commissioned shorts. A female MC who is in love with Milo and Mal, taking an evening to force Mal into being pampered. :)

"It's not going to work." My hands were shaking. In the dim light of the cabin, I could swear that my skin was turning into the washed out blue waves beyond, simply due to nerves. My tail was twitching and the horn I hid was aching. I didn't think I had ever felt this nervous before.

"It is going to work. You just have to trust the process." Milo hopped down from the rafters above, admiring his handiwork. I had asked him to come and help once I realized that in order to pull this off, I was going to need all hands on deck when it came to subterfuge.

"He's going to figure it out," I told Milo. There was a sort of calm resolve that had taken over. One that suggested I already expected us to be found out. As if Malcolm had eyes and ears everywhere. "More than likely, he is on his way here now with a giant bouquet of flowers or an entire catered meal. Or, I don't know, a diamond."

Milo leaned against one of the beams, crossing his arms in front of him. "You're kind of cute when you're all worked up, darlin'." I felt my cheeks heat and the glow in the room became a bit brighter as my freckles chased the shadows. "Ya need to calm down a bit. Mal doesn't suspect a thing. And he certainly wouldn't bring you a diamond. He would be way more thoughtful than that and draw you a picture detailing every little bit about you that he finds beautiful."

I slapped my hands to my face and groaned. I was supposed to be spoiling Malcolm today. I had been trying to for the last three months, but the man always evaded it. I would have dinner made for him after



a long day, and he would come home with an elaborate desert, a bottle of wine, and then slow dance with me around the living room. I would rent a cabin get away, and he would contact the owner ahead of time and throw rose petals around the room and light dozens of candles. One for each month I had been his Lamplight. I would try to just make him sleep in and keep the house quiet, and he would wake me instead with breakfast in bed. Trying to take care of Malcolm Albright was one of the hardest tasks I had ever had the pleasure of navigating, but I was at the end of my rope.

"Aster," Milo said gently. He had pushed away from the middle of the room now, coming over to place hands on my shoulder. "You've got this. I promise you, he doesn't suspect. He thinks he is meeting me here because I've gone on a bender."

My eyes widened. "What?"

Milo only laughed, leaning forward to press a kiss to my cheek. "I'm gonna head out. You two lovebirds don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Milo!"

"Talk to you tomorrow. I'll water your houseplants." He slipped out the window because of course Milo couldn't do anything normal.

"I don't have any houseplants," I called after him. But my voice was cut short as I heard footsteps rapidly approaching the front door. Cursing to myself, I ran towards the back of the room, hitting the button that was linked up to all the lights that had been strung in the rafters. They popped on right as the door opened.

Malcolm stood there for a moment, a look of pure confusion on his face. His hair was disheveled, lending to the fact that he had rushed out of the house. His eyes were wide as he took in our surroundings. Beautiful hand stained planks made up the entirety of the small cabin, the grain of the wood lit up by the small lanterns strung up all around the room. Large leaf plants were potted in the corners, mingling with shoots of bamboo and sweet smelling iris. Steam began to swirl in the room, scented with eucalyptus and just a touch of amber.

"Surprise," I told him, wringing my hands together.

Malcolm stepped into the room. "I— yes. This is a surprise."

I realized then he didn't know what to do with himself. Malcolm was so used to taking care of everyone else that when the spotlight was shined on him, he twisted it all around. It was a skill, really. The man could turn any moment into a reason to pamper his partner. Even if that moment was supposed to be dedicated to his own care.

"I thought it would be nice for us to have a little bit of a spa day," I told him. "You had mentioned that you really liked that bathhouses in the bogs. But, you know, they're gone now, so I thought to myself, why not bring the bogs to you. Minus the smell, of course."

Malcolm was still looking around the room, his eyes flicking to each corner. Before he could somehow find a way to make this about me, I quickly walked over, circling behind him and wrapping my arms around his shoulders. There, I rested my head next to his, bending down, so our cheeks pressed together.

"Come on," I whispered to him. "I got the water all warm for you."

In the center of the room was a deep and sunken tub. It was dug out from the earth and lined with hardened clay. I had gone to several districts to get the right oil concoction to soothe aching muscles and spiraling thoughts.

"Lamplight," he breathed, finally finding his voice. "You really shouldn't have—"

I pressed a finger to his mouth. "You are going to let me spoil you today," I told him firmly. "Because it is what I want." It had been the only way I could think of to make Malcolm stop trying to focus on me. To tell him this was for me as much as it was for him. And really, if that was how I had to trick him, then so be it. I just hoped he fell for it.

Pressing his body back against mine, he took a deep breath. "You know, a bath does sound good."

I grinned against the shell of his ear. "Then let me help you." Slowly, I got my fingers beneath his shirt, pulling it up and over his head. He kicked his shoes off for me, allowing me to push down at his loose pants. They slid down his hips with ease, leaving him naked before me. I felt a warmth fill my belly at the sight of him. But as he reached for my robes, I had to bat him away. "Go get in the water," I told him. "I can do this part."

A frown that I couldn't help but find adorable, twisted against his lips. But, to my surprise, he actually listened. As I disrobed, I heard him hiss as the heat hit his toes. I watched him from the corner of my eye as he settled down into the tub, sighing deeply at the sensation. Meanwhile, I was grabbing the large carafes of cold water I had prepared, and the small plate of berries that had been chilling. Slipping into the water beside him, I poured him a clay mug of water.

Malcolm eyed me over the rim of the mug. "This is unfair, you know."

"Oh?"

"We are partners. If I had known you were doing something this elaborate I would have—"

"Completely ignored your own needs in order to make sure the attention was off of you?" I leaned forward, giving him a quick peck on the lips. "I know." Then, scooting him forward, I maneuvered myself until I sat behind him, my legs bracketing his hips. I felt that telling blush again when he moved our linked hands up to press a kiss to my knuckles. I wasn't going to let him win, however. "You deserve to be spoiled, you know."

"There's spoiling and then there's this." He looked around and for a moment, I held my breath. He was taking every inch of the place in, using his artistic eye to gaze across the room. "Is this an old fishing hut?"

I hummed a little. "I rented it for the evening and then had the tub installed. Brought in food, extra blankets for if you would like a nap, massage supplies. I even have your favorite dish heated in one of those little boxes you had enchanted last week."

"You've thought of everything then."

I squeezed him to me tighter, taking a nearby cloth and squeezing it out across his chest. The water droplets slowly traced their way down each scar before disappearing into the tub itself. "Let me take care of you tonight," I whispered to him.

"I'm not very good at that." He laughed, but I could hear the strain in it. I wondered what had happened that made it so hard for this man to relax.

"Malcolm, you've been taking care of everyone. I would say it's only been lately, but we both know it's been all your life. And I think that's what I love about you the most. You are selfless. But sometimes, you need to allow the people who love you to do the same."

Twisting in my grip, he turned so that his hand could cup my cheek, thumb resting beneath my right horn. "I'm bad at that," he told me. "It's my one weakness."

"So humble," I grinned. I rested my forehead against him, letting the steam waft up around us. "Can you try?" He nodded, closing his eyes and keeping close. "Good. Because I have an entire evening of pampering coming your way. Just you and me until you are putty in my arms."

He blinked at me, the water workings its magic. "I don't think that will take much." Then, leaning forward, he nuzzled the crook of my neck. "You're perfect," he whispered. "My Lamplight."

"My Gatekeeper," I whispered.

[Gabriel - Holiday Traditions](#)

[Dec 28, 2024](#)

The cacophony of laughter was accompanied by the clinking of glasses and the occasional shout. It was muffled behind closed doors, filtering through the cracks where amber light spilled. Next to me, Gabriel continued staring at the bars that were embedded in the wood. The iron looked as if they twisted within

the planks, weaving in and out in intricate little patterns. I knew it was an old cell door. It was an oddity about the Velvet Guard. If they needed a room, they converted a cell. It left most of the establishment depressing, to say the least.

Looking towards him, I squeezed his hand. "We do not have to do this."

He looked startled, so lost in his reverie that he had forgotten I was even there. Clearing his throat, he shook his head. "There is no reason not to."

"You looking at the door as if it is your own personal enemy is kind of the reason not to," I told him.

He bristled at that. Gabriel didn't have enemies, according to him. He had adversaries and even then, they were only the ones that had dared to try and sully the market. Meaning, me. "I can handle a company holiday party."

"You hate people."

"I do not."

"When you were invited to come, you literally asked Marissa why."

"I was simply inquiring why she would be inviting me at all. They never have before."

It was true. Most of the Velvet Guard kept their distance from the Warden. He was their superior. But there had been a development in recent years that I didn't think many anticipated. Especially given how thoroughly Gabriel had cleaned house. A small pocket of his closest, the ones who trusted him and actually wanted the man around, had formed a tight-knit bond within the organization. They found Gabriel's dryness endearing and his stories fascinating. They were young, of course. Not yet jaded. Secretly, I hoped they stayed that way. There needed to be a bit more innocence within the guard. Kindness was a trait sorely lacking within positions of authority and I was hoping to gently nudge that change into being a respected quality within the next few years.

But Gabriel found all of it uncomfortable. Not the act itself. Genuine goodwill towards others was something he admired. Held on a pedestal even. But in the face of it, I was finding he fumbled. As if he was so unused to it at this point that he had forgotten how to react.

"Let's just make a small appearance," I suggested. "Then we can go back to your place if you want. Open a bottle of ghost wine. Sit in front of the fire."

He squeezed my hand tightly, his other tugging at the wool knit sweater I had made him buy for the occasion. It was still in a dark blue but had small shimmering celestial patterns across the collar and edges of the sleeves. "Yes. I am looking forward to getting this sweater off."

I grinned at him, knowing his armor had been taken away. "I'm looking forward to you getting that sweater off as well."

I saw the hint of a smile on his face, the crack in the exterior. It was enough to give him the courage to open the door.

The sight that greeted us beyond was warm and inviting if one could overlook the fact that it was still a renovated cell. But, whoever had decorated, placed bottles with glowing candles all around the room, sending an array of flickering glass spinning up above as they twirled in a mimicry of a chandelier. There was a table near the back with some of the best smelling food I had witnessed in a while, and every available surface had soft throw blankets and pillows. They had done their best to make the cell as cozy as possible.

“Warden!” Tally greeted us. She was around when the lights had gone out and had insinuated herself in the ranks without an interview. It wasn’t until nearly a year later that anyone realized no one had actually hired her. She stole a uniform and claimed she worked for the guard. Given how hard she worked, Gabriel hadn’t been inclined to make an issue out of it.

“Happy holidays, Tally.”

She smiled brightly at him. “And this is... oh... this is the Night Market.”

The room went silent. There had of course been rumors about the two of us, but nothing confirmed. It hadn’t been anyone’s business. But now, I supposed, since we were going to parties together and events in the future, it was high time people knew. That, and I wasn’t going to lie, it was a show of strength against any of the naysayers of Gabriel’s current position.

“Warden, you aimed high,” someone from the back called. “Where do I get myself a sentient world for a partner.”

Gabriel shifted next to me, and I could have sworn he was reaching for his sword. I placed a hand on his arm and stopped forward. “Hi,” I greeted. “Night is just okay. Night Market feels a little odd.”

Tally smiled broadly. “So you’re the reason Warden is here, I’m guessing.” Gabriel was still staring at the guy in the back of the room, his hand hovering dangerously over his blade. “We’ve seen the changes in him. Eating better and all that. Got to say, love what you have brought out in him. Can I buy you a drink? And by buy you a drink, I mean, can I get you a drink that we have made the Warden pay for?”

“Within reason,” Gabriel grumbled.

Tally grabbed my arm and tugged me away from. “Of course, within reason, boss!” she looked at me, shaking her head. “What is his version of ‘reason’.”

“Oh,” I hissed in sympathy. “You can expect you’ve already gone past that.”

Tally winced, but what’s done was done and she kept walking anyway.

The party was small. It boasted no more than a dozen colleagues. These were the ones that had been there through the thick of it. The ones that were actively trying to change the way the guard operated. I could tell, as I looked at all of them, that they were passionate about their work. That they held a respect for Gabriel.

And he, them.

I walked over to him after I had made my rounds, coming to lean into his side as he sat on a comically oversized couch that I was pretty certain was the old cot in the cell. "You've done well," I told him.

He was sipping his wine, looking around the room. "I'm afraid none of this is me."

"You are allowing the change to happen. Part of it is you. Don't underestimate yourself."

"They are good people," he said slowly, looking at them all in turn. "I need to remember not to underestimate them just because they are not hardened."

"Look at you," I teased. "A far cry from the man who threw me in a pit to die." I watched him wince. It wasn't one of his favorite memories but it certainly was one that I wasn't going to let him forget. Smiling, I leaned forward, placing a kiss on his cheek. "Also, go easy on Tally. She definitely went over your budget plan."

He frowned. "I suppose her holiday gift can be that I pay for this out of pocket."

"I think that would be really nice."

Sighing, he wrapped his arm around me. "This is not becoming a tradition," he murmured. But the room was softly lit and people were *happy*. They were genuinely happy to be with each other. To be in a room with good friends and conversation. And while it was small and humble, it was a start to something so much greater than anyone even realized. It was a start to a group that would walk through the new phase of the Night Market together, heads held high.

I looked at Gabriel out of the corner of my eye, noticing how he saw it all too.

"Fine," he conceded with a put out sigh. "Maybe this can become a tradition."

I laughed a little, threading my fingers through his. "Do you want to go?"

His grip tightened around me as he sunk down into the cushions of the sofa bed a little further. "No. We can stay for a while longer."

[Dec 28, 2024](#)

The sight before me was an omen. A sign certainly that we were in for it again. I had the sudden urge to call down Pen, to ask if there were more tears in the thread of the world. To walk into the streets and personally test every lantern there was, looking for signs of burn out or infection. It was a knee-jerk reaction but one that I didn't feel anyone could blame me for.

In front of me, Belladonna sat on my sofa, clad in a pair of oversized sweats and a large hooded shirt. Her hair was wrapped up messily on the top of her head, and her makeup had been wiped away entirely. It left her pale, the firelight flickering across her face in an orange smear.

"Could you pour me some more wine, dear heart?" She didn't even look up as she held out the glass.

I had been out most of the day. Visiting friends. Checking on the status of areas of the market. The Yule season was upon us and I wanted to make sure that everything was going accordingly, given how things had a tendency to go holiday awry this time of year. The last thing I expected, as I crawled through my apartment window, was Belladonna. The very very last thing I expected, was Belladonna sans even a hint of leather and lace.

"Hi," I said dumbly. Because I was still not certain this was her. Or if it was some odd dream. Perhaps a changeling coming to take her place and whisk me away in the dead of night.

The only thing familiar about the entire ordeal was the fact that she had a book in her lap.

Still not looking at me, she shook the wine glass. "Wine, my heart. I'm just getting to the good part."

Slowly, I walked over to her, my feet cautiously, taking it one step at a time until I could reach out and grab the glass from her hands. Her nails weren't even painted.

"Uh, Bella?"

"Hmm?" She turned the page of her book, only half listening.

"You okay?"

"I would be better if I could finish this chapter." It was the subtle little cue from her that I needed to shut up. I had heard it before and had once not backed off. She turned vicious when her reading time was interrupted.

Needing a moment to think about what I was seeing, I turned back to my kitchen where three bottles of wine sat neatly. Two of them were blood wine and one a bottle for me. I poured some of the blood wine in her glass, smelling the copper tang of it and watching as it stained the crystalline sides. Belladonna had mostly been working this week. Something about the Baron council in chaos for land reorganization

issues. It was all a petty dispute, from what I could see, but Bella had been put in charge of redistributing who had say with what. And it caused more than a few Baron's to put up a fight. I hadn't seen her more than a handful of moments for what felt like a moon cycle. I hadn't even known she was coming here tonight. I had been content to potentially spend the holiday alone and give her the gift I had found for her, when I next saw her. But, as always, Belladonna had different plans.

When I came back to her, the crinkle of the next page echoed through the room as she wordlessly held out her hand. I handed her the glass, watching as her eyebrows rose at whatever was on the page, and she took a healthy sip of her drink. A small smile curled at each corner, either at the taste of the wine or the words on the page, and finally, she closed her book and turned to look at me.

"Well, hello, my heart. Happy Yule or whatever it is we are celebrating."

I blinked at her. "You're here."

