**Part 1: Finding Wonder**

Chapter 1

Kane looked around the backyard for a familiar faces, or if not familiar then a pleasant face, preferably female, and even better laughing. The once crowded backyard had thinned with the approach of midnight, and the dimmed lights lent a softness to the night. Looking around it, Kane marvelled that more than twenty people had been crammed in to this small space earlier. The thinning had energised those remaining outside, even a lascivious game in one corner. Despite the very pleasant evening that felt more summer than autumn, the blue-eyed girl Kane had been flirting with bowed out of conversation, not giving Kane her number. To some, perhaps, time wasted, but Kane had enjoyed himself in the conversation.

Finding nobody outside, Kane meandered inside. He stepped over a couple sitting on the floor of the narrow corridor and in to the loungeroom where the music was quieter. Kane found the friends he’d come with sitting in there. Kane’s roommate, Doug had his standard earnest expression of concentration on, listening to sweet Tracey, with her long black hair, too white teeth, and fluttering laughter, talking animatedly to a girl on the other lounge. Tracey nodded at Kane as he entered, but kept speaking to... Gabrielle, Kane recalled the name.

Kane looked at the man next to Gabrielle, brown hair cut neat, and collared shirt tucked in, just a touch too formal for the evening. He wasn't speaking, just staring at the floor. "Hey, mind scooting over?" Kane said, smiling at the stranger. The stranger started from whatever thoughts had been absorbing him. "Yeah. Yeah of course," he said sliding awkwardly as far over as the couch allowed. Kane dropped in to the seat, giving the nervous man another smile. The too-neat man, looked uncomfortable with his new company. Tracey laughed. "Oh Kane, frightening off the other men again?"

"Why? Worried nobody's going to pay enough attention to you?" Kane slouched further back, getting comfy. "Don't worry, I'm sure you'll do fine even with my charming self around. And you're not scared, are you?" Kane said to the quiet man.

The panic in the man's eyes denied the quick shake of his head. "Man, you really are jumpy. You need another drink or two. Or maybe you've just been listening to Tracey for too long and are starting to realise the full terrors of women." Kane tried his grin again. The other man glanced quickly back and forth between Kane and Tracey, uncertain what to say.

"Well, you going to answer?" Tracey asked.

Kane took pity on the other man. "Don't worry, you don't have to say it, I'll understand if you don't want to offend her. I only do because I am charmingly foolish."

At last the other man seemed to find his voice. "No, it's n-ot you," he said to Tracey, his voice staggered slightly as he spoke, but he managed to push a smile on to his face. "Sorry. I was sort of just sitting here." Kane nodded. Sometimes the best thing was to sit still, relax, and let the world flow around. You heard the most interesting things that way.

Tracey rolled her eyes. "I suppose we should introduce ourselves. I'm Tracey, and this is Doug, who lives with Kane here. And this is Gabrielle, who I believe you already know, somehow." Doug waved at the stranger, and Kane offered him a hand. The man took it a little too swiftly, gripping the fingers instead of the hand, grimacing as he realised his error. "I'm Ward. Nice to meet you. All."

Kane ignored the stammer, and the mirth he knew Tracey would be feeling. Instead, he looked for some way to help ease Ward in to conversation proper. "Ward. That a nickname from somewhere?" Ward coloured slightly. "No, just my name. Ward Hobson."

"Well it's certainly a memorable name,” Tracey said, leaning forwards in her chair. “You must have really interesting parents."

"Yes." Ward said, stopped, then started again, "I mean they just found it and sort of liked it. I think they didn't think much about it.” The sentence ended, but there was a sense of hesitation in Ward, as if to continue. Tracey waited to see if there was anymore, then concluding there wasn't continued her conversation with Gabrielle. Kane didn't bother listening, instead examining Ward a little further. Ward smiled nervously at him, eyes flickering away, remaining silent, hunching in on himself. Kane thought he understood Ward, and felt an immense pity for him. There was a hesitation to everything Ward did, and a nervousness to him, that required familiarity to overcome, and in needing new familiarity thwarted its own defeat.

Unable to help Ward without fear of making him even more nervous, Kane was content to quietly drink his beer and let the other three talk animatedly. Unsurprisingly, Tracey was having the best of the conversation. The woman was so comfortable telling other people they were wrong that they tended to believe her. The utter confidence of her tone made it hard to question her, despite Gabrielle's best efforts.

"I mean I know you said that the accounting course is easier than the maths, but god it's boring. I don't know how you stayed awake through it."

Tracey smiled, "Oh it's not that bad. I'm sure you'll make it through with at least a credit. I mean, it's principles you've mostly done before, right?"

Gabrielle nodded uncertainly, "I just wasn't expecting it to be so... dull."

Kane snorted. "You took an accounting course, one recommended by Tracey no less, and you didn't think it would be dull?"

Gabrielle smiled at Kane’s comfortable smirk. Tracey rolled her eyes. "I wouldn't listen to his advice. He's not someone I'd want to imitate."

Kane looked at Tracey, in her nice new sleek blue dress, completely unperturbed by her commentary on him. “Say what you will about my life Tracey, I've been enjoying it,” Kane said, taking another swig from his bottle.

"So is then why you keep following me to parties?"

"Because raising your hackles is just too much fun. And I'm bound to meet people more interesting than you to talk to. I mean, it's not hard when the bar is set that low."

Kane could feel Ward's confusion next to him. Tracey had just a slight smile. "You'll pay for that one."

"Well at least you're not still obsessing over uni courses. I thought graduating meant you could stop caring about that?"

"And how would you know anything about graduating?"

"Many of my best friends have graduated,” Kane said, feigning hurt. "And I could have if I wanted to, but I just had better things to do with my time." Kane finished his beer and stood up. "Anyone want another drink?" He looked around the room to see that everyone had a full glass except Ward, who was holding an empty cup. "Ward, what were you drinking?" That same fear showed in Ward's eyes, but he answered ‘red wine,’ and Kane took Ward’s plastic cup with him to the kitchen. There he found exactly what he had been looking for earlier, a couple of pretty faces.

One of them Kane had seen before, a tall woman with rich brown skin in a bright blue dress. The other was new though. The woman’s black hair fell to her shoulders, touching the top of a white blouse. Kane’s eyes quickly took in her jeans, with sensible black shoes, and the small black bag sitting near her feet. Seeing Kane, she gave a slightly embarrassed smile which he met, enjoying how she cast her brown eyes downwards. The two women becoming silent.

“Hey,” Kane said, opening the fridge, and pulling out another beer. “What are the two of you doing in the kitchen?”

“We were having a private conversation,” the taller woman answered.

Kane nodded, and leaned against the bench in the small kitchen. “Yeah, the party is pretty crazy. This is the wrong place for a quiet conversation though. Everyone comes to the kitchen for another drink. You’ll be constantly interrupted.”

“So where would you go?” the taller asked.

Kane opened his beer and took a sip. “Well, within the party, you can probably have some privacy in one of the other rooms. The loungeroom, for example, you just sit in the corner and you’ve got far more space so nobody overhears, and people don’t keep wandering in and striking up a conversation.”

The taller woman shrugged. “The loungeroom seemed pretty full.”

“Then you just step out the front door. There’s a park just around the corner, tiny little one house worth of grass with a swing and a bench. Great place to go for a quiet moment with just a bit of privacy. Of course, there are other reasons to go there for privacy.”

The shorter woman blushed deeply, Kane’s expression showing his meaning. “Surely nobody would do anything in a park?”

“Depends what you mean by anything, but somebody probably would. Not a good idea though. Walked up on someone in a park once and the embarrassment almost killed them.”

The woman’s eyes went wide. “No!” Kane put on his serious face. “True. The two could not have been more embarrassed. I had to avert my eyes. They were lucky the sudden stop didn’t break anything.”

The taller woman snorted. “No way that happened.”

“It did. Not even to a friend of a friend. I’ll swear it on the beer I’m drinking. May it go sour if I’m lying. So, I always like to know, who do I have the pleasure of talking to?”

The tall girl spoke first, “I’m Rhani, it’s nice to meet you…?”

“Kane,” Kane answered, holding out a hand and shaking hers. The other woman answered too, “My name’s Veronica.”

“Veronica, nice name,” Kane said, bowing to kiss her hand. He stood up and saw Rhani’s eyes. “Ah. Private conversation, right. I forgot I was interrupting for a second there. Hope it goes well. It sounds like drama and that’s always dangerous to just step in to.”

Kane made it the two steps to the door before spinning around. “Two things actually, first, you wouldn’t know where a bottle of red wine is around here? Almost forgot to get my friend’s drink. And second, Veronica, in case you’re otherwise occupied for the rest of the evening, could I possibly grab your number now?”

Veronica glanced at her friend before looking at Kane. She reached down, pulling a bottle off the floor. “Here’s the wine, and I’ll say hi before I leave, okay?”

Kane nodded. It was not a no, so that was good enough. “Though it might be bye in that case, but I look forward to it nonetheless. Good luck to both of you on whatever isn’t my business. Hope it works out well.”

Kane left the kitchen still holding the bottle of wine, and arrived back in high spirits to find, against all expectations, that Ward was speaking.

"It's not just that Wicca is a modern religion, but its claims to more ancient attachments are very, very flimsy. The whole notion of witches before the twentieth century is made almost entirely by people who didn't consider themselves witches. Even if religions have to start somewhere, it shouldn't be claimed that this is some ancient tradition that's been around forever."

"Jeeze, I just thought it was interesting. What's up with you? Witch curse your mum or something," Tracey said.

Ward shook his head, "No. Wiccans don't do that. They're all about balance and nature and concepts like karma. When they do use rituals, it's not for cursing people. Or it's not meant to be. Only, Karma’s not wiccan either, since they believe in threefold return.”

The change in Ward was amazing. Animated features, sitting straight, right on the edge of the couch, the man glared Tracey down. He was certain and clear, and Kane saw that Tracey was almost overwhelmed. Kane knew better than that though. Tracey’s eyes flickered to Kane, and then, she laughed. “Honestly, you got so worked up over nothing. It’s just silly beliefs about magic, why worry about how ancient they really are except to discredit them? I mean, everyone knows magic isn’t real.”

Kane watched the flicker of uncertainty on Ward’s face. “Who says magic isn’t real?” Ward asked.

“Well for one thing there’s science, clearly disproving it.”

Ward wavered a second longer then silently folded in on himself, lowering his eyes and hunching his shoulders. “Forget I said anything,” Ward mumbled.

“Don’t worry about it,” Kane said, “Tracey tends to batter people in to submission. Makes some parts of her life rather hard.” Kane handed the bottle of wine to Ward. “So, Tracey, know anything about a girl called Veronica?” Kane asked, letting one arm rest on Gabrielle’s shoulders.

Tracey brought a finger to her lip, thinking. “You know, I don’t believe I do. At least none at this party. Someone caught your eye?”

Kane shrugged, “I was just curious. Her and her friend, Rhani, were having some kind of drama in the kitchen, and I was wondering if you knew anything about it. Sounds your area.”

Tracey’s face lit up. “There’s drama happening and I wasn’t invited? What did these two girls look like?”

“One of them was Indian I think, but tall. Like over six feet. Bit acerbic, but probably just stressed. The other was maybe Chinese? Kind of a shy one., but definitely a pretty face.”

“I’m going to have to go and investigate.” Tracey said, standing up, adjusting her dress, and walking towards the kitchen, adding “Be back in a second,” as she passed out of sight, completely speaking over some half formed comment of Ward’s.

In the pause that followed Ward sighed, and stared at the wine bottle in his hands. “Did you leave my glass in the kitchen?” Ward asked barely above a whisper. Kane slapped his forehead. “Of course! Sorry for that. Slipped my mind.”

Ward nodded, accepting it without any comment, and carefully placing the bottle of wine on the floor. “Is Tracey always that…?”

Kane took Tracey’s old seat. “Arrogant? Dismissive? Nah, she’s alright really. I mean, she puts up with me, so she can’t be too bad. What do you do anyway?”

Ward shrugged. “Uni for now. Hopefully get a job and stuff soon.”

“Living at home for now then? Man, I couldn’t manage that. My parents drove me crazy enough before I finished school.”

Gabrielle nodded agreement, but Ward shook his head. “No, I’m living in my grandad’s old house. He left it to me since it’s close to uni. He assumed I’d go to Sydney.”

Kane nodded, “Well that’s a stroke of luck then! Amazingly fortuitous really.”

Ward stiffened. “I’d hardly say there’s anything convenient about my grandad’s death. He was…” Ward trailed off, glaring at Kane’s feet.

“Hey now, I didn’t mean anything by it. Just, y’know, the house must be convenient, right?

Ward hesitated before nodding once. Kane shrugged, and asked Gabrielle how she was going, and she had almost got a word out when Tracey re-entered the room, this time trailed by both Veronica and Rhani. Tracey did a round of introduction so that everyone was clear on names, before ousting Kane from her old seat, making him sit on the floor. Kane abandoned it with good grace, settling himself on the slightly uncomfy carpet, legs crossed.

Kane glanced at Rhani, then looked at Veronica. Rhani had sat next to Tracey, and her cheeks had coloured since Kane last saw her. Veronica sat between Gabrielle and Ward, elbows resting on her knees. Her eyes tracked the conversation, however once she was sure the room was conversing, she held a plastic cup out to Kane and asked, “Missing this?”

Kane laughed. “Not me. It’s for Ward. Thanks though. Very thoughtful.” Kane scooted back till his back was against the wall and watched Veronica’s mouth twitch up as she handed the glass over. Her hands free, Veronica twined and untwined her fingers.

Then Kane rested back and watched. Tracey had already befriended Rhani, and the two of them sat talking quietly, thick as thieves. Veronica always spoke softly, and almost every time before she spoke she threw a glance either at Rhani or at Kane. After several minutes comparing timetables and contact hours, Veronica began to relax in to talking, leaving her glances aside, leaning in a little closer to be heard more easily.

Kane spared the occasional glance at Ward, who sat next to Veronica, listening intently, but never participating as he sipped his wine. Ward’s eyes would dart around everyone in turn before coming back to whoever spoke. Every time his eyes met Kane’s he glanced away and would stare intently at whoever was speaking for a minute or two.

Tracey managed to catch Kane’s eye. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you dumbfounded before Kane. Care to share your thoughts?”

Veronica cut in. “Why pick on Kane? Ward’s been just as quiet.”

Ward choked on his wine. Kane glanced at the half empty bottle sitting next to Ward.

Kane spoke up to help Ward out. “Unlike you Trace, we’re fine not hearing our own voices, just enjoying the mise en scene, you know?”

Tracey cocked her head. “I’m sure that’s what you’ve been enjoying all this time. Why are you sitting on the floor anyway? Wouldn’t you rather sit up next to Veronica?”

Kane shrugged. “I’m a gentleman. Wouldn’t want to bump Ward or Gabrielle out of their seats, like you ousted me. Though does that just make you a lady? I never perfected my etiquette.”

A slight frown creased Tracey’s face. “Whatever. It’s really none of my business.”

Veronica looked at her phone then up at Kane. “Sorry to interrupt, but I actually need to be going. Rhani, you wanted a lift, right?” Rhani nodded, and stood up, stretching. Kane stood up too. “Sure you’ve gotta be off? If I knew you were heading soon I wouldn’t have wasted the chance to talk to you.”

Veronica looked happily embarrassed at the comment, but said, “Yeah. Work tomorrow, and I hate being exhausted for it.”

“Well I’ve got work and I’m staying a bit longer. Surely you can stay another half an hour.”

Veronica shook her head. “I can give you a lift if you…” Kane studied Veronica’s nervous expression and shook his head. “Nah, might stay a bit longer. The night is young and what’s a little tiredness at work?”

“Oh. Well then.”

“See you again though?” Kane asked, looking down at his phone, not looking at Veronica.

“Yeah, sure. Want my number?” Kane looked back up at her, smiled, and nodded. They recited their numbers for the other person, before a slightly awkward hug, goodbye, and Rhani and Veronica left, saying brief goodbyes to the others.

Tracey peered around the doorway, checking they had gone while Kane settled in to Veronica’s vacated seat. Tracey turned back to Kane, watching him smile to himself, phone held idly in one hand.

“You seem to have done well for yourself then.”

Kane shrugged, stretching his legs out in front of him. “She seems nice, doesn’t she?”

“A bit wet, uncertain, young. Bet her parents wouldn’t be pleased to know about you.”

“Well it’s a good thing I’m not planning on meeting her parents. Parents tend to take such an unfortunate interest.”

“Maybe if you had a career they might like you more.”

Kane just shrugged. You couldn’t argue with Tracey if she was in a mood. You just stopped responding and waited it out. Tracey sipped her drink, and her eyes darted around the assembled faces, finally coming to rest on Ward.

“When’d you get back then?”

Ward frowned. “Just a minute ago.” Kane looked at Ward, sitting where he always had been, then back at Veronica, waiting for the snap back.

Tracey sat forward. “I’m surprised. Didn’t seem like you knew anyone much at the party. Find anyone interesting?”

Kane saw a flicker of amusement across Ward’s face. “Just talking to. You know, some of the others. People.”

Tracey rolled her eyes. “Whatever. Probably having some wild adventures that we seeing only your mild exterior could never guess at. Just make sure you say goodbye before you leave.”

Kane sat forward. “Now hang on then, Ward’s been here all this time.”

Gabrielle looked at Kane strangely. “You really didn’t notice he was gone? He left when your new girlfriend sat down.”

“Not my girlfriend, and no he didn’t. Why d’you think I wasn’t sitting next to her?”

Gabrielle shrugged. “Kane, your ways have always been mysterious to me.”

Kane looked at Ward for support, but he had settled back in to his seat, not looking at anybody else. Tracey checked her watch. “Well, whatever entertainment was going to be here has probably already happened. Time for me and mine to hit the road, Gabrielle, want a lift? Doug?”

Doug nodded, and Gabrielle began gathering her things together. Kane eyed Ward, to see what he would do, and then stood up himself, finished his beer, and stretched. “You got room for one more Trace?”

Tracey glanced at Ward. “No, actually. Gab took my last seat, so guess you’ll have to find your own way home.”

“What, but that’s ridiculous. You’re taking Doug to my house.”

“Actually, I’m taking Doug’s to his house, and I assumed you’d be staying late, like you always do, so didn’t want to have to wait for you.”

“Well I’d be happy to leave if there was a lift.”

“Last time you said that you complained seven times about having to leave while there was still fun to be had. I counted.”

“Doug, you up for walking home?”

Doug looked from Tracey to Kane. “Sorry, but I’ve got work tomorrow morning. Need to get home faster.”

“But I’ve got work too,” Kane said, resisting an urge to stomp his foot. Doug just shrugged for answer. Tracey said goodbye to Ward, then Kane, and left, trailing the others behind them, with Gabrielle smirking and Doug looking slightly guilty. Kane watched them out, and then collapsed on the couch opposite Ward, letting out a sigh.

“You not going to head off now then?” Ward asked.

Kane shook his head then let it rest backwards, staring at the ceiling. “Nah. No point trying to get home early without a lift. May as well relax for a bit, take it easy. Probably just skip work tomorrow anyway. Better than showing up all tired.”

“Oh. Fair enough then. Sorry. That you were left behind.”

Kane studied Ward again. The man stared at his cup, not meeting Kane’s eyes as he spoke, and his sentences still had an odd cadence. They came in segments, like the ideas got stuck halfway through. “Hey, why’d Tracey ignore you like that?” Kane eventually asked. Ward shrugged. “I left the room for a bit. Nothing special.” Kane shook his head. “No you didn’t. I would have noticed.”

“Are you sure? It’s really easy to miss things. At a party and stuff. And with all the attention you were paying to Veronica.”

“But you know I was paying the attention. You were sitting right there. I would have far rather sat next to Veronica.”

Ward studied Kane, taking another sip of wine. The intensity made Kane shift in his seat. “Alright,” Ward said, “I used magic. I was hiding myself with magic.”

Kane almost laughed, but there was a look to Ward, pride and certainty, that made him stop. “What, you made yourself invisible?” Kane asked, incredulity in every word.

Ward smiled, eyes looking above Kane’s head. “No. Invisibility would be hard. Light refraction, complex. You make something ignorable. Stop people from looking at it at all. Much better, easier, cleaner.”

Kane sat forward. “So what, you have some super power that makes you particularly hard to notice? No offence, but that sounds like you’re just embarrassed with how quiet you are.”

Ward shook his head. “No, this isn’t like that. It’s magic. Magic, wizards and fairies and all that, it’s real. Hidden, but real. People dismiss it so easily, but it is. This hiding, that’s just one spell.” There was a sincerity in Ward’s tone, an earnestness in his face. It made Kane’s palms itch. Kane had a desire to be anywhere else other than talking to this awkward troubled person, but he could not just walk away, so he continued polite questions. The conversation becoming the most bizarre casual conversation of Kane’s life.

“So if that’s the case, then why could I see you? Weren’t you hiding yourself?”

Ward’s eyes passed Kane’s on their way to the floor, briefly meeting. “It’s complicated. Like. Like when you have a focus. When you focus.” Ward picked up the half empty wine bottle. “This wine bottle, right. You’re looking at it. I can’t make you stop noticing it. Because you have. Right?”

“So you can make people not pay attention to things they’re not paying attention to anyway.”

“Yeah. Yeah and it’s harder to make something someone is looking for hard to notice. Like, it’s different. You’re making focus, attention, slide away from an object. So you can’t do it when it’s already a focus, or fight people if they’re trying to. Focus.”

“So can you prove it?” Kane asked. Kane immediately regretted it, no desire to show up someone else’s delusions.

Ward met Kane’s gaze. “Yeah. I can prove it. I mean, me you noticed me because I was next to Veronica, right?. Veronica must have noticed me the same way. But Tracey glazed over mention of me.”

Kane shrugged. “Not really proof. Trace would totally mock me like this. You could be going to have a great laugh at me later.”

“What about the other object I hid?” Ward asked.

Kane paused. “What other object?”

“You still can’t see it. I’ve kept it hidden still. Not that it’s relevant anymore.”

Kane looked around, at the television, with DVD player and xbox, the two lamps that gave the room its light, at the small table that hadn’t been dragged in to the centre of the room. The coy confidence Ward had didn’t seem to suggest any of these. Kane looked around again. “Oh I see. You thought you hid the armchair, right?”

Ward started, and Kane smiled, knowing he got it right. “What, just because I didn’t sit in it you thought I couldn’t see it? That seat is so uncomfortable, and completely closes off how much of the room you can see. Better the floor any day.”

Ward rallied, brow creased in thought. “But, no, you couldn’t have been able to see it. Or did you just notice it now?”

Kane lay back on the lounge. “I mean I didn’t think about it much, but yeah I knew it was there.” Kane eyed the armchair from his new angle. It was a really uncomfortable chair, but he really should have sat in it. Far less awkward than the floor when there are women in dresses around. Mistakes of the past, but ah well.

Kane felt sorry for Ward. The man seemed upset. Kane opened his mouth to say something, but there was nothing he could think of to say. There really wasn’t much he could offer Ward. “Look, maybe there are other parts of Wicca which are true and-“

“No, it’s not Wicca. It’s magic. And I know you’re going to patronise me, but it’s real, you, you just got lucky, or, or noticed the chair then, when you focused, trying to find it out. You can’t have seen it the whole time.”

Kane stood up. “Look, what do you want me to say. Sorry? Just calm down and think about it. Maybe less wine.”

“Of course, if I hadn’t had the wine I could have hidden it from you, I’m sure. Maybe I can show you later…”

Kane grabbed his jacket and looked down at Ward, unwilling to watch this anymore. “Sorry, but I really gotta get going. I’ll catch up with you some other time maybe? Yeah?” Ward was staring down, and made a noise that might have been a yes, and that was enough for Kane.

The cool night air felt nice after the aftermath of the party. Kane decided to walk home. Cheaper than a taxi, and it would give him a chance to clear his head. King Street was nice late at night too. The street didn’t tend to stop buzzing until two or three in the morning, and even then people would be out, often in some odd costume or another. King Street was a place of eccentricities.

Walking along, Kane watched a group of people, talking together, laughing. Two of them were wearing top hats and one of the women was wearing a luscious beard that tickled her belly. One stood out to Kane though. There was something about her that made Kane study her as he walked closer to them as they waited for a light to change.

The woman was wearing make up, appearing pale, almost blue-tinged, her lips were near black, but her clothes didn’t match, a bright red t-shirt and no eye liner. It was a look Kane hadn’t seen before. Kane kept finding his eyes drawn back to her, and even slowed as the lights changed, watching her walk across the road. His eyes felt itchy as he watched this strange woman, and finally he managed to place it. The curls of her hair were flowing without anything there to move them.

Chapter 2

Kane leaned against a street pole outside the cinema, glancing up and down King Street. His phone rested in one hand, fingers slowly folding it over and over. Kane wasn’t used to waiting, and it was trying his nerves. Kane checked the time on his phone again, and looked up and down the street, wondering what direction she would be approaching from. The streets were crowded, and even a little back from the flow, Kane couldn’t see very far in either direction, lit up by the glow of the various shops and bars.

Instead he spotted someone who looked weird even for King Street. The man seemed to have facial tattoos, and a perhaps an eyelid piercing. Kane craned his neck to watch the man as other people got in the way. It was probably just King Street. Kane had been seeing odd people a lot more recently. Sometimes just some body mod that stood out even in such an eclectic place. Some he could not figure out how they had done it though. There had been a woman with what appeared an extra joint in her arm. It was beginning to worry him. Surely the world couldn’t be getting stranger.

“Oh hey there, waiting for me?” Kane turned, and smiled at seeing Veronica. It was a winning grin. Kane had practiced it. “Evening. I see you finally found the place,” Kane said, as his eyes quickly took in her nice white top, and slightly conservative black skirt that billowed slightly. “Difficult time getting here?”

Veronica stood one foot in front of the other, uncertain how close to stand. “Yeah, I’m so sorry about being late. It was just work. My boss kept saying I could go in just a minute, and then half an hour later. I had to completely rush getting ready.”

“I’m surprised you didn’t just walk out if he was keeping you that late. I would have.”

Veronica’s eyes widened. “You wouldn’t, surely.” Kane shrugged, and began walking in to the cinema. “Once I had a boss who kept trying to make me stay back after my shift was done at this cafe, and after the first couple of times I just started leaving whenever I finished.”

Veronica fell in to step behind him. “And what? That worked out?”

“Nah, I got fired about two months later. Didn’t do work I didn’t have to though.” Kane scanned the movies board and sighed. “Yep, missed the start, and the first ten minutes.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to make us miss the start. Let me buy the tickets.”

Kane put a hand on Veronica’s shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. Why go in if we miss the start?” Kane felt Veronica droop as he studied the movie times. “It’s on again in two hours. How about we go have a nice dinner and a drink, and then circle back to it if we feel like it?” Kane looked down at Veronica, who was still uncertain. “Honestly, I’d rather sit and chat with a beautiful woman than to just sit next to one. I mean, we are on a date right?”

“Well, if you don’t mind doing that, then that sounds nice. That sounds really nice.”

Kane led Veronica back out on to the street, and down the road. “The Thai place a little further down is nice, but I was thinking of going somewhere a little closer. Honestly, the pub just there does nice food if you’re fine with it, I mean?”

“That sounds great. I mean, I’ve never been there, but, if you think it’s great, I’m sure it is.”

The two of them went in and found a table. Kane went to get the drinks and order the food, making the bartender laugh, and returned to the table very pleased with himself. The bar wasn’t too crowded, and they would still be able to hear each other speak. A nice place to sit for a while.

“I kept meaning to apologise for Tracey the other day. She can be a little bit crazy at times and I think she gave you a bad showing.”

Veronica finished a sip of her drink, placing it down. “Your friend? She seemed lovely. Obviously, she had strong opinions, but that’s good, right?”

“Depends. Sometimes I like to take it easy. No need to care strongly about everything, right? Sometimes I think Trace could really do with relaxing a little, take work a little bit less seriously, you know?”

“Why? She works too hard?”

Kane shrugged. “She’s just kind of intense about it. And sometimes she’s just not there for her friends.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry for being late. I really didn’t mean to be.”

Kane raised an eyebrow. “Honestly, it didn’t worry me. I’m late all the time, hell, some places I’m practically known for it. Your boss gave you a hard time.”

“But you were just saying how much you hated…”

“Nah, don’t read in to that. I was talking about Tracey. Hell, I’m impressed I wasn’t a bit later than you. It was highly unusual for me to be so punctual.”

“And it was wasted because I was late.”