"I would think so."

"And you aren't wearing an evening gown."

She tipped her head to the side, a bemused expression flitting across her eyes. "Is that what has got you in such a tizzy. The state of comfortable dress has nearly got you shaking like a leaf."

"I'm just not used to it," I told her.

Taking another sip, she set her glass aside. "I suppose I should have sat here naked. That may have been a more common sight to you." With a flick of her finger, she beckoned me forward. I could feel the very slight pull of her thrall as I stumbled to the sofa, coming to sit beside her. And while normally, she pulled me against her, this time, she curled against my side.

"Okay, seriously. Are you okay?"

I could hear her throaty chuckle. It reverberated through me like a warm caress. "I am fine. I am merely letting you in on a tradition of mine."

"Oh?"

"Once a year, normally around this time, I like to remember my roots. What it was like to be human. So, I don clothes that are far too large for me, and far too cheap for my liking, take off all the trappings of Belladonna Malady, and curl up with a new book. Most of the time, I read through the evening and then am useless the next day, but it is worth it."

I craned my neck to look at her. "Was this a holiday tradition you had when you were alive?"

"It was. My parents couldn't afford much, but they made sure every holiday eve, to give me a new book. I would then go to my bed and curl within it, fighting the cold for the rest of the night while I read by



candlelight. I have not missed a single year of it.”

Part of me relaxed. Every so often, a more human side emerged from Belladonna. It made me remember that underneath the cold exterior and the sultry voice, had once been a woman who was the daughter of a priest and who worked the farm with her mother. It was a secret. One that the two of us shared. And each glimpse into her human life brought me closer to her because I knew that she was not sharing that part of herself with anyone that she did not trust implicitly.

“If I had known this was a tradition of yours, I would have gotten you a book for tonight.”

Her eyes ticked towards the mantle. “That wrapped gift up there is not for me?”

“Not for tonight,” I told her. “You have to wait until morning.”

There was a small pout to her lips. “But I already know it is a novel. Couldn’t I open it now?”

“No,” I laughed. “Morning. It’s tradition.”

“Who’s?”

“Mine. Starting now.”

Turning, she narrowed her eyes. “I could just steal it, you know. Walk over there, pluck it up and tear into the paper.”

“You could,” I agreed. “But that would mean you would have to put back on the trappings of Belladonna,” I reasoned. “And since you got into, how did you describe it, cheaply made clothes? It seems like such a waste if you are going to go through all that effort just to toss them back off.”

Her nose wrinkled in disgust, and that was how I knew I had won.

Laying back down, she situated herself until her head was in my lap, grabbing her book again. “Your punishment is you are not allowed to move for the rest of the night. I will be reading, and you will be my pillow.”

“Who is going to get you your wine?”

She rolled her eyes. “You need a butler. I’ll put the paperwork in for one tomorrow.”

Laughing, I scooted down on the sofa so the two of us could sit more comfortably. “And what am I to do while you immerse yourself in your book?” It wasn’t a wholly serious question. I would have been content laying there and watching her read all night. But Belladonna shifted a little, getting more comfortable as she cleared her throat.

Her words washed over the room as she began to read and I felt myself transfixed. This beautiful, bright, intelligent woman could tear apart anyone with a look. With a word. She ruled her domain fiercely

and quickly shut down altercation she didn't find worth her time.

Yet, there was such softness to her now.

A softness that was all mine.

Sighing, I closed my eyes, listening to the crackle of the fire and the way she wove a story. Already I was looking forward to next year.

[Sneak peak - Malcolm](#)

[January 8](#)

There was a small tap coming from my window. It roused me from a deep slumber, my lashes sticking together. The room was still dark, the small candles I had placed within my home lanterns still doused. It took me a moment, the edge of sleep still clinging to me. But as the tap sounded once more, I lifted my head from the pillow, looking around the room. Somewhere, it registered to me that it was coming from outside. I still had yet to make a front door and at this point, I didn't think I was going to. Not having one left me with a sense of security that I oddly clung to in recent days.

Standing, I padded over to the window, drawing the curtains aside. Malcolm stood on the opposite side of the glass, a worn jacket pulled around his shoulders, snow flecking the black fabric. I frowned as I pulled open the window, silently stepping aside to let him in. He ducked his way through, climbing into the small little place I now called home.

"What time is it?" I asked. Voice still raspy with sleep.

He stared at me, as if the idea of time had yet to register to him. Suddenly, he was looking around the room, not quite sure how he had even gotten here in the first place. "Late," he said, licking his chapped lips. He half turned back to the window. "Sorry. I should go."

When he turned to leave, I reached out for him, grabbing onto his arm. He startled as my warm fingers gripped the cold leather of his jacket. There was no resistance as I tugged him back, leading him further into my home to sit on the sofa.

"What happened?" I reached out, slipping the jacket from his shoulders, intending to replace it with something warm. I could feel it then. The sticky sign of blood against his skin. Eyes wide, I pushed his jacket fully away, seeing the torn shreds of his sweater and the dark blood that soaked through the grey threads.

"It's nothing," he said.

Reaching for the hem of his sweater, I slowly pulled it up and over his head, ignoring the look of protest he tossed my way. The skin of his shoulder was mottled and burned. Looking like it had been cauterized after a large gash had been etched into the muscle and bone. "That's not nothing."

Getting up, I went for the first aid kit that I had underneath my sink. It had herbs and tonics, most of the brews ones I had learned while employed to Hazel. I looked for one of the antiseptics, while also getting out some distilled water to clean the wound properly.

When I turned back to the sofa, Malcolm was just sitting there. Staring off in the distance, his mind occupied. I knelt before him, slowly beginning to wipe off the excess blood and the charred bits of flesh. A putrid smell came away from the rag, the remnants of magic shining at the edge of the wound.

"Malcolm," I started softly. He hadn't even flinched. "Are you hurt anywhere else?"

I blinked slowly, still not quite looking at me. "I don't think so."

"Are you sure?"

He shrugged me off, making to go move away, but I placed my hands on his knees and with the gentlest of pressures, kept him down. "Malcolm. What. Happened."

Maybe it was the gravity of my voice. Or maybe the pain was starting to push through him enough to make him notice that something was wrong. He blinked a few times, clearing the haze from his vision, but when he looked at me, I felt something in my chest break.

"Why wasn't I ever enough for her?"

His lips were numb as the words came spilling out.

Lucinda.

He had never been enough for his mother. She had made it quite clear from the time he was born. A child born without magic. One that didn't even look like her. Then, as that child grew, he cast aside the female trappings for his true self. Forsaking the female line and showing no respect for the craft that Lucinda had worked so hard to obtain. Malcolm had never wanted to be like his mother. He wanted to be his own person. And Lucinda had not once even tried to understand that.

Grabbing the salve, I dipped my fingers into the pot before raising them to his flesh and smearing the concoction over the bumpy surface. I could feel the loose flaps of skin rub oddly beneath my fingers. The exposed muscle. The little bits of charred whatever it was that had been used to close the wound.

"I don't know," I answered him slowly.

"I would have done anything for her, you know. When I was little, I would have learned. I would have followed her lead. If I thought for one second that she would have been proud of me."

I shook my head. "I don't think you should follow your mother's wishes just for the hope that she'll be proud. While I don't know much about parents, I do know that they should just be proud of their children for being good people. And you, Malcolm, are good people."

He snorted in bitter laughter. "I wasn't. For a long time. She wasn't proud of me then. She isn't proud of me now. She wasn't proud of me for making my own way in this world. For learning magic despite not being born with it. Everything was a slight. Everything. How I presented. How I spoke. The people I hung out with. Who I loved. My job. My apartment. My taste in music. Even loving Hazel somehow offended her. As if I was supposed to hate my sister because she was only half my blood. Or because she had the magic that I did not."

The wound was closing beneath my fingers, and I took some of the gauze from the nearby box and began to tap up the wound. "What has brought all this on?" I whispered. I had seen him not long ago. He hadn't even uttered Lucinda's name unless it was to spit it out like a curse. So why had now become so different.

"I went to see her."

I glanced down at his shoulder. "Is she the one who did this to you?"

"Yes."

I stood, my fists clenching at my sides. Lucinda had no place in this world. I had thought it for a long time. But now, the desire to rid my realm of her was strengthening tenfold. Because I feared if I did not, then the Albright's were not going to last. The children of this monster were slowly dying, day by day, due to her simply walking the cobbled streets.

"Don't," Malcolm said. "There's no point."

"She hurt you."

"And she'll do it again."

While every ounce of me wanted to run out of the building and find Lucinda, I felt myself going towards Malcolm once more. Because while I would feel justifiably elated to have Lucinda's blood soaking my palms, the person who needed me was right in front of me. The man who never shared his inner thoughts. The one who didn't show weakness. Who was always taking care of everyone else.

Closing my eyes, I sank down next to him. Rage coursed through me, nearly causing my body to shake. But I pulled him towards me, maneuvering him so his head could lay in my lap. One muscled arm came out, wrapping around my waist, pain lashing across him as he moved his wounded shoulder.

"I want to make this better," I told him.

He was silent, fingers curling against my side. "Do you think my other mom loved me?" he asked. "Can you— is there a way you could see her? When she was still alive, at least?"

I hadn't thought of it. Looking into the memories of the past. Getting to see who the woman was that technically had birthed Malcolm. What had happened to her. If she had held him and looked at him with care.

"I don't know if I can," I told him. Disappointment shot across his face as he swallowed thickly. "But, Mal. I will certainly try."

He shook his head. "Don't. It's nothing."

But I knew that it was everything.

[Belladonna](#)

[January 15](#)

The stench of death was potent as I entered the candlelit room. Waxy white flames were stuck to the stone walls, the room looking far more like a location for a dirge, rather than Belladonna's resting place. But she lay in the middle of the room, flat against a stone sarcophagus, looking pale and frail.

My footsteps echoed, sending the shadows scattering. I was light that had once been dark and the beings that thrived in the bleakness of the world were hesitant to come near me. My hands rested by her, touching the cold stone. It all felt so very wrong. This wasn't Belladonna. This wasn't the woman I loved.

"You shouldn't be here," she said.

"I don't even understand what 'here' is."

Her eyes were still closed, lips pale and cracked. "My heart, go home."

I reached out, taking her hand in mine. "You are my home." Her hands were bony as I lifted them up, pressing a kiss to her knuckles. The skin there was thin and translucent and the blue veins that no longer carried her own blood, were stark against the paper thin veil.

She cracked her eyes open then, looking at me with that twist of her lips that I had fallen in love with so long ago. "Simp."

I couldn't help but laugh. It was wet and corroded with the kind of grief that came when watching someone die. But I would not let her go from my side. Not now. Not ever. Eternity was to be ours.

"What is it I can do to help?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. The ritual didn't take the first time. Or the second. Gadora assures me that the new priest knows better on what they are doing."

I looked around the room. I couldn't understand how anyone could possibly heal here. It was too stark. Not personal at all. Devoid of the finery that Belladonna surrounded herself with in order ground herself to her humanity.

Sighing, I rubbed a hand across my face. "I'm getting you out of here."

"You would have to pick me up to do that, and I am going to put my foot down at being held like a yearning young maiden."

"Lucky for me you can't put your foot down. You can barely lift your arm."

"Rude," she muttered, but I noticed that she did not correct me.

"This is no place for healing. You don't even have your books here."

"I will kill anyone that comes down here with my books. This place is far too damp and drafty. The books would not survive."

I leaned in close then, my nose practically pressed against hers. "And neither will you. Please, let me take you home. I will take care of you. If it's a ritual you need, I will find someone to do it or learn it myself."

"You are going to perform a ritual that is thousands of years old."

"I *am* thousands of years old. I most likely predate the ritual."

She sighed. It was in that way that Belladonna often sighs when she has decided she has won an argument, and I have yet to discover how. It was always full of tired pity and indicated the end of her patience.

"Dear heart, I know what I am doing. I will be fine by tomorrow. Back to ruling the district with sensuality and grace and making grown individuals grovel at my feet."

"And what makes this time so different from all the times before?" In her own words, the ritual had yet to work. Everything that she had been trying had failed, which was an omen all in its own, when it came to

someone like Belladonna. “You are sick, Bella. This is not working. And I’m beginning to worry that someone is doing this to you.”

“No one is doing this to me.” It was not the first time that had been brought to her attention but for some reason, she refused to give it even the smallest thought.

“Then why have you not gotten better?”

She turned her head away from me, looking off into the dark. An insane part of me wondered if there was something in the shadows. Something I needed to go take care of. As if Gadora or one of her many other minions were just lurking, spying on the entirety of our conversation.

“I do not wish to fight,” she finally said.

I pushed her hair aside, running my fingers over her temple, the arch of her cheek. “I am not fighting with you. I am worried. I do not like seeing you on a cold slab in the dark.”

Her hand gripped my own. “Then stay with me.” The vulnerability was there. The one I had yet to get used to. It was what worried me far more than anything else. And while I wanted to pick her up and carry her home, there was an agonizing part of me that wondered if it would kill her in the end.

Sighing, I lowered myself down to my knees, a worshiper in supplication. Bending my head, I pressed my cheek against our joined hands. I would stay with her. For however long it took. And when she was better, I would burn the market down to find out what was happening to her.

[Milo - Sneak Peek Book 2](#)

[January 15](#)

“I wondered if I would find you here.”

Milo paused, a mug of ale halfway to his mouth. I had seen the way his fingers reached for his knife. An instinct that he had honed when out in public. But when he registered it to be the sound of my voice, he dropped his hand, twisting around to look at me. “Don’t usually see you out at the bars.”

The bar in question was the Tumble Tavern. A little out of the way place owned by a bunch of hobbes. Their seats were comically large given that their clientele was supposed to be of the shorter nature, and their food was abysmal. But, their ale was some of the best within the market. And they offered a quiet place for contemplation as long as it was not the holiday season.

"I wanted to talk to you," I told him.

He winced. "What'd I do wrong?"

"Not that kind of talk." I hoisted myself up on the tall barstool, my foot tapping against Milo's ankles. Both of our feet dangled at least two inches off the ground. "Your fae side is getting to be a bit for you to handle, isn't it."

He stared out in front of him, looking at his reflection in the wall length mirror behind the bar. A hobbe jumped up, giving me an ale without question, before padding away. That was another thing I liked about this tavern. The wait staff read the room.

"Why do you say that?" he started slowly. Another sip from his ale was made, this time, much more delicately. At least he wasn't trying to hide behind the mask of getting roaring drunk.

"There are a few little things I've noticed," I started. I wanted to treat this delicately. I didn't even know how much Milo realized he was changing. "You forget things sometimes."

"Everyone forgets things."

"The other day you wandered off during our time together and then came back two hours later apologetic because you forgot we were talking." He had spotted something down the alleyway and went to investigate. Which led him to the Spice District where he had bought himself a cup of kafe. And then to a long conversation with a woman named Petri as they caught up on the latest gossip taking place down in the gem mines. When he had returned to me, he was flush and apologetic and I had to start considering how often this had been happening in the recent days.

He really had no leg to stand on there.

"You also have no qualms in who you hurt during a fight."

He looked at me pointedly. "That's always been the case. Fights are fights for a reason." I knew that to be a lie. I had images of him crying after blood was spilled, begging someone to just tell him he was not his father. Then again, maybe in the moment, Milo had never cared how he made bleed. It was only after, when he had calmed, that remorse reared its head.

"You also have a strange little glow around your shoulders at times. When you get passionate about something."

"Okay." he eyed me oddly at that.

"Wings, Milo. They look like wings."

That caused him to falter a bit, though he tried to hide it behind another sip of his beer. "I like to accessorize."



Taking my own mug in hand, I stood, reaching out to grab Milo's own. He followed me without complaint to a darker corner of the tavern near the very back. The seats were far more comfortable here and the lighting offered some privacy I was sure Milo was going to need.

"You cannot tell me you haven't noticed any of this," I started, settling down next to him, the two of us nearly pressed together.

Milo sighed. "I have."

"And?"

"And what? I'm technically fae. I have no idea why all this is coming out now. I've gone most of my life thinkin' I was human until someone had the audacity to prove otherwise. I don't know how to stop any of it or if it's even worth stopping."

"I don't know if you need to cut it off. I just think we need to be aware of it all. Especially if it gets... more intense."

Milo hit his head on the table, groaning. "I don't even know what that means."

Silently, I patted his back, watching as he continued to bounce his head off the table. A few of the hobbes looked towards us but I smiled at them, assuring them that everything was okay. When Milo finally rose again, he had a red mark on his forehead.

"So, this brings me to the next part of our conversation," I told him quietly. "What if we try to find a way to the fae realm. Where you were born. Connect you with your people."

"No."

"Milo—"

"My father was a piece of shit and I don't want anything to do with him, and my mother is dead."

His father was human and his mother was missing. But Milo had already put his blinders up.

"You may have other family. You also may be able to get help in understanding what exactly you are. What it is you need to look out for. I'm not saying we go off tonight and do it but I am saying that we should consider it."

He was frowning. That intense line between his eyes were deepened as he listened to what I had to say. With a sigh, he took the rest of his drink, gulping it all down. The mug slammed on the table, startling a few of the patrons.

"I'll think about it," he told me quietly.

"That's all I ask."

Turning to me, he studied my face. Eyes traveling up and down the bridge of my nose, to my mouth, and back to my own gaze. "You gonna mind if I get more and more fae like?"

"I don't think so." Scooting forward, I wrapped my arms around his shoulders, one hand snaking down to toy with the knobs of his spine. "I kind of like the wings," I told him.

Milo shivered, a lazy grin finally melting across his face. "Oh?"

"Yeah," I grinned, leaning forward to press my mouth to his. Beneath his shirt, I felt something flutter.

"Well then, darlin', wings you should have." I laughed loudly as he tried to pick me up bridal style to carry me from the room. Instead, he ended up tipping over the table, spilling my drink, and garnering the attention of three disapproving hobbes. The night would end with us back at my place, but before that, I would watch him clean up his mess, and try to hide my smile each time a hobbe glared at him with the disappointment of an elderly grandmother.

At through it all, I could see the faint glimmer of Milo's wings.

## [Milo/Mc/Mal Vacation](#)

### [January 17](#)

A/N: This is one of the stories that was commissioned for the month of December. The prompt was a cozy harbor tale with the poly.

A chilled wind swept across the shore, kicking up swirling bits of ice as it peeled from the frozen ground beneath. The sky was overcast, looking a shade brighter with the stark white clouds that were covering the moon and stars. The light reflected off the frozen harbor, casting the world in an icy glow.

It never ceased to amaze me how much I did not know about my world. I was sure somewhere, in the dark recesses of my mind, I was aware of a district like this. But as we had walked out towards the frozen port town, I couldn't for the life of me remember when this district had come to pass.

The ocean had frozen. Some said overnight. Others said that it was a slow process of solidification over the course of several moons. None of it mattered, however. Large boats, carrying goods and passengers, had gotten caught in the mess of it all. Some had made it to the rickety docks and could unload their cargo. Others were stuck out at sea, left contemplating if they wanted to risk carrying large crates across patchy ice. Ocean waves splashed up against their boat in a frozen wall, anchoring the vessel to its spot until a warm wind thawed the ice. Yet, no one seemed upset by this development. In

fact, the docks were decorated with greenery. Large lanterns were hung with flickering warm flames, and several spots had been set up where large hearths had been moved in and wood glowed happily within the stone enclosure.

I looked at Malcolm and Milo. Neither of them were surprised by what they saw and instead wore excitable delight upon their expressions. Milo, more so than Malcolm, that is.

A man walked by us, a fishing pole strung over one shoulder and a line of frozen fish trailing behind him. "What exactly am I seeing here?" I finally asked.

Milo laughed loudly, clearly giddy at being able to show me something new. "The Frozen Harbor, official name pending."

"That tells him nothing," Malcolm added.

We began walking across crunching ice, the soft crackling simply a backdrop to the entire district. "Once a year, a big freeze comes through. It stops all production. This harbor is normally the place where the transport ships come in and out. Carrying all our imported and exported goods. Most likely some contraband. And I'm really hopeful there's a pirate or two."

I frowned. "Where are they transporting goods to? I don't think there's a door out there." And as far as I knew, there wasn't supposed to be a way in or out of the market without the Gatekeepers approval.

Milo frowned. "Uh—"

"The Deep's passages operate without doors," Malcolm supplied. "They do not connect to every realm out there but quite a few. These ships use them to navigate the waters and sail between ports. It's what keeps trade open."

"Then why the hell do we even have doors?" Milo protested.

"Because people frequently die in the Deep passages. It's not exactly a safe mode of transportation."

Milo clicked his mouth shut. "Never mind. We love doors. Doors are good."

"Anyway," Malcolm rolled his eyes, turning to me. "The freeze hits and it stops all transport. Sometimes the freeze lasts for a few days. Other times it last an entire moon. And since most of the people manning these ships also live on them, they have made it into a sort of event every year."

I looked around. Just because they couldn't go anywhere, didn't mean they were sitting idly by. I saw several people placing chairs out on the ice, cracking open a small hole down into the ocean below and casting fishing line. There was another section, off to the right, where children were sledding, ramming into the side of a broken boat and using the space they created as some sort of tunnel they could slide through. Other areas had fish roasting open an open flame, while little tables had been set up offering warm drinks. It was cozy, in a strange, open waters kind of way.

"That one's ours," I heard Milo say.

They both turned me towards a smaller boat, not too far off the original shore line. Strings of lights were wrapped around the deck railing, their glow creating little puddles of light upon the ice. There was a wrap around deck where I was sure the fishers walked back and forth and what looked like a small cabin built in the middle. It was barely any bigger than my kitchen back home but it did provide a beautiful glow that made me warm just looking at it.

Malcolm held out his hand, helping me up the icy plank, while Milo climbed up the side, simply because he could, and started gathering wood for an open fire.

I looked around. From our position on the deck, I had a good view of the festivities. The icy expanse was alive with laughter, a sharp wind, and warm pockets of amber glow. "Ours?" I asked, turning to both my men inquisitively. Milo already had the start of a good flame.

"We thought," Malcolm began, taking my hand and brushing his lips across my knuckles. "That we could get away for a bit."

"Life has been a series of shit storms," Milo added helpfully, "so we thought it would be kind of fun to not do that. The shit storm, that is."

"What he means to say is that we thought it would be nice to have a vacation somewhere." Leading me over to a soft seating area, Malcolm tugged me down with him, placing a large fur over our laps. Milo was currently stomping his feet back and forth as he tended to the fire, trying to stay warm until it blazed true. "Here we can just be us," Malcolm continued. "Not the Gatekeepers. Not the Night Market. But Milo, Malcolm, and Luke. That's it."

I felt something inside me unfurl. I hadn't realized how much I actually wanted that until this very moment. But by the gods did it feel like something that I had been desperately craving.

"We have this boat for three days," Milo said, shouting a bit in triumph as the blaze took hold. Quickly, he rushed to the two of us, worming his way beneath the furs. We all were forced to adjust, leaving me leaning against Malcolm, and Milo stretched out with his head in my lap.

"Button, you are on fire duty. Do not get comfortable."

Milo waved Malcolm off, nuzzling his face into my side instead. "Have you ever gone ice fishing?" he asked.

"Can't say I have." I was laughing a bit, the cold of Milo's nose working its way beneath my shirt to get to my skin. It tickled, causing me to squirm against Malcolm.

"Mal is terrible at it. But it's really fun to watch."

"I am not terrible," Malcolm rumbled. "The fish just don't bite for me."

I leaned against him, smiling a bit. "That's a good excuse." He poked me a bit in the side, but I could see the smile on his face. "So, this is all ours then. Really?"

Milo was finally sitting up, apparently lying strangely against me, not working for him. "Yeah." He paused. "Do you... do you like it? Is it okay?" I could see the way he was nervously glancing at Malcolm. Like he was certain he had done something wrong.

"No. Oh, Milo. I love it." I told him, pulling him close. Malcolm reached across too, putting a reassuring hand on Milo's knee. "I just," I huffed out a laugh. "I've never actually gone away with anyone before."

Milo's eyes went wide. "Oh. Oh, that's— oh."

"Elegant," Malcolm laughed. Turning my face towards his, Malcolm leaned forward, brushing a chilly kiss across my lips. "It's high time you enjoy this world, Lamplight. And all the trappings of it. We can show you so many things, if you would let us."

"Spoil you rotten," Milo agreed.

I couldn't help but feel the heat rise to my cheeks. The way they two of them were looking at me, how they wanted to take care of my every whim, it sent a bolt of warmth through me.

"I'd like that," I told them softly.

"Perfect!" Milo jumped up. "Then Malcolm will have to fish for our dinner while I ravage you on this very bench."

"No," Malcolm told him sternly.

"Aw, come on. Luke's looking cold." He was kneeling in front of me now. I knew he wouldn't do anything out in the open. Or at least I hoped. But the look he had on his face, and the way he kept wagging his brows, sent a nervous little jolt through me. How far would Milo really go? And how far would I let him. "Come on, Mal. By the time you go and attempt to fish, I'll have him all warm and snug and then you can cook for us like the good house husband you are and—"

Malcolm shoved him away with his foot, sending Milo to land on his butt. "You're the house husband this week. Not me."

I looked at Malcolm with a bit of a wince. "We'll die out here if that's the case."

"Hey!"

The fire roared brightly on the deck, the icicles hanging from the ship's roof beginning to melt. There were a few fishers taking up spots near our boat, and a small cook pot being set up below. Beyond that, I could see a few people repairing their fish nets, while others sat and talking jovially around an icy flame.

And with both my men by my side, I felt myself fall into a contentedness that I had not known for a long while.

"If I like it," I mused, "out here I mean, do you think we could stay for longer?"

Milo looked pleased at the idea, simply because he had done something right in my eyes. And next to me, Malcolm curled me close, content to just watch the fire while I lounged in his arms.

"We'll stay as long as you want," he told me.

"Forever," Milo grinned.

I was tempted to take them up on that offer.

[Sick!Pen](#)

[January 17](#)

Starlight was often made of broken song. Little bits of tune that swirled around the night sky, sometimes got lost. When that happened, they wandered for a spell, winding through the alleys of the market to try and find home. But ultimately, they ended up lost to the night before ascending towards the cosmos and finding a new home there. When the stars were happy, everything was bright. There was a glimmer of something more to the world. As if the future was holding out its hand and asking the past to come and play.

But when the stars were mournful, the skies became a monochromatic wash of sorrow.

I woke knowing that something was wrong. The starlight was drooping. Instead of pinpricks of night, they looked like fading bits of tin or streaks of watercolor that had long dried into a blotted smear. But as I reached out, the world felt okay. For now at least, the Night Market was functioning the way it should, stepping through the motions without falter. It was because of this, that I turned towards the sky.

When Pen was sick, the stars had a tendency for dramatics. She hadn't been out to play with them in years, but they remembered their companion from childhood. The delicate way that Pen would tuck them in her pocket as she skipped through the dimensions had bolstered their song. Because of her, they set out on mischievous games that felt as if they may never end. Now that Pen was older, the stars still conjured around her. Asking her for her hand. Tugging at her hair. Sitting at her feet as she held court. It was the closest to a game they could get with Death now.

Closing my eyes, I let myself sink into the void. My body dismantling and reforming with the stagnant bits of the heavens as I set foot in Death's 'palace'. I felt a cold shiver go through me then. This had been the home of Pen's father. Where she had grown up. But it was also the sight of the worst day of her life. For her to return here sent a chill through my bones. I raced through the hall to find her, bypassing the royal chambers and going towards her old room. Vaguely I remembered it from our youth, but I was much more accustomed to the small mausoleum she kept in the graveyard.

Outside her door, the stars were gathered. They sang a dirge that doused the hall in black. I pushed my way through them, my fingers dissipating their silver threads like webs before pushing open the heavy black door.

There was a lump under the four-poster bed. The blanket of swirling galaxy was cast over a small and shivering form.

"Pen?" I approached cautiously. There was no answer aside from another wailing cry from the stars. "Oh, hush," I told them. Closing the door behind me, I stepped further into the room. It was far too cold in here, the vacuum of the galaxy beyond taking any source of light. "Pen," I called out for her again. She only curled tighter under her blanket.

Pausing by her bed, I pulled down some of the comforter. It felt like ice against my fingers. Pen was curled into a small ball, her skin ashen and lips chapped. When she blinked her eyes opened, and she looked at me with a fevered gaze.

I whipped the blanket off of her immediately, getting my arms under her own until I could pull her from the bed. Curling tight to me, she hunkered against my chest. "I think I'm sick," she whispered.

"You are sick." I carried her to the room next door where a sunken tub was kept, the water constantly steaming. The little star sprites scattered as we entered the room, but I was happy to see that at least there was steam bubbling from the tub. Without thinking, I walked the two of us in, feeling Pen recoil at the heat. "Shh," I murmured. "You need to get warm. You were laying under a star field. That wasn't going to do you any good."

"Just grabbed the nearest blanket," she murmured.

"Star fields aren't blankets."

"Are too." Because that was who Pen was. Even sick, she was going to childishly argue.

"Pen," I sighed. "What happened? Why didn't you tell me you were under the weather." I settled the two of us down in the water. It smelled of roses and eucalyptus. I wondered idly if the stars had been drawing a bath for her. They needed to do something useful other than mourn a death for Death.

"Reaped too many," she said. "Boat drowned off the coastline trying to get into the market. Took them all."

I felt my heart clench. For the people who had been seeking salvation. For Pen who tried to accommodate each soul instead of letting their Reaper find them. It also explained why she was here. It was the closest place to where she could usher the souls to their afterlife. She most likely dropped after sending the last one through.

Curling her close to my body, I tucked her head under my chin. "It was too much," I told her.

"I know."

"You can't be doing that."

"Not gonna listen." Her hands came out from the water, curling up and around my shoulders. They were wet and soaked the hair at the nape of my neck. But I knew how ridiculous the two of us looked. Two immortal beings, bathing and cuddling up in the hot springs of night. "I'll be okay," she murmured, her shivers subsiding only slightly. "Just need some time."

"I'll stay with you then." Scooping some of the water in my hands, I let it drip down her shoulders and arms, watching the goosebumps rise across her skin.

"You just want to see me naked."

I snorted a bit in laughter. Despite her fever, she still tried to waggle her brows at me. "I see you still have your humor."

"Death is often the funniest person at the party." A hacking cough was what punctuated the end of that sentence. One so hard it jerked her body to the side and made her groan.

"I'm staying," I told her firmly.

When her shakes subsided, I rose from the water, finding large robes for each of us. When I held out the black silk, she glared, snatching the garment away from me before ducking behind a screen to change. Quickly, I stripped out of my sodden clothes, putting my robe on as well. The second I did, she came padding back to me, plastering herself against my front to try and leach back some of the body heat she had lost.

"Come home with me," I told her. She didn't respond. Not that I gave her much of an option to. Instead, the world was sinking around us until we were back in my apartment, the well-worn couch butting up against our thighs. Wrapping my arms around her, I sunk back into the cushions, stretching myself out and pulling her on top.

"This is bordering on romantic," she said, yawning loud enough that her jaw cracked. She then sneezed into my chest.

"It would be if you hadn't just used me as a tissue."



She patted my chest. "Good tissue," she praised. But as I settled the blanket across her back, I felt her melt into me. Her breathing was labored, and I could feel the fever on her skin. It made me hold her tighter. "Thank you, old friend," she whispered.

I sighed, feeling my heart swell slightly. "Get some sleep, Pen."

And with that, she was drifting away. When the stars came to check on the two of us later that night, they could only peek through my window. There, they saw Death sleeping on top of the world, both wrapped around each other as only lovers could do.

## [Date and Dancing with Milo](#)

### [January 17](#)

A/N: This is part of the baron tier commissions.

"Whatcha doin'?"

My lavender eyes clicked across the room, reflecting in one of the many broken mirrors that were scattered across the floor. A few bronze vases fell down around me, falling like gold coins in a treasure trove of jewels and gathered relics from multiple expanses of time. I hissed as one of my horns got tangled in a low-lying string of flags, tattered from the wind. When I turned to bat it away, I nearly tripped over a bust of a raven, looking at me with a bemused glint to their eyes.

Milo laughed a little, hopping through the open edge of the wall that served as a window. His feet were planted on the floor, the rug shifting beneath him. He raised a brow at me, trying to keep his amusement to a minimum as he watched me struggle with the cord that somehow continued to knot itself around me in some mimicry of binding.