“Oh I’d hardly call it wasted as long as it was clear that I was being keen.” Kane held Veronica’s gaze, until she looked away blushing slightly, taking a sip of her drink to cover it up, but stole a glance back at Kane, and the hidden smile made him feel warm. Kane’s smile was interrupted as he had to stifle a yawn.

“Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realise you were tired.”

Kane ran his hand through his hair. “Don’t worry about it. Just haven’t been sleeping well recently.”

“Why not? Just been enjoying yourself too much?”

Kane shook his head. His eyes wandered around the bar, looking at the other patrons again. “It’s just, oddness. I’ve been…” Kane’s eyes came back to Veronica. “Don’t worry about it, really.”

“What were you going to say?”

“Well, I just remembered this was a date and I’m all trying to impress you, so I shouldn’t be putting weird insomnia front and centre. Kind of makes me look bad.”

“Oh come on, you started the sentence, you should finish it. I promise not to judge you for it.”

“You can’t say that! You don’t know what it is?”

“Have you been… I don’t know, staying up late to scare strangers on their way home?”

“No?”

“Anything that weird?”

“No.”

“Then tell me. After all, if you’re really tired, then maybe you should go home and get some rest…”

Kane frowned. “It’s been odd. You know that guy Ward?”

“Your friend quiet friend from the party.”

“Not really my friend, but anyway. He made some silly claim about being able to do magic. Hiding things in plain sight and stuff, like, he thought Tracey couldn’t see him.”

Only, since then, the world’s looked a little bit off. I don’t know how to explain, it’s just, since that party, I’ve been noticing just how strange people are.”

“Maybe it’s something altering your perception. Some kind of substance or other.”

Kane’s attention came right back to Veronica. “No no. Alcohol and caffeine are the two drugs for me, and never anything else. It’s not that. I’ve probably just been looking at people more. You notice all kinds of things when you take some time out of your own bubble and really…”

Veronica swivelled in her seat to see what Kane was looking at. There, standing at the bar was another woman, with long curly black hair, and worryingly thin frame. Her complexion was pale, almost sickly, and her make up didn’t seem to have helped. She was laughing with a couple of friends. Veronica turned back to Kane. “Recognise someone?”

Kane glanced back at Veronica and then continued staring. “Yeah, that girl, I’ve seen her before. Her hair is just…”

“Curly?” Veronica provided, touching her own straight black hair.

“Not just curly.” Kane’s focus snapped back to Veronica, eyes wide, face white. “You can see it right? Her hair is wavy.”

Veronica leaned back, stealing another glance at the woman. “I guess it’s sort of wavy, but I do think it’s more of a curl.”

“And her skin. It’s the wrong colour. This is the kind of thing I mean, just those odd little details.”

Veronica looked closely at Kane. “She looks no paler than you right now. You really are too tired. I don’t think we should see the movie after dinner. I don’t want to weary you.”

“What no I’m fine don’t worry about-“ Kane stood up and his stool fell over. There was a brief gap in ambient noise, and Veronica gave him a pained look. “Maybe you should just head home. I mean, I’ve got an early morning tomorrow too. We can try the movie again another night.”

Kane frowned. “You really think that’s best?”

Veronica nodded. “What’s the point of seeing you if you’re too tired to care.”

“I care.”

“Goodnight Kane. Get some rest.”

Veronica left Kane standing there, blushing, wishing people would stop looking at him. He downed his own drink, not daring to look around to see if anyone was laughing, then downed the drink Veronica had barely touched. It was awful pub white wine but he didn’t care. Kane picked his chair up, and then glared around the room to see if anyone was still watching him, and met the green eyes of the woman with the moving hair.

Kane ignored her, and went to the other end of the bar to get himself another couple of drinks. Kane downed the first one at the bar, and then went back to claim his seat, only to discover he had lost it. Cursing slightly under his breath, Kane looked around, and found the only table available was right next to the strange looking woman.

Kane took his seat, feeling the tingle of alcohol in him. Up this close the woman looked worse. A complexion near stage white extended to her arms as well as her face, a truly unnatural colour. Kane stared, but couldn’t pick out a trace of powder. It just seemed to be the colour of the skin. Kane couldn’t help what he did next, reaching over and touching the girl’s arm, to attract her attention. Kane drew his hand back instantly. The arm had been cold. Not cool either, but as cold as the drink in his hand that spilled as his other hand trembled.

The woman turned and looked Kane straight in the eyes. Her hair though trailed behind, as if travelling in slow motion, then once it caught up in continued on around, slightly obscuring her face. Kane didn’t move, shocked, gaping. “I’m sorry, do I know you?” she asked. She mouthed something at Kane, but he couldn’t read it. Her friends were staring at Kane.

Kane unfroze, and laughed it off. “I think we’ve met before, and I certainly should remember it, but I just can’t seem to place you. Perhaps a name to help me out?”

“That might be the lamest pickup line ever.”

“Good thing I wasn’t trying to pick you up then, because then this would get awkward quickly. Though your hair is remarkable. I should have remembered that.”

The woman stared at him for several seconds, then turned back to her friends, muttering that she should probably deal with this. The woman turned back, standing up. “I’ll tell you my name if you buy me a shot?”

Kane nodded, standing as well, and followed the woman to the bar. “My name’s Kane by the way.”

“I’ll be sure to write it down. You’re buying by the way. Three shots thanks.”

“But there’s only two of us.”

“That’s one for me, one for you, and then another one for me. And I’d save yours.”

Kane looked at the serious expression in the woman’s grey eyes and almost turned it down, ready to walk away. She was too intense, too earnest. It caught Kane off guard. His skin was crawling and he couldn’t tell why.

“Three shots of tequila, thanks.”

The woman grimaced, but had downed one shot while Kane was still paying, then studied him thoroughly, taking a few steps to either side as she examined him, her brow furrowing. She met Kane’s eyes again. “Hi Kane, it’s nice to meet you,” she said holding out a hand. “My name is Charlotte, and I’ve been dead four years now.”

Kane’s hand was already held out, and Charlotte grabbed it, not letting Kane back away. Charlotte kept ahold of Kane, her cold skin pressing in to him, clammy to touch. “That’s ridiculous. You can’t be.” The entire world seemed to vanish, gravity abandoning Kane, everything focused on that cold touch, on the eyes that bore down on him.

Charlotte let go and the rest of the world reappeared, the sound of a pub slowly getting busier. “I’m sorry for that. But you needed to believe me. I’d take your shot now.” Charlotte reached for her own second shot.

“But how?” Kane asked as he reached for his own shot.

“It’s a story for not for here. Look, I know you’re probably going through a lot of freaking out right now, and I know someone who can help you. I’m sorry for what I did, but you needed to believe me. I promise this can all be explained.”

Kane tried to smirk. “You mean you’re going to show me how this is all a trick?”

Charlotte looked away from him. “This, what I am, what you’re going through. It’s not a trick. I’m sorry. Really sorry.”

The smirk fell away. Kane wanted to deny it, to turn away and laugh it off with his friends as just some crazy woman in the bar, but the sight of her, and the feel of her was too much to be denied. Something was wrong. Kane sighed. “Alright, Miss Charlotte the dead girl, take me wherever it is I need to go to get over this little patch of madness.”

Charlotte led him out in to the cool air, and then down along the street. Kane’s hand still tingled from the touch, the unreal experience too absurd. Every time Kane looked at Charlotte with her pale skin with a blue tinge, he felt that edge of certainty worn just a little further away.

“So how are you still alive? Or not quite dead?” Kane asked, trying anything to start a conversation.

“It’ll make more sense once you’ve had some basic facts explained to you about the Other.”

“The other what?”

“Not the other anything just the Other.” Charlotte took a deep breath. “The other is whatever exists beyond reality. You have what’s real, and logical, and then you have what’s Other. Only, not being properly real, not properly working doesn’t always stop the Other from being, well, real enough. I can’t explain it properly.”

“Okay.”

“You want to talk about how you came in contact with the Other?”

Kane shrugged. “As far as I know, it’s when I spotted you.”

Charlotte glanced at Kane. “Easy there. I’m pretty sure I’m not your type and you’re certainly not mine.”

“No really, that seems to be it.” There was an awkward pause as they waited for the lights to change. Once they had crossed, Kane asked, “So what about you? How did you come in contact with the Other?”

“It’s a personal matter. I don’t really want to discuss it.”

They were walking out of Newtown, down Erskineville Road, Charlotte leading Kane in to darker areas. Kane peered around. A cat made him jump as its bell jingled in the still evening. Charlotte arrived outside an old building, once a theatre, now abandoned. There was a laminated sheet of paper stapled to the door with the font too small to read save the title at the top, ‘The Ghost’s Rest’. Charlotte reached for the handle but Kane stopped her.

“You want me to go in here?”

“Why? What’s the problem? There are people in here who will be able to help you. Explain things.”

“Yeah, but that’s a really ominous door. Am I going to learn all kinds of things I don’t want to know?”

“Probably, but you need to know them.”

“Nu uh. For all I know, this is some kind of murder den you’re luring me to, with other cold-blooded people like you. You could be vampires.”

“I’m not a vampire.”

“How do I know that. You could be a vampire. It makes sense, and you already admitted that you’re dead.” Kane took a step backwards, beginning to turn away.

“This is something that you’re going to have to face up to sooner or later.”

“Well considering how little you’ve been willing to tell me, I’m fine with it being later.”

“What if I told you how I died? Would that put you more at ease?”

“Why would that put me at ease.”

“It would help a lot, explaining me.”

Kane looked back towards King Street, the brighter lights, the crowds, then back to Charlotte, eyes anxiously peering from a discoloured face. “Will it explain your hairs disdain for gravity?”

“Yes, it explains my hair.”

“Alright then.”

Charlotte led Kane to a park bench, sitting down beneath a lamp. Kane gingerly sat next to her, watched her take a deep breath, run her hands through her hair, keeping it floating behind her, and begin to speak.

“I died four years ago, though it doesn’t feel that long. The memory of that day are still so vivid. My friends and I had been on a trip, out camping next to the beach with the constant sound of the ocean to keep you company. It was my first big trip as an adult.

“Some of the others were there just to screw around, but for me, it really was the ocean that was the greatest draw. The taste of salt in the air, the gulls crying out. The first night I fell asleep on the beach, under the stars. I woke in the night, shivering cold, only half-aware. It wasn’t the cold that woke me though, but a sound. There was a melody in the breeze that tickled my mind.

“In the morning I asked who had been singing it, but none of my friends had heard the tune before. I assumed I had just dreamt it, and put it out of mind. The next night, after almost everyone had gone to bed, two friends were being a little too intimate around the fire. I got up to give them some space, and wandered down, standing at the edge of the ocean.

“Alone with the stars and the sand and the soft motion of the waves, is where She found me humming her melody. Her head broke the surface of the ocean, the moonlight shone off her skin as her face studied me. For a moment I was alarmed, and then she began to sing.”

Charlotte glanced at Kane, then blushed through her pallid complexion. "I want to make you understand that sound, since it's important. I could tell you it was heavenly, or angelic. I could try to impress upon you that this was a melody not heard through the ears, but through the entire body, like a pulse that touches your soul. Perhaps I could imply that the melody touched on perfection, but it will leave you skeptical. If you really want to try and understand, I have to sing the song for you.”

“So sing it.”

Charlotte was so sincere, so genuinely worried that Kane found it hard to remember why this girl had so alarmed him. Under the dim light, with her hair almost motionless, she seemed like any other girl who had opened up to Kane. Charlotte bit her lip, and then watching Kane closely, she began to sing. The first note wavered, but the rest was sung purely.

When the melody closed, Kane’s heart was beating fast. Kane held his breath for the next sound, and when certain there was no more he asked, “Why did you stop?”

“Because that’s the end of the melody.” Charlotte was breathing deeply. “I always hate hearing me sing it. My voice isn’t as good as Dessa’s.”

“That was the most beautiful thing I have ever heard,” Kane replied. He lifted a hand to cup the side of her face, not daring to quite place his fingers. She looked in to his eyes and there were tears in her own that Kane understood. He wanted to kiss the lips that had breathed that song, to try and grasp it, touch some part of it.

Charlotte reached up to touch Kane’s outstretched hand, and he jumped at her icy cold touch. He lowered his hand as the melody left, becoming a great memory but nothing more. Kane looked away. “You were telling me a story.”

Charlotte’s voice quivered slightly as she said, “Yes, I was.”

“You felt that song, you understood it. But my voice can’t carry it well. I imitate it, but it’s a poor imitation. When I heard Dessa sing it, imagine that but a thousand times more. Every note resonating through you, purer than thought. It fills the whole world, and combines with every part of the world.”

Charlotte took a deep breath before continuing. “I remember stepping forward when I heard the song, in to the ocean. The melody blended with the touch of the waves against my legs. It wasn’t enough though, and I wandered out further, until I was swimming towards her.

“I don’t remember how long I swam for, chasing the song, the moon’s sparkling reflection adding a silent harmony alongside the rhythm of the water. It was bliss.

“Then a dissonance cut through. Something not part of the music. Another sound, breaking it. It was my friends come to look for me, though I could barely see them.

“I turned back to the figure, only to see that she had dived, taking the melody with her. You have felt a touch of that melody so you understand, I had no choice. I dove after her. I swam deeper, my skirt tangling frustratingly with my legs as I tried to get further down. Then at last I was face to face with her.

“I could see her even in the gloom, with her pale skin tinged all through with green, and large black eyes staring out at me. Her neck had gills, and it was from between her lips that the song still echoed. Below the waist she was all scales, and two elegant legs twined together to form a tail. She stared at me, and slowly the song drew to a close.

Kane looked at Charlotte again, and saw she was staring up in to the sky. “As the song’s grip faded, I became aware of where I was, dizzy and disoriented. Without the melody, I began to panic. I tried to scream, and out came a gush of bubbles. She grabbed my arm drawing my attention, and asked, ‘Do you want to live in the ocean with me, and my song?’

“I won’t lie. I considered it. But I was scared, and I let the last of my air go in a bubble of no, water now filling my mouth. At that, she grabbed me, twining her legs with mine, and her arms holding me gently but firmly as I struggled to reach the surface. ‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered in my ear, her tender voice tickling it through the water.

“She held me tenderly as I thrashed, then slowed and was still. My sight failed first. My taste was next, and last was my touch, her body pressed against mine, and the water that now filled my lungs.’

Charlotte stopped in her telling. She lowered her eyes and stared at her hands. She stared so long that Kane began to think that she wasn't going to start again. He shifted himself on the seat watching her. After too long she took in a breath that shuddered, and only then did Kane realise Charlotte’s state. He reached an arm around her, and placed it on her shoulder. For a time she simply rested her head against him, while he ignored the cold of her, the strangeness of her hair moving slightly against his shoulder, sweeping slowly back and forth.

“My very last sensation was something pressed against my lips. She kissed me, and I felt something return to me. Not life, but something close enough. She still held me tightly and whispered that I would walk the land, cold and dead.

“The next thing I know I am waking up on the beach, the same two friends standing over me looking terrified. They’d seen me dead. The doctors called my recovery a miracle, but they didn’t understand that I hadn’t recovered, not really. The two friends who found me were able to see me properly though. That’s why I moved to Sydney. None of us could life with me any more.”

Charlotte pushed herself up, then stood, and wiped at her face. “I’m sorry. I thought it would be easier to tell. It’s been a while since I’ve thought about parts of that night.”

Kane stood up. “That story is amazing. And you are amazing for having dealt with that. Moving on as well as you have. I couldn’t have done that.”

She laughed then. “It’s not moving on. It's trying to scrape some kind of existence out of whatever parts of the world you can still touch. Those bits where people won't sense the oddness of you, won't subtly avoid you, avoid touching you. You’ll understand that. I'm sure whatever changed you will have its own effects. I hope there’s nothing as bad as my clammy skin though.”

Kane stiffened. “What of me? I haven’t died. I haven’t even had anything unusual occur.”

“You’re here, on the edge of what’s true, just like me. Something happened to you, something triggered it, and even if you’re not yet sure what it is, it will change you.” Charlotte pointed to the theatre. “In there are people with their own stories, people who have helped me learn to cope as best I can, to live with this. And there are things you need to know about, like Sam.”

Kane looked at the dimly lit doorway. “No offence but I don’t really want to join in this little bizarity set. Even if I can see all this stuff, I'm certainly not like you.”

“You’re going to what, walk away and hope for the best?”

“Yes, actually. That sounds like a brilliant idea.”

Kane took a few steps away and then turned back. “I’m sorry Charlotte, for what happened to you, that I can’t help you. You, you seem nice. I just, all this Other, it’s not for me.”

Charlotte frowned. “Goodbye Kane. I really hope that you get your wish and never have to deal with me again.”

Chapter 3

Kane and Veronica lay on the grass, staring up at the blue sky, the clouds skirting across it. From here you couldn’t see the graveyard at the other end of the park, and that was perfectly fine with Kane. The date had gone well. More than well, considering how the last date had gone. Kane pointed out one of the clouds, and said it was a cat, and Veronica took a photo of it, to remember it. She took delight in preserving the moment, and Kane wasn’t going to deny it to her.

They had finally seen the movie they had both wanted to watch, and now they were just lying, chatting a little. Kane had audaciously taken Veronica’s hand. Her shock had caused him to try and draw away, but she had held on, delighted by the development.

Veronica pointed out her own cloud, this one possibly a camel in shape. Kane agreed, then looked away from the sky. A few moments later he looked up again just to check that the little anomaly was gone.

It was what he was calling the little visions he was having, just little anomalies, when there was someone whose appearance made no sense. The woman flying sedately across the sky possibly qualified as a slightly larger anomaly, but Kane was committed to putting up with it and not making any comment. Ignore anything for long enough and eventually it went away, for one reason or another. That had got Kane to where he was today, and today he was very pleased with himself.

“You know you are possibly the most relaxed person I’ve ever met,” Veronica commented, watching Kane’s face as he stared at the sky. “You’re probably the prettiest person I’ve ever met.” Kane felt Veronica’s palm with his fingers. This was nice. Everything should be like this forever.

“If I’m the prettiest, what about anyone you’ve dated.”

“Oh they’ve all been fine, but none of them have quite had your glow.”

“My glow?”

Kane didn’t know what to say, so he said nothing. That was meant to be how wisdom worked. After a while Veronica propped herself up. “Hey, Kane, want to get some lunch?”

“Sure. Where would you like to go?”

“I was kind of thinking of my place. I have some stuff lying around for a really nice salad if you want, otherwise there are lots of other places around, sure.”

Kane stood up and stretched. “Sounds overly healthy, but sure, sounds nice.”

“If you want to get something else we can.”

Kane shrugged. “I’ll try your salad, we can try something I like later.”

“If you’re sure…”

“Don’t worry about it. I’m sure it will be great.”

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Kane stared down at the salad in front of him, then back up at Veronica’s expectant expression. “Rocket and pear?”

“And walnut. It’s a really neat recipe. Oh, and parmesan to round it out.” Veronica let Kane serve himself first, with Kane taking a large portion, still staring at his food suspiciously. Kane didn’t dislike salad per se, but it was something he regarded as an addition to a meal, not the meal itself.

Upon trying the salad though, Kane found it surprisingly delicious. The mix of flavours worked. Not a meal, but definitely worth having. Kane took a moment to mull the flavours in his mouth, letting the smoothness of the cheese contrast the crunchy pear. Once Kane begun to eat, Veronica tucked in to her own plate happily.

“So what are you doing anyway?” Veronica asked. “You’re not a student right? What’s your career?”

Kane finished up a plate of salad and began to help himself to a second. “That’s kind of an interesting question. Career isn’t something I’ve really considered.”

“But you work, right?”

“Yeah. Just odd jobs. Currently got some work in an office, but it was the cafe circuit before that.”

“Oh, what are you doing in your office?” Kane took a large mouthful of food, and Veronica watched him patiently while he chewed it. “It’s just odd job stuff, replacing light bulbs and delivering things. I’d probably be bringing people coffee and stuff, but that’s not a done thing anymore. Accountancy place.”

“That’s it? Sounds rather dull.”

“Sometimes they let me do filing.” Kane looked up from his plate at Veronica and added, “It’s not that bad. Lots of time to just kind of chill, do some reading, hum to yourself, zone out. No stress to it.”

“Well that sounds pleasant then,” Veronica said without much confidence to her voice. “It gets me enough to live pleasantly. Not quite as sophisticated as trying to be a Lawyer. That, that takes some gumption.”

Veronica smiled to herself. “It’s good work. Going to be a great once it gets going, but this is only first year, so it’s a little overwhelming.”

Kane shrugged. “You’re smart, you’ll do fine.”

While Veronica was doing the dishes, Kane took some time to study Veronica’s house. Open plan and free standing, the place was modern for a rental home. Veronica was sharing it with two other women, one of whom, Rhani, home. The other was out somewhere.

The house had been kept immaculately clean, save for the ceiling which had accumulated layers of spider’s webs. The table and chairs were well-cared for, and he could not feel a single scratch on the table’s surface. Kane had just stood up to go help Veronica, when he spotted a spider on the ceiling.

No, it wasn’t a spider. It was too large for anything you would find in Sydney. Kane froze, watching as it lowered itself down towards the ground on a single thread being spun delicately out. The creature was covered in fur. Not just hair like a spider, but fur. It even had a tail that looked like a worm, and as Kane stared it turned and looked at him with eight beady eyes that sat around a twitching whiskered nose.

Veronica walked out of the kitchen and bumped against it, completely oblivious. The creature scuttled back to the ceiling, and was lost among its webs. Kane stared in horror, Veronica following his gaze. “Oh I know, we really should clear out the little dears, but it always seems so mean, I mean it’s not like they’re hurting anyone.”

Kane stayed calm. It was an effort. He lowered his eyes back to Veronica and smiled at her, trying to make his shoulders relax, to slouch back in to the chair. “Yeah, they can be such a pain.”

Veronica smiled, and sat down opposite him, hands twisted together. “Look Kane, it’s been great to get to hang out. You’re so relaxed it’s incredible.”

“Yeah? I mean, yeah, relaxed is me all over.”

“So, I was wondering if you might like to, you know, date?”

Kane couldn’t help a chuckle escaping and Veronica looked up, hurt. “No, it’s not like that. Not that at all. I’d love to date. That’s what I thought we were doing already.” Kane’s eyes found themselves darting glances at the ceiling. “What did you think this was?”

Veronica blushed. “I didn’t mean-“

“Hey, you like me, and I like you. Let’s not complicate it further and just enjoy that.”

Veronica hugged, him, and Kane felt her relax in his arms, warm against him. Kane stared up in to the ceiling while Veronica couldn’t see him. There was movement up there. Veronica separated herself and followed Kane’s eyes. “Yeah, I know, it’s disgraceful. We really need to tidy it up, but we just keep forgetting, and it’s just a bit high for any of us girls.”

The front door opened, and Veronica took a couple more steps back from Kane, peering down the hallway to see who it was. Rhani called out a hello, struggling to close the door while holding a bag. Kane waved a hello, and then froze as he watched the creature lower itself on to Rhani, and bite in to her shoulder, without either women even blinking.

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Kane sat at the bar where he had met Charlotte. He had sworn off coming here again, but there was no way around it. Whatever it was living in Veronica’s house was not normal, and that meant Kane needed help. Maybe if he told Charlotte about it, there would be some kind of supernatural pet control she could call.

It was the the fifth night Kane had spent sitting here, waiting for some signs of the dead girl to show up. Tonight, he was completely sober, and the Friday crowd was beginning to bug him, but there was no way around it if he wanted to find Charlotte.

The image of that door in to an old, seemingly abandoned theatre sprung up in Kane’s mind again, but Kane shook the thought off. There was no way he was just going to wander in to there, which meant he had a problem. Tomorrow he was meant to be cleaning Veronica’s house for her, getting the cobwebs out. Alongside whatever that thing was.

Kane had fled the house as soon as he was able. He had barely kissed Veronica, which annoyed him, but there was no way he was going in to her room if that creature might have been in there. He had offered to help her clean the house the next Saturday, and then left. As people tumbled in and out, Kane glumly began to consider just bailing on Veronica, not seeing her again. It was a glum thought.

Kane looked at his phone, checking if there was anyone he could chat with while he waited and thought. Kane spun his phone a couple of times between his fingers, and then finally thought of a second plan. It was one he had been avoiding, since it relied on the person Kane was more and more blaming for the strange things he now had to see. After a full drink of internal struggle, Kane finally decided to at least try. Kane sent a quick message to Ward.

‘Hey, I know we didn’t get along great, but I have a problem to do with magic. Swear I’m not pulling your leg, defs need help, sorry I didn’t believe you - Kane’

Kane went and got another drink, wincing slightly at the price before taking his seat, staring at the door. He checked his phone after his first sip and was surprised to find a reply from Ward.

‘Something to do with magic? What is it?’

‘Magic spider-rat I saw in a friend’s house. No idea what to do. Need help with it. You free to chat?’ The reply was almost instantaneous, ‘Where are you?’ Kane paused, looking around the room once more, and then sent his location. Ward replied he would be right there.

It was barely ten minutes until Ward lurched through the door, looking quickly around the room, then hurrying to Kane’s table. Ward sat down, frown on his face. Ward went to lean on the table, then decided against it, jerking upright, then said, “So, you had something to show me?”

Kane shook his head. “Not show you, but tell you about. Veronica, you remember her? She’s got some weird rat-spider thing that’s living in her home, and I think it’s living off her and her flatmates.”

“So you- why tell me about it?”

Kane shrugged. “This is your kind of thing isn’t it. Weird stuff in the world, that’s all around us, but hidden. I mean, you’re a hider yourself.”

“You don’t believe that,” Ward said.

Kane shrugged. “Sure, I don’t, but you seem to have an interest, or, or a knowledge of things like this, and I needed help with it. Veronica and Rhani just don’t seem to see the thing. I’m meant to be clearing it out tomorrow, and I wanted to know if you knew anyone who could help.” Kane held his breath, waiting for the response.

“You’re lying,” Ward said, hands clenching. “You can’t have been allowed to clear something out if people can’t see it.”

“There are spider webs all over the ceiling which they just leave there. Maybe it’s got some magic venom that keeps them ignoring it.”

Ward sat very still for some time before responding. “No, this sounds like another, just another prank on me, and my beliefs. You’re making this up as you go along. Not going to show up and embarrass myself again.”

Ward went to stand, but Kane reached across and grabbed his hand. “Look, if I wanted to trick you, I could have done it here. I’m not lying, the last few weeks I’ve been seeing all kinds of things. I met this girl who’s dead, drowned, but still walking around.”

“What makes you think she’s dead?”

“Nobody with skin that cold is alive.” Kane shuddered. “And her hair was all ambulatory, moving around by itself like it was underwater.”

“Why not get her to help?”

“Because I wanted to come to you. You’re, you know, normal. But you’ve got some magic going on. You’ll be a real help.”

Ward Looked uncertain, pulling his hands away from Kane, eyes darting around the room. “Look, I don’t know what you think I can do. I can’t- I can just glamour. That’s all. Nothing special.”

“So you’ll just let me deal with this by myself? Come on, I’ll even introduce you to Charlotte.”

“Who’s Charlotte?” Ward asked.

“Charlotte’s the drowned girl, keep up. You want to meet others like you, or who know things like you, well here’s an opportunity.”

Ward looked down a the table, and was silent so long Kane almost gave up hope, but at last Ward said, “Alright, I’ll help you help these women. It’s the what we- the right thing to do.”

“Great. We’ve got to do it in the morning. Veronica and Rhani are leaving the house for an hour while we get it all down off the ceiling. What great ideas do you have to help us?”

Ward’s eyes looked up to meet Kane. “No, really, I know a glamour, that’s it. No major magic from me. Glamours are meant to be so simple that lots of things just do them naturally. Probably what your mouse-spider does.”

“Rat-spider. And if you don’t know any tricks, don’t you have anyone who you could call on for help? Some mentor or whatever?” Kane looked at Ward’s face as Ward stared back, empty expression. “Sorry, dumb question. Well now you’ve got me who believes you, and I’ll introduce you to Charlotte, and then maybe you won’t be so lonely, right?”

Ward started, “What makes you think I’m lonely?”

“Come on, I’ll get you a drink, and we can think about how precisely we’re going to do this, eh?”

Chapter 4

Kane’s head hurt. Ward and him had stayed up till four, retreating to Ward’s house once the pub closed. They had gone through more than a bottle of wine but hadn’t found a good answer to the problem of the rat-spiders. Kane had wanted to give up, not go to Veronica’s, but Ward had insisted. Kane was really beginning to regret asking Ward’s help.

Kane was able to tell Ward things about the magic folk that Ward had not known. More annoyingly, Ward’s apparent glamours had completely failed to work. Kane had been always able to peer through them, and so nothing could be made of them for their ‘cleaning’ job. The only thing Ward had going for him was his belief.