"Need help, darlin'?"

I stopped with a huff. "Think you can reach?" While Milo was not that much shorter than me, I teased him about his height relentlessly. It was because he was so skinny. He always looked far smaller than what he was. And while he could keep up with me while eating, he had the metabolism of a jittery hamster. At least, that's what Malcolm and I suspected.

"I'm more afraid of breaking my ankle as I walk across the room," he told me. Things were littered around the floor before accumulated into piles that reached and somehow curved across the ceiling. It was the best way I could describe everything. *Things*. Some of them had meaning. Others had meaning

for a friend I hoped would come back. But in the end, I was sure that was how Milo saw everything. As just things. To me, they were so much more.

"You'll be fine," I told him. I reached up, trying to wack away the flags. I couldn't figure out how it had gotten so bad. I had of course added to it all over the last few months but there was more here than even I could contribute. Part of me wondered if Caliban had somehow continued to add to it. Or maybe that was wishful thinking.

Milo made his way across the room, hand reaching out to trail softly down my arm. I shivered, standing still as he stood on his tiptoes, unwrapping the cord from my bent head. "This is why we can't leave you alone."

"Ha ha," I told him dryly.

With my hand in Milo's, I walked away from the pile I had been digging in. I was supposed to be meeting Milo down in the Renaissance district. There was a festival happening down there. One of rebirth and renewal for the land. Milo and I thought it would be fun to go and participate. To dance around the fire and beneath the stars. To contribute to the world that we were secretly in charge of. And then I had caught sight of something shiny up above, and it was all over. Mainly because it wasn't one of my 'shinies' so I needed to know who else was here.

"Isn't this that one guy's place?"

I had forgotten that Milo had never met Caliban. It was a call back to a time when Milo had started to pull back. Hiding from me, from the world, from the fears that he had.

"Caliban's," I said. "It was his. Or still is. Someone's been here."

Milo was looking around, taking in the belongings of a stranger. His eyes dragged on something buried, however, and gingerly, he stepped forward, pushing aside a few beaded scarves. An old pair of boots were yanked from the bottom of the pile.

He held them up, dangling by the laces. "Either this guy had the same size shoe as you or you've been here more than once."

I bit my lip, feeling a bit of heat rise to my face. They were the boots Milo had given to me when we first met. A pair he had bought me because I had nothing of my own. I hadn't worn them for a spell, but I hadn't the heart to get rid of them either. Because they were given to me without thought. Milo had shoved them in my arms because he saw a need and wanted to meet it. And to me, that was quintessential Milo.

"I come here from time to time," I confessed. "It brings me comfort."

He looked at me curiously. "Because of the things or the man that had the things?"

“Both.”

He nodded, wrapping his arms around my waist. His head was buried between my shoulder blades as he breathed with me, and I felt myself push back against him, seeking out the feel of his touch. “You’re a hoarder,” he mumbled into my shirt.

It wasn’t a taunt. More of a teasing observation. “Probably.”

“Bet you this stuff is all from you. You’ve just forgotten what you’ve gathered.”

“I forget nothing of what I’ve gathered,” I told him, slightly offended. Then again, this place wasn’t really mine to begin with. And while I normally would have felt uncomfortable with someone rooting around my things, I didn’t this time. As if the very items themselves were trying to sing to me that it was all okay.

“Still want to go dancing?”

“Has the festival started?”

“Mmm,” he hummed. Milo had this way about him in the last year or so. Once he was given permission, he had his hands on me as much as he could. Falling into me in a way that wrapped me up in him and only him. It grounded me, keeping me safe. It was one of the things with being the Night Market. I felt a void in this world, like I was flying apart. When Milo had figured that out, he held me as tight as he could.

“That’s not an answer.” I turned in his arms, looking down at him.

“Darlin’, I always want to go dancing. You just say the word and I will twirl you around the floor like a little princess.”

“I think it’s your turn to be the princess tonight,” I told him. “I wore the tiara last time.”

Milo snorted, pushing me away before twirling back and taking my hand.

We made our way down the rickety elevator together, heading outside the building and down the road towards where the broken cobblestones became whole, and the trees grew tall. The district was lit up for the festival, flags with family crests hanging from beneath the oval lanterns. Tall tents pitched with large oak tables were arranged underneath, with the smell of food wafting enticingly out from under them. I held Milo’s hand as we walked into the heart of the district, minstrels wandering and singing bawdy tunes. Looking at Milo out of the corner of my eye, I could see the way he was itching to dance, his feet tapping along to the different beats that he heard.

Tugging at his arm, I pulled him closer to me, watching as he grinned a little before falling into place. We began dancing in the middle of the street, our feet stomping in a call and response to each other. Milo’s eyes lit up, the minstrels gathering and calling out cheers as we fell into the rhythm they played. A few calls sounded around us as more began to join and soon, the streets were filled with dancers, hands

being exchanged as partners switched. But whenever Milo and I met back up, I felt a small thrill go through me.

I had had many dance partners in my lifetime. I had taken the hands of enemies and lovers and had twirled across the dance floor with sure feet and an almost manic desire to see how far I could push a song. But everything with Milo and dancing had been different. From the first moment that he had held out his hand to this sliver of time we stepped through now. When I danced with Milo, I felt like I was taking my first breath. When we fell in synch with each other, I could feel his heart beat against my own. Dancing with Milo was more than a coordinated show. It was like coming home.

When we were out of breath, the two of us leaned against a tree together, watching as little kids skipped through the streets with long ribbons and older couples gently swayed as the music turned soft. Milo was pressed to me, hip bony against my own.

"You could stay here all night, couldn't you." Every time I saw Milo dance, I saw the best of him. Everything that he could be vs. what he thought he should be.

"I love festivals. They make me want to sleep under the stars and wake up to dance all over again."

I tipped my head towards him. "Want to?"

He rolled, kicking my legs apart to stick his thigh between mine. Hands kneading my hips, he began swaying to the music again, face flushed and hair damp from sweat. "There are so many other things I want to do right now." Leaning forward, his eyes dark, he pressed a kiss to my scar, lips tracing the raised skin. I hissed a little in both pleasure and pain, gripping him tight.

"One of those things better be about enjoying the food that's here at this festival. Because as delicious as you are, the smells that are wafting around here are distracting me."

Milo was about to protest when his own stomach growled. It was a loud roar that caught the attention of a few pixies hiding in the trees. He slumped against me as they were sent into peels of laughter that had them rolling across the twigs. "An entire roasted chicken. Mashed garlic potatoes. Greens. Buttered carrots."

I smacked his arm. "You are not helping the situation."

"I already sent Malcolm ahead to order. Don't worry." Pulling back, he laughed at the look on my face. The relief that was there. Because this man knew that more than anything, I was not going to skip a meal after dancing like that.

"You think of everything."

"No, I just know you and food," he grinned. "And I like to keep you happy. So, let's get you fed so we can either go get sweaty in other situations, or you can take Mal and I upstairs to dig back through your horde."

I stumbled along after him, our hands gripped together tight. "It's treasure. Not a horde."

"Okay, dragonling," he laughed. "You do you. We'll see how you act when Malcolm tries to clean it."

I knew the horror that was written across my face filled Milo with a delight that I should find concerning. The thought of Malcolm anywhere near my things felt horrifying. And suddenly I worried that Milo had a new game to play.

"Don't you dare tell him what's up there," I said in a panic.

"It's not nice to lie," he singsonged.

"Milo Next, you ripped my chest open and slid a key inside. You owe me."

The bark of laughter that escaped him wound around me like music. When he looked over my shoulder there was none of the guilt that had once been there before, nor any of the sorrow that had used to haunt his eyes. Instead, there was just that bit of deviousness that rose up when he was challenged.

"We'll see, darlin'. We'll see."

And honestly, I couldn't wait to see what this game would bring.

[Mal/MC Hurt/Comfort](#)

[January 17](#)

A/N: This is one of the baron tier commissions.

The birth of a Gatekeeper often meant the death of another. It was a bittersweet occasion if one really thought about it. Because one individual had to die for another to live. It didn't negate the potential that was created, nor did it erase the life that came before. For me, however, it was a day that I didn't like to go unnoticed. When I had been a nebulous web of thoughts in the sky, I had often looked down on the anniversary of a Gatekeeper's coming to power. I would try to make the lights shine a bit brighter. Warm the cobblestones a bit more. I never knew if my actions were noticed, but I tried to create peace on that day. I had done it for every Gatekeeper. Never before had I had a Gatekeeper that was no longer such, however. Malcolm was my anomaly.

Knocking on his door, I rocked back and forth on my feet. I didn't know if he even remembered what day it was. It had been what felt like a lifetime ago and he had lost himself to the dead for a time. There was a possibility that this day didn't even matter to him. But I wanted to acknowledge what he had done for

the Night Market. Despite not having the powers of a Baron any longer, he still felt invaluable to this existence.

When the door opened, I grinned at him, rocking back and forth. "Surprise!"

He stared at me, not greeting me with his usual soft smile and gentle tones. It was as if he didn't actually understand why I could be here. He seemed to snap out of right around the time my own smile started to falter, opening the door a little further and gesturing for me to step inside.

"Surprise?" he asked, ushering me in.

"Yeah." the door clicked shut behind me and I turned to him, a package in my hand. "I brought you a present."

"It's not my name day."

"No, but it is the anniversary of something." I was beginning to have that nervous coil in my stomach. Something wasn't quite right. As I looked at Malcolm, there were bags under his eyes and his face had that pinched quality to it that I often times only saw when he was in pain. "Are you— are you okay?"

He tried to soften his face as he stepped forward, placing a kiss on my forehead. "Yeah. Sorry. Just a bit tired. You said it was an anniversary? An us anniversary? Are we doing those?"

I hadn't really thought about that, actually. There was no specific day in which Malcolm and I had declared ourselves to be together. I hadn't really thought of the idea of an anniversary because of this.

"I mean, it's kind of an us anniversary, I guess. But not in the traditional sense."

I handed him the present, watching as he took it to the counter to unwrap the folds of thin paper. There were layers of greens and golds that I had woven together in a swirl, creating a nebula of rich earthen tones. It was what reminded me of Malcolm the most. As he finally peeled the paper away, it revealed a small lantern inside. It glowed faintly. With a delicate touch, he picked it up, holding it in front of him. It was round and had a tassel hanging from the bottom edge that I had woven another, smaller lantern within.

"Do you like it?"

"It's beautiful, Lamplight." The lantern was eye level with him, and I hoped he could feel the warmth radiating from it.

"Okay, now I need to show you the best part."

Stepped forward, I sucked in a deep breath. The lantern pulsed with light and warmth, a soft amber glow emanating from it. Just like it had all those nights where he had lain on the rooftops and talked to me.

An unreadable expression crossed Malcolm's face as he stared at it. The light from the little lantern was playing across each of his lines, seeming to highlight just how exhausted he really was.

"This way," I told him softly, "even when I'm not here, if you need to talk to me, you still can. And I'll hear you."

Without a word, Malcolm walked to the corner of the room, hanging the small lantern by a hook that Hazel had installed for plants nearly two decades ago. The plant had died when Malcolm had and no one had bothered to replace it. But now, the lantern took its spot, hanging perfectly near the window. It caught the enchanted light from the outer garden, reflecting the rays of false setting sun. At night, it would serve as a gentle light to help anchor him to home.

When he was done, he came back to me, wrapping me in his arms. "I became Gatekeeper today," he whispered.

"You did."

"Is that the anniversary we are celebrating?" There was a smile to his voice, but I could still feel it in his body. A weakness. Something strangely off.

With a frown, I pulled back, placing my hand on his forehead. "Are you okay?"

"Just a headache," he muttered. But he leaned into my touch, trying to chase the comfort it offered.

Frowning, I led him to the sofa, getting him to sit down. He was looking worse and worse by the moment. "Only a headache?"

"It's nothing."

"It's something."

Sighing, he pinched the bridge of his nose. "On the anniversary of a Gatekeepers ascension, there are just some – it's not –" Sighing, he slumped back against me, the fight going out of him. "The day is painful. Headaches. Body aches. The works. It's like the power is trying to renew itself, or maybe it's just a reminder of what we are. I don't know. But it's always been a day marked by a lot of pain. The same fever that burned through when the power first took shows back up again."

"What?" I stared at him. I had no idea that had even been a thing. Then again, when I had looked down on my charges, it wasn't like I had ever understood what pain truly was. Not then, at least.

"And this happens to all Gatekeepers?"

He nodded.

"Milo, too?"

Leaning his head against me, Malcolm sighed. "Yeah. His should be coming up soon. Probably be worse since he's an actual Gatekeeper. Mine is some strange residual thing. Guess it never really leaves you."

I wrapped my arms around Malcolm, pulling the blanket from the back of the sofa. Numbly, I situated him so he was resting against me, dimming the lights in the room with a flick of my fingers and blocking out the rays from the enchanted window. So many questions raced through my mind, the dominant one being, why no one had ever told me. But, now was not the time for it. Not with the way the vein above Malcolm's brow was twitching in pain.

"Well, I'm glad I'm here then," I told him softly. "I'll take care of you today."

His eyes were already closed. "I'm sorry this didn't turn out like you wanted it to. Next year, maybe we can plan for it and—"

I cut him off with a small hush. "Malcolm, let me do this, okay? We can talk about it all when you feel better. Right now, just rest."

His body was heavy against mine. It sagged against me, his hand coming up to weakly rest on my shoulder. I felt my heartache for him then and vowed to hold him for as long as he needed.

As Malcolm drifted off to sleep, I looked towards the corner of the room where the lantern hung. Running my fingers through his hair, I made that lantern shine bright, filling the room with soft lighting and comfort. Against me, Malcolm sighed in his sleep. And while I was sure it had not fixed everything, he relaxed further against me.

I kept the light glowing for him all night.

[So Many Stories!](#)

[January 17](#)

I just posted a ton of the commissioned stories on the Baron tier. Remember, if you sign up for the Baron tier, you get a monthly story about your MC and RO of choice. Plus access to everyone else's stories. :)

[Art](#)



[January 17](#)

Hello everyone!

I need some ideas. What would you all like to see for art. We did our full body nudes for all the RO's. Is there something else you want to see? Comment down below and then I will take the options and put them in a poll for everyone to vote on.

[Hazel - Sneak Peek](#)

[January 22](#)

"Billows! I can't find him. I can't--"

I snatched Hazel into my arms, hauling her away from the rubble upon the ground. It was still smoldering and her hands were blistered with the efforts to dig through the wreckage. Tears tracked through the soot on her face, but her eyes held that green black tinge that said her power was at hand. Around us, the wind whipped, stoking the flames even further, but Hazel didn't seem to care. Her one and only companion was lost to her.

"Hazel," I tried, yelling at her over the noise. "Hazel, he's not there. I promise, he is not there." While I didn't know where Billows was, it was doubtful he was within the destroyed shed. I hadn't seen the cat around for some time. It was far more concerning to me that Hazel only now was noticing his absence.

"Let me go!" She was struggling in my arms, kicking her feet up to try and fling her body forward. I created a band around her middle, holding her as tight as I could.

"You are hurting yourself," I tried to reason. "I'm not going to sit by and let you do that. Billows is not in there. I swear on my life that he is not in there."

Hazel began to scream. An inhuman sound erupted from her like an inky shadow that settled over the cottage and the surrounding land. If the animals had moved back in, they would have quickly scattered. As it was, the trees were bending and even the flower looked as if they cowered in the face of her rage.

But enough was enough. I was not going to let Hazel become lost to this. She had been lost for far too long and I could not sit back and continue to let her drown. Turning her in my arms, I held her tightly by the shoulders, shaking her a little to gain her attention.

"Stop," I told her firmly. "You are so concerned about Billows, but you are killing everything that he loves. Everything that you love. I know you are angry. I know you are scared. But we will talk about that. We

cannot keep this up, Hazel. There will be nothing left.”

The tears tracked down her face, but she was looking at me now. Really looking at me.

“I can’t lose him,” she told me.

“And you haven’t. He is not here. And if you stop whatever it is you are doing, I will help you find him, okay? I will turn over every cobblestone within the streets. I will look in every building. I will rearrange the walls. Just stop destroying your home.”

Something clicked in her then. I could feel the power douse out of her like water over a flame as she deflated into my arms. Even her hair went limp around her anguish riddled face while her eyes half shut.