Even the way Ward walked was odd, Kane observed as they approached Veronica’s house. Ward would jolt to a stop at a road, needing an odd little shuffling of feet to stop himself falling on to it every time. Kane could not for the life of him work out what had been causing this odd skip-step.

They finally arrived at Veronica’s door. Kane let Ward knock, but stood in front of him as it was opened. “Hey there stranger,” said Veronica, “Here to help with some spring cleaning?”

Kane put on a smile through the throbbing in his skull. “Closer to Autumn cleaning, but I’ll take it. I brought Ward, you remember him, right? Mind if he gets paid in lunch as well?”

“Of course not. Nice to see you again, Ward. Come in.”

As Veronica led them in, she said, “Don’t worry Ward, it’s not that bad. It’s mostly the ceiling, where our lenient policy to spiders seems to have caused a bit of clutter. Don’t really want to force them out, but it’s probably necessary at this point.”

Kane heard Ward gasp, but doubted Veronica had heard. “Kind of crazy, right?” Kane muttered to Ward. Ward nodded mutely. They reached the living room, and Veronica continued, “Of course, I’d rather you didn’t kill them, but they really must go, and I understand if you can’t save them all.” Veronica pointed to a collection of plastic containers. “If catch them in there, Rhani and I can probably relocate them somewhere they’ll be more appreciated.”

Ward had turned slightly pale, eyes darting around the room. “Are you feeling alright?” Veronica asked. “Yeah, I’m fine I just- really don’t like spiders. Should be fine.”

Kane gave him a nudge. “Don’t worry about him, he’ll be fine.”

Veronica looked uncertain. “You don’t have to help if you don’t want. You can do something other than the ceiling, like the oven.”

“Nah, he knows the score. He volunteered to be a valiant warrior in the battle to reclaim the ceiling.”

“Well if you’re sure…” Veronica said, before leaving to go find cleaning supplies.

Ward stared open-mouthed at the ceiling. “Hope that’s enough proof that this isn’t a hoax,” Kane said as he looked around for the little creature. “I mean, this is a lot of effort, and I’m going to be honest I didn’t really care enough to orchestrate something like this. Though I might still believe it of Tracey.”

Kane’s eyes came back round to Ward, and Kane took a step back. “What is it?” Ward asked, looking at him. Ward saw that Kane wasn’t looking right at him and turned green, then ran his hands over his shoulders, jumping around. Kane watched as the creature was brushed aside. Ward’s hand broke the thread it had been hanging from, and it scuttled across the floor, behind the TV cabinet.

“I didn’t see it,” Ward said, looking around frantically. “Did you see where it went?”

“Yeah, it’ behind the TV somewhere. Close call there. You didn’t feel it?”

Ward stared intently at the TV cabinet, taking a step away. “I didn’t feel anything, didn’t even see it.”

Veronica came back in with buckets and gloves. “You two look spooked. What was it?”

Kane shrugged. “Oh, a spider dropped on Ward and he freaked out.”

“Oh they do that, but they’re such small spiders, they’re harmless. I realised that our mops no good anymore, so I’m going to have to run out and get one. You two want to come for a walk?”

Kane and eye glanced at each other. “No need,” Ward said, “We can get started. If you want”

“Oh you don’t need to. I’d feel awful if you started without me.” Kane tried to read Ward but couldn’t figure him out. “Sure, no, we’ll just stay here and get started. Sooner started sooner finished and all that,” Kane said, looking back at Veronica.

“Well, if you’re sure…”

Once Veronica was gone, Kane asked, “So what was that about? Why are we here alone?”

“If Veronica can’t see the arachno-rodent, then it’ll be harder with her here. Now come on, we need to find that thing and kill it,” Ward answered, going to peer behind the TV. Kane sauntered slowly over to help look. “I think rat-spider works better than arachno-rodent. So we find it and we kill it and that’s that?”

“Yeah. Maybe you should go get some bug spray.” Ward said.

“Will that work?”

Ward shrugged. “Don’t know. It’s worth a try isn’t it? Spray the ceiling as well in case there’s more than one. That’s a lot of webbing.”

Kane found the kitchen, muttering, “Why’d you have to suggest there would be more than one,” to himself. A search below the sink and through all the cupboards showed no bug spray, which made sense in a hose where you weren’t meant to just kill the spiders like everyone did. Kane returned back to report the bad news to see that the rat-spider had moved.

Ward stood where he had before, staring behind the TV cabinet. The rat-spider though had crawled up and perched itself on top of the TV, watching Ward intently. Kane froze, unable to think. He watched as the rat-spider extended a spindly leg and delicately climbed on to Ward’s head.

Kane let out a little gurgle.

Ward looked up, and the creature flinched back, nose twitching to point at Kane, wiggling wildly around between all of its eyes. Kane pointed at the TV, mouth moving silently. Ward looked back and stared at the top of the television. Kane couldn’t draw breath as he watched. At last Ward started, and swung a hand at the creature. It leapt too late, and the hand caught it, and the back of the TV. The creature sailed in to the middle of the room.The TV teetered as Ward chased the creature through the air. Kane dashed to make sure the TV didn’t fall. Ward stamped down on the creature.

Kane screamed out, “It’s scuttling! Don’t let it just get away!” Ward ran a hand over his eyes. “I can’t see it properly. Where-“

“It’s on the bloody wall there!” Kane yelled as the rat-spider continued to climb. Blood oozed from cracks in its chitinous shell, and one leg jutted out alarmingly. The creature rotated slightly as it climbed, requiring readjustment as it went. Kane watched as Ward flailed ineffectually at the wall, failing to hit the creature as it disappeared back in to its nest.

“Well that’s just great,” Kane said, checking the TV was fine. “The rat-spider almost jumps you and you don’t even manage to kill it.”

Ward’s scanned the ceiling. “It’s not my fault. The creature was glamoured, like I could do. Can do. How do you expect me to deal with something I can’t even see?” Ward rubbed at his eyes. “It’s all- maybe if we- hells, migraine. Do we have, you know, a plan?”

“Go home and hope someone who understands what’s going on?”

“We can’t do that. People live here.” Ward ran his hands along the wall. “Could you really leave your girlfriend in a place like this?”

“She’s not my girlfriend.”

Ward found a trace of the blood on the wall. “Does that even matter?”

Kane looked at the floor.

“Oh hells,” Kane said. “You stamped the creature’s blood in to the carpet?”

“What?” Ward followed Kane’s eyes down while Kane ran a hand through his hair. “You can see that right? What is Veronica going to say when she comes back and we’ve made a mysterious bloody patch in the middle of her lounge room?”

“Of course I can see-“ Kane waited at another of Ward’s awkward stops, but the man didn’t continue. Kane went back to the kitchen to find some cleaning supplies, and Ward trailed after him, eyes still drifting upward. As Kane was crouched down, looking through bottles under the sink, Ward said, “You saw the arachno-rodent.”

“I’m telling you, rat-spider. And you got around to noticing it.”

“No, I mean, it was glamoured so I couldn’t see it, but you saw it fine, straight away.”

Kane came out from under the sink, having found a soap he thought would help, a cloth and some baking powder. “I’d rather not see horrors.”

“Even when I made it out, it was just a big spider, and it was so hard to focus on it… Kane, I think you can see through glamours.”

Kane wet the cloth, liberally applying soap, and taking the baking powder with him. “Well hurrah for me. I’m sure that means a lot to you.”

“It means that you’re the only person who can see that thing coming.”

Kane got down and poured the bicarb on to the carpet, rubbing it in with his thumb. “So what does that even mean?”

Ward breathed in to answer, but the door opened, and Veronica’s voice carried in to the room, “Hey, made it back, and Rhani should get back from work in about twenty if you want to wait for her to get to work.”

Ward and Kane met each others eyes, matching horror on their faces. ‘Hide it,’ Kane mouthed at Ward as he shoved the cleaning supplies behind the TV, then went to say hello to Veronica. When they re-entered the lounge room, Kane saw the bloody patch, now smeared with white powder sitting in the middle of the room and spun to Veronica.

“So boss, where do you want us first?”

Veronica put down her bags and looked around the room. “I dunno. Why not you two start on the ceiling, and I’ll look at the oven. You can use brooms to get the cobwebs down if you can’t reach.” Kane waited for some outcry about the floor, but Veronica seemed oblivious to that mess. “Well sure, hand us the brooms and we’ll get brooming.”

Veronica fished a broom and, after some thought and a touch of embarrassment, a mop out of a cupboard and handed them over. “You good to go?”

Kane nodded. “I’ve cleaned enough things professionally that I can probably manage a ceiling.” Veronica went to the kitchen to start on the oven. Kane slumped his shoulders and whispered to Ward. “So what now? We just prod at the roof?”

“Let’s clear the roof. Hopefully it attacks me? Then you can hit it.”

“Why not you hitting it?”

“Glamours, remember. We need to hit it right. You need to.” Ward raised the mop and began to prod at the webbing above. Kane raised the broom and gingerly prodded at the ceiling, testing it. After a few moments he sighed and drove the broom head through the webbing, then tried to drag a section clean. The webbing held, and Kane wasn’t able to lever the broom to push it through. Annoyed, Kane pulled down on the broom, but it was held firmly in place. Using all his weight, Kane was able to force the broom free.

Kane looked at Ward, who was staring forlornly at the mop which now hung from the ceiling. “Okay, how about we forget the mop for now and just focus on trying to push the broom through the web.”

Ward nodded slowly. “I suppose. What if someone walks in?”

Kane walked to the centre of the room. “Does it really matter? We’re not getting this web off otherwise.”

Kane shoved the mop in to the very centre of the room, hoping that it touched the roof, and began to push against it. Kane got the broom half a meter before the built up resistance stuck it. “Well come on, you going to help?” Ward walked over and pushed against the broom handle. With the two of them, the webbing slowly gave way, allowing them to push it all the way to the wall.

Kane yanked the broom down, and examined the head, now hidden under layers of webbing. “Can’t believe that all came from one thing,” Ward commented. “It’s been living here a while. Come on, let’s try and do this.”

Kane kept his eyes up as he worked, constantly craning to see as much of the ceiling as possible. Slowly, very very slowly, the two of them cleared the ceiling, working their way around. The webs built up on the edges of the roof, balls of sticky white-grey goop. Half way through, one of the chunks of gunk came off, but they pressed on, Kane saying how good this was, now that they wouldn’t have to worry about how to pry that ball off.

The revealed roof was far from clean, still almost hidden by the webbing, but the shape of the ceiling’s pattern began to become visible. At last, there was only one small strip of ceiling to go. Kane wiped the sweat off is brow and peered at the web trying to discern any movement. The head of the broom was completely hidden in a mass of webbing. Grimacing, Kane and Ward pushed through the last of it.

The rat-spider wasn’t there. The entire ceiling had been forced clean, but there was still no sign of the creature.

“Damn, must have got out when we weren’t looking,” Kane said, now peering around the room. “I think it’s high time for a glass of water.”

“I think that can be arranged,” Veronica said, standing in the doorway, hands and clothes slightly blackened. Veronica looked at the ceiling. “It’s taken you guys all that time to clear the ceiling?”

Kane nodded, “There was a lot of gunk up there.” Veronica looked to the sides, where the webbing was now clustered while Ward stood in front of the mop, not that it did much good, since it extended all the way to the ceiling. Veronica blushed, putting a hand to her cheek. “God, I really didn’t realise how bad it had got. What even is that? It can’t all be spider web.”

Kane shrugged, “We were just going to grab a glass of water before trying to pull those globs down.”

“Yeah, sure, of course, I’ll grab them.”

Ward pulled the mop from the ceiling, and then stood on the back of the lounge to try and reach some of the webbing and tug on it. “What are you doing?” Kane hissed. “It might be up there still.”

“That’s fine. We can’t get rid of it unless we can find it.”

Kane half-heartedly peered under some of the couches. Looking for it. Veronica returned with the water, and Kane took both glasses while Ward struggled to disentangle his hands from the web he had managed to tear from the ceiling. Kane thanked Veronica, who was still staring at the ceiling, distracted.

“Look, I’m so sorry for this. I really shouldn’t have asked for your help, Kane, I mean, this is too much?”

“What, don’t like me all hot and sweaty?”

“Not this soon anyway.” Veronica said absentmindedly, then blushed again. “I’m actually not feeling so crash hot. Might have a lie down and start when Rhani gets home. I’ll walk the two of you to the door.”

“We’re fine to finish at least this before we go, right Ward?” Ward nodded agreement, and Kane smiled, but Veronica just rubbed her eyes. “I’d like the house quiet while I slept, but I’ll see you around sometime?” she asked Kane hopefully. “Yeah, sure. Anytime you’re free,” he answered. Veronica turned to walk them to the door and Kane spotted the rat-spider. It had its paws grasping on to the back of Veronica’s shirt, and its teeth dug in to the back of her neck. A little blood dribbled from its jaw.

Ward went to follow Veronica out, giving Kane a look as Kane stood frozen. Veronica reached the doorway, and Kane could stand it no longer, her leapt forward, clattering to follow. Veronica began to turn at the noise, but Kane reached out and managed to grab the rat-spider. Veronica’s shirt tore as he forced it from her back, and she gasped in pain. Kane wasn’t paying attention to her though.

The creature writhed in his hands, hard to hold. Eight paws covered in sharp claws dug in. Kane held it in both hands to stop it slipping free, but the creature’s legs worked against it, their angle stopping its smooth fur from being a help. For a second, its eight eyes stared in to Kane, and then it bit in to Kane’s finger. Almost immediately Kane felt woozy, and despite a firm grip, the rat-spider’s chitinous casing stopped him from crushing it. Kane felt his grip begin to weaken as the wooziness increased. Kane bashed the spider against the wall and heard a crack. The creature screamed, scrabbling more desperately.

Kane’s grip slipped, and he fell to his knees. Kane watched through blurry eyes as the rat-spider limped past Veronica, who leapt back, and then the creature scuttled out the front door. Veronica fell to her knees next to Kane. “What was that?” Kane watched as Ward stepped past both of them to shut the door, then stood there clearly uncertain where to look. Kane remembered to answer Veronica. “Think it was the spider that was living in here.”

Veronica gasped. “That? What kind of spider even was that?”

“Queensland spider,” Ward blurted. Kane rolled with it. “Yeah, must have been. They’ve got those bird-eating spiders up there. Must have been that?”

“And it was just on my back?”

“Yeah. Pulled it off you though, no worries. Now hopefully it’s gone for good and we you can get all that gunk cleaned up.” Kane forced himself to his feet, then leaned against the wall. “I’m not feeling so good actually. That thing bit both of us.”

“Do you want me to take you to a hospital?” Ward asked. “Nah, it’s fine,” Kane replied. “I reckon I can just lie on the couch. Although actually, Veronica, not really feeling like being the the lounge room right now. Mind if I completely chastely take a lie down on your bed, or are you still intending on using it?”

Veronica smiled at him. “After you managed to deal with that, I reckon I’ll let you lie beside me.”

“I’ll clean the lounge room more, since I wasn’t, you know, bit,” Ward said. Veronica waved at him. “Don’t worry about it. Mind if we do the lunch some other time?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Ward let himself out, and Kane and Veronica silently collapsed on to either side of her bed. Lying there woozy and sweaty Kane couldn’t help smiling to himself. Despite strange sights, a strange new friend, and definitely the strangest way he had ever got in to a girl’s bed, Kane was happy.

**Part 2: Sight Unseen**

The woman sat with perfect poise, her black hair completely still as her slender arms worked at writing. Here in her sanctuary she went without clothes, however her ornaments, her gold necklace that hung so loose and long as to dip between her two petite breasts, and the earrings that were a constant motion of gossamer-thin threads of gold that spun amongst themselves neatly above her shoulders. The final touch was gold filament that tangled her hair, interspersed evenly at the tips, but collecting together to all form one plate of gold at her brow.

Her head was barely bent as she surveyed the paper, looking down upon it and not deigning to lower her delicate chin. She rested herself on the grass, her legs folded to one side, and her right hand rested on the small table in front of her. The table itself was a marvel, seeming to have grown whole from a root of the one tree. There were no marks of carving. Even the inkwell looked to have formed naturally.

Her left hand was occupied with the very slow process of writing. Each word was the labour of a full minute, ink applied and reapplied till the exact shape desired was realised. Each letter was unique to its kin, with each curvature flowing neatly in to the next in as many delightful ways as there were letter to the word.

She was beauty and grace and in her tranquility she made every action of hers flow with that same elegance that her form held. It was not effortless, but there is all the more prestige in that she held such perfect poise even when there was nobody to observe it.

Her lips, of a deep dark red, curled in a smile as she finished her letter. The smiled touched her green eyes. Her eyelashes appeared damp, as if she had been crying, though it is hard to imagine a tear upon that face. She held her letter up for inspection to those brilliant green eyes and the smile reached them too.

In the happiness of a note completed before her, she relaxed for the briefest of instants. She blinked without thinking. Those pretty eyelashes, thick and dampened, let fly a few droplets, the finest of droplets, that landed on the page she had held up for her own inspection.

The smile vanished. She returned to her previous poise, the control of every motion to the greatest effect as she tore the letter in to pieces, letting the marred page fall to the ground, before taking up her quill again, and beginning anew to carefully craft those words. The marred page lay as condemnation in front of her, the off-white page marred by black ink, and the slightest flecks of red.

Half way through this new sheet a voice interrupted her. “How much longer will you be at that?” The woman scowled, carefully finishing up the sentence she was working on and then turned around. She spoke softly. “A letter should always have your full attention. Each word is vitally important.” The woman studied her guest and wrinkled her nose at the smell of cigarettes and lax hygiene. He wore a fashionable suit that was crinkled, ruining its effect, and he had a scraggly beard. “I thought you wanted out of my life,” The woman said.

The man looked uncomfortable. One hand cupped a cigarette, rolling it between his fingers. “Look, m’lady, I was going to leave you be, but we’re bound together, and that, that’s important.”

“You’re evading,” she stated. Standing up and beginning to walk around him, studying him. “Why did you come here? Weren’t you enjoying Europe?”

The man resisted swivelling to follow the lady, neck itching as she walked behind him. “I - I made a mistake. Made some bad friends.”

“Friends worse than you?”

“Friends who were breaking the rules. Planning to. Needed to turn King’s Evidence.”

“We don’t have a king.”

“It’s a phrase.” The man glanced longingly at his cigarette. “If I tell you who they are, will you get me back to Sydney?”

The woman stopped in front of him, green eyes examining every part of his face. “I will send you back, but you have offered me nothing for doing so.”

“We’re linked, you and I. Shouldn’t that be enough?”

“You used up all tolerance for that already.”

“What if I get you my sister?”

The woman breathed in sharply then nodded once. “Alright, Mark. If you help me get your sister, I’ll give you what you’re after.”

Ward sat in the cafeteria, waiting for Kane to show, checking his phone for the third time. Thankfully the place was beginning to clear out, the lunchtime rush over at last. The place was built like a concrete box, and lunchtime was almost intolerably loud. Ward tapped his fingers on the table. At last he spotted Kane striding in to the food court, grinning disarmingly.

“Sorry I’m late, you know how it is.”

Ward didn’t know how it was. Kane worked blessedly little, and Ward couldn’t understand how someone who had been free all day had still managed to be twenty minutes late. Ward didn’t say that though. “Good you’re here. How’s things?”

“Great. Ran in to Veronica on my way here, you know how it is.”

“Just ran in to her?” Ward asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You’re judging me now? I don’t think I can cope with that. I really can’t.” Kane said as he slouched further back in his seat. “I mean, I’m going to lose all my debonaire if even you’re going to comment on me being coupley.”

Ward shrugged. “I think it’s nice. It’s good right? You’re happy?”

“Yeah, damn her, I think I am.” Kane said, absently running a hand through his blonde hair. “What about you though, any girls on the horizon. Ward shook his head, then quickly asked, “So any luck finding Charlotte yet?”

“Well I’ve been cruising bars every night I don’t see Veronica and aren’t working. Still haven’t spotted her coldness. Don’t worry I’ll find her eventually.”

“And how often is that anyway?” Ward couldn’t quite keep the sharpness out of his voice. It had been two months since Kane had promised to introduce him to Charlotte in exchange for Ward’s help. It was only after Ward had helped that Kane had bothered to mention that he had no way to contact Charlotte and was just hoping to ‘run in to her’.

“Relax. I’m out maybe two or three nights a week. We’ll find her eventually and you can sate your curiousity about this magic stuff. Don’t worry.”

“That’s what you said a month ago. You’re not even really trying to make good. You’re just, just hanging out with your girlfriend and relaxing.”

Kane stretched. “Well yeah, of course. What else would I be doing with my time? Isn’t that what everyone wishes they could do? If you like I can introduce you to some other girls if that’s what it’s about.”

“What makes you think it’s about women?”

“Well you jumped right from how awesome my life was to wanting me to introduce you to one. Fairly easy conclusion to reach.”

“No, it’s not about that, it’s just…” Ward trailed off, trying to find the words. Kane grinned at him. “No? Not about that? No jealousy in the heart of Ward? You just Ward it off?”

Ward rolled his eyes. “It’s still not funny.”

“It’s still funny every time you do that though. And really, I’ve seen you at parties. You’re practically dancing the amount you shuffle your feet trying to work up the courage to go talk to someone. It’s painful to watch.”

“Gee thanks.”

“No, I’m not trying to me mean. It’s just, you seem to work things up so much. It’s always a Big Deal with you, but it’s not really a big deal. Women are just people after all.”

“Thanks Kane, I wasn’t aware that women were people too. What do you think of me?” Ward was speaking too loudly, and he took a deep breath, trying to calm himself down. Kane kept his slight grin. “Nah, you’re a great person, real kind soul, way better than me. But when you see a woman you like, you’re not seeing her as just another person, you suddenly think she’s some amazing wonderful mystical creature. Everyone else is basically like you or me, basically just a friendly face, and I guarantee if you just pack up those nerves, just work on thinking of them as people first, you’d have a far easier time.”

Ward sighed. “It’s not that easy. I mean who knows what they’ll think, what they’ll be like.”

“Ah, you’re letting your imagination carry you away. You didn’t know what me, Veronica or Tracey were like, and now you do and I bet you found that we’re just people, right?” Ward nodded slowly as Kane added, “Of course Tracey’s a kind of volatile bitchy person, but I guarantee your nervousness is completely unnecessary.”

Ward frowned, checked his phone again, then cursed quietly. “Sorry, I’ve got to get to a class.”

Kane threw his arms wide, “But I just got here. You can stay for another twenty minutes right?”

Ward stood up, shouldering his bag. “Sorry, but you’ve got to go to class.”

“I didn’t.”

“Sure, but you dropped out,” Ward said offering Kane a hand. Kane sighed, but shook it. “Mark Zuckerberg dropped out of uni.”

“Sure, but you don’t have a multimillion dollar company you dropped out for. See you later, Kane.”

Ward hurried off, checking his watch for the time to make sure he wouldn’t be late for class. It was just a short walk, and Ward arrived five minutes early, before any other student was waiting. Ward sat down with his back to the cold stone of the courtyard, stared out at the Jacaranda tree and tried not to pay any mind to Kane.

It was hard to do. Kane had known Ward all of three months, and already he was trying to help Ward. That was what stung. Kane didn’t even seem to think Ward could make it on his own, and it stung all the worse because Ward wasn’t sure he was wrong. It had been so long since Ward had a date that the thought of it had become scary. Ward never just talked to people though. Some days he felt he hadn’t learned how, others he thought there was something wrong with him.

More people started to cluster around the door to the lecture hall and Kane stood up, not wanting to be too low compared to anyone else. He leaned against the wall for a few seconds, then stood up straight, picked up his bag then put it down again, watching the other people as subtly as he could manage.

They were people. A couple chatted loudly about music, while another three stood huddled together, quiet and intense. Two women with dyed hair were smiling as they talked to a man in a sports jacket who leaned against the wall. Ward recognised some of the people from his tutorial all standing together, too far away for Ward to hear. Ward remained his own little island among the noise of conversation, trying to find where to rest his eyes without drawing anyone’s attention.

At last, the class went in, and Ward hastened to the front corner furthest from the door and took a seat. It was a nice place to sit, because you could sit by yourself without it being too obvious, as almost certainly someone else would sit down. Sure enough, a woman with a cream-coloured top and glasses sat next to him and pulled out a laptop. Ward carefully studied his own note book, turning his pen over and over in his hands, and avoiding drawing her in to conversation.

The lecturer entered, and the class settled down. As soon as the slides came up, Ward furiously took notes, trying to make sure everything the lecture said was down there somewhere. The pages got crowded as arrows were added to link ideas, and blank space on the right had new thoughts haphazardly added where they seemed to fit. Once the information started flowing, Ward felt far more comfortable, listening to the lecture pronounce the importance of folklore in English culture.

The class ended, and Ward took some time putting his notepad away so that the woman next to him had time to get up and leave first. Ward left the classroom happy, and went towards his next tutorial. Ward was almost there when he had to stop still, foot pulling back midstep to stop himself colliding with someone.

The first thing Ward realised was that he recognised her. The second was that he had no idea who she was. The woman was almost a head shorter than Ward, slightly stocky, and tanned. She flashed Ward a smile and an apology.

“No. Sorry. Really sorry. Sorry,” Ward said, as the two of them spent awkward seconds both dodging the same direction. “Hey, don’t I know you?” she said. Ward stopped moving, one foot in the air. “Uh, maybe? No. You don’t.”

“No, you’re in my tutorial for Greek Religion.”

Ward paused, then nodded. The woman had managed to walk around Ward now that he was stationary. “You’re going the wrong way you know. They changed the tutorial rooms for the week.”

Ward stared for a few seconds trying to process what was happening, and then nodded quickly. “Sure. Um. Where are we meant to be going?”

“Come on, we’ll get there together and that way neither of us has to be late on our own.”

Ward fell in to step slightly behind the woman as they made their way through the winding corridors towards their class, Ward stealing glances at her out of the corner of his eyes. The woman was definitely attractive, and Ward considered Kane’s advice, to treat her as a person. Ward flicked through his mind to try and find something to say.

“How did you find the first assignment?” the woman asked, shocking Ward out of his own thoughts. “Oh, the first one was hard. No, not hard. It was just a little rushed for me, but it was actually really interesting. How did you find it?”

“It was good. I wrote about the use of sacrifice in story and in recorded history, which was a fun comparison.” They turned a corner and Ward did a little skip to stop himself walking in to his companion. “Bit uncertain there. Too much coffee?”

“No. I don’t drink coffee. Does it look that bad?”

The woman smiled. “You just seem so jumpy.”

“Just got distracted. Too many thoughts.” As soon as Ward said it, Ward realised how dumb it must sound. “It’s just so easy when there are so many interesting things wandering around. Like tigers. Which aren’t wandering around here. But they do wander…”

The woman just smiled at him. Ward didn’t meet Iris’s gaze. “At last, class,” Iris said, pulling them up in front of a new room. Ward ducked inside and found a seat with space on either side. Iris followed and sat next to him. Ward absorbed himself in getting out his notepad and properly arranging his three different pens for note taking. By the time that was done, the tutor had thankfully arrived, and Ward was able to busy himself with note taking.

The woman, who answered to Iris on the roll call, didn’t bother with any notes for the tutorial. Instead, she sat forward in her chair, talking animatedly on the roll of women in myth, and their frequent connections to magic. Half way through Ward found himself adding a comment, a rarity in his classes, and by the end of it had become embroiled in the debate.

The class ended, and Ward risked a smile at Iris. The woman was definitely pretty, and definitely smart. Ward couldn’t believe how well the class had gone, and he found himself just a little impressed by Kane’s advice. “It’s an interesting question, don’t you think?” Ward asked Iris as they walked out. “Do you reckon there was a prevalence in greek myth to depict women as the weilders of magic, while men had the more traditionally heroic roles?”

Iris shrugged. “There are plenty of examples of magical powers by male characters in myth, though I suppose there are a couple of examples of mortal sorceresses where there aren’t really any wizards to speak of. Hard to tell how much our modern view colours it. I mean, in the original x-men line up, Jean Grey is given telekinesis so she doesn’t end up getting physically hurt.”

“So what, you think it might be a way to show women getting in on the excitement, slipping it past the norms?”

“Well it’s comparable, but probably not. The main problem is that the female characters still aren’t the protagonists. Still a gender skewed genre. Product of its times and all that.”

“Yeah, I suppose that makes sense.”

Ward realised that they had stopped walking several sentences ago, and were standing at a break. “I’m heading over towards that way,” Ward said, pointing. Iris nodded, “I’m heading the other way. Good talking to you though.”