Gathering her in my arms, I slumped to the ground. The blackness that was surrounding us began to dissipate, the trees hesitantly standing back upright. Up above, the night sky was uncovering, the stars peeking out to make sure they were welcome once more. The only thing left of the destruction, was the embers of the burning shed. A shed that was nothing more than a pile of planks now and a few old bags of last year’s harvest.

I pulled Hazel against my chest, holding her close. “It’s going to be okay.” Part of me felt like I was lying. I didn’t know the answer. I could barely control my own life, let alone guarantee hers would be fine. In that same vein, I knew I would protect her above me. That I would do anything to put happiness back in her day. To see her smile. My heart ached each time that vacancy began to take over.

“Where is he?” she gasped against me. I didn’t know if she remembered me at this moment. Or if I was simply the comfort that she could rely on. It didn’t matter. This wasn’t about me.

“Billows is smart,” I told her. “I– I think he ran off a while ago.” She began to squirm again and I held her tight. “Not because of you,” I quickly assured. “You didn’t do anything to drive him away. I think– I think he’s looking for something for you. To help you.” If there was one thing I had learned about that cat, it was that he would kill for Hazel. I was almost positive that he had. When Lucinda came back into her life, the very woman who used to torture him, I don’t think he stayed around for long. I just wish he had come back by now.

“I thought I saw him in the rubble,” she sniffed, staring at the fire with the certainty that she was going to see a tuft of fur sticking out from beneath a burning board. “He hides in there at times. When mother is home.”

I had to approach this with care. Hazel’s mind was still such a fragile state. “When’s the last time you saw him? Before all this, I mean.”

Her eyes remained unblinking as she looked towards the wreckage. Maybe she was trying to find the answer to my question. Or maybe her mind was carefully blanking out once again. When her lips parted, it was with a small expulsion of breath and a confusion that she didn’t quite grasp. “I don’t remember.”

I used it to my advantage. "I don't think he was hiding out in there, Hazel. Even when he did that in the past, you would see him. You would visit him. He would have wandered out for food by now."

"I haven't gone in the shed in months," she whispered.

"And if he was waiting for you, he would have come and found you," I told her gently. "Billows was never one to leave you alone for long. Not unless there was something important he had to go do." There was little doubt in my mind that Billows had been gone for some time. I just needed Hazel to see it now. Or accept it as a possibility.

"He's my best friend," she said simply, her cheek pressed against my heart. "What will I do without him?"

I didn't have an answer to that. Not one that would satisfy her, anyway. So I didn't say a word. Instead, I shifted, maneuvering us into a more comfortable position on the ground. The grass was cold and damp beneath us, soaking through our clothes. But the heat of the fire before us was enough to keep us warm.

Neither of us talked as the shed continued to burn. Hazel was limp against me. The night was proceeding cautiously. And there was no cat to be found. But, after some time, when the flames became orange and the embers began to die, Hazel moved her hand, placing it over my own. It wasn't a start. By no means did it mean anything was okay.

But for a single moment, it felt like the world was whole again.

[Gabriel - Sneak Peek](#)

[January 22](#)

Boxes were stacked to the ceiling, gathering dust and grime from neglect. It hadn't hit me how long it had been since Gabriel had been to the office until that moment. There was always a sense of disorganization from Gabriel. He had too much going on and always refused help from anyone who offered. It left his office in a hoarders state of papers and books. But today it was the sheer amount of grime that had gathered, was shocking. The doors to the Warden's sanctuary had been sealed off at some point, but I doubted he had been in the office much before that. In fact, I didn't know where Gabriel had really been. From the memories I could gather, it seemed far more likely he had been wandering the streets on his rampage than here doing paperwork.

I stood behind him now, watching as he took it all in. He didn't seem as big as before. I remember when his presence took up the entirety of the office. The glare that settled across his face anytime anyone

knocked to ask a question. Gabriel was a taciturn man married to his job. And all of that had fallen apart when the madness began to settle in his veins.

"What have they done?" He stormed into the room, but had to stop before he reached his desk. A stack of papers had fallen over at some point, littering the ground. A few boot prints were outlined against the ink. "This is unacceptable."

"You aren't the Warden any longer," I told him. "They aren't going to run it like you do."

"Debatable," he said.

It wasn't. But Gabriel still was having a hard time coming to the conclusion that he had essentially been kicked out of office. He still wore the uniform. He still demanded respect. But sometimes that respect ended at knife point.

"What is all of this?" I asked. We were here for personal effects. Not for business. "Is any of it important?"

"It's all important."

I refrained from sighing. "Is any of it personally important?"

He looked around, his brow furrowed. I had suspected already that there were no personal effects to gather. Gabriel didn't even have personal effects at his own home. I had to be the one to buy him a bed frame.

Ignoring me, Gabriel crouched down, gathering the papers in hand. "These are years of documents. I have cataloged every arrest. Every new soul that has entered the market. Their rehabilitation after leaving the cells. I have a watch list of those that may be involved in business deals that could harm the populace. I have a list of informants. A list of lying informants. I have a detailed map of where the gangs have gathered and where they move through the years. Every bit of the market has been written and mapped out in this room, and they didn't even take advantage of it. Instead, they stomped all over it. This is entirely unacceptable."

His hands were trembling as he continued to stack the papers. Moving them to his desk. But with each stack he picked up, another layer of documents was revealed. The room was so crammed full of them that I was beginning to wonder if Gabriel did have some organization system in place. While it looked like chaos to everyone else, he did seem to have an idea of where everything was supposed to go. That, and I couldn't remember ever seeing this amount of papers within the office.

Coming to kneel beside him, I placed my hand over his cracked skin. "Gabriel," I said gently. "This isn't worth your time."

He snatched his hand away. "This is the market. Your market. *You*. Of course it is worth my time."

I shook my head. "No. You are not the Warden. What is gathering all of this going to do? They don't even want it. This cell was not locked. They could have come in here at any time. The new Warden is going to be elected, and they are going to have their own system."

"There will be no new Warden," he growled.

Individuals were already casting their name for the role. There would be a new Warden. It didn't matter what Gabriel said. All of this was going to be lost to him. And since none of this made sense to anyone but him, I was almost positive it would be stacked up and burned and this office would be converted back into a cell once more.

"Gabriel." I tried to keep my voice steady. Soft. He always did respond better to gentleness, even if it did take him awhile to come around to it all. "We are here for your personal items. We are not here to get your job back."

His eyes flashed silver. "I am the Warden," he told me. "I do not care what they say out there. This is my job. I took a vow to do this job until the end of my days. So if they truly do not want me in office, they will have to kill me."

Grasping both of his hands, I squeezed hard. "Gabriel, they just might."

He ripped them away, unconcerned about my statement. But Gabriel had never been concerned about his own life. It had never mattered to him as long as the Night Market was safe. And now, as long as I was safe.

"Help me get my office back in order." It was stated as a demand, but I knew it to be more of a plea.

I didn't know what to do. Gabriel would not leave the place like this. Even if I could force him to, he would pace for days. In the end, I knew that this once shrine of his working days, would be nothing more than garbage. Any usefulness it may have contained would be lost. I dreaded that day. But for now, Gabriel was still not dealing. Or maybe this was his way of coming to terms. I had a choice to either walk away from it, and effectively him. Or get on my knees and help.

There was really no choice. I got down and began gathering the papers.

We worked in silence for a long moment, the only sound the soft feather rustle of parchment. When Gabriel's hand came to rest over mine, only then did I look up.

He didn't say thank you. He didn't need to. There was such pure anguish in his eyes. The end was coming. We both knew it. But for now, we would do what we could. Flipping my hand so my palm faced upwards, I squeezed it slightly, giving him the softest smile I could muster.

For now, it would have to be enough.

[We need to talk...](#)

[February 16](#)

No, I am not breaking up with you. :P

So, I am going to be honest with everyone. Who I was when I started book 2 is not who I am anymore. There has been far too much loss in my life in a very short time. Also, death brings out the ugly in people and hoo boy did it bring out the ugly in some people that I know. It's been a lot, and it has affected who I am as an author.

I've been telling myself that I am just going to push through it and do the chapters anyway. That this is my job and money doesn't really wait for you to grieve. And while that is true... also, kind of fuck that?

I do not want to stop writing the Night Market. This is by no means saying that I am done. I pick at it occasionally. But an intense, multi branching story that deals with death, identity crisis, forgiveness, betrayal? A little too much for me while working through some things that have been unearthed through this process. I am writing a novel on the side as well, and it has all taken me in directions that I feel I am not giving you the best of who I am anymore.

I'm proposing a compromise.

I am considering taking a few more months before I dive back in. Really allowing myself some time. Because where book 2 has gone is not actually something I am happy with. Instead, I was considering writing a short Night Market sexy/cozy game. Something a bit less intense. Still with your MC. Still with your RO. I'll put it out on patreon monthly. I'm not sure how it will work with the tiers yet, but I will let you know. But is this something you are interested in? Also, what cozy vibes would you like to see?

I know you all signed up for the angst. I can't deliver that at the moment. But I still want to be a part of this. I still want to create. I still want to talk with all of you.

Let me know your thoughts below. I am willing to brainstorm. Tomorrow I will be beginning some of the writings. Getting something sexy up for the month of Feb.

Thank you all for loving me through this.

Zinnia

[Input](#)

## [February 16](#)

Please read the post below before voting.

I will stick around for sexy/cozy content

Sorry, I will have to leave

102 votes total

[Please Contact Me](#)

## [February 17](#)

Remember, if you want a personal fic this month, please send me a message with a brief description of your character, your RO, and any ideas you may have.

[The Night Market Cozy - Milo](#)

## [February 21](#)

Well, here it is. A cozy little date night with Milo, or a raunchy little spicy piece with the man. Both routes are available. They are not full chapter pieces but instead short stories with about a half a dozen choices within them. We are going to start with Milo, but the other RO's will be added as written.

Hope you enjoy!

Link: <https://the-night-market.itch.io/the-night-market-cozy>

Password: C0z3y

Please note that the "0" is a zero

[The Night Market Cozy Milo/Mal Poly](#)

## February 23

Here we are. Enjoy a date or a spicy moment with Milo and Mal on the poly route. Please remember to ask Malcolm to stay if on the spicy route. Otherwise it defaults to Milo's spicy scene.

Link: <https://the-night-market.itch.io/the-night-market-cozy>.

Password: C0z3y

The "0" in the password is a zero.

## MC/Milo/Mal undercover shenanigans

## February 28

A/N This is a part of the commissioned stories for the month of Feb.

"I'm telling you, he's buying us something."

"And you're going to ruin it if you continue to talk loud enough for him to hear us," I hissed.

Milo and I hid behind a new shipment of fabric. There, between the deep midnight blue silks and the creamy, bright cotton, there was a small gap. It was this that we used in order to spy on Malcolm. He had left early this morning, claiming he had 'errands'. Something that wasn't unusual for the man, except that he had now claimed to have errands three days in a row. So Milo and I followed him, leading us both here in the early hours, when we should have been snuggled down in bed.

"We should have gotten kafe before coming here," Milo bemoaned. "I can barely keep my eyes open."

Silently, I handed him a flask. He took it with a raised expression, unscrewing it and taking a small sniff. Immediately, he sighed in pleasure at the contents, taking a deep drink.

"You angel," he said.

I laughed. "I grabbed it this morning before leaving. Figured you'd eventually start to get twitchy."

"This," he said, taking another long pull of the kafe from the flask. "This is why I love you." Leaning forward, he captured my lips with his own. He tasted like cinnamon and a hint of nutmeg. I was



beginning to wonder why we had even gotten out of bed this morning. “Shit,” Milo muttered as he pulled away. “Mal’s on the move.”

My eyes widened as I clung to the silks, peering through the little window we had created. Sure enough, he was moving down to yet another stall. “This is the third one he has been to this morning. He hasn’t bought anything. Is he just browsing?”

“For three days?”

“We don’t know that he was here yesterday. Maybe he’s been going out to other districts. Getting out of the house.” I gnawed at my lower lip. “You don’t think he’s regretting us being at the apartment so much, do you? I mean, you know how Malcolm is with his quiet time. Maybe he doesn’t have the heart to tell us that we are around too much.”

“Luke,” Milo laughed. “Calm it down. Mal is great at boundaries and if he didn’t want us there, he’d boot my ass out and then gently guide you to your own place. So, unless he is buying a gift to let us down easy, I don’t think we have to worry.”

A pair of marionettes ambled by Malcolm, there smiled bright, the fabric hanging from them in jeweled waves. Malcolm paused, admiring them for a moment, but ultimately, didn’t seem to find what he was looking for.

“He’s getting too far away,” Milo muttered.

I looked around the district. We were in the longer stretch of the fashion district where the runway met the perusers. It allowed the clothes to come to the marketeers, advertising the latest designs in practice.

“There,” I said. “We can hide behind them.”

A group of individuals were sauntering by. They wore long, flowing coats of velvet and large feathered hats. If Milo and I ducked, I thought we might be able to hide behind them.

“If they shift wrong, we’ll be seen,” Milo said. “Neither of us dress like that. No one should dress like that, in fact.”

“It’s our only chance. Come on.” I grabbed Milo by the wrist, running towards the group. We elbowed our way inside, most of the models smiling at us with wide grins as we pretended to admire their clothes. Meanwhile, we kept trying to catch glimpses of Malcolm. Making sure we didn’t lose him too far ahead.

“There,” Milo said, pointing to a nearby stand. “Jewelry. That’s got to be for us.”

“Neither of us wear a ton of jewelry,” I commented.

“Maybe it’s a new kink for him.”

I ducked down just as one of the models tried to fit me with a large peacock colored hat. Milo already had scarves draped around his neck and middle and somehow, I had a skirt on. How, I was unable to even say.

"If we run now, we can hide behind the belt shop. I know the owner. They'll keep us safe." I nodded towards Milo, not questioning him, as we broke free from the group, a puff of feathers in our wake. We wove through the crowd, keeping ourselves ducked fully down, before we came to lean behind the belt shop, the two of us panting. Our shoulders were pressed together, the market roaring in our ears, and despite the circumstances being the lowest stakes we had ever partaken in, we clung to each other's hand.

"We did it," I breathed.

"You gonna look out, or am I?"

"I can do it. Just give it a minute. He was pretty close to this one."

"Belts," Milo said with clarity. "He's probably buying a belt. His broke last week. That really nice one he sometimes wears?"

I shook my head. "I repaired it for him."

"Then what the fuck is he even here for!"

I shushed Milo quickly, reminding him that Malcolm's hearing was far better than either of ours. The man was a bat. "I'm going to look, okay. If he's not too far ahead, we can stay here. If he's moved on, I think I see another stall we can hide behind."

Milo nodded his head once, letting go of my hand. With a deep breath, I took a step to the right, pivoting on my foot to peer out from the other side of the stall. I screamed loudly as I ran straight into Malcolm.

Milo was behind me in an instant, knife drawn and ready to fight. Meanwhile, I was trying to get my heart rate back under control. Malcolm just looked at the two of us, in our newly acquired garbs, covered in feathers. He didn't look amused.

"Mal, hey," Milo said, flipping the knife and putting it away. "Wow, fancy seeing you here. Luke and I were just out for a stroll."

He looked between the two of us. "Behind the stalls?"

"Yeah," I said. "You know us. We like the behind the scene's thing." I stopped, my face falling. "No, that's a lie. Sorry. We were following you."

"Luke!"

"We've been really curious about what you've been doing in the morning, and so we decided to get up and follow you and honestly it's been a bit weird because you haven't bought anything, and now I feel kind of like an ass because we were spying, and I'm really sorry, and I love you."

Malcolm blinked at the two of us, his eyes then slowly dragging up to Milo for confirmation.

Milo sighed. "What he said."

With a shake of his head, Malcolm stepped forward, pulling me into his embrace. He kissed the top of my head, looking down at me with a soft smile. "Why didn't you two just ask what I was doing?"

I glanced over at Milo. Why didn't we ask? Milo seemed just as perplexed by the knowledge.

"I was running deliveries for Hazel," he told us. "She's gotten a lot of orders lately and she cannot keep up. So I offered to do the early morning ones, since you two sleep most of that morning."

"Oh," I said. Milo just shuffled sheepishly by our side.

"Though, don't get me wrong. It's been amusing watching you two try to be secretive."