“Yeah. Yeah it was.” Ward turned and began to walk away, and then spun back a second later to see Iris already turned away. Ward stood there for a second, trying to make his voice work. “Hey, we should, uh, talk again sometime? Sound good?”

Iris turned to look at him and gave him an unnervingly critical gaze. At last a shy grin broke her stern study. “Yeah. Sounds good. Want my phone number?”

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Ward was practically skipping when he got to the pub to meet Kane. He didn’t remember anything from his last two classes, and couldn’t wait to tell Kane about his new friend. Kane spotted him first and called out from near the far wall, and Kane had his own grin on his face.

Ward sat down, and impatiently exchanged hellos. Kane smirked at him. “So are you going to share your good news first, or should I share mine? I bet mine’s more exciting.”

Ward shook his head. “No, I made a friend today with a girl in one of my classes.”

“Well it’s going to be a good day for new friends for you then.” Kane stopped, looking at how his friend was beaming. “Wait, is this a friend-girl or potential girl-friend thing?”

Ward’s normal worried frown returned. “I, think that it was a maybe a date thing. I don’t really know. I was thinking maybe you could give me some pointers.” Kane nodded. “Well not right now. Tonight we have a special guest for you. You’ve heard about her, and you wanted to meet her, and at last, I present to you, Charlotte.”

Ward looked around, “What? Where?” Kane pointed towards the bar. “Over there at the bar, black hair, faded black jeans, some other weirdness you probably can’t see.” Ward wished Kane would describe her otherness more, but Kane had stopped giving those details once he realised Ward wasn’t able to see any of the strange things Kane saw. Ward held on to the details that he knew were there, the blue skin and black lips that the drowned girl would have. Ward spotted the woman Kane was pointing out as she turned, drink in hand, and headed towards Kane’s table. Charlotte saw Ward and gave him a quick wave, sliding in to a seat between Ward and Kane. Ward thought she looked slightly pale, with curly hair, and no weirder than that.

Charlotte walked over and sat down, meeting Ward’s eyes, and smiling at him. “You must be Ward. Charlotte. Kane was just telling me how you helped him deal with some other ghoulie. Nice to meet you.” Ward nodded his head a couple of times trying to think. His chest felt tight. “It’s nice to finally meet you. I’ve been hoping to for so long.”

Charlotte looked at Kane, leaning back in her chair. “What have you been telling the man about me?”

“Nothing out of the ordinary. The boy just wanted to learn about magic, and all that nonsense.”

Charlotte frowned, but turned back to Ward. “Alright, I suppose I could help out Always good to help out someone in our predicament. What did you want to know?”

Ward sat completely still, staring at Charlotte’s hair. There were so many things to ask, to learn. Ward couldn’t possibly pick which to say first. The bar was too loud around him, and as Charlotte waited he realised what a fool he must be looking. What would be a stupid question, make him look stupid in front of this woman?

“The other. I wanted to know more about it.”

Charlotte nodded in response. “Well of course, but what part. There are all kinds of different things. Can you be a bit more specific? What is it you know already? How were you introduced to the Other?”

After a few moments, Charlotte cleared her throat and Ward realised he’d fallen in to silence again. “At a party,” he answered. “When I was seven. Or eight. I don’t really remember it that well. There was a magician doing magic tricks, and he taught me one, how to make people not see anything.”

“Oh, you know how to do a basic glamour?” Charlotte said. Ward fought against the slump from that wonderful ability he had being called basic. “Yes. It’s about all I can do I’m afraid. I heard about you, what happened to you. I was sorry to hear about it?”

“It’s a tragedy when the good die young. Even the inoffensively bad deserve pity.”

“Still, there must be advantages,” Ward said.

“I beg your pardon?” Charlotte’s eyes narrowed to slits.

“To, you know, being dead and all. I mean, being sort of dead. And you still seem to be able to drink and stuff. I mean, do you actually need to breathe anymore? There must be advantages.”

Charlotte took a long slow breath in. “I’m going to forgive you because you’re obviously excited about the idea, but no. I’d rather you never talked about my state again.”

“I’m sorry, but I thought that, you know, you’d like being special.”

“Someone with a new disease is special. It doesn’t you should wish unusual afflictions on everyone you meet.”

“I- sorry.” Ward lowered his eyes. “I didn’t think. I’m going to get myself a drink. Maybe when I get back, you can talk about something else.” Ward got up, and awkwardly patted Charlotte’s shoulder on the way to the bar. There he absentmindedly bought a drink as he tried to compose himself. He shouldn’t ask about Charlotte, but instead the Other in general. How many people from the Other were around and what kinds they came in. Those would be good things to learn. When Ward got back, looked at Charlotte who sat with her lips pressed together in a thin line. Ward looked at Kane for a clue, but Kane wasn’t meeting his eye, instead playing on his phone. Ward sat for a moment before deciding to plough ahead. “I was wondering if you could tell me something about the Other itself. Is it a place? Or is it something else?”

“You can’t see my hair moving, can you? When you touched me, you couldn’t feel that my skin was cold.”

“N-no, I didn’t. I don’t get all that.” Ward shrugged. “It’s a little embarrassing really.”

“The ability to see through basic glamours is what defines someone as being part of the Other. You’re not. It’s a vital distinction. I shouldn’t have told you anything at all. And Kane made as big a mistake telling you.”

“Why?”

“I can’t tell you.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t tell you that either.”

Ward drooped, and Charlotte seemed to soften. “I really am sorry that I can’t be more of help, but there are some rules that you don’t go around just breaking.”

“Does that mean something Other is watching us right now?” Ward asked.

“Probably not. Why would you think that?”

“Because of all this secrecy. You’re acting like a casual chat is as bad as murder. That means there’s something behind it, some organisation, someone to enforce the rules.”

Charlotte breathed out, making a hissing noise, almost a whistle. “You’re trying to make me talk, I should leave.”

Charlotte went to stand, and Ward reached across the table to rest his hand on hers. “No, don’t go. Please. I’m sorry.” Ward was ready for it, and resisted the odd compulsion to draw his hand away swiftly, to end the contact. Charlotte looked at the hand in surprise, then over at Ward. “If I stay, I can’t tell you anything about the Other. So why do you want me to?”

“Because, because you’re someone who I can talk to, and they won’t think I’m crazy when I talk about my ideas of magic. Because even if you don’t say anything, you won’t have to pretend anything around me. Why not just hang out a bit? What harm can it do?”

Charlotte glanced over at Kane, then nodded, a smile creeping on to her face as she resettled herself. “Sure. Sounds like fun.”

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The pubs had closed, and the three of them had retreated to Ward’s house to watch episodes of some series they had all already seen. Ward sat on a chair he had dragged in from the kitchen of his thin terrace, while Kane lounged next to Charlotte on the couch. Kane was drunk, and exulting in it.

“I’m glad you decided to stay, Charlotte. You,” Kane’s hand swayed slightly with the weight of the beer bottle that hung from three fingers, “You’re a lot of fun. I’m glad of it. Who needs all that magic and weirdness stuff clogging up hanging out, having fun.”

Charlotte nodded. “Better not be part of the Other at all.”

Both of them looked at Ward, who smiled sadly. “Yeah, sure. Who needs it.” The words sounded hollow, though neither of the other two seemed to notice. Kane whistled at one of the actresses, and Charlotte shoved him, provoking mock outrage.

“I guess we probably should have invited Veronica along too, since we ended up not doing the magic thing” Ward said, staring at the TV.

Charlotte gasped. “That girl you were seeing when you completely flipped out on one time when you saw me? She’s still talking to you?”

Kane laughed. “Of course. Do you really think there was any chance that she wouldn’t? I’m adorable.” Charlotte snorted, but stayed quiet. The episode finished, and Charlotte said she needed to be off, that it was far too late. Kane decided he’d rather sleep on Ward’s couch than bother walking all the way home. As soon as Charlotte stood up, he stretched out on it and refused to get up to say goodbye.

Ward walked Charlotte to the door, and hugged her goodbye. Ward saw Charlotte studying him. “Oh honey, you’re really sad about all this secrecy thing aren’t you.”

Ward shook his head, but there were tears in his eyes that he had been holding back all night. He couldn’t meet Charlotte’s eyes.

“I know it might not seem it, but trust me, the Other is nothing you want to be part of. Many of the Other people are cruel and selfish, dangerous people. You’re well clear of them.”

“Why can’t you just tell me about it?”

Charlotte hesitated, but then spoke. “There’s a contract that governs people in the Other. It says you’re not allowed to introduce new people if you’re part of it. And there’s this man, Sam. You break this law, Sam hunts you down and kills you.” Charlotte shuddered in the warm night air. “Everyone in the Other is terrified of Sam.”

“But if nobody can be told about the Other, or shown it, how do new people end up involved with it?”

Charlotte bit her lip, and Ward had reached for the door before Charlotte spoke. “Some stress, undeniable proof, or extreme circumstance. Those tend to be the catalysts, but each person in there has a different story. I wouldn’t seek out the Other. You could drive yourself mad that way.”

Ward felt his forehead throbbing as his eyes itched, and his hands shook. He rubbed his face with his palm, trying to force himself to be fully awake for the lecture. Ward glanced down at his computer, noting the lecture was half way finished, and feeling too exhausted to be properly guilty about the empty document on the screen.

It had been two weeks since Ward had met Charlotte. That night Ward had lay awake, staring at his ceiling, and listening to the house settle as the heat left the bricks. Charlotte had given Ward the answer, and given it to him in a way that should bring no blame to her if Ward were able to bring himself in to the Other. Lying there not sleeping, Ward had furiously plotted what he might do to break in to this amazing world his senses refused to let him experience.

Ward had decided that the best way to try it was to avoid sleep, for as long as possible. Ward hoped that if he avoided it for long enough, then that Other world would snap in to glorious focus. Push himself towards the edge of sanity and in to the glorious newness and difference of what was beyond.

Occasionally, as he sat staring at the walls in his house, tasks forgotten, Ward found himself worrying about what he was introducing himself to. Charlotte had listened to what he could do, and named it as if it were nothing, the most basic talent. Maybe every child involved in the Other could create a glamour and all the wonderfulness would yield to the bitter discovery that his special little ability was the kind of thing that everyone did out of hand. It would be worth it though, to be included. Maybe if he became part of the Other, he could learn all kinds of other interesting things. Things that really mattered, not just what everyone learned.

The person next to Ward cleared his throat, and Ward realised that the lecture had finished. Ward must have been dozing, a grave error under the circumstances. Ward apologised, and packed up his computer as fast as he could. On the third attempt to put it into his bag, Ward gave up, and just held it in his hands as he got up, and walked out, pulling aside once he was sure nobody from the lecture would be able to watch him to carefully slot his computer in to his bag, and then continue walking. He picked up a coffee with three shots and took a moment to recompose himself outside the small coffee cart, eyes closed as people milled around him. Ward rocked slightly on his feet, balance thrown out by the lack of sleep. Ward had heard that sleep deprivation had the same debilitating effects on the mind as driving, and he was willing to believe it.

Ward opened his eyes and sipped the coffee impatiently, finishing the entire thing as fast as possible. Ward was approaching the point where he wanted to be most awake for the week. He could feel the adrenaline in his system already, losing the battle against the dizziness and lethargy of sleep deprivation. Ward shook his head, trying to clear it enough for the conversation to come, then headed to the tutorial.

“Hey there,” Iris said, smiling at him. Ward smiled back, making sure to meet her eyes despite how his head blurred the view. “Good to see you again. How’s your reading going?” Ward asked.

The tutorial started in earnest before Iris was able to answer, him, but she wrote the answer on the side of her page. Ward brought the words in to focus, and smiled. She had written, ‘shrug. Always lot to read. Think I’m down to fourty pages a night.’

Ward tried to push himself in to the discussion through the tutorial, and to his credit was only confused once. All throughout, Iris sitting next to him made him more alert than he had felt in several days. Ward was still sleeping most nights, against his will. At some point, no matter what movie he had playing, the body would just shut down. It was a constant frustration.

After the tutorial, Iris and Ward found themselves standing outside the room, neither moving to walk off. “Are you alright?” Iris asked after some nervous chatting. “You seem less… alert than normal?”

“You mean less nervous? Just, getting used to you,” Ward answered, then clenched his jaw against a yawn, eyes flickering briefly closed. “Oh you’re exaggerating your nerves. And no, you just seem tired.”

“I’m fine. Just some late nights is all.”

“Well, alright. I was going to ask you if you wanted to come see a movie tonight, but you look like you could use the sleep.” Ward almost forgot to breath. “What? No. No no, I’d be happy to see a movie. Where would you like to meet?”

Iris’ fingers tapped against her notepad as she thought. Ward tried not to stare, instead Ward focused on the wall behind her. Ward barely dared to breath unless it betrayed the anxious excitement in him. “If you’re sure you’re alright, how about we meet at the cinema on King Street. There was this film I really wanted to see tonight, but one of my friends bailed on me.”

Ward agreed without hearing what the movie was, and again, apologising, when she told him. There was an awkward pause when Ward wondered if he should hug Iris goodbye, and then settled for a wake, a shrug, and a promise to meet up that evening.

Ward walked out of the building and smiled at the sun. The day was bright and his tiredness was forgotten as Ward began to plan out the evening. It took a full five minutes before Ward began to panic.

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Ward sat on a chair in his kitchen, rocking backwards and forwards slightly, while Kane and Charlotte sat at the table, bickering over what he should do. Dazed and dreamy, Ward had almost literally ran in to Veronica, who had been so concerned over his tired state that she had worried the story of his day out of him. Unable to talk to him for very long, Veronica had recruited Kane to help provide him some advice, and Kane had invited Charlotte over to Ward’s house for a drink.

“He clearly isn’t well. I mean look at him just rocking there.” Charlotte said, gesturing at Ward.

“‘m fine,” Ward mumbled.

“See? He can’t just cancel on this girl. It would be such a wasted opportunity.”

“And if he turns up like he is now he’ll likely embarrass himself. He needs to rest from whatever’s wrong with him. Which he isn’t saying. Which is worrying me.”

“He just looks tired,” Kane said, finishing his glass of wine. “He’ll be fine in a bit. Just get him out the door and in sights of this lovely woman will surely settle him down.”

Ward stopped listening to them. He had already decided he was going out, that he wasn’t going to touch the glass of wine Kane had poured for him in case it made him even more sluggish, that he was going to avoid caffeine and just sit through the movie and relax. It was going to be a nice evening.

Ward could tell Charlotte was worrying about him, and wanted to reassure her, tell her what he was doing, but didn’t want to get her in to trouble. He had his palms pressed together under the table, waiting for the clock to spin around to time to wander up.

“Ward? Were you even listening?” Charlotte asked.

Ward shook his head, trying to clear it. Charlotte sighed. “Look, there’s something wrong, and we can’t make you talk about it, but I really don’t think you should go.” Ward ungummed his mouth. “It’s fine. Good. Okay. I’ll be fine.” Ward smiled, trying to make himself look alert and failing horribly. “I think I should probably head off now anyway. You guys are good. You can get out. Show yourselves out when you’re good. And ready.”

Ward stood up, pulled the jacket off the back of his chair, said his farewells and left. Charlotte looked glum, swirling the wine in her glass and staring at it. “You know he’s going to get in to trouble,” Charlotte said. Kane leaned back on his chair and finished his own glass. “It’s not going to be too bad. At worst he embarrasses himself, and the boy needs to get out more. This house doesn’t look like a bit of furniture has been moved since his grandfather lived here.”

“So what do we do now?”

“Show ourselves out. After finishing the wine.” Kane reached for the bottle, and poured himself another glass.

“I don’t think that’s good enough.”

Kane waited for Charlotte to expand, and his questioning look drew out an answer. “Whatever this is, it’s because of me, you can see it in his face.”

“Hey, he met this girl before he met you. No need to be narcissistic over there.”

Charlotte frowned. “No, not that. The exhaustion. I shouldn’t have told him anything about the Other. I knew I shouldn’t have, but I did it anyway. Such a stupid thing to do. Now he knows that much he’ll try to find another way. What if he thinks he’s already found one?”

Kane shrugged, then grabbed the table to stabilise his chair, the movement almost toppling it backwards. “So what if he has, or he does? That just makes it easier for you to talk to him?”

“You don’t understand this.”

“Nor do I want to, thank you.”

Charlotte paused. “Yes, you do have the right attitude. The Other is *dangerous,* and if Ward keeps searching for it, something less friendly than me is bound to find him.”

“So what, you’re going to give him a stern talking to?”

Charlotte bit her lip, and pushed at some hair that had floated in front of her face, sending it on a new course. “I need to talk to him. When he gets back. Try and sort all this out.”

Kane shrugged. “Sure, but if you’re doing that, we’ll need to order some dinner.”

“You can’t stay.”

“Sure I can.” Kane took another swig of his wine. “We can put a strong front, be all parenty together. ‘Son have you been talking to any bad pixies of late?’ “ Kane was grinning, and Charlotte couldn’t help but crack a smile.

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By the time Ward made it all the way to the cinema, he had shouldered a lamp-post, almost stepped in front of a car, and tripped over the curb, mysteriously present at the side of the street. He had also realised that he hadn't shaved properly, his left cheek still holding stubble, and he had put on the wrong jacket. Everything told him that this was going to be a bad evening for him. To top it off, he was early, with more time to get nervous.

After an eternity, or possibly ten minutes, his eyes managed to focus on the figure of Iris walking towards him, already waving and smiling, her black hair bouncing slightly with the energy of her step. He hastily raised a hand and waved back enthusiastically. As Iris got closer though, the smile fell from her lightly freckled face to be replaced by a frown. "You're looking really tired. Are you sure you're up for a movie?"

"I'm just a little tired. I'll be fine. Don't worry about me," Ward answered. "How are you?"

"Oh I'm fine, Glad I didn’t have to go by myself. Thanks for coming.”

"Right. Glad I could be of assistance. Lucky I live close, otherwise I mightn't have been able to get here." Ward tried to think of some witticism to add, but his mind left him standing blankly. He turned to buy the tickets for the two of them while he tried to terrify his mind in to working for him just this once.

They walked up to the counter and grabbed their tickets. Ward tried to be the gentleman and shoulder the bill, but Iris prevented him, and there was just no way he could argue with those eyes, so he gave in. They bought a small popcorn to share, and went in to watch the movie.

The pre-movie chattering and the constant fear of accidentally saying something awful kept Ward awake. Once the movie started though, while those little fears of being inattentive kept shocking him enough to stop actually falling asleep, he simply couldn't concentrate enough to follow the plot. Try as he might, he knew he was going to end up embarrassing himself if Iris asked for his opinion on the film.

The credits finally rolled, and Ward suppressed a yawn. He immediately glanced at Iris to see if she had noticed, but she seemed to still not be paying any attention to him. Ward hadn't been able to help glancing at her through the movie to see where her attention was, to try to read her body language. He wasn't quite sure what body language he should be looking for, but still he checked. She seemed relaxed and engrossed in the film, except for a couple of times where there was an awkward moment of eye contact when he had glanced over.

They stood up, and she stretched her arms, and shook out her legs, and they walked out of the cinema with Ward loping along behind. He almost walked in to her as they ducked out to head in to a nearby cafe for a slice of cake and a hot drink, and was so apologetic that it took about a minute for Iris to get him to sit down.

Once finally seated, and the cakes ordered (chocolate cake for Ward, and a carrot cake for Iris), she turned to him, and her face full of excitement asked, "So what did you think of the film?"

"It was good? I mean I don't think it was the best film I've ever seen."

Her face fell slightly, "Well, it's certainly not to every one's tastes I suppose. The intrigue went a bit overboard, don't you think?"

Ward tried to gel together the plot in his brain, "Yeah, I'm not sure how well I followed it really. Couldn't get my mind fully on it. Though some of the action was cool I think."

Her face fell a little further. Several awkward seconds of silence followed while she glanced around, not even paying that much attention to Ward anymore. Nothing creates awkwardness quite as much as uncertainty about the other's expectations.

Thankfully, the drinks and cake arrived to provide a distraction from this, and Ward set upon it with grim determination, eating faster than he probably should have, trying to think about how best to try to salvage the situation.

"You really are exhausted," Iris said, as Ward snapped back to reality, realising he had stopped eating with his final piece of cake suspended half way to his mouth. Ward glanced at his food, set it back down on the plate, and slumped in his chair, closing his eyes.

"Yeah. I really am. Sorry."

"Well why didn't you just say so when I asked you to see a movie? I mean, you should clearly be sleeping. What time do you have to get up tomorrow?"

He opened his eyes again and looked directly in to hers. His face was completely serious, focused. "I came because I wanted to see you. And I wasn't going to miss that opportunity just because I was a little tired."

Iris snorted, and a smile crept up on her face. "That's kind of sweet, in a really dumb way."

A relieved smile from Ward matched Iris'.

The shared smile passed, and the two returned to conversation. The topic shifted to favourite movies, and Ward was able to engage in it without too much thought. He was quiet, but he was always quiet so there was nothing too unusual about it all. The evening wound down pleasantly.

Ward agreed to walk Iris to her car, back through Camperdown Memorial park. While they were crossing it, Iris asked, “So why are you so tired anyway?”

Ward sighed, "It's a really dumb reason," and he walked on silently, trying to figure out exactly what to say. “I was just thinking that being tired, really tired, not just a little tired, might give you a different perspective on the world, life, stuff like that. It seemed, I don’t know, interesting to try out.”

"Well you're right. That is a really dumb reason. Why would you ever do that?"

"I don't know. I just wanted to see."

"And how is it working out for you?"

"Well, my thoughts are broken and my head hurts. Nothing looks particularly new unless you count occasionally out of focus. I’m perpetually more upset than normal.”

"So not that well then. You better get some sleep tonight or you'll be the death of you."

"Yeah. You're probably right."

They reached the park, with the moonlight bright around them, augmented to near daylight with the lamps that dotted it.  "What kind gave you this idea anyway?"

“One “of my friends was just talking about how the world could sometimes look different and I just wanted to see if I could find a way to do it.

“And from that start you decided to give up sleeping indeterminately?” she shook her head, "I think I might have misjudged you. You look... sensible. I was sure you were way too competent to do something that whimsically foolish. You always think about everything before you act.”

Ward was taken aback by the description. There was an decisiveness and a certainty to it that was completely unexpected. She hadn't seen that much of him, yet she apparently thought she already had a precise understanding of him. He was almost a little insulted at being so easily summarised. They got back to her car, and she hugged him as they said goodbye, holding on an instant longer than he did. Trying to think what he should say, Ward said, “You have the most beautiful eyes, you know?”

Iris paused a second, keys in one hand, door open, and stared at Ward, expression surprised and, Ward thought, slightly worried. “Goodnight Ward. Go get some sleep.” Then she was off.

Ward walked back in to the park, and took a seat on a bench. He silently cursed himself for all his small little mistakes through the evening. He tried to think of what small actions might have been wrong, but his mind just wasn’t up to the task. Some people might have taken her rather sensible advice and gone to sleep. Ward was too determined. If he could make this work, then it would be worth it.

Alone, Ward slumped further. The effort of focusing on the here and now had completely drained him. His head lolled forward and his eyes closed while his thoughts reached inwards. They tried to wonder, they tried to speculate, however there was no way his mind was going to focus for him, and instead he drifted through a haze of incoherence.

He was jolted back to the world around him by the bench creaking beneath him. He blurrily saw the person who had sat beside him on the seat. This stranger wore a suit, creased, and from the smell it was from several days wear. His black hair was short, and his face had patchy stubble. An unlit cigarette sat in his mouth drooping down at the centre of a smile directed at Ward.

"Hey friend, got a light?"

"Nu. Wha. No. I don't smoke."

"Well that's a shame. Does you good to feel the smoke in your lungs. Yeah the cancer stuff is bad, but still, does your soul good. Guess I'll just have to live a little longer."

The stranger gave an attempt at a chuckle and stretched himself out, trying to get his entire body straight while remaining on the seat, before relaxing back in to it. Ward just stared at him. The man seemed happy to just to sit with his unlit cigarette. Ward was falling asleep again by the time he spoke.

"That chick you were seeing. She's something pretty special, ain't she?"

Ward almost fell off the seat at this comment. "How would you know about that?"

The man continued to grin, "I used to know her, see. A while ago now, but still worth thinking about. You could probably say I knew her pretty damn well, though we had our little falling out. She is something special though, you wouldn't believe some of the things I could tell you about her."

Now Ward was sitting up, looking closely. "Are you some kind of stalker?"

The man shifted the cigarette to the corner of his mouth. "You pulled out of the hug too early though. The way you kept glancing away was annoying her too, you should learn to focus where you look.”

Ward began to interrupt, but the man pressed on, "The way your hands brushed while you were walking up didn't mean anything. It might have seemed significant, that point of contact, but it was accident, coincidence. Don't make a big deal out of it. And when you tried to edge slightly closer in your seat at the cinema, if you were trying to stop her from noticing, you failed. She was more than aware that you were so desperate to be near her you cared about that centimeter shift."

Ward stood up. He tried to loom over the man who was still sitting there, smiling at Ward with his eyes twinkling. Ward stopped himself shaking the man, from drawing the man to his feet, or from hitting him. Ward had never been in a fight, and wasn't planning to start now.

As he relaxed, and began to start thinking again, a strange smile slowly crept across his face, and it was followed by a laugh. It was long, loud and only slightly tinged with delirium. His tired eyes focused on the man again. "Oh this is rich. I'm not an idiot you know. You don't think I would figure it out?"

The man stared at him blankly while Ward continued, "There are two real options of how you would know that. The first is that I've gone mad, and you're some figment of my imagination, and the other is that being this tired forever finally payed off and I can see Other things properly now. At which point you are some kind of  creature, not a person, that's been spying on her.

Ward began to pace will the man still stared at him slightly bemused. "I don't think you can be a some kind of creature. The knowledge you were talking about, that was personal, that was internal stuff. So I am going to guess that you're just some figment of my imagination."

The man's attempts to put his thoughts in order were disrupted by this further revelation about what he was. After several moves back and forth, Ward stopped, asking "Well?"

"You're right. I am just a figment of your mind. Would you believe I'm your good judgement?"

Ward laughed, with an appropriate hint of manicism mixed in. "I am fairly certain my good judgement doesn't smoke, though where my mind conjured you from is a mystery."

"You don't seem too worried to be talking to a figment of your own imagination."

"Not really. Little concerning, but it means I'm close to breaking through. And people keep telling me to sleep," he said shaking his head, "When I'm finally close to actually getting where I want to be."

"Right. Well, I want to tell you that this girl is going to stop you getting there. You should stay away from Iris, or you're not going to get what you actually want. Surely a girl isn't worth the trouble of it if that is the cost."

Ward ran his fingers through his hair while beginning to pace again. "No, I don't think you're actually helpful. I think you're a destructive hallucination. I'll have no advice from you."

The man shrugged, standing up. He pulled out a lighter and lit the cigarette still dangling from his mouth, "Whatever suits you,” he said as he walked off trailing smoke behind him. Ward watched him begin to walk off and then said, “Wait, come back. Maybe I do want your advice.”

Ward stared at the figure, smoke trailing up. The old night had finally become cold as the heat of the day escaped. “The only question is how can I trust your advice.”

The man chuckled. There was a disconcerting gurgling noise to it. "You don't. You shouldn't trust whatever advice I give you, and you’re smart enough not to. Bad figments give bad advice. But, well, perhaps listen to this one piece of advice only. Talking about things can help to iron it all out. Having to put it all in to words clears your thinking. No harm, see?"

Ward eyed the figure warily. There was something wrong with the situation, and he was trying to place his mind on it. Ward warily began to lay out his situation.

"It's... I feel so excluded from Kane and Charlotte's, I don't know. I feel excluded. They don't like, they don't talk about it. But they're looking at what I've always wanted. What I wanted to know about. And they get it and I don't. And then there's this way to-yeah it's a dumb way but-well, the not sleeping means I might be able to join them with that."

Ward looked down at his hands, elbows rested on knees, and said in a quiet voice, "I might get my magic back."

Ward began to pace, keeping one eye on the figure. "On the other hand, there's Iris. Who you were focused on. She's nice. When I'm able to relax around her, it's like, the stumbling and the, the confusion. That's not something I get when she's around. Yet I can't tell her about, well, about magic," Ward stopped pacing and stared at the man again. "I mean just saying it sounds dumb. If I want whatever, want something with her, then what do I do?"

The figment dropped the almost-finished cigarette and stamped it in to the grass. Ward stared at where it lay, and frowned. The butt lay in the grass. “Well it’s been grand getting out from behind your eyes and all, but I should be on my way, and you should too. You’ve got a long night of not sleeping I’m sure.”

Ward shook his head and looked back and the man was gone. Ward walked to where he stood and poked at the butt with a single finger, watching it move under his touch. Ward straightened up and looked around. The night was silent around him, but Ward wasn’t comforted.

“I know you’re still here,” Ward called. “You’re bad at pretending. A figment doesn’t leave a cigarette behind.” Ward stood still, every muscle tensed, trying to force his eyes to see what must be really there. The man appeared in front of him for just a second, just as a small nova of pain burst behind Ward’s eyes. Ward swung out to where he had seen the man and his fist connected with something before he was thrown to the ground.

The man was standing above him when Ward looked up again, lighting another cigarette. “Bad habits eh? They get you in all kinds of trouble.”

Ward stood, glaring at him. “Whatever you are, you should leave Iris alone.”

The man let a breath of smoke out. “Aren’t you worried for yourself?”

Ward shook his head. “It’s Iris you care about. You showed up after I saw her, and that was what you wanted to talk about. You accepted being a figment after I said so.” Ward’s hands went in to his pocket, and came out, throwing something at the man, who deflected the small container down, then stared at it.

“You threw salt at me?”

Ward was staring at the man, eyes itching. The pain behind his eyes had gone away, but the man’s presence still unsettled him.

“What would salt do? Pathetic superstition. If I’d been anything truly terrifying, you’d be dead by now.”

Ward lunged forward at the man in a wild punch. The man sidestepped easily, and punched Ward in the side of the head. Ward stumbled, head ringing. Spinning around, Ward found the park empty. Ward stood for just a second and then ran.

The second blow hit his head. Ward had not seen where it came from. Ward stumbled. The third blow knocked him down, head ringing, purple blotches ruining his vision. Ward tried to stumble to his feet. The fourth blow knocked him out.

Charlotte woke early, unsure where she was. The intake of breath beneath her made her sit up. Charlotte had been sleeping, lying against Kane’s chest. Kane was still fast asleep.

Charlotte quickly got up, looking around Ward’s small lounge room. They must have fallen asleep before Ward got back. After the first hour of waiting, Kane had decided to put a movie on, and Charlotte had changed fairly swiftly from worrying about putting a movie on in Ward’s house, to arguing over what movie to put on. They had compromised by watching Charlotte’s movie first, then Kane’s choice if they were still there. Charlotte had got to pick a second movie, whose title screen was still displayed on the television.

Now it was eight in the morning, and sunlights struggled in to the lounge room from the kitchen. There was no way for sunlight to get in to the room directly. Charlotte stared at the stairs, shrugged, and then crept up them, peering very cautiously in to Ward’s room. The bed was neatly made, and completely unslept in.

Charlotte shook Kane awake, who came to stretching and grumbling. “Ward didn’t come home last night,” Charlotte said instead of any greeting. Kane blinked sleepily. “Mwrvlsbls,” Kane murmured.

“Didn’t you hear what I said, Ward didn’t come home last night. Aren’t you worried?”

Charlotte waited impatiently while Kane rubbed at his face and finally managed to sit up. Kane managed to focus on Charlotte and sighed. “He went on a date. You can make your own inferences.” Kane lay back down, closing his eyes again, with a satisfied smile.

“What if he didn’t go home with her?”

Kane grunted, but didn’t bother moving. Charlotte crossed her arms at him, but Kane couldn’t see it. Charlotte gave up on him, sent Ward a text asking how his night had gone, and then went to scrounge out some breakfast.

Breakfast was hard to come by in Ward’s house. There was one kind of cereal, no milk, and no bread. After digging through some cupboards, Charlotte unearthed a dubious jar of jam, and then after re-examining the fridge found some yoghurt that was by this point good enough. Charlotte spooned some in to a bowl and at it slowly.

To pass the time, Charlotte began to look up Iris’ profile, trying to find some more information about her. There was a profile picture of the woman in front of the harbour bridge beaming from under large, dark sunglasses, and some information about her high school.

It came around to midday, and Ward had neither replied nor arrived home. Kane finally got up, joining Charlotte in the kitchen, slumping in to a chair. “He must have had a really good night.” Kane shivered slightly at the cold. Charlotte hadn’t noticed it.

“So we should head off now. Time to get back to the real world and give that boy his talking to later?”

“You’re not at all worried?”

“No. Why? Are you jealous?”

Charlotte ignored Kane. There was university work that needed doing, and the day was draining away from her. “Fine. Let’s head out and meet up with him later.” Charlotte tried to pat her hair down. “He’s an adult. I’m sure he can manage for himself.

“That’s very grand of you, being the better woman.”

“Oh, shut up.”

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Charlotte arrived home after a day of study and threw her bag on to the bed. It was too early for the first glass of wine, but she was dead, and it couldn’t do her any harm. It was nicely chilled and she sipped it slowly as she checked her phone again.

She had texted Ward thrice and called him once and still hadn't got ahold of him. After finishing the glass of wine she grabbed her jacket and her bag and went out again. She caught the bus back in to Newtown and wandered down the main strip, phone held lightly in one hand so she wouldn't miss if it rang. On the way, she sent Iris a friends request, just in case.

Arriving at Ward's house, she knocked and with no answer. The street was dark. The nearest street light was covered by a tree. Charlotte waited there for five minutes before moving on, heading to Erskineville. Off the main strip of Newtown, it is one of Newtown's many quiet neighbours. A place to come home to after a wild night. She wandered down the main street, then turned off one of the side streets and went a block back to an old abandoned theatre.

It wasn't much to look at anymore, and that was a shame. All the paint was faded and chipped, the sign gone. The display board was sadly empty. There was no graffiti on the place at all, which might have struck a passerby as odd if they had noticed, but they never did. To the casual observer it was possibly one of the least noticeable buildings around. If you asked the person next door about the abandoned theatre it might take a few seconds for him to remember it was there. Charlotte though could read the sign that had been neatly tacked to the door, with a neat font ruined by a garish sparkly silver ink:

**The Ghost Bar**

**All Others and Displaced welcome**

**Safety guaranteed**

**Your discretion is appreciated**

The sign was completely unnecessary. Everyone who came here already knew about the place. It was advertising not the place, but that it was hidden. Charlotte glanced at her watch. It was still really too early to go in, but she pushed the door open anyway and wandered down.

It had changed since her last visit. The lighting had been brought up, and a red tinge added to it. the walls remained dark and black, and you could see the tiered seating which you could wander down through to the bar. At one time those layers would have been the seats of the theatre, but now there were six distinct layers with stairs leading down the centre of the place. Each layer had four booths for people to sit in nice plush seating. Down the bottom, the stage had been cut out, only the front left to provide the bar. There were doors either side of the bar that led out to the back of the place. As expected, there were no patrons, but she had been convinced that the bar's owner would be here.

"Callum?" she called. There was a pause and she readied to call out again, when the door to the left of the bar opened and a man emerged from what must have been backstage. He was frowning, and his normally neat black hair was mussed. He wore a brilliant blue shirt with the sleeves rolled up, and matching pants that hadn't been fashionable for at least a decade. It took a moment for recognition to dawn on the man's face, at which point he sighed, and called out "Take a seat and I'll be out in a second."”

He went out the back again and Charlotte found a seat in one of the booths nearer the top. She sat there long enough to get uncomfortable before Callum emerged again. He had combed his hair down, and his full customary suit, the jacket a different blue. When examined closely, the shirt, jacket, and the pants all has a tightly made pattern, crisscrossing lines. The pattern was complex, chaotic and cramped. If you looked closer, you could see that it wasn’t just lines on the suit, but divisions in the fabric. If you looked at it from just the right direction, you might think it was a very complicated spider’s web. The man, Callum, walked over to Charlotte, and smiled at her. “Good afternoon Charlotte.”

“Not going to offer me a drink?”

“I don’t really do that, and my barman isn’t in yet.” A pen flicked idly in Callum’s hand making a rhythm on the table. “Dessa hasn’t got ahold of me since I last talked to you. If you want a little more detail it’ll cost you though. I’d be a poor information broker if I told you everything I know.”

“No, I don’t think I need anything more.”

“Came here for some other reason then?”

I didn’t mean to disturb you if you if you weren’t open yet.”

‘Oh I wouldn’t worry too much. I should have mentioned earlier that your hair is as stunning as always, rude of me. You are always welcome here when you need anything.”

He stood up, and motioned her towards the door. She stayed seated, saying, “Actually, that wasn’t the entire reason I’m here. I also wanted to see if you could help me with something else. Callum nodded. “Well if it’s business I need a drink. Don’t feel right without one. You’re free to help yourself while I help myself at the bar. A bit of a wicked experience for both of us.”

They both went down to the bar, and he pulled down a cup, though when Charlotte reached for the one next to it, Callum directed her to the lower shelf instead. He poured himself something amber-coloured, and Charlotte helped herself to some lemonade, wanting to be careful. She went to return to her seat, but Callum had stayed behind the bar. There was a grin on his face as he threw his jacket off on the counter, and threw a napkin over his shoulder. “There’s no one else here, so let’s do this the old-fashioned way,” he lent on the bar, with his drink in front of him and pen resting in his left hand, held by the tip. “So little lady, tell me your sorrows.”

The routine surprised Charlotte, bringing a smile to her face as she sat on one of the bar stools. “I just wanted to know what beasties might be lurking around at the moment that would attack a poor girl, or possibly be a poor girl in disguise?”

Callum frowned, “That’s very general information you’re after. That's not the kind of information I sell.”

“You mean there’s some kind of limit to what you would give out?”

“With people, I prefer to facilitate meetings rather than just sell people’s private lives. It’s a trust issue. Are you looking for someone wicked to help you on some project?”

“No. Nothing like that.” Charlotte took a sip of her drink to buy some time. “Okay, different angle Mr Bartender. Are there any others who would call themselves Iris? That would help.”

The tapping of the pen stopped for a second, “Well that information either way is going to cost you. Name recognition is still quite broad. Probably about two thousand.”

“You know I don’t have that kind of money.” she said, her voice rising. Callum just shrugged. “That is not my problem. Though it seems there are things you aren’t telling me. Why not get it off your chest.”

“You want me to just tell you things?”

“You should trust your bartender more. If this were cinema, you would tell me your woes and I would offer sage advice in return.” Charlotte still looked sceptical, so Callum continued, “If you want, I’ll write out a guarantee for knowledge or assistance to the worth of the knowledge you tell me. Would that make you more comfortable?”

“Actually yeah, it would.”

Callum rolled his eyes, but reached for his jacket and removed a notepad. He jotted down a note, and passed it to Charlotte for inspection. After checking the wording for possible misinterpretations, she nodded. “Okay, I’ll tell you then.”

“There’s no reason to treat me like some fae trickster you know.”

“Why not? You’re the closest a human can get to being a fae. And you never accept bargains with the fae unless you’re desperate.”

“Almost fae? I’m flattered.”

“Only almost. That’s why I’m agreeing.” She took a moment to gather her thoughts before proceeding. “So recently I met two people who are just starting to get involved in the Other. One learned a basic glamour as a kid, hiding things, and the other developed clear sight when his friend tried to show him that glamour. The one who can glamour can’t see the Other though. Now he’s met this girl called Iris. He’s been acting strange since then.

“That sounds more like jealousy than worry.”

“No, it’s not that, it’s...he wants the sight really badly. He wants to get in to the community but hasn’t figured out how yet. Last night he was asking about what kind of dangerous things were around and I’m worried that he thinks he’s found one, and maybe this Iris girl is trouble.”

Callum nodded along to her short description, his smile temporarily replaced with a weary look. “I already gave you the piece of paper didn’t I?” Charlotte looked confused, but nodded. “And I don’t suppose there’s any chance that you’d let me take it back now? You’re asking for something pretty small and... two new people I didn’t know about? Do you know what that’s worth?”

Charlotte clutched the piece of paper tightly. “What’s it worth?”

“More than what I’m going to tell you. Okay, I suppose I should get to work trying to redeem that debt then.” He took a larger swig from his glass. “There is an Iris in the community. She’s not as easy to pick as you, but if you see her eyes then you’ll know her immediately. All I've heard says she's harmless though. In any case,  you would have noticed such a woman.”

“I actually haven’t met her.”

“Right. Well that’s handy for identifying her. Anyway, Iris is harmless. Her brother is distasteful, but he has been long gone from these parts. He’s faebonded, though he got a better deal than you. I’m not quite sure where he’s gallivanting. He'd be hard to spot ”

“Can you tell me more about either of them.”

“Not unless they've broken the Contracts while I wasn't looking.” Charlotte frowned, but nodded. Callum said, “ Feel free to drop by any time. Even if it is just a social visit. We don’t see enough of you here. Bring your new friends.”

Charlotte nodded. “I should be heading home. Should get some study done.”

Callum snorted, “Sure, if that’s what you think is best. And I’m going to be honest, I doubt that this guy you know is involved in anything. I know you think I was joking, but think about why you’re worried before doing anything rash."

Callum saw her to the door, then just as Charlotte was about to leave, he added, "If you want to confirm who this woman is, just look in her eyes. You'll know Iris's eyes on sight. Trust me.”

Charlotte thanked Callum and left, heading home. She checked her phone on the way, and sent Ward another message, still finding he hadn’t replied. She sent Kane a text asking what he was doing, to which the reply was ‘Veronica’. Charlotte thought about making some kind of acidic reply, but resisted. She walked back to King Street slowly, wandering past Ward's house and seeing if there were any lights on there. Still, the house was empty.

Once home she helped herself to another glass of wine, and got to her study for the evening. It wasn’t exciting, but it was a nice distraction from sitting and waiting for a reply. It was approaching midnight when she stopped and checked facebook, where there was still no change. She flicked on the TV and sent another text to Kane, asking when he would be free, but he didn’t reply either. Charlotte was left to sit and watch TV alone.

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Charlotte woke up to find a text from Kane, saying, ‘free whenever you want me’, and Charlotte quickly organised to meet for lunch. They met at a cafe, and Kane ordered a large breakfast, which he ate with gusto, while Charlotte declined to get anything save a coffee. As Kane tucked in to his food, Charlotte asked, “Have you seen or heard from Ward recently?”

Kane swallowed a large mouthful of food, “Everyone seems to just want me to know about Ward recently. It’s like everyone’s completely ignoring how dashing and handsome I am.”

“Why? Who else would ask about him?”

“Well, Veronica for one,” he said as he prepared another fork with a delicately balanced stack of food, “but also Iris. Seems like they must have had some falling out, and now Ward’s being all Ward about it and isn’t replying to her messages. Hasn’t contacted her since the other night. I reckon they’re going to break up.”

“You talk to Iris?” Charlotte had to wait for a reply while Kane chewed his food. “I added her on facebook as soon as they started dating, and I don’t talk to her, but she said hi to me this morning.”

“What kind of eyes does she have?”

Kane paused, fork halfway to his mouth. “I don’t know. I don’t tend to remember that kind of detail. Alright, I do, but I don't remember hers. That's a really weird and specific question.”

Charlotte was frowning now. “Ward hasn’t been replying to my texts either. You heard from him since we went out?”

“No.”

“Not exactly sounding worried.”

Kane looked back up from his meal. “Look, Ward’s an odd guy. He said that at one point he didn’t talk to anyone for two weeks. That was before he met us, sure, but he’s not a great socialite. I’d be more worried if he were everywhere than if he’s being quiet.”

Charlotte couldn't argue with that. Kane swallowed his current mouthful and said, “By the way, you might want to back off a bit with him. Iris asked a bit about you. She sounded kind of jealous. Maybe you're the source of whatever tension?”

Charlotte raised an eyebrow. “Like that would ever be a problem. But sure, if it comes up, I’ll be a non-threatening friend buddy. Mind if I have a look at her on your phone?”

Kane shrugged and handed his phone over. Charlotte found Iris’s page and started looking over it. After reading the generic information, she started looking at the photos. Flicking through them, she became agitated. She glanced at Kane who was watching her with mild curiousity. “What’s the problem? Is she hotter than you? Not quite as blue a perplexion?”

Charlotte didn't even seem to notice the gentle teasing. “No, it’s not that. It’s just her eyes.”

“What’s your obsession with her eyes? You’ve got your brilliant blues. Hers couldn't be any nicer.”

“None of the photos of her show here eyes.”

“What, really?”

“Glasses or cut-off or closed eyes in every one.”

“Well sure, a weird coincidence, but not worth the agitation. Why so twitchy?”

“I talked to someone who said there was an Iris among the Other, and that you could always pick her by her eyes. And here’s an Iris who’s kept her eyes off facebook. She asked about me after I tried to friend her. I think Iris has Other ties.”

Kane looked surprised, but still completely unconcerned. “So? She seems harmless enough.”

“That's the thing about people from the Other. They seem harmless until they're not." She looked back down at the phone again then back up at Kane, worried now, "My friend said that she was probably harmless but her brother was a nasty one.

"So?"

"Her brother posted on her wall last night. Look.” She passed the phone back to Kane, who read it. “It’s a comment from her brother saying he’s in town, and wants to meet her. Some place called The Cavern.” Charlotte looked at him, waiting for something more. “You’re really going to make this a thing, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

Kane sighed, “Fine, I’ll cancel my plans and help you pursue whatever foolish notion this is that you’re having here. I’d like to note that if this is just paranoia, there will be so many ‘I told you so’s’ you’ll want to kill me.”

“And if this is something, we need to warn Ward right now."

The first thing Ward felt was the pain. His skull started as an ache, then changed in to cracks of pain piercing through his head. The next thing was the cold, numbing his extremities and bringing a violent shivering. Lastly, a collection of cramps and aches made him aware he was sitting, not lying down, and this was followed by the realisation that there were chains around his wrist. He was chained to a chair. As he began to stir and test the bonds, a familiar voice said “Ah good, you’re awake.”

Ward pried his eyes open and focus on the world around him. There was that man in his dirty suit, smoking, with a collection of butts strewn about his feet. He was sitting on a milk crate. Ward looked beyond and saw the walls in the distance, then the roof above, corrugated iron visible in the dim light of a single light bulb in the large space. He was in a warehouse, shackled to a chair, and the horrid man was smiling at him.

“I was starting to think I might have knocked you too hard there. I thought I had been careful, but I wasn’t sure. I haven’t bludgeoned many people like that, and you have to be careful of things like making sure the head doesn't crack the ground too hard. Can’t just hit to my heart’s content.” The dirty man smiled.

“Why take me? What are you going to do?”

"Well so far I’ve made you pretty uncomfortable, and a little bruised. What I was going to do was going to be a lot worse. I had plans of how to hurt you, how I was going to make sure that it showed on your body, but now that’s not an option anymore.”

“Why?”

The man took a drag of his cigarette and the smoke spiralled up out of sight. “You’re not really interested in dating Iris are you?”

“What do you mean?”

“You like her well enough, but you’re conflicted about it. She’s just not part of the life you want. You’re sad that she’s normal even as it relieves you. Do you really think someone normal could hold your interest?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Don’t lie. I know you’re not sure. I know how you look at that other girl, Charlotte and there’s an awe there that you simply don’t have for my sister. Now that’s a fetish and a half.”

He stood up and walked over to Ward, standing above him. “But here’s the secret, that bit of the puzzle that you missed out on, why you weren’t able to figure out why I was after her.” He leaned down next to Ward’s ear and whispered, “My sister Iris, she’s more special than you are. She’s more special than some drowned waif. She really is what you’re after, what you’ve dreamed of, and what you are now never going to have the opportunity to get.”

Ward's head throbbed. The man made no sense. Ward closed his eyes tight, wishing the world would go away, that the nightmare would end. The man was deranged, trying to torment him. Maybe he planned to torture Ward. Maybe he was going to kill Ward. Ward let out a sob.

Ward smelled the presence of the man back away. He opened his eyes and saw confusion on the man’s face through slightly blurred vision. The man wandered around the warehouse, rubbing at his temples and pulling out another smoke as he discarded the end of one. As he lit it, Ward saw his brow knit, and he closed his eyes. Ward was hardly breathing, trying to remain still and silent.

“That’s a neat trick you’ve got there,” the man said. “I’m surprised you didn’t try it earlier. Glamouring yourself when I glamoured might have helped you out. Yours is a better glamour, I’ll admit. I almost forgot why I was here at all, but you don’t have even a touch of the sight, so I could still have beaten you bloody. Probably.”

The man wandered up to Ward and hit him hard in the stomach. Ward cried out, as the man laughed. The chair had forced the full impact on to Ward. Once recovered, Ward began to yell at the top of his lungs. If someone found him then everything would be fine. They could intervene. He just needed to cause a scene.

He stopped and listened. The only sound was the echoes of his own howl, and the man’s laughter echoing back and forth across the room. “Yes, I suppose you had to at least try. This place is here precisely so that people can do what they want without anyone overhearing. I’ll admit it’s normally more debauched than what I'm planning. But it's a good place. No need for padded walls when you've got emptiness to work it for you.”

Ward glared, heart beating fast while the man kept speaking. “You’re outmatched in this world, but there’s a chance you get out of here without further harm. My original plan wasn’t a complex one. I was going to hurt you, and make it show, then kill you and leave you for my dear sister to find.”

“What kind of monster are you?!”

The man grinned at Ward, all his teeth showing. “I’m not one of the monsters. I’m only capable of human cruelty. Though I always find it odd when people expect that to be less.”

“Why would you do that to her?”

The man paused, “You are actually fascinating, you know that? I promise you the most awful things and you're thinking of what it'd to to my sis. What kind of idiot does that?”

He dropped another cigarette, “Anyway, I was going to kill you and leave you out for your lady to find. I wanted to go the more subtle approach first, and break you two up. You spoiled that with realising what I was, so I thought why not take the fun option? It seems I took a little too long to just do that though. My mistress got word that I was involving myself in my sister’s affairs again, and she wanted another piece of my sister for whatever reason.”

He got out another cigarette and lit it. “This means you got moved from my little torture instrument to being bait. Lucky for you! Possibly not so lucky for my sister. Then again, I suppose we’ll see, won’t we.”

“Leave Iris alone," Ward yelled at him.

“Because you’re in a position to make demands. You’re a foolish little child. All we’re doing is waiting for my sis to arrive and then you don’t matter. If I get really lucky, I get to get rid of my sister and break you at the same time. But we'll see.”

Both started as the door was shoved open, and Iris strode in to the gloom of the warehouse, no hesitation. She marched straight towards her brother, face twisted. She had come in cargo pants and a thick shirt. She carried her backpack in one hand. She only slowed when she saw Ward, and her mouth fell open in surprise. Her entrance faltered and came to a stop, her hatred replaced with uncertainty.

“Ah dear sister. Glad you could join us. We were just getting to know one another.”

“Mark,” she spat, “You realise that you’re not walking out of here alive.”

Mark held his hands up in mock fear. “Oh no, is my scary younger sister going to stop me? I’m terrified sis, I really am.”

She didn’t answer him, but instead reached in to her backpack, and drew out a feather, a knife, and a lighter. She pricked her hand, letting some blood trickle on to the feather. “Really sis? You’re going to threaten to call Sam in to a family matter?”

She dropped the knife and flicked the lighter on, “I wasn’t planning on threatening anything." She lit the feather, and barely let go in time to avoid her fingers getting singed. She threw the lighter on the ground then bent to retrieve the knife.

Mark put his hands in his pocket and shuffled around so Ward was in between the two siblings, out of Ward’s vision. “He won’t come you know. This is all fine under the contracts, and under Sam’s precious little ethics.”

“What about Ward? You involved him.”

“And if you want to bring charges against me for it after, you’re welcome to. But your knight isn’t riding in to save you sis. He's half a world away with his own problems. Now drop the knife and let’s stop this charade.”

There was a pause. An expression of surprise crossed Iris’s face, followed by the ugliest smile Ward had ever seen. “Looks like that’s not working anymore. Getting scared yet?”

Ward felt a hand grab his hair. “I’m just pleased it wasn’t as easy as it could have been. Now I get to cut up either you or your boy here with that horrible stammer. I felt you cringe every time he messed up a word or a sentence. It was such a subtle tell that he didn’t even pick up on it, but I knew you better.”

“Ward, don’t listen to him. He just wants to hurt me,” there was a pleading in her face as she addressed him. Ward stared in to her eyes, trying to see what the truth was. As he looked at her beloved eyes he suddenly found himself with the most awful sense of vertigo, a nausea and dizziness that nearly overwhelmed him. He scrunched his eyes shut, trying not to be sick, trying to make that dizziness pass.

Ward heard the laugh from behind him. “That expression was worth this entire trip sis, but don’t worry, I have an offer for you. I was planning just to hurt you, but it appears my mistress learned that I was near you again and wanted a chance to get at you herself.”

“Let him go. Right now. I know what your mistress wants, and I know she won’t get it. Leave him out of it, and then we can talk.”

“Don't make stupid, childish requests. Come quietly and I’ll leave him here for somebody else to find. You can get out of here without any harm coming to him. I’m sure that you don’t want to see him suffer. ”

Ward tried to gather his thoughts, stop his head spinning. He didn’t know anything about either of these two, and he was being talked over, discussed like a prize. Ward tried to find something to focus on, to ground him. He tried to remember what colour Iris's eyes were, but his mind couldn’t picture them. He opened his eyes and looked at her and tried to focus, but her eyes were lost in the dark.

“Fine. I’ll go with you,” Iris said.

“Just put down the knife and slide it over here and we’ll go. Nothing too risky, right?” She obliged him, and slid the knife towards Ward, who raised his feet as high as he could as it skidded towards him. The grip on his hair was released and Mark wandered in to his view, scooping up the knife and laughing. “This is probably the last time we get to play, sis. Hope you enjoyed it.” He turned his attention to Ward, who was still reeling, unfocused. “It has been a pleasure Ward. I hope you remember that she could never really love you. Perhaps some day I’ll come back and tell you all those little things you missed about her.”

“Come on Mark, you don’t want me to change my mind.”

Mark turned and using the knife to threaten her, began to walk Iris out with a casual ease to his manner. Tears had begun to cloud Ward’s vision. He didn’t know what was happening. His mind was looking for anything to fall in to place and make sense.

He missed the movement, but saw the reaction. Mark was bending double all of a sudden, only to have his chin met with a fist coming the other direction. Ward was watching for the third blow from Iris, which kicked Mark’s legs from under him, and then the stomp on the hands that had stubbornly held on to the knife, before kicking the knife away, skidding across the room.

From there, things went badly. Mark grabbed Iris's leg and tripped her. She fell hard, unable to brace properly, and he moved almost immediately to pin her. The brawl continued as Ward looked at the knife that had landed only half a meter in front of him and began to edge the chair forward.

He reached the knife as Iris regained her feet, but he couldn’t see Mark anywhere. The idea of it made his skin crawl. One foot on the knife he waited and watched.

“You’re trying glamours against me?” Iris wheezed as she ducked and then swung at... trying to watch it trebled the pain in Ward's head but he stared at the fight anyway. The pain subsided as Mark came back in to view, now sporting a bloodied nose.

“Anything’s worth a shot, eh? Gave the boy a hard time I can tell you.” Mark had his back to Ward, and the brawl had stopped for now with both parties breathing heavily. Ward saw a chance. He tried to attract Iris’s attention, then once he thought he had it, hekicked the knife back towards Iris and Mark just as Iris screamed, “No, don’t!”

Ward had imagined that the knife would skid past Mark, Iris would then bend and scoop it up. Iris seemed to know what she was doing, while Mark who was brawling wildly, and with a knife she would have the advantage. She would win the fight, and then they would both get out of here, and beyond that anything would be good.

When he kicked it though, Mark stepped back, stopping the knife’s trajectory with a foot, then before Iris could press an attack he had scooped it up. He hadn’t looked at it once. Ward gaped.

The two went back to scuffling, but Iris was on the back foot. The knife had to be dodged, and every time she did she had to fall back, or unbalance herself. There was no opportunity to strike back with the knife weaving in front of her. Ward cursed himself as he was left to watch this retreat. He didn’t understand what either of them was, and he had kicked a knife back in to that fray.

The next twenty seconds were silent except for the panting and the moving footsteps. Ward’s brain had shut down in horror, and he watched mutely. A slash came close enough to draw blood, just a light cut, and Iris fell backward, landing even worse than before. She cried out in pain.

One tiny bit of Ward's mind stirred, one last piece of self not overwhelmed with terror, the piece that had stopped him sobbing. There was no room for doubt in his fear-filled mind. He would do the only thing that he could possibly do. He threw a glamour over Iris. Mark stopped, puzzled for a second. Iris used that instant to kick his kneecap. It was a good kick, and Mark screamed.