I blinked up at him. "You knew we were here?"

"Kind of hard to miss you two. Like the skirt, by the way."

I batted at the thing, trying to get it off. Though, I suppose it did feel soft.

"Uh, as penance, you want us to help with the rest of the deliveries?" Milo asked.

"I'm done," Malcolm said, keeping his arm slung around me. "But I wouldn't mind walking for a bit with you two."

As we exited from behind the stalls, Milo gave a wave to the shop owner, getting drawn into a conversation. Malcolm and I stood back as he waved his hands animatedly at the man, no doubt telling another tall tale.

"I'm sorry," I told Malcolm.

He placed a kiss on the crown of my head, holding me close. "It kept the morning interesting. No need to apologize, Lamplight. Just ask next time."

"I will." Though, as I looked at Milo, I wondered if I truly would. Because despite how it ended, it was one of the better mornings we had had in a long while.

[February 28](#)

A/N This is part of the Baron tier shorts

There was a place midway up the Eternal Staircase that jutted off into its own district. An alley that was easily missed unless one knew what they were looking for, was etched into the side of a wall, blending in with the dim light and the rest of the flagstone walls all around. It dipped downwards, plunging into darkness, and most who even ventured within the alleyway had to measure their steps with faith. Confident in the knowledge that they would not fall into eternal darkness.

It was what I was doing now. I had checked and checked again and was suddenly cursing myself for not having agreed to walk here with Malcolm. Instead, I was meeting him. Because I wanted it to be more of a date. Not just the two of us leaving the house together. There were a few things about our relationship we had skipped, given who we were, and now that life had settled, I wanted to set them right.

Blinking, I tried to peer through the dark, hoping that I was going the right way. I kept my hand on the wall, walking until there was nothing before or behind me. In a rare twist, Malcolm and I somehow had more than two nights off together at the same time. We had spent those days resting, barely leaving his house, and recuperating from having far too much to do. But on the morning of the third day, I realized I had never taken Malcolm out on a date. He had taken me on plenty. A picnic in the middle of the Emerald Pond. Dinner and a show down in Vaudeville. And even tea on the rooftop terraces that overlooked the market. But I had never done anything for him.

He had mentioned a spot once. Back when we had first gotten together. A little music hall that was on the Eternal Staircase. After asking around, I found it still functioning. Albeit, a little slower than before. But I had set my plan into place then, requesting it be cleaned up. Renovated. And for the band to play loud tonight. Then, I had told Malcolm to meet me there. Dress in his nicest clothes. The light that entered his eyes was one I had never seen.

And now I might be late because I was somehow stuck within eternal darkness, trying to find my way to a spot I only vaguely knew the location of.

Hours, minutes, maybe even seconds later, the light began to glow on my behalf. Maybe the market sensed me, or maybe I had chosen the right path. Either way, the light was faint at first and I assumed my eyes were playing tricks on me. It was blue. The same color as my skin. I had to wave my arm around just to see if I had somehow put my hand in front of my face without knowing. But this had a certain tinge to it, and as I walked closer and closer, the alley became alive. Bright neon signs lined the walls, while the lanterns above were strung in tiny green and blue musical notes. Each one pulsed with a beat. One that I could hear if I listened close enough. And the people. There were so many people. Individuals of every variety, milling about in their finest, dancing in the streets and disappearing inside open archways down into small clubs below.

I spotted Mal's almost immediately. The Broken Tune. Stepping inside, I was met with an arena. A wide open dance floor in the middle with large leather booths surrounding it. A band was playing high up on the rafters and off to one side sat a wrap around black bar, backlit so each bottle on the wall shone green, amber and violet. Malcolm was easy to spot. He sat in a booth near the back, eyes closed as he listened to the band. It was something big and brassy with a loud beat. A small smile was on his face. I walked over to him, standing and just staring at him for a long moment.

When he opened his eyes, he grinned. "Hey, Lamplight."

"Hey stranger," I whispered, feeling my words catch in my throat. "Can I buy you a drink?"

He laughed a little, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "In a minute. Sit with me. This song is good."

I sat down next to him, the leather creaking as I slid close. Wrapping my arm around him, I felt him lean back into me. It was uncharacteristic of Mal to partake in public displays of affection. Especially when he was on the receiving end. But the music wrapped around him so tightly that he didn't care.

"I can't believe they are still her," he murmured. His foot was tapping in time with the beat.

"The club?"

"Yeah. I thought for sure it would have disappeared while I was gone. Don't know why. I just thought... I don't know."

He had been afraid to look. It was precious to him. A sanctuary. And it would have broken his heart to see it gone forever.

A woman came up to us as we sat and listened, setting down a bottle of something fizzy. Malcolm looked up at her, but she only smiled. "Compliments of the Night Market," she said.

He turned to me, eyeing me as he reached for the bottle. A snort of laughter escaped him. It was placed in a wine bottle, but was a pressed cranberry tea. Malcolm rarely drank, but liked to keep up the social appearances of doing so.

"You?" he asked.

"I called in a favor of to. For example," I took him by the hand, my eyes ticking up towards the band.

A song startled playing. Something soft and sweet. It was a yearning tune, weaving throughout the room in a gentle sway. Next to me, Malcolm tipped his head to the side. It then hit him, all at once.

Back before I was here, back when I had been nothing more than the lights, Malcolm had sat on a rooftop, playing this song to me over and over. Telling me that I could become real if I could just listen to music. That music made up a soul. He had been young and lonely, and had desperately hoped that the

sentience he saw in me was more than just hope on his end. I had never heard the song again. Not until now.

"You remembered," he whispered.

"How could I forget."

I wanted to pull him to the floor to dance. To take him in my arms. But I knew that was not how Malcolm listened to music. No. He listened to it with his entire body. Transcending time. Leaving the present. With his eyes closed, he swayed next to me, lips slightly parted. He was the most beautiful man I think I had ever seen.

The song ended too soon. The band nodded towards us before switching back to their Big Band set. Malcolm turned to me, however, a light shining in his eyes.

"Thank you," he said softly. Reverently.

"You do so much for me. I wanted to give you something in return. Make another good memory here."

"This tops them all.

We didn't dance that night. Instead, we sat with our heads bowed close, listening to the sets play. As the band finished, and the hall began to close for the night, we sat, watching the cleanup. Listening to the employees laugh and the band pack away their instruments. Malcolm nodded to a few of them, their click of surprise at his presence lighting their eyes. I couldn't help but feel warmth as they came over to us, expressing their delight at his return.

But what I remembered most of that night, what I would always take with me, was the fact that Malcolm held my hand. When people came near, when a few sat and chatted with us, he never moved away from me. He pressed himself close. And I could feel his happiness.

It made me feel alive.

[Hazel Date/NSFW Cozy Game](#)

[March 22](#)

Join in a cozy game and either go shopping with our lovely Hazel or meet her on the creek swing for some fun times. :) Only available at the Velvet Guard tier for now.

Link: <https://the-night-market.itch.io/the-night-market-cozy-15>

Password: NM0z3y15

[Cozy Game!](#)

[March 22](#)

Hey everyone!

I know I've been very quiet this month, but the milo/mal poly cozy game has been dropped down to the courtesan tier and the Velvet Guard tier now has a cozy Hazel game. Next month, it will also drop down to the courtesan tier.

Now, the reason it has taken me so long to update patreon. :)

The next chapter is off to the beta readers!!!! It'll still be a few weeks but I am back, baby!!!!

Hope everyone is doing good.

Zinnia

[Book 2 Chapter Seven!!!!](#)

[March 31](#)

It is here!

I am so excited to announce that chapter seven is up and running. Join the MC and the RO's in the Outlands for this long overdue chapter! I cannot express how excited I am to be back at this. Thank you thank you thank you for all the support you have given me.

Now, on to the show... book... game? Whatever. :p

Link: <https://the-night-market.itch.io/the-night-market-book-2>

Password: f\$ck1ngf1nally7

[Dev Note](#)

## [April 2](#)

There was a slight update to chapter seven on Hazel's route. Malcolm no longer randomly shows up when you had Herald or Deucalion escorting you.

## [Post Chapter Seven - Milo](#)

## [April 7](#)

They were out there somewhere. Out in the middle of nowhere, while he was wandering the streets, with his attention cast over his shoulder because he was certain someone was going to stab him in the back. There was no part of Milo that didn't regret his absence from the Outlands. Things were shaky at best. His relationship wasn't even a relationship so much as a tedious little bridge that he was balancing on in an effort not to scream. But he should have gone. He was the fucking Gatekeeper. The one who was supposed to protect the Night Market or be the Night Market's right-hand man or something. Yet, here he was, wandering aimlessly, not sure what he was supposed to do next.

"Fuck."

Turning, he leaned against the nearest wall. The lanterns were still unlit, hanging in tatters above him. He wasn't sure if he hoped they would magically turn on and light up the atrocities that had been enacted in the dark, or if they would stay dim forever.

"Can you hear me?" he asked, scowling upwards. "Is that a thing?" He had never really taken stock into talking to the lanterns. He wasn't even sure it worked. "Look, I— I should be out there. I wanted to put my foot down more, but doing that seemed like a dick move considering our history. But now I kind of wish I had been a dick. Is that okay?"

There was no answer. Because of course there was no answer.

Head hanging between his shoulder, Milo itched for a cigarette. The light would possibly attract the shadows though, and they hadn't been too accommodating to Milo's existence lately.

"No," he answered to himself. "I know it's not okay. You don't have to say it." He kicked at the ground, digging the toe of his boot into a crack on the floor. "Maybe I should just start talking out loud to you. It will probably scare you away, but you'd get it. Or maybe you could explain to me why I can't seem to get any of this right."



“Who are you talking to?”

Milo’s eyes flicked upwards, eyes glowing in the dark. A pixie hovered in front of him and at first, he thought it was one of the messenger pixies. She was dressed differently, though. Little maple leaves dotted her arms, while moss wrapped around her hips and chest.

“Can I help you? He had his hands in his pockets, a finger running over the small blade there.

“You’re fae,” the pixie said.

“So are you.”

“There aren’t many fae here. You smell like apples. Do you know the way home?”

“No.”

“But I can smell it. Home. I would like to go home.” She flitted forward, fluttering inches from his face.

“Send me home, Gatekeeper.”

Milo felt his stomach curl. So it was out. Creatures that he hardly knew were aware of who he was. That didn’t bode well for his life. Raising his hand, he brushed her away. “Yeah. Time to go.” He pushed off the wall to continue walking, but he could hear the buzzing of the wings as she flew after him.

“You have a way to go home,” the pixie said, her voice edging on anger. “I have been here since you closed the doors. Send me home.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Milo stumbled as something jolted through him. A bite of magic zinged across his shoulder and he felt the wetness beneath his collar. It was only a small cut, but still a cut. Turning, he watched as the pixie changed. Her wings turning translucent, skin becoming veiny and hair wild around her face.

“If you do not send me home, Gatekeeper, I will make you.”

“With what? A toothpick? Get the fuck out of here before I throw you across the market.”

The pixie screamed, flinging itself towards him with elongated claws. Milo stumbled backwards, ready to swat the thing out of the fucking sky. But the pixie disappeared. One moment, she was there, and the next, the pixie was swallowed. As if a part of the sky opened up and just took her away.

Milo stood there in silence, staring at the place where the pixie had been. “What the fuck?” There wasn’t even a trace of magic. It was as if she had never existed.

“Milo!”

Turning, he came face to face with Malcolm, running down the alley. “Mal?”

"We got to go. We found a lantern. Lamplight and I need you to come out and take a look at it."

Milo looked behind him, half expecting to see the pixie peeking out from behind a brick wall. "Did you see that?" he murmured.

"See what?"

"There was a pixie."

Mal only blinked at him, looking as if he was ready to slap Milo out of a daze. "Milo. Lantern. Now."

"Right," he frowned. "Yeah. Sure." The world started to catch up. A lantern. The outlands. The person he loved and had betrayed. He needed to figure out what was going on. He needed to get to Night. That's all that mattered. Fuck the pixies. "Everything okay?" he asked, turning back to Mal and trying to shove what happened away.

"No." Mal told him, turning back the way he came.

There was no further explanation needed. The pixie was forgotten as he followed Mal off into the dark. But the cut remained.

[Belladonna's birthday](#)

[April 7](#)

A/N This is for the Baron Tier shorts

**The forgotten birthday. That was what Belladonna would have preferred to call it. A birthday that never was. A day and night rolled into one that was cast aside like any other day. While the vampire loved celebration, she never did like it much when it was focused on her. I was never quite sure if it was the pageantry of it all, or if she simply found the entire thing tedious in a different way. But every time I had asked her when her birthday was, she gave a different answer. At first, it was no answer. Changing the subject all too quickly before moving on to something else. Then, it was random days. One year, she had said it was yesterday and to just try again next year, only to confess nearly nine full moons later that she had been lying. It was nearly impossible to get her birthday down.**

So I went over her head and went to Reese.

It took the man a while. He was not one to like to help me at all but he had a way about him. And the way in which he adored Belladonna was unrivaled. So when I explained to him what I wanted to do, he made it his mission to find her birthday. And not only did he find me her birthday, but it was her actual birthday. Her human birthday.

That evening, as I walked with Belladonna through the converted cathedral, I watched as she doused candles and put away a few wayward books. She was speaking about some individual who had come to her that day, petitioning the right to steal the third floor of a building unit because he had been the vampires blood bag for longer than their contract said. We climbed the stairs, up to her office quarters, as she described in great detail how the man had somehow gotten roped into signing a blood contract for his own blood and was willing to break the contract with ever more blood. None of it really made any sense.

"I am so sick and tired of these frivolities," she told me, coming to her office landing. "I dearly miss the days when vampires just ripped the throats out of anything warm. Now we are political and..."

She trailed off.

Inside her office, I had lit every candle I could find. The light in the room was flickering and beautiful, the closest I could get her to sun. There, in the middle of the room, a large table had been set, a decanter of blood in the middle, along with the deep, purple roses she had always admired.

"Happy birthday," I told her.

She turned, looking at me over her shoulder, clearly a bit confused. I could see her counting something in her head and when it dawned on her what today really was, she glared. "How did you find out?"

"I will never trade my secrets."

She rolled her eyes. "Reese. I knew he was fishing for something. I just didn't think the two of you would team up." With the snap of her heels, she walked further into the room, practically throwing herself into the velvet wing back chair. The hem of her skirt slid deliciously up her thigh and when I finally pulled my gaze towards her eyes, she was looking at me expectantly. "Well?" she asked. "I haven't celebrated a birthday in a time but I do believe it requires presents."

I walked towards her then, and while keeping eye contact, I fished a few boxes out from under the table. All of them were wrapped in black silk. "I would get you books but I think you may have all of them."

"You can never have too many books."

"Good, because these are books."

A thin smile came over her as she found it slightly amusing. And, just like I knew she would, she couldn't keep her hands off the beautifully wrapped tomes. Reaching out, she snatched one, unwrapping it, her fingers eager as they ripped off the paper. She froze, her red nails hovering above the title.

## The Life and Perambulation of a Mouse

"Do you know it?" I asked. "It's from the 18th century. The man at the book store said that is around the correct time period for where you would have hailed from."

Belladonna's smile grew slightly watery. "I read it," she said. "When I was about eight. I haven't thought of this book in years." Looking up at me, she tipped her head to the side, the light of the candles catching her just right to make her skin look flush. She nearly looked human. "I hate my name day," she said quietly. "But, this... this might actually be worth it."

Scooting closer to her, I poured her a glass of blood, reaching out to take off her shoes for her and begin massaging her feet. She leaned back in her chair, flipping through the book, her fingers dancing lovingly over the pages.

"It's not a good book," she laughed. "Not by today's standards at least. But I loved it. You follow a mouse around to different houses as it ease drops in on various conversations. The mouse's name was Nimble. I named the church mice at my fathers parish after him."

I dug my thumb into the arch of her feet, watching as her toes flexed. "So you enjoyed this book."

"Very much so. I have a thing for mice, actually."

"Oh?"

"I think they're adorable. Little, defenseless creatures. But they are quick. Savvy. And cause so much chaos. They might be one of my favorite 'normal' creatures."

"Normal."