Iris rolled away and scrambled back to her feet. Mark didn’t turn to face her as he tried to keep his balance and then grimacing moved the leg again. He spat, and grimaced. “Okay, so now you can skitter away all you like. But you know what, sis? Your friend’s still tied to a chair, so I think it’s time we stopped this, eh?”

Iris stood in front of Ward now, in between him and Mark. Her shoulders were set. She didn’t even address Mark as she said, “Ward, close your eyes.”

“What?”

“Close your eyes and don’t open them till I say to.”

She turned to glance at him and Ward saw her face, and the world slipped slowly back in to place. He held the glamour to her and closed his eyes tightly.

There were the sounds of a struggle. A cry from Mark, a hissing out from Iris. Something bumped against his leg, but he didn’t open his eyes to look down. Something thudded to the ground. It sounded close. Two more short sharp impacts, and then silence save one person breathing heavily. Ward couldn't pick who it was.

“You can open your eyes,” Iris said. Ward opened them and saw her, hands and knees supporting her, arms shaking slightly underneath her. Beside her lay her brother, face down on the ground and unmoving. One of his arms rested against Ward's leg. The warehouse was too dim to make out much else about him. Iris stilled the shaking of her arms and looked at him. “Did he hurt you?” she asked.

“He knocked me out, and my head hurts something fierce. Otherwise, no.”

“Sweet mercy for it.” She levered herself back to her feet and began looking around for the knife, “I don’t think I could have coped if he hurt you because of me.” She found the knife and picked it up.

“Is he still alive?” Ward asked. Iris stood over her brother’s body, knife held in a clenched fist. “Yes. He’s still breathing. Don’t think I hit him hard enough to lose him now.”

Her face was hidden in the gloom, but Ward thought he heard a sob. “Are...are you going to kill him?”

She turned away from her brother then. “No. I can’t.” She drew in another shuddering breath. “I thought I could, but I can’t do it. Not even to him, while he lies there like that. I just...can’t.” Her grip on the knife loosened as she walked up to Ward. “Are you okay?” Ward asked. “Not even a little. But we still have things to do. You’re still chained up, and we can’t just leave my brother there, the bastard.” She wouldn't look directly at him. She wandered around and looked at the chains behind him.

"I didn't think he'd come back. What he almost did to you... That might have been enough to make me kill him. I don't know."

"What happened once I closed my eyes?"

"He couldn't spot me properly without your eyes watching me. I was able to hit him a couple of times, but then he grabbed me. Didn't need his eyes once he'd grabbed me so we both went down. Mercy that he dropped the knife before grabbing me or who knows what would have happened. We rolled and I ended up on top and I...I beat him."

Iris continued to chink with the chains, until she heard a sob escape from Ward. Iris wrapped her arms around Ward and he could feel her shuddering as she rested her head next to his. Ward's heart was still racing, and there were still tears on his cheeks. Having her hold him opened some wall that he had held up, and he sobbed in silence while she held him. Ward broke the silence first. "So I guess things are going to be a bit different now."

Iris's voice sounded hollow as she answered, "Yes. Not the second date I wanted. I need to ask you questions, and I'm sure you have so many questions to ask me. Things will have to change. I'll go find the keys."

Iris wandered back in front of Ward, though kept her back to him. "Iris, why haven't you been looking at me?"

She turned to face him, "I just wasn't sure what you'd see." He looked at her face, but couldn't make out the colour of her eyes in the gloom. He studied every other detail of that face, the slight furrowing of her brow, and her lips pinched tight. Her hair was matted with sweat and grime and her arm dripped just a little blood on the ground. "I see pretty much what I've always seen. A woman who can light up the world when she smiles." Iris laughed nervously.

Charlotte and Kane walked towards the warehouse. Nestled away, it was all that remained of a once thriving industrial area close to the middle of Sydney. Almost everything had been turned in to terraces and then apartments save this one block, an unofficial memorial to the lost industry.

Charlotte had never been here before. The inner city still held many mysteries for her. For Kane, who had grown up far more locally, the place wasn't new. He had wandered through it a couple of times. Someone had held a party among the warehouses once when he was younger. A quick internet search had revealed that one of the defunct warehouses was rented out now under the venue name, The Cavern. The website had been unspecific as to what.

The website hadn’t said which warehouse either, so Charlotte had been testing all the doors until Kane spotted one that was open. They both hurried over. Peering in, Charlotte balked at the scene inside. There was a man, bloodied and lying unconscious on the warehouse floor. Ward chained to a chair, and standing over him was Iris, a knife in her hand.

Charlotte ran forward in to the room. Her footsteps echoed, and Iris turned at the sound. Charlotte looked in to Iris's face, covered in grime and blood and surprise. Ward seemed to be in shock. Charlotte ran full tilt at Iris. Iris began to set her feet but Charlotte reached her too soon. She tackled Iris to the ground, no finesse, just momentum and brute force. Ward screamed “Stop!”.

Scarlet spots appeared on Charlotte's vision as her side lit up with agony. She looked down and saw the knife pressing in to her up to the hilt. Iris struggled against Charlotte’s weight pinning her down, trying to move the knife. Charlotte grabbed the hand holding the knife and held it there. After a moment she managed to grab the other arm and hold that still too. Iris struggled, but Charlotte was larger, and Iris was tired. The two women looked at each other, and Iris stopped thrashing. She stared at Charlotte, and Charlotte’s skin crawled under that gaze. Charlotte didn’t loosen her grip though.

Ward cried out again and again, but Charlotte did not let up her hold. She listened as Kane walked hesitantly over, listened to Ward whimper. Kane looked completely lost, standing away from everyone and shifting his weight nervously.

“Charlotte, please let her go. She saved me.” Charlotte ignored Ward, staring down at Iris. “She didn’t mean to harm you, let her up. Please.”

Iris watched Charlotte’s face, and spoke to her. Her voice was quiet and weary. “Charlotte? We’re not enemies. You came to save Ward, same as me. You were worried. But we’re on the same side.”

“For god’s sake Charlotte, let the girl up.” Charlotte started to breath in for the first time in a minute. It was cut abruptly short as she coughed, hacking up a glob of blood. Kane looked and for the first time saw the knife, and his face went pale. “Gods, get that out! We need to get you to hospital.” Charlotte just shook her head, her face becoming briefly pained, and glanced at Ward. Iris spoke next, slowly and quietly. “Why not help calm Charlotte here down and get Ward unchained. That unconscious man should have had the keys on him. Go through his pockets. Find them, and get Ward out of here. He should get him to a doctor.”

“And what about Charlotte?" Kane yelled.  "She needs way more help.”

“Your faebond friend is going to be fine. She just needs to see that Ward is safe, and she can let me up, and we can pull out the knife, and then we can talk about this. Just find the key."

Kane went to the man on the ground. The look of him, the bruises forming and the blood almost made him hurl. Kane dropped the keys three times before he managed to unchain Ward, and pull the chains off. As soon as he was free Ward stepped towards the two women, ignoring Kane. He faltered though. "Charlotte, let her go. She’s not dangerous. The two of you, you shouldn’t have met like this. She’s... she’s just a normal girl.”

A laugh almost escaped Charlotte’s lips, causing another splatter of blood. Slowly, she pulled Iris’s hand away, sliding the knife out of her side. She pushed it out away from them both, and Kane fell to his knees at the sight of the bloody knife emerging. Iris let Charlotte move her without any struggle. After a further minute, Charlotte drew in a breath, which rattled only a little. “You know nothing of this woman, you don't know what she is.”

“Charlotte, I’m just a human. Like you.”

Charlotte’s eyes were wide. “I don’t believe you. You could be anything, but you’re not human.”

“I’m not normal. But you can’t hold that against me. You know what that’s like.”

Charlotte glanced at Ward, uncertain.“Let go of the knife, and I’ll let you up.”

Iris slowly unclasped her fingers, until the knife rested in her open palm. Charlotte wrapped her own fingers around the handle, then slowly stood up, and stepped away. “We should get out of here,” she said to Ward and Kane. Kane stepped closer to her, and she grabbed him, trying to steady herself. Ward shot Charlotte such a look that she stepped back, dragging Kane with her. He knelt down next to Iris, who still hadn’t moved.

“Are you okay? Please say you’re okay.”

“I’m the one who got stabbed,” Charlotte said, but Ward didn’t even look at her.

Iris smiled up at him. “I’m really not okay. But it’s fine. We’re safe now.” She raised a hand and he grabbed it with his. She squeezed it, and tried to lever herself up. With Ward's help she made it to a sitting position. "Charlotte... can we not have this talk here? I don't feel safe here."

"You don't feel safe! You stabbed me."

Iris managed to get to her feet with Ward's help

“And how are you going to explain all this?" Charlotte asked. "There's a man lying there-.”

“She needs help," Ward interrupted. "We need to get her to a hospital or something. She really hit her head when you tackled her. That’s the third time she’s hit the ground hard.”

“She had a knife and was standing over you chained up. And... and you can’t even see what she is. Her eyes, you can’t see them properly at all. You shouldn't just be standing there.”

“I don’t care. Now get some help right now, one of you.”

Charlotte and Kane glanced at one another, and Charlotte answered, “Fine. I'll go see what help I can get that won't freak out. Kane, stay and keep an eye on Iris and that unconscious man. Don't want anything else to happen to Ward.”

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Charlotte stood outside the warehouse, waiting for half an hour before a van drove up and Callum, in his spider-web suit, hopped out. In the light of sunset its vibrancy was drained. Four creatures hopped out behind him, two of them carrying stretchers. They were strange creatures, as simple as a child's clay figure. The creatures were tall, and comically burly. They had indents for eyes and a protrusion for a nose. Their mouths were gashes in their face, and their skin was a dull gray, speckled with indents.

“I didn’t think you’d come yourself.”

“I owed you a debt. And I didn’t want to take any chances. My servants aren't doctors, and I couldn’t find true medical minds at such short notice, though I did get in contact with a doctor.”

“Thankyou. There are two injured people inside. Iris, and a man I don't recognise. What are you going to do with them?”

He gestured his followers inside. “Take them back to my home and tend to them. Did you want me to do anything else?”

“Will you guard them?”

"I intend to guard them both ways. Anyone from them, and them from anyone."

“Make sure to keep an eye on them. The woman scares me.”

Callum looked away from Charlotte, peering in to the gloom of the warehouse while the four creatures moved in, starting to set up the stretchers and apply deftly applying bandages to Mark. “Is it just the eyes that scare you, or was she the one who stabbed you? No, don’t answer. Who are the other two?”

“That's Ward and Kane. I told you about them. I don't think they're coping. You'll be sorry if you let any harm come to them.”

“Probably, though not because of any threat from you. Ward’s not sure about letting my servants approach.”

“He doesn’t have the sight. Who knows how he sees them.”

“Interesting.” Callum walked in to the warehouse, and approached Ward, who was glaring at the two creatures who were standing mute next to Charlotte where she still sat, resting against Ward. Whatever he was seeing he didn’t seem to like it. “Greetings! You are a friend of Charlotte’s and so a friend of mine. My name is Callum Garland, and I want to help you if you're willing to let me.”

Ward glared at Callum. “And I should trust you and your friends?”

“Of course. I want no harm for Iris here, and I am the person most capable of keeping her brother at bay out of anyone you would have met.”

Both Iris and Ward stared at Callum, who continued to smile benignly. "Alright," Iris said, "I'll trust you, Callum. But only because you keep honest company." Callum laughed at that. "You're too kind to me dear, but I'll take what compliments I can get from you. Don't worry, you have my word that you'll be quite safe, and that's worth more than your weight in gold."

Mark was already settled in the van by the time Iris made it out. One of the lumbering creatures helped her in. Ward went to hop up, but Callum gestured him away, saying there was no room. Ward went to argue, but Iris shushed him, and he didn't have the energy to object to her.

Kane and Charlotte had come up beside him to watch the van off. "Come on," Charlotte said, "I'll take you to Callum's place," and she strode forward. After a minute, Ward asked how far it was to Callum's, and Charlotte replied 'not far' without elaborating. Ward didn't press it. It wasn't until Charlotte went to open the door to Callum's bar that someone broke the silence, and to the surprise of the other two, it was Kane. "Okay, this is ridiculous. We can't just not talk forever."

The other two glanced at each other and neither spoke. "Fine then," Kane said, "I'll go first. Charlotte tried to save your life back there Ward. Got something to say?"

"Kane," Charlotte said, "he's in shock. Don't-"

"Actually no, I do have something to say," Ward interrupted. "You assaulted my girlfriend, didn't listen to me screaming to stop hurting her. After she saved me from her brother trying to murder me.”

"Because there was so much time to think. There's a woman standing over you with a knife. I'm not just going to stop and ask who she is. And she isn't the one who got stabbed. If Kane had reacted first, he'd be dead now."

Both men looked suddenly queasy, but Ward pressed on, "She saved me, and I don't care what she is. She’s nice to me, and nothing she has ever done has suggested she is at all dangerous to me. Without her help I would have been tortured in there, possibly killed."

"Only we were right there to save you as well. And you're trusting this woman who you don't, can't, understand. She's hasn’t been honest with you."

"Because I'm sure you spill your secret to everyone you meet. How far in a relationship do you have to get before you tell them you're a walking corpse? Before or after they freak out at your cold skin?"

Charlotte's mouth dropped open. "No. screw this. You two idiots get yourselves in to whatever trouble you want. I'm out."

She stormed off, leaving Ward still fuming. "Maybe you went too far," Kane said. Ward took a few breaths, trying to calm himself, and then almost fell over. Kane had to catch him to stop the tumble. "Hells, I feel sick," Ward said. "Let's just get inside and find Iris." Kane looked towards Charlotte's retreating form once more, before following Ward inside.

Callum was waiting for them inside the bar, which both Kane and Ward were surprised to see was built in to an old theatre, with the shape maintained. Callum sat at the table nearest the bar, while a bartender stood polishing an already shining glass. The room was dimly lit with red lighting that Ward found awfully sinister, and there were a few patrons who Kane started at, but Ward didn't pay a second glance to. He went straight to Callum and asked "Where is she?" without taking a seat.

"Iris is resting in one of my spare rooms and tidying herself up. There's also a room for you, and I even managed to dig up some clothes for you to wear." Callum peered past the two men sitting next to him. "Where's Charlotte gone?"

"She went home," Ward said.

"Why?"

"Why do you care?" Ward answered

"Because you are all here as her guests right now.”

Kane put a hand on Ward's shoulder, and spoke up. "I think she wanted some time to herself."

"I see. Can I have her phone number then? I may need to get ahold of her."

Kane stepped forward and provided it, and Callum noted it down in a little book with a lovely wooden pen, before turning his attention back to the two men. "So, boys, we haven't really been properly introduced. Rather, I introduced myself without you returning the favour."

"My name's Ward and his is Kane." Ward answered.

"Interesting names, though I'm sure you hear that way more than you'd like." He addressed Kane directly, "Did someone really name you after the murderous brother?"

Kane looked affronted. "No. k-a-n-e. It's different."

"Do you know where it's from?"

"No. Never seemed important."

Callum gave him a look of complete incomprehension saying to nobody in particular, "Can you believe some people? Not even caring what their names mean?" before turning his attention back to Ward. "My assistant here will show you out the back if you like so you can tidy yourself up.” He gestured towards one of the clay-like figures. To Ward's eyes he was a burly and unkempt man, though he couldn't pick out any features.

"I can't just see Iris now?"

"I can't promise you that she'll be decent, and I wouldn't dare risk a person's modesty in my bar, now go on, the door on stage left. You look like you're going to collapse. No, the other direction, stage left."

Ward was gently led away, leaving Kane sitting in front of Callum, who was looking out over the room. As his focus wandered back to Kane he said, "Well if you're going to be staying, may as well join me. First drink is on the house since you look like you need it. Go talk to the bartender and then come back. Don't worry if the bartender doesn't join in. No tongue."

Kane went to the bar and got himself a beer, trying not to look too closely at anyone in the bar as he waited for a drink, then returned to the table. "So," Callum said, as Kane took a deep pull from his beer, "nobody has been terribly forthcoming with what actually happened. Iris, Mark and Ward are all in no fit state to give me answers, while Charlotte has decided not to come," Callum paused here, but continued when Kane remained silent, "which means that I would like some kind explanation for all this from you.

"Why do you need an explanation?"

"Because I've got two people in my bar beaten bloody, and knowing why is important in making sure that there is no incident here. And because I'm doing this as a favour to Charlotte, and I want to know why she's the only one not here."

Kane was staring at his beer, "I don't know what there is to explain. I missed most of it. When we got there the man, Mark? was lying there as you found him. Iris was standing over Ward with a knife, with him chained to that chair. Charlotte reacted first, tackled Iris. Charlotte got stabbed, but was able to hold Iris down, and then once they were able to be separated, Charlotte called you. I thought Charlotte was going to die."

"None of this explains why she decided not to stick around."

"Ward and her had a fight over Iris. I don't think Charlotte trusts her. I can see why too. What happened to Iris, or was she just born like that?"

"I think it's more polite if you ask her." Callum paused to take a sip of his drink, his free hand twirling the pen idly between thumb and forefinger. "Now, I know Iris, Mark and Charlotte, at very least by reputation. You I don't know, nor Ward, and that makes me a touch nervous."

"We're both harmless. Ward's, he used to be able to do a bit of magic," Kane looked embarrassed saying it out loud, "but he can't anymore. And I can see all this Other stuff, but that's it. Nothing to worry about. We're harmless."

"Do you know where your friend learned his magic?"

"Just some wizard who taught him a spell when he was a kid. No idea beyond that. Is it really important?"

“The Other is full of dangerous people. I can't run this place like this without a good deal of caution about what my clientele is and how you treat them. I've worked hard to make sure it's a civil environment. Discretion and caution are so important."

"What is this place anyway?"

"This," Callum said, gesturing around himself, "is the Ghost's Rest, a place for all those who don't quite fit in with the world to have a drink, mingle, meet up, and have a guarantee of their safety. We get a mix of poor unfortunates and true Other beings through here, and do our best to meet the needs of all of them. I personally extend a welcome to you, and please, drop in any time, although the Ghost's Rest's official serving hours are only between sunset and sunrise."

"And you run it?"

"I built it. From buying out and discontinuing the theatre, to picking what entertainment to provide for my patrons. Saying I run it sounds clandestinely impersonal for my fondness of the place." Callum looked past Kane and sighed. "Well, I need to be making sure everyone here is comfortable. I'll be seeing you around, I hope. Tell you what, I'll give you free drinks for the rest of the evening. For the friend of a friend."

Kane thanked him and Callum got up, taking his drink with him, and began to move from table to table, striking up small conversations. Kane shifted to watch him, and followed it immediately with a big pull from his drink and a long stare at the table. He glanced back around at the still small crowd, worry mixing with awe as he tried to decide whether the man with two faces, or the boy who looked like a sapling had been bent into a human shape was the most unusual thing in the room.

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Out the back of the bar there were a number of old dressing rooms that still had artefacts from the theatre's last performance. Ward was led to the last door, where the large man in his odd gray clothing gestured that he should enter.

This dressing room had been maintained entirely. Rather cramped, but with a large mirror.  Ward looked at it and almost burst out laughing. It was that or cry. His face was filthy, and his hair was matted with what was probably blood. His left temple was an ugly-looking bruise. His right cheek was grazed. His clothes were just as dirty as he was, and torn in several places. Looking at that reflection he had to steady himself on the counter.

He recovered, and investigated the attached bathroom. It had managed to fit in a shower despite needing to awkwardly manoeuvre around the  door to be able to close it, and Ward began to run the water, letting the warmth wash over his fingers. He stood for several minutes with just his hands in the water, letting it run down his arms. His shirt and jacket were getting wet, but he didn’t care.

When the anticipation was too much, he stripped himself down, and stepped under the water. So much time was lost to that experience, some of the stiffness washed out with the grime. Only when his fingers started to prune did her remember to wash himself. He soaped himself gingerly, finding all kinds of new sore spots that he hadn’t known about before. After the third attempt to touch his skull, he gave up trying to wash his hair, and let the water rinse out the shampoo he had clumped on it.

In the dressing room, someone had left clothes for him. They were horribly bright, but Ward wasn’t going to complain. Putting them on he found them to be the softest cloth he had ever touched. He looked in the mirror and was pleased to see a familiar plain face staring back at him, save for the bruise and the grazes.

Ward felt more tired even than the last two weeks, and he looked at the thin carpet with longing. He turned away from it and opened the door, almost running in to Iris who had been reaching for the handle. They smiled at each other awkwardly, and Ward backed up to let her in to the room.

Iris bit her lip and lowered her face before speaking. “Do you know where they’re keeping my brother?”

“No,” Ward said, “I’m not sure of much. Charlotte and I... Charlotte went off before I could find out much and Callum just sent me down here to get cleaned up. Don’t think I realised how bad I was till I got in the shower.”

Iris reached out to towards him, but faltered. “I suppose we need to talk now? About all this. About me and my brother.”

Ward frowned, “Well, I think we need to talk about it. But not yet. You need to sort out your brother before you collapse.”

She hugged Ward then, and held him tight, despite the strain on both their injuries. She grabbed his hand as she let go, and led him out, limping slightly.

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Kane saw Ward and Iris emerge, and tensed. They were hand in hand, and after a quick glance around, went straight to Kane’s table. Kane nodded to Ward, and after a brief pause, to Iris as well. "You wouldn’t believe how hilarious this place is," Kane said grinning too widely.

“Doesn’t seem all that funny to me,” Iris said.

“Ah Iris, nice to finally meet you. You wouldn’t believe how much I’ve heard about you. Though I’m wondering if you’ve told Ward the rest yet?”

Ward responded instead, “Not now Kane, just let her be.”

“Fine. I’ll just say Ward’s description really missed the mark in some areas.” He waggled his eyebrows, looking rather stupid. “I have a free drinks thing going on at the moment, and am happily on my fourth. Would either of you like anything?”

Iris didn’t look at him while she talked, “I’d rather just have the owner. I want to know what he did with my brother.”

“Well, he’s a funny one. I’ve been watching him meander around, and I bet he comes over to check on you before I get back with drinks. Ward?”

“I’ll have some wine. Don’t care what.”

“Fine, get me the same,” Iris said.

Ward looked at Iris while he waited, while Iris watched Callum hawkishly. Ward tried to pick what colour her eyes were, but the red light of the room had washed them out, giving even the whites a red hue. He was so intent on his inspection he didn’t even notice when Callum sat down opposite him just before Kane arrived back with the drinks.

“You two look far more presentable. The suit sits surprisingly well on you, Ward, and Iris, I see you preferred to stick with your dirty clothes?"

“I’ve heard about you," Iris said. "This place is nice. Not what I imagined.”

Callum laughed, “Well I'm glad it exceeds expectations. I try my best.”

“Perhaps. Could tell me where my brother is.”

Callum started spinning his wooden pen between his fingers. “Straight to business then. Your brother is my guest here, and I have been searching for someone to come and treat his injuries, as well as the injuries of both of you, and Charlotte, if she comes.”

“Was he badly hurt?”

Kane counted the pen hit the table ten times before Callum answered, “Hard to tell with head injuries till you’ve done some testing. He regained consciousness, but is sleeping now. He wasn't all that lucid.”

Iris breathed out a breath she didn’t realise she had been holding, then frowned, “Wait, if he’s your guest, can he just leave whenever he wants?”

“Of course not, he is my guest here as a favour to Charlotte, and shall remain so until she says otherwise.”

Kane wanted to get up and bolt away, but there was no way to do that unobtrusively, so he was forced to sit and watch what was going on. This was no place for him. This entire conversation wasn’t his.

"Are you saying you're holding me here?" Iris asked.

"I wasn't saying that," Callum answered, "But you aren't allowed to leave until Charlotte gives permission. Were you planning on heading off particularly soon?"

The tapping of the pen against the surface of the table was driving Kane slowly insane. He found himself tapping along with it. "What if I went to walk out of that door right now?" Iris said. Callum glanced around, then sighed. "Currently, my personal assistant is out of town, and I am not at all a violent man, but you saw the trolls who brought you here. They're what will stop you. Don't think they can't."

"We'll get out anyway," Ward said. "We're not afraid of some goblins."

"Not goblins, trolls,” Callum said. “They're quite different. The fact that you're not afraid is because you're blind to them, so I wouldn't brag about it. And think about it Iris, you're safe here, and there's a doctor coming who won't ask questions. That's a service you should want."

"As long as my brother isn't allowed to leave, I'm willing to accept that. I'm handing him over to Sam."

Callum's breath hissed out and the pen stopped its motion. He put the pen on the table slowly, and let it go, staring fixedly at the pen. "Have you already called Sam in to all this?"

"Yes."

"Well then. I suppose it's time we dealt openly. I owe Charlotte a debt, which is why I am keeping you both here, and looking after you, but Lady Himoto sent me a letter requesting that her faebonded be given back to her for disciplining in his dealings with you. I am obligated to accept her request, barring word from someone with more authority."

"And when Sam finds out about it?"

"He'll do nothing, because everything was done according to the Contracts."

"But if Sam arrives first?"

Callum focused his full attention on Iris, pen coming to rest on the table. "Then I suppose he will deliver justice as he sees fit. Though I'd be worried if I were you. His brand of justice is rarely neatly focused."

Callum lifted the pen, but didn't start tapping. Kane's mind seemed to snap back, and saw opportunity for escape. "You said unless someone with more authority? What about your owing of Charlotte?"

Callum glanced at him, "Well that's a tough one. I'd need to weigh up who had the better claim."

Kane turned to Ward and Iris saying, "I'll go get Charlotte to come back, and maybe we can still sort this out."

Ward nodded, while Iris's brow wrinkled. "You're right, we need Charlotte to come back. I don't think you can do it though. Ward upset her. So, so he's the one who should go."

"But I don't even know where she is!" Ward objected. Iris put her hand on his and smiled at him, "But I reckon you can find her." With that confidence put upon him Ward couldn't object, and he got quietly to his feet, heading towards the door. Kane lurched up, and followed his friend to the door. Ward saw him following as he opened it and asked, "You're not going to stay with her?"

"This place really creeps me out. If you could see it the way I do..." He saw the look on Ward's face and raised his arms. "Okay, okay. I'll stay here and be company. Before you're off though, the people here are strange. Really strange. And Iris looks right at home here. Think about it."

Charlotte hadn't made it very far from the Ghost's Rest before coming to a stop. Ward found her sitting on a bench, in a small park just down the road from where she'd left him. Sydney's inner city is dotted with half-blocks that are still owned by a council, where some grass, and maybe a swing, is placed to get it the name of ‘park’. Charlotte sat clutching her knees to her chest to stop herself trembling. Her eyes were staring in to nothing, and she started when she noticed Ward’s approach.

She barely acknowledged Ward when she saw him approaching. She sat in the middle of the bench, leaving not enough space for Ward to sit comfortably on either side. He opted to stand in front of her. "Hey Charlotte, I tried calling you."

"Yeah, I didn't answer. There's a reason for that."

"So I came to find you."

"If you're just going to state the obvious do it somewhere else. Did you come just because you want my help with something else?"

"No."

"So you don't want my help with something else?"

Ward looked uncomfortable, which was answer enough for Charlotte, who gave a snort of disgust, and got up to leave.

"I came because we needed your help. Callum is holding both Iris and Mark until you say otherwise, and someone's  coming to take Mark away unless you can stop them."

Charlotte just started walking, "Goodnight Ward."

"You can't just walk away. We need your help. I need your help this time."

Charlotte didn't slow down, and Ward was forced to jog after her to continue talking. "Please Charlotte, I need you to help me with this. Just this one thing, then I won't ask anything else of you."

"That's an appealing offer."

"Are you so determined to hate Iris? Or were you hoping for some hero worship?” he reached out and put a hand on her shoulder.

Charlotte spun, stopping in place, “I wanted to help, because you don't know anything about Iris, and because you've managed to do the worst thing you could. You'd have been better off staying away from everyone involved with the Other, but still you managed to get yourself involved. And if Kane had been the one to get stabbed..."

“You got stabbed because you tackled someone holding a knife, and it just happened to get in the way. It wasn’t like Iris tried to stab you. I know you had reasons for worrying, but you started that fight. Stop trying to blame Iris for it. And if she used the knife on purpose, so what? Wouldn’t you draw the knife up if someone who looked like you really do was running at you?”

Charlotte stared at him, "She still hasn't told you what she is yet, has she?"

"No, I don't want that to be the thing that matters."

Charlotte started walking again, this time back towards the Ghost's Rest. "Right then. I guess I am going back." Her jaw was set obstinately. Ward touched her shoulder again, and she slowed, still glaring at him. "I wanted to say," he started, before stopping. He stepped forward and to Charlotte's complete shock, he hugged her. "I wanted to say thanks. For caring, for wanting to make sure I was safe. I'm sorry for not thinking earlier. I owe you."

Charlotte stood tense for an awkward few seconds, before reaching her own arms around Ward, holding him tightly. After nearly a minute under the street light, she let out a sigh and pushed him away. The harshness had fallen from her expression, leaving just mournfulness. "Come on, Ward. Let's have a talk with Iris.”

Ward and Charlotte walked in to see that another man was standing at the table where Kane, Iris and Callum still sat. He was a man of impressive figure, with a bushy grey beard sitting atop an expansive belly that was barely contained by his shirt. His brown overcoat was more appropriate for the bush than the city, and he shouldered a large old fashioned leather doctor’s satchel.

Charlotte hesitated at the sight of him, before heading down to the little gathering, where she heard Callum saying, "...I understand the objection, but you need to at least see a doctor. You can't..." Callum spotted Charlotte and Ward, and stopped immediately, coming to his feet, saying "Charlotte, so glad you came, I was just trying to get medical assistance for your friend Iris here. Can you talk sense in to her?"

Charlotte looked at Iris, then back at the man. "You really found a zombie doctor?" she asked Callum.

"Professor Eveller is an esteemed medical professional, and yes, also a zombie. I didn't really think this would be a problem. We take all sorts."

"Not his sort surely?" Charlotte said.

Callum looked at the professor, "I really am sorry about this. I didn't expect either of these two to have such hostility towards you."

The professor pushed his glasses up and shrugged, "It's not your fault. Prejudice does as it wants. You said you had another patient for me?"

Callum had one of the trolls take the professor out the back. The Professor walked with an odd gait, rocking slightly too much from side to side. The whole exchange left Ward perplexed.

Callum slid himself back in to the seat, followed by Charlotte. Ward resumed his seat next to Iris, facing Charlotte. The four young people were glancing back and forth amongst themselves, but Callum was the first to speak. "Well I hope you're happy with that. You just insulted a very kind man, both of you."

"A zombie's a zombie," Charlotte said matter-of-factly. "Nothing but a mannequin. Someone else is pulling the strings."

"That's wrong. A zombie created from someone recently enough deceased retains brain function. Like the professor there."

"Smart zombie is hardly a more appealing option. Who knows what broke or changed while they were out. Or who brought them back."

"And what about the fact that he is about the only person who might understand your unique physiognomy? You don't have the moral high ground on him, and he could have helped you."

"He seemed nice enough to me," Ward contributed, but the glare from Charlotte and the horror from Iris quieted him right back down. Callum looked around the table, but seeing no sympathy, at best confusion, he decided to let the topic rest. "You weren't very clear on your terms before Charlotte. You had me keep both Iris and Mark in my establishment, but didn't say when they would be freed. An oversight I was wondering if you could fix with some simple clarification."

Charlotte looked around at all the faces at the table and settled her attention eventually on Iris. "I'm willing to let Iris resolve everything however she wants…" both Iris and Ward perked up, surprised but happy, "if, and only if, she first tells everyone here what happened to her eyes."

There was silence. Callum looked backwards and forwards between Charlotte and Iris. Kane took a large pull of his drink. Iris looked exhausted, and Ward looked angry. "This is ridiculous. She's exhausted. Let her tell it later. Let her rest."

"Oh she's free to rest. Callum has space here if she wants to. She's just not allowed to leave."

Iris put her face in her hands, palms covering her eyes, and quietly said, "I don't think you want to do this, Charlotte. It's been a long day. For all of us."

"Then let's all go rest. After your story."

"Fine. If this is what it takes. Though remember that this is on your head that I tell this tale in this place, to this group. I want your word too, that you will hand over my brother to my care, rather than leaving him to Callum."

"If that's what you want, then fine. Though I don't know what you plan on doing with him."

"Fine then."

Iris sat still, with her eyes resting on her palms. The sound of the room faded from the attention of those gathered, leaving only Iris’ slow breathing. She lowered her hands, and her palms glimmered with moistness, turning her attention to Ward. Kane shuddered at the sight of her hands.

One of her hands curled in to a fist, and she opened her mouth to speak to Ward, before lowering her face without speaking. "You don't have to do this," Ward said. "No," she replied, "I do. It's not all going to be easy to listen to, but I do. Just try, try not to look at me differently afterwards."

Ward looked at the moisture visible at the base of her palms, stained red by the light of the place. He couldn't help but wonder what had inspired Callum to make this place with such red-tinted lighting. Iris looked at Callum, then asked Charlotte, "Does the information broker have to hear this from me? Surely this can just be between friends?"

Charlotte shook her head. "No, I said everyone here. We’re not all friends. Everyone at this table gets to hear.”

Iris took a deep breath. "All right, let me start then, right at the beginning."

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My mother, bless her, grew up knowing about the Other. She talked about how her mother had been a friend to ghosts and elves since she was a little girl, and her mother before that. All our family, passed on from mother to daughter, over and over. Not all have been the same in how they found the Other, but still it goes, mother to daughter.

When my brother Mark was born, he came as a great shock to my mother, who was expecting a little girl of her own. Still, she loved her little boy all the more for the surprise of him. When I was born two years later, it rekindled her belief in the tradition. It gave her a special care for me.

My earliest memory is of my nameday, when I was almost two. I remember being held in my mother's arms while my brother cried, sitting on the sand next to us. There was no one on the beach but the three of us, not even my father. I remember the taste of the salt air and the wind against my cheeks before anything else.

I remember seeing Lady Himoto rise up through the sand. Her black hair hanging to her waist, and golden threads mixed with the hair, as thin as the hair itself near the tips, but slowly twining together until they formed a crown at her brow. There was no sand stuck in her hair, as the sand had flowed around her to form an elegant gown. The sight of her quieted my brother, and made me giggle with laughter at the proud woman with her straight back, and her bright red lips set in a smile.

My mother handed me over without a word. Lady Himoto held me in her two perfect hands, and I gazed in to her deep brown eyes. She examined me meticulously, and then smiled down at me, drawing out a laugh. Lady Himoto's words were the first words I remember hearing. She drew me in close to her, and I felt the breath from those red lips tickle my ear. “Iris," she whispered. "Remember always, that is your name.”

After whispering this to me, she told my mother my name, before handing me back.  My mother was delighted with the name, and thanked Lady Himoto for her generosity. After Lady Himoto left, my mother said my name to me again and again, and each time she said it, I giggled at it. We lingered on that beach for some time after, watching the waves.

Later, my mother told me that the name came from Greece, where her family had been once, long ago. It meant 'rainbow', and that I would be a child of all the colours;  that my name would be to me my identity; a bright child who would go over the horizon to the places where the rainbow touches the ground. It was her gift to me, she said, to give me a name, so I could always know who I was.

My brother and I got along well before I started school. I adored him for all his adventures, and he basked in my adoration. Occasionally, he would get me in to mischief. One time, he got me to spend a whole afternoon trying to find the faeries at the bottom of the backyard. I thought I almost had one when my mum caught me. She was in a right fury. She explained to me how the little folk like their games, but don't understand the limits of play. If I chased them for too long I might end up no one knew where. When I expressed excitement at the idea, my mother held me close, and said that if I were to follow one of the faeries I would never be able to come home for dinner, and she would be so sad to never hold me again.

Once I started school though, my admiration for my brother lessened. At first, I delighted in helping out in his little schemes. It made me feel so grown up to take part in his games. Whenever there was trouble though, he was quick to blame everything on his little sister. I couldn't believe it at first, but I learned quickly to avoid him at school, in case he got me in trouble.

The final straw was when I got into an argument with one of my brother's friends. I was near tears from the already loud argument with this one boy who said I was such a silly little girl for believing in faeries, so I told my brother to tell him about the fae. My brother didn't even look towards us when he said 'don't be silly Iris, of course there aren't any faeries.'

I went home to mum that day and cried and screamed. I accused her of lying to me, that the other kids knew there wasn’t anything else, even my brother. My mother hushed me and calmed me down, then took me out in to our wild backyard.  She poured a small pile of sugar on the ground, then drew a circle around it. It wasn't long before a faerie flitted up to have a look, the small creature glaring at the circle, while drooling at the sight of the sugar inside. I giggled at the sight of it, and my mum smiled. She explained to me that most people would never see a faerie, and that they wouldn't believe in them, and that I was lucky because I could. We shouldn't try to convince others, but as long as we remembered what was real, and we could always share it with one another.

I don't know when my brother first developed his talent. How the Other touches those in my family is often different, and I know now how secretive my brother tends to be. I had accused him of cheating at hide-and-seek since I was four, but whether he was using his talent I'm still not certain. I was surprised to even learn he had one. I am certain though, that it had come in to its full by the night our parents died.

When I was twelve years old, our parents died in a car crash. My mum died instantly. My dad, he slipped away over the next two days. I could barely sit in the room with him, the sight unnerved me so much. My brother though, he would sit there, hour after hour watching Dad slowly dying. He left me alone in the waiting room.

My brother told me about his talent after Dad died, when he came out into that cold waiting room, excited, eager to share with me. Right then he told me how he could feel the pressure I was resting on my feet, sitting cross-legged on the chair. He told me that the nurse’s back ached, even though she didn’t let on. All of a sudden my brother couldn’t keep quiet about his talent. The way he's described it, he gets some of the senses of people he's near. He might feel fingers holding a ball when a nearby kid is holding it, or hear things through a nurse’s ears, or even see through the eyes of his little sister when playing hide and seek.

My brother was there when dad died. He told me in detail what my dad has experienced. He had felt every little sensation of Dad’s for hours while dad slipped further and further away, fascinated by it. The parts where there was pain, the parts where the pain had numbed, and  the last thing dad felt. The sheet beneath him, the slightest of sensations through the tips of his fingers, before the brain finally failed, and dad was gone. Throughout his description, Mark’s face was flushed with excitement.

I couldn’t look at him after that. The thought of what he had done made me sick every time I thought about it.

Several days were lost to a miasma of unhappiness, all the misery blurring things together. I don’t know what happened to me and my brother before the funeral. The next thing I remember clearly is sitting after the funeral alongside Lady Himoto, Sam, and Mr Alastair to discuss what would become of me and my brother. They pulled my brother and I aside, and took us back to our house. I remember how large and empty it felt. They sat at our dining table, and argued over our future. Our parents’ will had given us no guardian, and all three argued over who should have our care. Mr Alistair argued that we should be left in the care of the state, that obligations to our mother gave neither Lady Himoto nor Sam an obligation to help us. Our situation was provided for financially, and that we had no family save each other was no fault of any gathered there. While Sam was content with the lawyer’s arguments, Lady Himoto was not. She moved foster parents into our house to care for us. They were a charming normal couple, who I never cared about at all.

At the time, I thought my horror at my brother would change. My mum had so often taught us that everything we could ever do would be a gift, and we should always appreciate the gifts of others. When we talked of it, which was rare, I encouraged him in learning to use it better. The idea of him feeling what I was touching though... it sent shivers down my spine.

Through thinking of my brothers gift, I slowly became aware of my own. If my brother always had some part of other people’s senses, then at some level I think I must have had my sight earlier. Of course I could see those things the way they are, rather than how they would appear to most people. I have played with the young fae before they have been given form. I could always see how they looked, and it perplexed me when I would see a boy with a tail, and nobody else noticed.

My particular talent was one not seen in my family for a very long time.

When almost all in the Other look at things, they see the surface, they see what they are, with the illusion cut away. I have the gift of true sight though. When I looked at someone, I could see through to their nature, just as you might see the colour of their hair. It's not the soul, and it's not the mind, but it's enough like both. I see something of what defines them.

Though, as I said, I think I could always do this in some way. It is hard to be certain, because it was part of seeing to me. It wasn’t until after my parent’s death, and talking to my brother, that I realised there was something more to my sight than everyone else’s. I once asked Lady Himoto whether she could help me to learn about it, but she said I was too young; that in time I would be ready.

I wasn't going to wait, though. So I practised by myself. I looked at people and tried to figure out what I was seeing, what they looked like, and then who they were. My brother remained my confidante in this, the only other person who knew about the Other in our house. With practice, it became more natural to see far more about people. I would look at a girl for five minutes and understand her; who she was and how she would act. It's like seeing a metaphor placed inside the person, and you watch the metaphor and can start to guess things about them.

The only troublesome part was that the more I trained it, the less I wanted to see some of the scarier people I had encountered. I had no interest in seeing Sam, or Mr Alastair when they visited. I saw them as nobody else did, and it was frightening. Lady Himoto’s visage was not much changed by it. And my brother. The more I developed this talent, the less keen I was to look at him. As I became incapable of not seeing people as who they really were, I began to avoid my brother, avoid meeting his eyes. I didn't want to admit the why of it. I told myself it was the same reason Sam was so hard to look at now, that my brother was just too intense. You have to forgive me that foolish hoping. He was still my brother.

I was fourteen when I was forced to accept the man my brother was, and was becoming.  One day he asked me to look at him, and let him look at himself as I saw him, let him look through my eyes. I raised my eyes to him and looked at him earnestly for the first time in I don’t know how long, with nothing sidelong to that examination. Looking, I realised how much more acute my true sight had become. The sight of him was a blackness, a recklessness, a violent curiousity so obvious to my eyes. We saw what he was through my sight, and his expression of horror matched my own, as both of us gaped at the sight of him. It is hard to say who was more terrified of him in that moment.

He ran away for three days. We didn’t speak again, on that, and barely spoke at all.

At that time, my brother’s girlfriend had been spending lots of time at our house. In spite of my horror at my brother, I couldn’t help but like her. She was sweet and bubbly, and I couldn’t see what she liked about Mark at all. When I asked, she giggled and waved it off as unfit for someone my age to know about. After thinking for a few minutes about my brother’s abilities, I blushed, and didn’t ask her anything further. You can figure it out yourselves.

By the time I was fifteen we were good friends, and we were seeing each other often. When she broke up with my brother, I was the first person she told. I comforted her as she talked about how he could be so casually cruel, and helped console her. She sobbed to me about how lucky I was that I was the only person that my brother would never hurt.

Over the next couple of weeks, the two of us grew closer. She would invite me to the parties she went to, and as  I could see the fracture to her bubbliness I always managed to match her mood. I knew  I was a security to her, not just a simple friend. I didn’t care if that was why she wanted me around most. I was 15, and going to all the parties of those older kids who had just finished school. It was a bright and exciting couple of weeks.

I got a text from her one day about an impromptu party out at this place called 'The Cavern'. She gave me an address and said to meet her there. It sounded weird, so I looked it up, but it was a real place designed for particularly loud parties. I dressed up, not even bothering to say goodbye to the installed parents and headed out to see about this party.

Only, there wasn't one. My brother had broken in to her house and stolen her phone. He sent the text message to lure me out, and even put on some music, so I didn't realise the trap until I pulled the door open. At first, I was confused, seeing no one there, then my brother tackled me from behind. I looked at him, and saw what he was, and he sprung off me, eyes wide.

"Don't look at me!" he screamed. What happened next was the second worst experience I have ever had. I averted my eyes. I didn’t think about it, but his command went past my consciousness and straight in to my actions. I stood there, shocked, while my brother breathed heavily.

"Sit on the ground, keep your head down," he commanded, and once again I found my body acting without me. It robbed the fire from me. It caused such a dread in me, a feeling of helplessness. I tried to raise my head, and I couldn’t.

I sat there, unable to do anything but wait, while my brother paced in front of me, starting to smoke. I asked him what we were waiting for and he didn't answer. When I told him to release me he ignored me. When I begged him to, he just laughed. He told me how he had made a charm to bind me to follow his commands. He showed me the little charm, covered with my hair and his blood.

It was after the fifth butt hit the ground that my brother stopped his pacing and faced the still open door. I was still unable to raise my eyes, but I heard him say, "I was beginning to think you'd hung me out to dry."

I spotted a woman's bare feet at the door, though still could not raise my eyes to look at her fully. The voice I recognised; it was Lady Himoto. She asked why my brother had brought her here. He replied that he had something she was looking for. He talked about how he had been learning of the Other, had been talking with you, Callum, and that he had found a seer for her. He offered my eyes to her.

Until that point, I had always thought Lady Himoto to, I don’t know, care for me. I had not seen her very often, for she could rarely afford the time to visit, but she wrote notes, the most careful and exquisite notes, and I would treasure them. After my mother died, there was no one who I was closer to than her. I thought she would defend me.

Instead, she asked what terms she could have me for. I cried out, but my brother commanded me to silence. That command turned the words into a futile howl in my throat.

My brother turned back to Lady Himoto, and started to talk about the deal.  He told her that he had his own powers. He explained how he could see through the eyes of others, hear what they heard, and even feel what they felt, and he wanted them enhanced and heightened. He wanted to be able to feed people's senses, rather than just observe them.

While they discussed the details of the agreement, I realised that I was getting some movement back. I raised my head, and then swiftly lowered it again so my brother wouldn’t know I could move. I waited patiently. My brother wandered over, saying, 'have a look and see whether it's worth it then'. I lunged up, and tried to tackle him. I got in one solid hit, but another simple command from him made my body go limp again. I crumpled to the floor.

My brother screamed of what awful things he would do to me for trying to defy him, but Lady Himoto hushed him. She came over to me, crouching down, and raised my head in her hand. She looked in to my eyes. I looked in to her more closely than I have looked in to anyone before or since, looking straight through her deep brown eyes.

Unlike my brother, there was no cruelty in those eyes, no malice or spite. She was simply curious. I had seen in her so many times her passion for knowledge, for learning, for understanding, but looking in to her eyes then, I saw how deep and how dangerous that curiosity was. Compared to that, my welfare was nothing; any speck of compassion was lost in those depths.

'We are agreed on the terms then? You will accept the faebond I offered, and any help I can grant with your talent, in exchange for the seer’s eyes?’ Himoto asked. My brother agreed.

Lady Himoto whispered to me not to worry, then she reached up and, with care, plucked out one eye, then the other. It took her no more than five seconds, so swiftly did she move. That, that was the most awful thing I have ever felt.

I don't know what happened next. I think I fainted.  The next I remember was lying in a hospital, feeling the bandage on my face, covering where my eyes had been. I sobbed for so long. I had no idea of how much time was passing. Orderlies came in to see me, to ask what had happened to me, but I couldn't answer them. What could I have said?

Ward had studied Iris while she spoke, and marvelled that she was so composed through every moment of the story. Her expression was tight, and she kept her hands clasping each other, possibly too tightly, but she delivered the story without her voice wavering. A quick glance around the table showed Ward a mix of emotions. Callum was the only one unmoved by the story, looking around, though Ward saw that his pen was held still, no longer tapping against the table top. Kane looked sick, and Charlotte looked shaken.

Ward couldn't bring himself to look up at Iris's eyes, but he looked at her hands, and looked at the tears he had seen on them glistening red in the light. Looking again, he saw the tears had dried, and were still red, and Ward slowly accepted that those tears had been blood. He glanced up at Iris' face and still could not make out her eyes, though now he knew why. Not knowing what else to do, he reached across and rested a hand on his girlfriends' hands. He ignored where he could feel the dried blood. She looked at him for the first time since she had started speaking, and she gripped his hand back, squeezing it too tightly.

"There, is that enough?" Iris asked Charlotte. There was an edge to her voice. Charlotte glanced around the table. "You've left one part out. You aren't blind. You don't move like your sight is even impaired. I want to know why or how."

Iris took a deep breath before speaking. "Magic is not science. You can't predict how things will work. The eyes themselves did not hold my talent. That is something I have regardless of what is done to me. The first thing I saw after my eyes were pulled out was Sam come to visit me. He was so bright that the sight of him burned through the bandages. That’s how I learned I wasn’t truly blind."

She pointed her face at Callum, "Sam became my protector, and helped with my rehabilitation. My brother ran away from home, and I could have gone back, but I didn't want to. I finished school living by myself, save for when Sam would visit.

"Over time, I learned to use my true sight to make out the world around me again. There are some challenges, because things appear can appear allegorically. I might see a cat as larger than it is, as it imagines itself, or a wall a colour that reflects its location. I worked on it though, and trained it so I can see almost normally."

She stopped and switched her focus back to Charlotte. They all sat in silence until she said, "Is that enough now?”

Charlotte tried to stare Iris down, but Charlotte could never win a staring contest with Iris. "Fine. That seems to explain what you are. You can leave if you want. You can even take your brother with you."

Callum nodded. “Yes, that seems enough.” He rolled his pen between his hands, thinking for a bit. “Quite enough all round, by my reckoning.”

"Nobody move or I slit this man's throat!"

The cry instantly attracted the attention of everyone in the bar. Standing near the door of the dressing rooms was Mark, holding a scalpel to the throat of the professor. Mark had taken the time to light a cigarette, and smoke was coiling from his mouth. In front of him stood a troll, who had backed away slowly. Everyone in the bar had stood up to look, though nobody seemed eager to get closer. The trolls, who were interspersed all over the bar, were all looking at Callum for direction.

Callum climbed over the table to get out of the booth. "You might want to let him go. You don't want this to get worse."

Mark sniggered. "You reckon this'll get worse? I think things can’t get much worse for me than this."

Mark was slowly edging around the bar, trying to keep an eye on the barman and all the other people at the same time. It was a challenge, but nobody seemed to want to get closer. The bartender was still polishing a glass. Iris stepped out of the booth, and strode forward. "Where do you think you're going to go? You can't just walk out with a scalpel to a man's throat. You're limping too, you can't even run away."

"Well if I were planning to leave by the front door, then that'd be a problem, but you've never been here before." He had reached the centre aisle and was beginning to edge past it towards the opposite side of the old theatre. Charlotte gasped. "He's heading for stage right." Ward and Kane both looked at her confused. "Stage right. It leads to the Other. But that's as good as suicide."

"Tell your ugly ducklings to back off, Callum," Mark demanded, "I don't have to kill this man all at once."

Iris looked at Callum, "You promised Charlotte to hold this man. You can't let him walk out."

Callum ran his hand through his hair, still holding the pen. "I said it had been quite enough all around, and that meant my debt to Charlotte too."

"Well Charlotte, you just humiliated me, get Callum to hold him again."

"Callum, just keep hold of him."

Callum glanced from one woman to the other. "My debt to you has been paid, Charlotte, and you have nothing to offer me that would make me get involved in this."

"Fine then," Iris said, "I'll stop him myself. Again." Ward leapt up at this, and moved to stand beside her.

"You can't," Callum declared. "No fighting in the bar. None."

"You going to stop us?" Ward asked.

"No, but my employees will. Gentlemen?"

The nearest troll lumbered forward and seized Ward with one arm and Iris with the other. Ward struggled against it, but the hold didn't loosen. Iris didn't bother trying. They watched as an amused Mark walked slowly around to stage right, standing in front of the door to it now. "Well friends, it's been an interesting little trip to Sydney, but I think it's time I took my leave."

Callum asked, "You know that once you do this, you will be banned from this establishment, yes?"

Mark didn't even look at him. "Sis, it was so good to see you, and meet your little friend. I'm going to make it back sometime, don't you worry."

Mark felt behind him until he found the handle and opened the door. The professor was sweating, and there was a nick on his throat that had caused a thin line of blood. Mark pulled the scalpel away, and shoved the professor forward, before stepping back through the door, slamming it behind him.

Once the door closed, the troll released Ward and Iris. Ward ran down the steps to the professor, helping him up and checking that he wasn't hurt.

Iris turned with hatred to Callum. "You let him go."

Callum shrugged, and took a step back from her. "I had no choice. I would always rather see someone escape than someone end up dead on the floor of my bar. This isn't meant to be a theatre anymore."

"But that thing is just a zombie. It's not even a person. Are you really worried about it dying?"

"Yes, actually. Even a zombie being killed in my bar is bad. Firstly, because if someone can get away with killing a zombie, then the question comes up of who else it is okay to kill, and that's not a question that I want asked around here. Ever. I want everyone to feel safe here."

Iris began to speak, but Callum cut her off, "Secondly, while essentially nobody here regards him as such, that man is still a person. The things he knows are valuable, and his skills are unique. His friendship is more valuable than yours. Your reason for disregarding him is questionable, like declaring animal cruelty fine just because they are not people. You don't get to do that here."

Callum lowered his voice, and pointed at Iris with his pen. "Finally, I did not just let Mark escape. There will be consequences to what he has done, you just won't get to be the one delivering them. Something which I suspect you're going to secretly be very glad about not having the burden of. You didn't kill him when you had the chance. Don't feel bad about that. It's a weakness, but one to be proud of."

Iris stepped forward toward Callum, and the patrons all held their breath. Iris raised a hand to slap Callum and began to swing when a golden blur barreled down the steps of the amphitheatre. From the front door of the bar, he made it to Iris in time to catch the blow. The figure resolved into a golden-haired man in a golden suit. One hand gripped Iris'. With the other, he shoved her, and she was thrown across the room just as Callum was saying, "Don't hurt her." The man didn't look at Callum, but dashed forward again, and caught Iris before she landed. He put her lightly on her feet, and looked back to Callum.

"Thank you Baror. Your timing is nearly impeccable. I don't think she's going to try it again."

Ward was hurrying up the steps towards Iris, ready to fight the new arrival, but Iris stumbled in to him and leaned on him so heavily that he couldn't continue. Baror glanced at Ward, then stared at his outfit. "You gave away my other suit?"

Callum smiled, looking relieved. "I didn't think you would need it for a while, and he needed some clothes. It does sit surprisingly well on him though."

Callum stepped towards Iris, though he still kept some distance. "I understand you're angry, and you probably didn't mean to threaten me nearly as much as you actually did. Still, you are to leave here immediately. You are not allowed to re-enter for the next two months. This applies to your boyfriend as well. If you have anything else to ask me, about your brother or anything else, then you must send someone else in your stead."

"But what are you-"

"I don't think you were listening. You are to leave. Now. No debate and no questions."

The trolls were gentle but firm in moving Ward and Iris out. Kane glanced at Charlotte, the two still standing in their booth. Charlotte sighed, but followed the couple out, and Kane trailed after her.

Kane and Charlotte parted from Ward and Iris with almost no words. Kane and Ward shared a glance, but had nothing to say. All four had silently decided they were too tired to try and sort anything out now. Ward said he would see Iris home and that was that. Ward and Iris set off together, leaving Kane and Charlotte. Kane suggested that he and Charlotte go and get another drink, but Charlotte disdained the idea, so instead they just walked towards where they could head home from.

Kane and Iris reached King Street, the main strip of Newtown. The lights had a yellow glow that was not too bright. The streets were full of people walking in colourful bunches, talking and smiling all together. Kane looked at the street and a smile flickered on his face. "What's so funny?" Charlotte asked him. "Just-just Ward, you know? Here he was having found a nice normal woman, and instead she turns out to have no eyes. And from your experience, that should have been off-putting but instead he’s walking her home, arm around her shoulder and,” Kane trailed off, breathing heavily.

“Are you going to be okay?” Charlotte asked.

"What, yes, fine! It's not like I saw a friend get stabbed today. Today hasn't been completely unnerving at all."

Charlotte looked around to see if anyone had overheard. Still ignored, she reached out a hand to pat Kane's shoulder, but jerked it back before she touched him. "I'm sorry I dragged you in to all this. If I'd known what would happen, I wouldn't have involved you in it."

Kane closed his eyes. "Yeah. I really didn't want to be involved in anything like that. But I'm still glad you asked me. Because for you, or Ward, or, or Veronica, I think that kind of thing is something I'd do. It's not like I even really did anything. Mostly I was just there. But I wanted to help."

"Well I'm still sorry anyway."

They walked on in silence, just enjoying the sights and sounds of the normal world. The street lights and the people calmed Kane. Eventually, as they neared the bus stop, Charlotte asked, "Wait, so you wouldn't risk danger for Tracey?"

Kane glanced at her. "Weeell I suppose I might, but it's not quite the same."

"Isn't she like your oldest friend?"

Kane looked slightly embarrassed, "I'm not sure she's my oldest friend. She's, she's Tracey. That's really all I could think to say about her."

"Well I'm glad that I made that list. And you have Veronica there too, who's a bastion of normalcy. I can’t see her getting you in to any trouble."

Kane ran his hand through his hair. "Yeah, though that might prove a little awkward, like explaining where I was all day. I couldn’t tell her what we’ve been up to even if she would believe me."

"When are you catching up with her?"

“Soon as I’m done here.”

“Really?”

"Yeah, I was meant to duck out and have brunch with you, then head back to meet her, but you wanted help."

Charlotte let out a low whistle, half smile on her face. "I wouldn’t want to be in your shoes tonight."

Kane asked "Why?" as his bus pulled up.

"I bet she's sitting at home right now tapping her feet. I bet you're going to be in so much trouble."