"Normal from my world, that is." Setting the book aside, she looked at me. "You did good, dear heart. I have shoved name days off for years because it seemed pretentious. A way for others to do something that made me beholden to them. No one has ever tried to celebrate my human day of birth, however. I'm impressed. And slightly vexed."

I liked it when Bella was slightly vexed. It worked well in my favor when she was. "Whatever shall I do?" I teased.

"Keep rubbing my feet for one." She grabbed at her wine, taking a sip and leaning her head back. "Also, I now expect this of you every year. Along with other books from my childhood. Think you can live up to the challenge."

Running my hand up her thigh, I made sure to rub the knots out that I felt. Then, leaning down, I placed a kiss on her bent knee, looking at her through the thick of my lashes. "For you? Definitely."

[April 7](#)

A/N This is for the Baron tier shorts

**A crack of light raced across the sky, splitting it in two as it followed a jagged line down to a wavering door. Milo had his hand flat against it, pushing at it with sweat on his brow, teeth grinding together in effort. Wind blew from the other side where a darkness was swarming, trying to spill forward like a tidal wave of despair and all Milo had to work against it, all he could do, was push. His muscles strained against the weight of it and to anyone else, it would burn. But the key he held in his hand was sucking up the pain. The fire. Taking the energy that would have knocked a normal person to their back and converting it into force that he could use. Head bent, eyes squeezed shut, he slammed his other hand against the door and gave one final push. It slammed shut with a burst of light before the crack of lightening faded from above, and the door was closed. Forever.**

Malcolm and I ran forward then. Mal caught Milo before he collapsed, getting an arm under him when his knees buckled. "I got you," he was murmuring to the man. I arrived next, skidding to a stop in front of him. Sweat coated his face and the key he had used was nothing but molten brass on the ground. I could smell burning flesh and while I knew his key hand was safe, I remembered the stark pain that had hit him when he put his other hand up. I felt it in my gut.

Taking his non key hand in mine, I held it up to my face. It was red and angry, the skin threatening to bubble. "Oh, Milo," I whispered. This one was going to leave a mark. But that was his body. A map of the doors that he had closed. Looking at Mal, I sighed. "Let's get him back to my place."

Mal dug into Milo's pocket, grabbing out a familiar key. He threw it on the ground and a door to my apartment appeared. Without another word, we walked through it.

We got Milo to the couch, lowering the man. He was always a bit woozy after closing a door, but he usually recovered quick enough. Blinking, he looked around the room, most likely not remembering how he had even got here.

"I'm assuming it worked," he said. "We're not in Nox's weird interdimensional thing where we walk around their body, right?"

I raised a brow towards him. "Is that what you think the in-between space is? My body?"

He nodded sagely. "I like to think it's your circulatory system. And anytime someone dies, they're the blood cells marching through."

I laughed a little, leaning forward to push the hair from his eyes. “You’re weird,” I told him, leaning down to kiss him softly on the lips. He grinned against me, proud of the statement. It turned into a hiss as Malcolm took his injured hand and began to tend to the wound.

“Why do you always got to do this stuff while I’m distracted with Nox’s lips?” he glared at Malcolm.

“Because,” Mal murmured. “It’s when you’re the most amenable. Now hold still.”

Milo sat, legs spread and hand in Malcolm’s lap. Malcolm was right in front of him, intently looking at the wound, while I sat on the arm of the couch, gently running my fingers through the small curls of hair at the base of his neck.

“That was a tricky door,” I commented as Malcolm began wrapping the hand.

Milo’s lips were twisted in a bit of pain but overall, Mal was gentle with what he was doing. “A lot trickier than I thought. The key didn’t work on its own. That’s why I had to use my other hand to close it.”

“I’m surprised your hand isn’t shredded,” Malcolm said with a frown. “I did the same thing once, and I had to have my hand in this repair goo for a month.”

“Tried something new today,” Milo said, shifting a little and leaning his head against my side. I wrapped an arm around him, rubbing soothing circles on his neck. “I tattooed a few keys on my wrist using metal from melted down keys.”

Malcolm stopped. “You did what?”

“It’s fine,” he assured. “I think. Anyway. I melted down some of the older keys that I know have no problematic doors and stuff, inked it all on my wrist and tada, some of the magic came through and I saved my hand. I mean, it hurts like a son of a bitch, but I still was able to do something. It gave me the push that I needed.”

I blinked, looking down. There was no tattoo on his wrist. Not anymore. But I vaguely remembered seeing it earlier. I hadn’t commented because the door had burst open only seconds later. “That was good thinking ahead,” I told him. I was going to do a mental check of whether or not that was going to have some horrendous consequences later on in life if he continued with this method, but I had to give it to him. He knew he needed a back-up plan in case things went south. And it had worked. It wasn’t like any of our bodies functioned like a typical one anyway.

Milo looked up at me, grinning, the dimples of his cheeks pronounced. “Why, thank you, darlin’. Always nice to know when my crazy schemes are appreciated.”

Malcolm tied off the rest of his hand and sat back. He kept one hand on Milo’s knee. “I’m not thrilled that you didn’t talk to me about it before.”

“That’s because you’re a control freak.”

I grimaced but when I caught Malcolm's eyes, I nodded. He kind of was.

"But," he said, "I will admit that you saw a problem and tackled it. I wouldn't have thought of it and I don't think many have before."

Milo looked at me. "Was that a compliment? Did Mal compliment me?"

"It's because he loves you," I told him. "And because he thinks you're great."

"Gods, Mal. I never knew. You think I'm awesome, don't you. You look up to me as a Gatekeeper. I get it. I'm pretty special."

Mal rolled his eyes. "And I'm done."

As he rose, Milo yanked him down so he landed sprawled on Milo's lap. I inadvertently ended up falling as well, on top of Malcolm. Milo took advantage of this and held us both to him. We all shifted around until we were comfortable, lying on the couch together.

"You honestly think I did good?" Milo asked after a moment.

I nodded. "I do. I want to make sure it's safe, but I think there is a reason why you are the longest living Gatekeeper, Milo."

Malcolm made a noise of agreement. "We'll go through the keys together. See which ones are necessary. It's a big job, and you shouldn't have to tackle it on your own."

I liked that idea. The three of us tackling Gatekeeping together. It calmed the storm in Milo's head and allowed him to think better. Milo was an incredibly intelligent individual that often just wasn't given the opportunity to thrive.

"Kay," he said. "I like that. But I also don't want to do anything for at least two days. Other than lay on top of the two of you and maybe have you both take me to bed since I deserve to be worshiped."

I laughed loudly at that, wrapping my arms tight around Milo while Malcolm ignored him. But I could see the twitch of a smile on his lips.

"What'ever you say, oh Gatekeeper of mine. We are at your service."

"Dangerous phrasing," Malcolm said.

"Perfect phrasing." Milo grinned. And the three of us, snuggled down, intent not to move for the rest of the day.

[April 7](#)

A/N This is for the Baron tier shorts

**Gabriel had gone to work before the alarm had gone off. It wasn't unusual of the man, but it was still concerning given that he had sworn he would be staying home during his non work hours. Last night, he had fallen asleep far earlier than what was normal for him and while I had a feeling of unease, I still had let it go. I had learned it much easier to watch him as opposed to asking him how he was feeling or even what he was thinking. Gabriel said more through small movements than he ever did words.**

So, when I awoke to him not by my side, yet again, I had gotten up and dressed and headed towards the Guard Station. Crossing the bridge that had now been repaired more times than I could count, walking into the front office and just giving a small wave at the receptionist. I wasn't awake enough to make small talk. Not that anyone in the room would have stopped me. They all knew who I was, and they all knew my relationship to their boss.

Gabriel's door was half open when I arrived. I could see him, hunched over his desk, a pen in hand. Though, the ink from the tip was dripping and forming a large stain on the parchment in front of him. When the snore reached my ears, I realized that he was asleep.

Pushing open the door, it gave a loud squeak, but still, he did not stir. I tiptoed my way over to the desk, looking to see what he was working on. Several versions of whatever he had been writing were scattered about, most of them with words and phrases scratched out. Frowning, I picked up the piece of paper with the ink blot in the middle.

Lyra,

I am writing to you in an effort to explain how I feel. I know that I do not always speak my mind in a way that is suitable for how you think, and I wish to make this abundantly clear. These past few years have been good, acceptable, exceeded expectations...

I laughed a little at the list of words as he tried to describe our lives. The man was wonderfully intelligent, but language had never been his strong suit.

Perhaps I have not always shown it. But I would like to now. So, I, Gabriel No Middle Name Caine, would like to formally ask for your han—



I dropped the letter, stumbling backwards with my hand over my heart. And of course knocked right into the filing cabinet. The very one that had been overfilled at the top and barely had anything in the bottom drawers to weigh it down. It was a task that Gabriel had been meaning to get to after having to clear it out last week due to some water damage. He apparently hadn't gotten to it in his cut hours, and so the filing cabinet went toppling to the side when I banged my hip into it.

Gabriel jumped up, grabbing his sword and pointing it towards me.

"No! Me! It's me!" I shouted, hands in the air.

He blinked at me, trying to clear the blurred visions from in front of him, as he dropped the sword. "Lyra? What are you doing here?"

"You weren't in bed," I explained, feeling my own heart try to calm. "I came to see you here."

"How did you know I was here?"

I looked at him with tired disbelief. "You're always here."

He seemed to concede at that because there wasn't much of an argument to be had there. Placing his sword safely back against the wall, he came over to me, pulling me into a hug. "I know I said I would stay in bed, but there was some work I had to get done this morning."

Work.

I could see said work lying on the ground. Was Gabriel going to ask me to marry him? We hadn't even discussed it, but I couldn't figure out why else he would need to write something out like that. Or what he would mean by formally asking for my hand. Also...

"What is your middle name?" I asked him.

He frowned. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I don't know it."

"I have no middle name."

I nearly kicked myself. Of course, he had no middle name and would feel the need to write that out during some sort of practice proposal.

"Why are you red?" he asked. "Are you sick? Your cheeks are getting heated."

"No," I squeaked. "No. Not at all. Don't worry about me. I should probably head back to the house. Get ready for the day. I mean, I just shoved some clothes on when I woke up. Haven't even had breakfast."

"If you will wait a few minutes, I will come have breakfast with you."

"No. No, you were working on something. You should continue to work on it."

"It's not that important."

I frowned at that. It should have been one of the most important things in his life. In our joint lives. "It is important," I told him, almost indignantly.

Gabriel shook his head slowly, holding me by the shoulders. "Not particularly."

"Then why come to the office?"

At that, he did look a bit sheepish. I almost winced at the sound of my voice. I wasn't doing a very good job in hiding what I knew. "It was a surprise," he told me gently. "I was going to wait until tonight at dinner, but I suppose I should do it now."

"You don't have to," I told him quickly.

"No. I want to." Getting down on one knee in front of me, he looked upwards with his grey eyes, taking his hands in mine. "Lyra," he said softly, and my heart was stuck in my throat. "I wrote all this down, but none of it seemed right. So I am just going to ask. I would like to have your hand in union. I would like for the two of us to go on vacation together."

I blinked.

"Huh?"

"Vacation," he repeated. "I found a wonderful little place that mimics the tropics, like you had been speaking of in that book you read. I was going to take a week off and I thought you and I could go there together. Away from the responsibilities of the night market."

"Why are you down on one knee?"

He glanced down at his knee and then back up at me. "Because that's how you ask people things."

"No, it's not."

Pulling my hand from his, I took both of my hands and placed them on either side of his cheeks. I squeezed them together until his lips puffed out, and his face wrinkled together as he stared at me in utter confusion.

"I thought you were going to ask me to marry you," I told him.

"I would not ask you in my office." Except it came out more garbled and mushed as I squeezed his cheeks just a bit tighter. "I'm sorry?"

“No. No. It’s fine. I was freaking out. But Gabriel, you do not ask for someone’s hand in union as a way to go on vacation. Or write out millions of proposals on parchment.”

“You don’t?”

“No!”

He was silent for a long moment. “Can you let go of my face?”

I hadn’t even realized I still had his cheeks squished between my palms. Dropping my hands, I backed off, biting my lip. “Sorry. I— wow, that was new for you and I. The cheek squish thing. And the misunderstood proposal thing. And—”

“Lyra.” Gabriel rose to his feet, walking towards me. “Do you want me to propose to you?”

I couldn’t quite meet his eyes. “I mean, I am not saying no.”

He nodded sagely. “Then I will. Just not here. Not now. And not when you have been snooping around my papers.”

I laughed a little at that. “Fair.”

Leaning forward, he pressed his lips to mine. “I love you. I would love nothing more than to call you mine officially. When the time is right.”

I felt relief flood through me, giddy almost with the feeling of laughter. I was sure once the adrenaline was gone, it would make for a good story. One we would share for years to come. But for now, I just needed to breathe.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I told him. “Can I just do one thing?” He nodded. Because Gabriel would give me anything. Taking his face between my palms, I stared up at him lovingly.

And squished his cheeks again. I couldn’t help the snort of laughter at his surprised expression, and at that moment I knew I would eventually marry that man. If only because he let me make him look like a puffed up fish for my own amusement.

[NM After Dark - Favorite Body Part](#)

[April 9](#)

**Milo - Milo was drunk. He was always a bit more handsy when inebriated, loose in his inhibitions and letting himself unwind with each drink. By the end of the night, he was giggly and touchy, and I was the one he often set his eyes on. So it was no surprise when he fell through my window, kicked off one shoe, and came to bed.**

"Hi," he giggled, slipping under the covers. He was cold from trying to walk off the alcohol and my skin was bare beneath the sheets. His hands wandered towards my hips, pulling me towards him, thumbs pressing into the crease of my thighs.

"What time is it?" I murmured, running my fingers through his hair.

"Time for me to be in your bed," he snorted. His nose pressed against me, tongue coming out to taste my skin, so very close to my center. "Couldn't stop thinking of this."

"Of what?" I asked, trying not to arch my hips into him.

"This spot right here," he said, pushing his fingers into the dig of my leg a bit further. "Do you know, nothing turns me on more than touching you right here. Fingers on your hips, thumbs in the crease, pullin' ya against me. Gets me every time, darlin'."

"You're drunk," I laughed.

"Uh huh. And drunk me was not satisfied with the taste of whisky. Wanted this instead." I felt my arousal building as he nosed around the area, placing small kisses and flicking his tongue out to taste me.

"Milo," I gasped as he shimmied around, chin bumping against me just right.

"Shh," he said from beneath the sheets. "Milo's not home." A gasp was stolen from my lips. Who was I to interrupt him.

Hazel - The smack came with a resounding crack, and my body shivered at the stinging pain that went through me. Looking over my shoulder, I was greeted with a full view of Hazel. Breasts heaving, thigh slick with her own release. Her pupils were dilated as she stared down at me, hand raised to smack me again.

"Was that too hard?" she panted, voice edging on concern.

I shook my head. "No. It's fine. It's—"

She spanked me again. She soothed it by rubbing the blushing spot with her palm, grabbing and squeezing my ass before smacking it again. "Look at you," she breathed. "You're getting so red. Does it hurt?"

"No." It would tomorrow. I would barely be able to sit. And I was pretty sure that was the point.

She draped herself over my back, grinding her pussy against me. "Your skin is so warm," she breathed. I moaned loudly as she slid her soaked cunt across my skin, my skin stinging as she ground herself against my ass. "Have you been bad?" she giggled. "Need me to spank you again?"

Before I could answer, she spanked me again, burying her face in my neck with a wet moan. I felt her release against me, her body shaking hard. And I knew I would let her spank me every night if that was the reaction I got.

Gabriel - Pressed against the wall, I sucked in a deep breath, feeling Gabriel's broad body against my back, his fingers ghosting down my sides. His breath was ragged, heart pounding, his cock a hard line against my lower back.

"I want you," he whispered.

I leaned my head back against his shoulder, my eyes fluttering close as he dragged his lips down my shoulder. "What's gotten into you?"

"I just want you," he said. I knew what it was, though. The shirt I was wearing was oversized, the collar worn out. I let it fall slightly down one shoulder, exposing my bare skin. I could feel Gabriel's eyes on me the second it happened and tugged the shirt up, hiding my smile.

A few moments passed, the two of us working in silence. When it happened again, he was on me in a second. Like a moth to the flame.

"That's what got you, huh?" I whispered. "Just the shoulder?"

I could feel his belt coming undone as he fumbled between us, shoving his pants down past his hips until his bare cock was rubbing against me. He groaned wantonly. "Leave the shirt on," he whispered. "Right where it is."

I laughed, letting the collar slide further down, and letting him have his way with me.

Belladonna - The candles were lit, but the light in the room was nothing more than a flickering, dim shadow. Belladonna had me shoved against the back of the couch, her legs straddling either side of me. She had her hands braced on my chest, nails digging half moon marks into my skin, as her lips grazed the side of my neck.

"You don't smell of me anymore," she pouted.

My heart skipped, the pulse of my blood thrumming through my veins as I felt her fangs pass lightly over my skin.

"What have you been doing, my heart?"

I swallowed, my body shuddering as she closed her lips around my neck, sucking. There would be a bruise there in the morning. Just over the scar that she had marked me with so long ago.

"I went out dancing," I told her. "You weren't there."

"Oh," she cooed. "Accusations, is it?" Dropping her hips down upon mine, she ground herself against me, her tongue laving at the crook of my neck. I couldn't think. I couldn't speak. I only knew the smell of her. The threat of her teeth. And the desire to have her sink into me over and over again until I didn't know my name any longer.

One hand coming up to cup the side of my neck, she pressed me closer. "Want me to bite you?" she whispered.

"Yes?" My hands rested on her ass, kneading the flesh there and feeling the way her skirt rose up.

"You know this neck is mine, right?" she whispered, one hand sneaking down between my legs. "That no one gets to touch this than me?"

I didn't know if she was speaking of what she was fondling or my neck. The answer was the same no matter what. "No one has."

"Good." She sunk her fangs into me then, her free hand coming around to clutch my neck. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. And I was fine with dying in her arms.

Malcolm - Light bounced off our joined hands as Malcolm wrapped his fingers within mine and pressed them above my hand and into the pillow. He was panting over me, grinding the lower halves of our bodies together. Wet and slick, the air around us thick with the sounds of our pleasure. My legs wrapped around his waist and a gush of slick coated us both. His fingers flexed within mine and with my other hand, I brought it to his lips. He sucked two of my fingers into his mouth, tongue laving at the combined taste of our juices. I gasped, arching against him.

"You're supposed to be drawing," I told him.

"Learning the shape of your fingers," he told me. Malcolm could fill entire books with the shape of my hands. But he never got enough of them.

"I need use of them if we're going to continue," I commented.

He shook his head, pinning both of my hands above my head. "I need them to stay there," he told me, dipping his hips downwards. "I need to study the way they move and flex," he whispered. "What makes your fingers curl into a fist. What makes them go rigid. I can't draw you mid-orgasm if I don't know what your fingers are doing."

"My fingers want to be doing other things," I told him.

He grinned at me. "Later," he whispered. "Just let me enjoy."

## [Post Chapter Seven - Gabriel](#)

[April 9](#)

**Every inch of his body ached. Stumbling down the street, Gabriel felt his wounds pull, his grace filling in the cracks of his skin with a murky silver. It was no longer bright. The very essence of what made him who he was, was fading. Soon it would be nothing.**

"But you will be reborn."

He nodded to himself, clutching at his abdomen. The voice was correct. It had assured him from the beginning that this would not be it. There was life beyond his grace. Something far more pure than what he had before. It was Gabriel's second chance.

"When will it happen?" he asked. His head was murky, stuffed full of cotton. There were times he knew he was slipping. Where the conversations he had were nothing more than a muddled dream that he could only partially recall. The voice had probably answered him before. He was simply thankful that they were so patient with him. He needed to show the same patience himself.

"In time."

"I am afraid I do not have time," he coughed. He took a few more steps forward, stumbling into the dark. His lungs felt wet and there was some sort of pull in his side that felt as if his body was tearing in two. But, he had to get to them. He could feel their presence far away. The Outlands. They had said the Outlands, right? "Please, the one I love. The Night Market. I am afraid for them. I must be at my strongest."

"In time," the voice said again.

"Please," Gabriel breathed. "I am trying to be patient. I just would like a direction or a time frame. With each day that goes by, I feel as if the future is getting darker. I cannot save the Night Market if I cannot think clearly."

A hand touched his face. Gentle fingers brushing across his brow. Tracing across the bridge of his nose. The line of his jaw.

"Do you trust the Knowing?" The voice was neither male nor female. Soft or harsh. It was just there, filling every inch of Gabriel with a warmth he had not felt since before he fell from grace. How he longed

for that. Each morning that he woke in the cold, putting his uniform on and marching to his job with no hope of bettering the world, he longed for home. "Answer me, Gabriel, son of stars. Do you trust the Knowing?"

"Of course I do," he whispered. It was the sound of a broken man.

"Then trust that, in time, all will be made clear."

Gabriel nearly fell to the ground as the hands pulled away. He never saw anything despite feeling their touch. Even when he put his hands out in front of him, he felt no shapes or jut of bone. The voice was in his head, and the touch felt as if it were from another lifetime.

"Now, there is going to be an opportunity and I need you to take it. Go to your Night. Soon, you will be able to hold them. But you must do what you are told out there. Give them some of your grace."

Gabriel nodded. "Will it help?" he asked.

"To finally rid you of grace? Or are you asking if it will help them?"

"First and foremost, I want to help them."

"First and foremost, you should be helping the Knowing," the voice chided. "Don't make that mistake again."

"I'm sorry." He bowed his head appropriately, berating himself for losing his temper in such a way. Trust in the Knowing above all else. Understand that he would be privy to knowledge when it was time. And never, never, place another above the Knowing. "I spoke out of turn."

"You have forgotten," the voice said. "You have been gone far too long. Now, if you will listen, I can tell you what your next task is to be."

"Of course."

"Go to the Outlands. Go to your Night. There is a lantern there that will need to be relit. It is part of the process of fixing what has been wronged here. Your grace could help, Gabriel. Try to convince your love that this is the best way. There are others, but it will not be as strong. We must bring light back to this world. The Knowing wishes to protect those who are lost here. We want to help."

Gabriel nodded. "What do I tell the Night Market when they ask questions of you?" The Night Market. Never their name. Always their title. It was better that way.

"You tell them to trust you," the voice said. "But most of all, trust the Knowing."

"They will wish to speak with you, soon."



“In due time. We can make that happen in due time. For right now, I just need you to be by their side. I know you are in pain, and I know that you have others that wish to keep you back. But I am the one who knows what you are capable of, Gabriel. I can take away your pain.”

And just like that, he was left with nothing more than a minor ache. The degrading of his body stopped, and he stood up a little straighter, able to finally breathe.

“Now, go.” The voice was fading away. Disappearing until he was deemed worthy to hear them once more. Gabriel would make use of this time. Help bring light back into this world. Help bring the Knowing to the forefront.

And save the one he loved.

### [April Announcement](#)

#### [April 15](#)

Just letting everyone know that personal stories and the rest of the Patreon stories will all be addressed very soon. My mom is in town visiting and we are redoing our bathroom so it's been a bit busy over here. I am back to work this weekend however and will get things rolling on Patreon again. :)

Love you all!

### [Post Chapter Seven - Hazel](#)

#### [April 18](#)

The flowers wilted in her hands, bright petals of light falling to the ground with a sizzle. Yet, she picked them. Over and over she gathered the delicate blooms, forming a fist full of flowers that she could take to her mother. As if she were a little girl running home after playing in the field. She hummed to herself, sniffing what she had collected, feeling the serenity of nature play against her skin.

“Hazel!”

She was wet. Soaked to the bone as salt water filled her nose and the stench of fish surrounded her. She coughed loudly, gasping for air as strong arms surrounded her, pulling her from the dark. She struggled against the hold, her skirts weighing her down. She wanted to go back to the flowers. Mother would be upset if she didn't receive the flowers.

"Hazel? Haze, come on. Breathe!"

With a gasp, she opened her eyes. A deep chocolate gaze stared down at her. The familiar shape of a jaw. A nose that she shared with him. Rolling to her side, she coughed out seawater, her fingers curling in the cobblestones and her nails bending back. Malcolm patted her back, trying to rid her of the rest of the water. Her chest stung, and her nose felt raw. Where had the flowers gone?

Pushing her hair from her face, she sat up, looking around. She was at the fish market. Down near the quiet was located, where the water lapped gently against a broken dock and the discarded chum rotted. There were a few workers hovering nervously by, staring at the two siblings, but no one seemed to be moving to help.

"What the hell happened?" Malcolm said. "What were you doing?" There was raw panic in his words and she couldn't understand why.

"I was picking flowers," she said softly, squinting through her salt crusted lashes.

"In the ocean?"

With a frown, she looked at him. "No. Of course not. I was in a field. Picking daffodils." The pollen had stained her fingers.

"Hazel, look around you. Does this look like a field?"

No. Of course it didn't. But that didn't negate what she had seen. What she had been doing. "I wanted to make a bouquet," she tried to explain. "There's a beautiful vase on the windowsill. It's the one you made. I wanted to fill it."

"What vase are you talking about?" Malcolm was hovering close, always within arms reach. "I haven't even been home for years. And I certainly haven't been there while Lucinda has been there."

Hazel sighed. "Stop calling her Lucinda. She's our mother, Mal. You need to be respectful."

"To someone who has tried to kill me? No, thank you. And you might need to start examining what's she done because she's got her clutches in you far further than she has before."

"You know those are misunderstandings." Getting to her feet, she brushed her skirts off. As if she could rid herself of the water. It was then she had to face the fact that she was nowhere near a field. That the daffodils didn't exist. And whatever she had been holding in her hands was far more reminiscent of something slippery and half rotted.

"Hazel," Malcolm's voice called to her from somewhere far away. "Haze." When his hand landed on her arms, she snapped back, staring him in the eye. "You were in the water," he said, trying to keep his voice under control. "You could have died."

"I was fine, Malcolm."

"Okay," he started. "Okay. But, to me? It didn't look like that. I came out here to see my sister thrashing in the waves and no one helping her. I'm scared."

She blinked. Of course, she didn't want Malcolm to be scared. How many times when they were little did they admit that to each other. Times when they were hiding under their bed. When the world got dark. They had always found solace in each other. The two of them against the world during the early days. If one of them admitted that they were scared, the other was supposed to listen without fail.

Stepping forward, she wrapped her arms around him, her clothes soaking through to his own. He held her tight. Almost crushing. Hazel had to come to terms with the fact that he might actually be terrified right now.

"I'm sorry I scared you," she whispered.

"You aren't the one that needs to be apologizing. I don't think you did this. Or, you didn't on purpose. I—"

"I don't want to hear your theories on mother," she pleaded. She wanted to be here with him. Lessen his fear. Not rehash an argument that never went anywhere.

Malcolm let her go. "I was going to say that I don't want to let you out of my sight," he told her. "I've been a terrible brother, and I'm not sure why. But when you are in my sight, I know who I am."

Her mouth twisted as the memory assaulted her. He had been absent lately. Abandoning her. Yet again. "Why are you even here, Malcolm?"

"That is a long story."

"I would listen."

But he didn't say anything. Both of them knew it was because he thought Lucinda was listening in. Shaking her head, Hazel gathered her skirts, wringing them out. Water sloshed at her feet, a few long strands of kelp sticking to her stockings.

"I need to get back to the shop. I'm sure I wasn't supposed to be away this long."

But before she could walk away, he snatched her hand. "Hazel, please," he practically begged. "I have to do something right now. But come back with me. Then we will go together to the shop, okay?"

The offer was tempting. Their mother had been trying to get him to come home. But he was always surrounded. By Milo. By the Night Market. It was hard to get him away long enough for Lucinda to have

a conversation with him.

"I'll make a deal with you. I'll go wherever it is you need to go, but you need to go see mom. Have a conversation with her."

Indecision crossed his eyes. He had been avoiding Lucinda. Especially alone. But there was an opportunity she saw within his gaze. One that she didn't quite understand.

"You'll go anywhere I ask you to if I go home?"

Hazel nodded.

Reaching out, he took her hand. "Alright then. I've got to show you a door."

A chill ran through Hazel. A door. That didn't sound quite right. But who was she to question when Malcolm was finally returning home after all these years.

## [Post Chapter Seven - Malcolm](#)

[April 18](#)

### **The lantern was dark.**

When Malcolm woke, he didn't quite know where he was. The edges of sleep were ragged against his mind, trying to drag him back down. He was comfortable. There was a down comforter across him and a warm body next to him. He reached out, placing an arm on a bare side, frowning a bit in his sleep. There normally wasn't someone in his bed. He couldn't remember the last time there had ever been.

With some effort, he blinked himself awake, looking at the sleeping form across from him. Lamplight was lying on their side, lips slightly parted in sleep. It all came back to him then. The kiss. The slide of their bodies together. The way the lantern had grown hot and then quickly cold again. Malcolm smiled a little, his thumb drawing small circles across their skin.

There had been a time that he had thought this would no longer be an option in his life. He assumed his days were to be spent alone. Love was not to be reciprocated. Malcolm was the unlucky son of a bitch in life that only had the opportunity once, and it had slipped away.

It wasn't that he thought he didn't deserve love. Love for Malcolm just felt ragged. Uneven. Like a stone that was meant to be polished but hadn't yet tumbled. That, and Malcolm was too angry to give himself over to anyone. The last time he had, it had crashed and burned, and the hurt had yet to go away.

But Lamplight was different.

He had been in love with them since before he even knew them.

That was the funny thing, really. And maybe that was why he had the views on love that he did. There had always been something missing. When he spoke to the lights above, it was the closest he had ever been to being seen. Maybe love was just something he was supposed to wait for. Until his Lamplight came down and showed him what it was supposed to be.

“Mal?”

Lamplight shifted, their eyes fluttering open.

“Did I wake you?”

“You’re staring at me. I could feel it before I opened my eyes.”

He laughed a little. “I just woke up. I haven’t been doing it for long. Don’t worry.”

“Everything okay?”

He didn’t know how to answer that. It was. Of course it was. But it was so much different than before. Like he was finally back from the dead. There was purpose. ;And with purpose, life became far more terrifying. Because purpose meant that there was plenty to lose. Malcolm was always the person that someone lost before. But now, the situation was reversed, and it clutched at his heart.

“Everything’s fine,” he told them. “My brain is overactive.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Lamplight, I think you will come to find that the list of personal and emotional things I want to talk about is almost always zero. I just do it because I like playing the role of a mature adult.”

“I would like to say a mature adult is overrated, but I also don’t want you to keep things to yourself.”

He reached out, hand tangling in their hair. “I won’t keep things from you,” he said tenderly. “Believe me. I’ve worked hard on not being emotionally constipated.”

“So what’s wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong. I’m just thinking. About love. About us. I— did you feel something tonight? Other than the obvious.”

“I’m kind of consumed by the obvious.”

"I'm okay with that. Means I did good." Rolling closer, he sighed, pulling them onto his chest. "I've never been that keen on sex," he said. "It's not that I don't like it, it's just that there has been a lot tied up in it."

"Why?"

"Trans," he said with a shrug. "Unfortunately, my sexual awakening was right around the time of my transition."

"Did we do something wrong tonight?"

"No," he assured. "No. Not at all. I just, I felt good tonight. It felt right. And it hasn't always felt like that. And there's some emotion mixed up there. I'm sad I've never felt that before and, at the same time, glad that it was with you alone. I of course have the romantic notion that I was just waiting for you this entire time."

When Lamplight reached out, pushing the curled locks from his face, he leaned into the touch. "I like your romantic notions."

"Do you?"

"Yes. You need to keep them. Makes me feel special." The two of them curled together, their legs intertwining. "Do you want to talk about what happened?"

"Not tonight."

"But will you?"

"Yeah. It's probably necessary. I doubt this is going to be a one and done thing."

"It better not. Come here." Malcolm rolled onto them, resting against their chest. His hands came up to play, wandering around the skin. "Say it again," Lamplight requested.

Malcolm grinned. "I love you."

"I love you, too."

[Spicy Pics](#)

[4 days ago](#)

So, I've been toying with something but I don't know how it would work with a customizable MC so I want to know how everyone would feel about it. I was considering commissioning full sex scene pics

with the RO's and just choosing a different version of the MC for each pic? We could even vote on if they are male or female. Position. What not. But, I didn't know how people would feel about that since it is technically not their MC. Thoughts? If you vote no, could you leave a reason why in the comments?

Yes, please do it

No, not interested

153 votes total