"Well it's your fault!"

"What did you tell her you were doing instead?"

"I told her you needed help on an assignment, a communications thing, and that you weren't sure how long it would take." Kane said, letting a couple of people get on the bus in front of him.

"That's actually a pretty good cover. Good to know you can lie when you need to."

"Hey, I was helping you."

"Oh I know. It's a fair call. Your little conspiracy is safe with me." Charlotte glanced again at the bus number as Kane hung with one foot on the bus. "You going to meet her right now?"

"I was going to."

Charlotte leaned in close to Kane. "Well, a little advice from a co-conspirator. You might want to sober  up and tidy yourself before you do. Otherwise we might have quite the wrong conspiracy on our hands.” The impatient bus driver yelled at Kane, who hopped on, waving goodbye to Charlotte.

Once ensconced in a bus seat, Kane texted Veronica to see if she still wanted to catch up. The reply was an instant 'yes'. Kane sat catatonic on the bus until it had bounced him out of Newtown, and down the streets to Burwood. Outside of the shadow of the city, Burwood was a nice spacious area of Sydney, and Kane always liked how relaxed it felt in comparison to closer to home.

His mind was blissfully dispersed. He wilfully stopped it coalescing, to avoid any thoughts about the day. He watched the street lights go past and waited patiently for his stop to arrive before him. He almost fell asleep on that bus, and the bus driver abused him again after he pressed the stop button at the last minute.

Kane arrived on Veronica's doorstep too soon for his own liking. He stood a little while resisting putting his foot on the first step up to the house. It was a strange world. Who knew what would happen to delay that moment further if he just waited. Nothing interfered, and he was forced to take that first step, then the next three as he climbed to Veronica's front door.

He knocked and it was answered almost instantly by Veronica who was wearing a dressing gown, and holding a book. She hugged him, wrinkled her nose in disapproval at his lateness, and then ushered him through the door while searching for a bookmark that she knew 'was around somewhere'. After a fruitless few minutes of searching for a proper bookmark, a tissue was used instead, allowing Veronica to finally turn her full attention to Kane, who had slumped in to a chair.

“You know that was my only day with nothing to do in the next week.” There was no anger in her voice, just weariness. “I mean, I need to go to bed soon. I have class early tomorrow.”

Kane sighed. “Yeah, I know today must have completely sucked. It was Charlotte’s stupid communication project. She needed some other voices for a radio production, and she kept thinking she’d got it, but that we just needed to spend a little longer at it to get the sound perfect. Just grab a couple more recordings and check what was up. And then the computer died halfway through.”

Kane got up and hugged her tightly. He loosened his hold when she asked if that had been all of it, in the quietest of voices. “It wasn’t quite all of it. Ward, he’s been having some problems. I don’t think he’d want me to go in to them. It’s just some relationship drama. I think it’s sorted, but he was not doing well.”

“You didn’t tell me Ward was there too.”

“Guy just called me up and was wrecked. I didn’t know what to do, so I helped as best I could. But yeah, don’t mention it to him. He can be a bit sensitive.”

He felt her nod, her nose nuzzling against his neck. “Alright, I won’t bring it up. He’s okay though?”

“Yeah, he’s fine. It just gave me pause to think. Sorry I took so long.” He took a moment to simply enjoy the warmth of her, before adding with a sigh, “We really have a nice thing here. It’s great to have something so simple to come back to after a day like today."

Veronica had meant to say more, but decided on silence. They stood and held each other in the small kitchen. Eventually Kane spoke again, “Come on, let’s get you off to bed before one of your flatmates comes and ruins the mood.”

Ward walked Iris all the way home. She insisted he didn’t need to, but he had done it anyway. Once back at her place, she said he needn’t find his way home. He agreed to stay, and she found him a spare toothbrush. Both were slow in getting ready for bed, and while Iris said nothing, Ward saw how her movements were hurting her.

Quietly and gently, Ward insisted on hearing about how she hurt. Iris shook her head, saying it wasn’t important, but Ward thought at least someone should look. She relented at the look of concern on his face, and together they examined her hands, the bruises and the grazes. Ward watched her rotate her ankle. It was swollen, but they didn’t think it was broken.

Iris mentioned her back, where she had fallen and hit the ground. Ward touched it lightly and she flinched. He asked about cracked ribs, although neither of them knew what to look for if there was one. She lifted her shirt so he could see the bruise to satisfy himself that it was nothing, or at least nothing to be too concerned about. He ran his fingers across the giant bruise softly, and she shivered under the touch.

There were few words said, and a single kiss to end the evening. Half-heartedly Iris said that they should talk, but Ward said there would be time enough later, put it off a little longer. They lay down beside one another, falling asleep, in each other's arms.

Ward woke in the night, Iris no longer in his arms. He opened his eyes and found her no longer in the room. He got up and walked out, spotting his girlfriend sitting on the balcony, wrapped in a large blanket. When he opened the door, she didn’t turn to face him, but the sobbing became audible. They were quiet, but with every sob he saw her entire body convulse. There were tears on her cheeks, and if the blanket was a good indicator for someone of Ward’s vision, the tears were red.

“It’s too cold out here.” Ward said. Iris didn’t respond. “You should come inside. No reason crying means you should also be cold.” He put a hand on her shoulder. She still didn’t move. She seemed to be trying to hold the sobs back.

“I can’t-I can’t,” the rest of the sentence was lost to the sobs. Ward bent down and put his arms fully around her. “Don’t try and speak now. Just come inside and I'll-I'll sit with you until you’re ready to talk. There’s no rush. There’s not- I’m not going anywhere.”

She turned to look at him. “I can’t. What he did. I couldn’t. Not even. I couldn’t.” He wiped one of the tear-lines from her face, suppressing a shudder at the sight of the blood on his palm, and slowly drew her up, and brought her inside.  He held her while she sobbed herself out. He held her for half an hour before the sobbing returned, this time large sobs that racked her entire body. He cried with her. There was plenty to make both of them cry.

After the third outbreak, when Iris had finally calmed, and Ward’s own tears had faltered, Iris began to speak, “I was so scared that his charm on me would still work. I worked so hard to learn to stop it, but still…”

“You mean you walked in there thinking you might be helpless?”

She nodded. “I was so scared of what might happen to me.”

“You shouldn’t have come.”

“I had to.”

“You didn’t. You should have stayed away from him. You knew how dangerous he was.”

“No. If you were hurt because of me, and I did nothing, I couldn’t have coped. Can you imagine the guilt? I had to.” She smiled weakly at him. “I mean, if there was someone in trouble because of you, you wouldn’t just sit there."

“No. I wish you hadn’t come."

He hugged her again, and kissed her forehead. "It's so weird finding out how special you are.”

He raised his eyes to look at Iris again. He still couldn’t focus on what her eyes looked like, but he tried to meet her gaze anyway. Iris rested her head on his shoulder. “You’re an idiot for not wanting to run as far away as possible.”

Ward was careful putting his arms around her, trying to avoid the bruises. “Probably I am, but still. Is he gone now?”

Iris rested her brow on Ward’s shoulder as she answered, “It’s so hard to tell. He might die in the Other. He might emerge tomorrow with some new ability. He might come back in twenty years as a fragile old man.”

"I'd offer to help against him, but it seems I'm the one who needs help."

Iris pulled her head back to look at him. "Don't think that. You helped so much."

He clenched his fists. "It was my fault he was able to lure you though. And then I kicked the knife to him."

Ward looked at Iris, and unclenched his fists. Iris said, "No, it was nobody's fault but my brother's and Lady Himoto's." Iris glanced down at Ward's then started back. “Oh hell. The blood on your hands. And your shirt. I just got blood on your shirt. I can’t believe I was so stupid.”

Ward looked down and saw that it was smeared along one shoulder. The sight made him queasy, but he kept his face impassive. “Don’t worry about it. It’s a shirt."

Iris lowered her head in to her hands. “I hate how much this sucks for you. You should have just gone home tonight. I knew I was going to cry, and it's always blood now. You shouldn’t have to deal with this."

Ward gently peeled her hands off, and cupped her cheek. “I'm here because I want to be. I'll deal with this. Don't worry.”

Iris’ smile was her first full eye of the evening. “You’re truly a wonderful person. I can't believe how well you're coping. I'm not even coping."

“I’m nothing special.”

“Trust me, because I really do know. You really are.

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Iris arrived home. Her bruises were healed, and she walked lightly again. It had been four weeks since her brother had vanished in to the Other. Life seemed finally to be getting back to normal, and she was still surprised how supportive Ward had been.

Ward already at her house, staring at a note on her coffee table when she got in. The note had been sealed with wax, and the paper was tinted with a dappled green. On the left, above the seal, Iris’ name had been crafted, each letter carefully shaped with regards to those around. On the right side, below the seal was the name of the sender - Lady Himoto. To Iris, the letters glowed, and the letter left an impression of yearning, a yellow that mixed with the green.

Inside, Iris knew, each letter would be unique. Each word would be a work of art. Ward looked at her, uncertain. “It was on the table when I got home. I wasn’t sure what to do.” Iris picked it up in trembling hands. “I didn’t expect this. Himoto… look at the writing. It’s so unique, every part. So crafted and controlled.”

“What does it mean?” Ward asked. Iris put the letter down, clutching her own hands trying to stop the trembling. “I don’t know what it means. But it’s important. She hasn’t sent me a letter since before she took my eyes.” Ward fidgeted while Iris stared at it.

It would be news of Mark. Iris was sure of that. Lady Himoto had not broken her silence of the last five years for a pleasant chat. Lady Himoto spent too long on each letter to send them frivolously.

Iris thought of Sam. Sam had helped her through her first run-in with Mark in his own way. She had expected him to help her, to come and save her. Even a month later, Sam had not appeared to make inquiries. She had hoped that Sam would come and say that this atrocity was enough that he would seek Mark out to receive justice. It saddened her that he hadn't come at all.

"Do you want me to get you some tea, or some wine, while you read it?" Ward asked, standing up ready to move in to the kitchen, to give Iris some space. She shook her head though, hands still clasped tightly. She didn't speak, and Ward sunk back down next to her.

"She can't put magic in the letter, or in the words, can she?"

Iris shook her head again, then swept the hair back from her face. It stayed out of her eyes on the second attempt. "No, she can't put magic in the words. You don't need magic to make words dangerous though. You just have to use them well.”

Staring at the letter, the real green and the yellow of her sight, Iris gave a little shudder. Green with hints of gold. It was the colour her eyes had been before they had been taken. Could Lady Himoto have planned that? Could she write a letter so carefully as to make Iris see it differently from what it was?

Iris took a deep breath. It steadied her hands. She wished she could have closed her eyes for that moment. "We'll read it together, okay?" She picked the letter up in untrembling hands, broke the seal, peeled it open, and they read:

My Dearest Iris,

I know my greetings may offend, but I offer them in honest feeling. It has been far too long since we have seen one another, and I shamefully admit this as my fault. I wish that I could deliver this news in person, but unfortunately my interests still keep me in the Other. I hope you will be satisfied with just this letter.

To put your immediate worry to rest, I found my faebond, your brother Mark. He was wandering lost through the Other, and it was fortunate that I found him, or else it is beyond me to predict what would have happened. There are things in the Other with as few scruples as Mark, who would have helped him in his vendetta. We have avoided something terrifying.

When I learned the methods and manner that your brother used in trying to acquire your gift for me last month, I was appalled. I assure you had I known the actions he would undertake just to hurt you, I would never have condoned his attempt on your gift. It grieves me to see that the possibility of our happy reunion has slipped further away through the actions of this beast. As a gesture of reconcilement, I am holding Mark in my grove. You can rest easy now, knowing that Mark will not threaten you, or your companion, anymore.

I know you must be skeptical that I would do this for you, but your mother was close to me, and your safety and well-being are the object of my heart. Your brother, having shown his basest nature, has lost my regard, and it grieves me that I find myself now bearing my tie with him, when you are the heir to that fine woman's graces. She would be so proud of how you have dealt with your adversities.

This I feel for you even before we mention your gift. In a world of oddities and strangeness, it still shines bright and clear. You may not care that it is what I desire most of everything in the world. It does not forgive what I have done to you, but understand that I hold nothing but kind feelings towards you. Greed for your gift has wrecked my good judgement before, but I will never let it cloud my vision of you again. There could be nothing more delightful than working together to explore your gift, now that you are of an age.

It may even be possible to restore to you what you lost from my grave misunderstanding.

Even if you refuse to work with me, you should remember how special your gift is. Nothing could grieve me more than if your gift were wasted on a normal life.

Finally, your new companion, Ward, is somebody to whom I owe a debt. Mark used him cruelly, and I would make up for my faebond’s treatment of him at the first opportunity. If you would pass along a way for me to contact him, I would gladly look to settle this as swiftly as possible.

If you wish to make no reply, then I will understand, and hold no ill will against you for the slight to me. If you wish to reply, do so as you used to.

Your guardian and friend,

Lady Himoto

Iris placed the note carefully back on the table. She breathed out, and ran her fingers around the edge of the letter. She folded it closed and applied pressure to the wax, creating a weak seal. “So that’s it. Mark’s gone.” Iris couldn’t believe it. She was numb through and through. There would be relief later. Now, there was just disbelief.

“Will she keep her word?” Mark asked.

Iris reached over to hold his hand. “Yeah. Fae take a huge stock in their word. If they say they’ll do something, they will. Their word is one of their most precious currencies."

Ward hugged her, saying “This is wonderful.”

He leaned back from the hug, and asked, “So, wait, did I read that right? I can get a favour from her? And she wants to make nice with you?”

Iris glanced back at the letter. “Yeah. Ignore it. We’re best to stay away from her. She'll make another pass at me, you saw what she wrote about my sight. And being close enough to make deals with us gives her all kinds of opportunities. The fae love making deals, because equal rarely means fair.”

"But she offered to just give me something, no deal involved. And she sounded sorry for what she had done to you."

Iris shook her head, "No, you don't understand the fae yet. She's after my sight, and everything else is just incidental maneuvering. We should keep our distance."

Ward nodded, swallowing the advice. “Are you going to write a reply?” he asked. Iris shook her head slowly. “No-o, I don’t think I will. It’s enough to know where Mark is for now. That will let us both sleep easier. Means we don't have to make sure to keep so close in case of an attack.”

Iris let out a deep breath. A tension to her face was released for the first time since Iris had seen her brother. She trembled with the force of the release. Ward shifted in his seat, suddenly uncomfortable. He started to speak, fell silent, then began to speak again. "So now we know that Mark isn't lurking around, I guess there's no need for me to keep so close to you. I mean, we never discussed those things Mark said about-about us. That you flinch when I stutter, and, um. That."

Iris just hugged him. "Don't you dare try and ruin this moment is by letting my brothers idiot comments.”

**Part 3: Before Midnight**

Chapter 1

"I just think it's a bad idea," Kane said, swilling his beer in its bottle, his head resting on the table in Ward's small kitchen. Ward sat opposite, sipping a glass of wine, and puzzling at Kane's statement. "I really don't see the problem." He reached for a piece on the chess board between them, but then took his hand back, hesitating.

"You're used to being all neurotic,” Kane said. “Think about it. The girls might get up to anything while we're not around."

"So? It's not like we get up to anything when we're on our own. 'The girls' as you call them can choose to go out if they want to."

"What about Iris and Charlotte? Are they talking to each other yet?" Kane asked, lifting his head, surveying the chess board, then finishing his beer.

Ward shifted his weight on the chair, and didn't look at Kane as he answered. "They're not on... great terms. But they're speaking to each other. And Veronica, and her friends are there too. It's a buffer. They can be civil. It'll be fine."

"You really don't understand at all. If they're being bitchy to each other, and the other girls notice, they'll ask why. Can you imagine how bad that'd be? They can’t really go in to who stabbed who that one time.”

“They won’t be a problem. They're both smart enough to not tell a random bunch of people about the Other."

Kane lifted his head off the table, and leaned back to take a swig. "Those two I will give the benefit of the doubt. Tracey’s a meddler though and she'll want to be involved if she realises there’s a conflict."

Ward looked up from where he had just placed his rook. "Wait, Veronica invited Tracey out?"

"Yeah."

"But doesn’t Veronica hate Tracey?”

“I don’t know why.”

Ward lowered his eyes back to the board. “Because you made out with Tracey that one time?”

Kane shrugged. "She made out with me. And anyway, we squared that. I don’t need you busting my balls over it. Anyway, Veronica wanted to try and do some reconciliations at the party. I tried to tell her that Tracey's a massive bitch, but she didn't listen to a word I said."

“Tracey’s your friend.”

"Yeah, that's why I'm allowed to call her a bitch.” Kane leaned back on his chair and pried the fridge open, getting a fresh bottle. “Anyway, ever since Trace made out with me when I was drunk, I haven’t had the most sympathy for her.”

Ward made his move. Making no headway convincing Ward that the evening was a bad idea, Kane turned his focus back to the game. After staring at the pieces splayed across the board for a few seconds he rubbed his hands through his hair. "Hells, this is so dumb. I can't stop thinking about this stupid party. I wish you could have gone and just glamoured everyone so they didn't see each other."

Ward looked down from the board at the table in front of him. "Couldn't do it."

"Well sure, it's harder than one person, but you managed that pretty excellently." Kane held his hand over his bishop, and watched Ward’s face.

"That was, special," Ward said. His voice was quiet, mournful. "Back at the cavern I was... I was so panicked. I didn't think about it, I just acted. Now though, it's so hard."

Kane stared across at Ward, frowning. "I thought you said you were able to glamour things though."

"Small things. It's slightly better than when I tried to show it to you, maybe slightly worse. Sometimes I can do it with almost no effort. Sometimes it fails, collapses. I can feel when it works, but still. It’s not easy.”

Kane turned his attention back to the game, no glib response ready. Kane’s hands traversed the space above his pieces, glancing at Ward and not touching them. They sat in silence for several minutes, before Kane got up, stretched, and said, "Screw this. I can't concentrate. The pieces are just kind of blurring. If the girls are going to have a girls night out, then lets have a guys night out. You and me, out on the town. We can flirt with sexy women, and drink till we burst."

Ward got up, but was frowning. "I don't think either of our girlfriends would like it if we went out and flirted."

Kane pulled his jacket off the back of his chair, and slung it over his shoulder. "Ward, I was clearly joking. We just want to live large. Sometimes I think you just don't get life.”

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Veronica asked her roommate, Rhani, for the third time if her hair was okay. She couldn't help it. She was jittery, and she was sure it was showing. That was just making her more jittery. Too late to have a quiet night now. It was her party now. She probably should have listened to Kane when he said not to do it.

Rhani parked the car out the back of Newtown as she answered that yes, Veronica's hair was still fine. The two of them got out and began to walk towards their destination, the cocktail bar where they were going to start their evening.

It certainly wasn't the world's classiest cocktail bar, but a cheap happy hour was a nice draw for the working student. It was also one of the bars she was sure everyone she had invited would enjoy.

She had invited some of her own friends out with her for the evening, she really wasn't seeing enough of them these days, between Kane, work and uni. She had also invited Iris and Charlotte, because she had seen them so much the last couple of months, and she always worried over how they avoided each other. She always felt sorry for Charlotte, with her sickly pallor but lovely hair. And Iris was a gentle soul. Finally, she had invited Tracey, who was one of Kane's friends. Of all the people, Tracey was the hardest to invite. It had been over a month since Veronica had walked in on Kane fully kissing Tracey at a bar they had all been at. Veronica had fled that night, and almost refused to talk to Kane again.

She took a deep breath, consciously refrained from asking Rhani again if her hair was still fine, then went in to the dimly lit bar. The moment was anticlimactic, as a quick scan of the room showed nobody else was there yet.

They got seats and their first drinks, and waited as the other guests trickled in. First her other friends arrived, then Iris, then Tracey, and finally Charlotte, who had brought a guest of her own. Iris spotted them first, and had tensed up, drawing Veronica's attention to where she was looking.

There was Charlotte, with her absurdly thin frame, wearing a dress for once, and curly hair as wild as ever. Arm in arm with her was another woman who... Veronica frowned. This other woman looked exotic. Veronica had never thought someone exotic before, but there was something in the angles of her face, and the masses of silver jewellery she wore all over that made the description fit. Charlotte was smiling, just a little embarrassed as Veronica got up to greet her.

"Hey Veronica. Sorry for not checking ahead whether it was okay to bring a guest. I only found out Dessa would be visiting an hour ago, and I was hoping you'd be cool."

"Of course I'm cool. Why wouldn't I be?" Veronica leaned over and hugged the unfamiliar figure as well. "Dessa was it? Lovely to meet you, an absolute delight."

Dessa smiled at Veronica, which was slightly disconcerting. "It's a delight to be here and meet you all." Dessa's words resonated through everyone within earshot. Veronica almost blushed from the rhythms of the voice echoing through her.

Charlotte bought a round of drinks for everyone as Dessa got herself settled between Veronica and Tracey. Dessa introduced herself to Tracey, who didn't meet Dessa's eyes, and then Dessa said hello to Rhani and Iris. Iris was about to speak to her when Charlotte arrived back with the drinks.

Tracey spoke up after the thank-yous were done with. "Dessa, how do you know Charlotte? I was beginning to think she didn't have any close friends before she met the boys."

Dessa relaxed back in her chair, stretching her legs under the table. Veronica noticed they bumped up against Charlotte's. "Oh, me and Charlotte go back almost four years now, right? We ran in to each other at the beach one day, and just hit it off. Sadly I don't get to Sydney very often. But when I do, I always make sure I check in on Charlotte. She's my favourite gal pal, isn't that right?"

Charlotte raised her glass in acknowledgement, before taking an overlong sip. Veronica asked, "So where are you from then?"

"Well I'd like to say the ocean," she paused, "but really, I'm just a wanderer. I work as a singer, and that lets me roam anywhere there's a sea. It's a pretty good line of work."

Tracey nodded. "Of course, singing is a pretty good life. Though travelling like that must be so hard, financially I mean. Other than money, it would be such a great lifestyle. Very carefree.”

Dessa looked at her briefly, then ignored her. She looked across the table at Iris, and leaned in over the table. "I'm sorry, dear. You were going to ask me something before?"

Iris startled at being addressed, answering "No, it was nothing." Dessa nodded, "Well It's certainly nice to meet you." Iris put a smile on her face, though Veronica wasn't convinced. She glanced from one to the other, sure she'd missed something, but unable to guess what.

The eight girls began to relax in to the evening, helped by another round of drinks, this time provided by Tracey, even though the half-price happy hour was over. Rhani quickly engaged Tracey in a conversation on what it was like working in the middle of the city, and Veronica struck up a conversation with Charlotte and Dessa.

Dessa seemed truly lovely. A woman enjoying an amazingly carefree life. She would be quiet for a while, and then she would speak, and her voice would thrill through Veronica. There was a little jolt of excitement every time Dessa said anything. The only one not engaged in conversation was Iris. Veronica kept trying to bring her in, but she was far quieter than usual, almost as bad as Ward could be.

Upon Veronica asking Iris what she thought their boyfriends were up to though, Dessa replied, "Oh so you're the one who's dating the famous Kane then. Charlotte has been telling me what a character he can be.”

Tracey emerged from explaining where was good to get lunch to add, "Maybe you should watch out Veronica, Charlotte's been talking 'bout your boy." Tracey laughed, and the others all laughed too, though Veronica had to force hers.

"Uh yeah, I'm dating Kane at the moment. I mean, I'm dating him. He's a sweet guy."

“I’m glad he suits you,” Dessa added. “And of course you suit him well.” Tracey supplied, took a sip, then added, “Though being a pretty woman makes that easy enough.” Tracey looked at Veronica's suddenly serious face and rolled her eyes. "Oh I'm sure he's settled down a lot these days. Just a little bit of teasing.”

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Tracey was leading the woman to Karaoke. Everyone was at least three drinks in, and it wasn't yet ten o'clock. Iris had declined her fourth and fifth, saying she wasn't feeling up for it yet. She really wasn't. She was the one walking the straightest as they navigated through the city centre to try and find somewhere to drink more and sing drunkenly, since Tracey wanted to hear the singer belt out a tune or two.

Iris wasn't wobbling at all. The rage in the pit of her stomach had burnt out her intoxication as she kept a constant eye on Dessa, only occasionally glancing at Charlotte. Veronica kept taking Iris’s sullenness personally, but right now Iris didn't care. The only thing that she cared about was that Charlotte had brought a fae out with them.

Dessa was tall, at least a head above all the other women except Rhani. She couldn't imagine what they were all seeing. Iris could see her properly though. Her legs were covered in fish scales, and flared out from the knee down. Her entire complexion was silver with a hint of green. She was beautiful in her own way, but she was entirely inhuman.

At a lull in the conversation as they stumbled off the bus in to the city, Iris asked Dessa how exactly she had met Charlotte. Dessa had narrowed her eyes for just an instant at Iris, before continuing in her easy manner, "Oh Charlotte hates me to tell it, but in short, I rescued her from drowning when she was younger and being a little bit foolish."

Iris glanced at Charlotte who was looking abashed. The conversation had rolled on. Dessa glanced at Iris when the conversation moved on, and the black orbs that were her eyes seemed to say 'I know what you were doing.' Charlotte also threw a glance at Iris, and shook her head just so slightly when nobody else was watching.

They made it down to a karaoke place opposite Hyde Park. There were drinks and a song list, and a room just for them. Tracey tried to push Dessa up first, but she refused, instead suggesting the night’s organiser be the first one up. After a little nudging, Veronica got up in front of the screen and began to sing. She wavered a bit, but she delivered the love ballad with decorum. Rhani and Tracey joined in on the choruses.

Tracey got up next, then Rhani, then Iris was forcefully pushed up. Iris's performance was less than stellar, but everyone just commented that it was just karaoke. They were sitting there talking between songs when Tracey commented, "This has been a really lovely evening Veronica." She paused, puzzled for a moment, then added, as if it were vitally important, "You can't shorten Veronica can you? Ver? Vera? Veron? Haha. That just sounds like a bird."

Veronica practically glowed with the compliment on a nice evening, laughing about the observation on her name. She was so pleased that she volunteered herself for the next song, which was delivered with some extra slurring. Iris was still sitting quietly. She'd been watching Tracey too, and she expected what happened next.

Tracey applauded loudly to Veronica finishing her song. "Wow. That really was spectacular. You're making me feel so guilty about what I did last time we went out drinking."

There was a pause as everyone glanced around the room. There was the briefest moment when Iris was hoping Veronica was going to be spared what was coming next. Everyone seemed to know. She had forgotten someone though. Dessa spoke up, "Why? What happened last time?"

If Iris had been capable of closing her eyes, she would have. "Oh last time we were out, I totally made out with Kane. I think I rather scared the poor girl"

There was an awkward pause, and Dessa, realising her faux pas, finally got up to sing. As she got herself set up, and flicked through the song list, Iris managed to get a few private words in with Charlotte. "You brought a fae here?"

Charlotte looked suitably embarrassed. "Dess doesn't come to town very often. I like seeing her as much as I can when I do."

Iris glanced over to make sure the other three women weren't listening in. "Sure, but here? This is the girl who drowned you, and you're letting her spend time with your friends who couldn't defend themselves if they wanted to?”

"She's not like that. She's..." Charlotte drifted in to silence as the music came on, and Dessa began to sing. Iris, who had been bracing to resist the pull of Dessa's already enchanting voice still wasn’t prepared for that sound.

Iris's sight made her a visually focused person. Her deepest experiences involved how the world was seen. Still, as the voice rolled through her body, causing her fingers to feel energised, and a speeding of her heart. She could almost see that song with her own unique vision. It was a tantalising trace of something beautiful at the edge of sight.

There was a hush from all the women as Dessa wrapped up the pop song she had chosen "I totally take back anything bad I might have implied about you," Tracey said in hushed wonder. "Charlotte, if this is why this older woman rocks your boat, then I understand entirely."

Charlotte blushed, but Dessa wandered over and draped herself over Charlotte's soldiers. "Sorry to say, but Charlotte's turned me down every time I've asked." Charlotte blushed an even darker shade, but didn't pull away.

Of course she didn't. Iris could still feel the pull of that voice, even when filtered through such a thoroughly average song. Those who weren't aware of what had just been done to them would be lost with inexplicable longings, possibly confusing longings. And Charlotte, who knew so much about Dessa, seemed the most entrapped.

"It puts the rest of us in rather a bad position though. None of us can sing after that. Quite a damper on the evening." Veronica was only half joking.

Dessa just smiled. "I don't know. My girl Charlotte here can probably top me if she sings the right song. Isn't that right Charlotte?" Charlotte tried to back down, but after that kind of build up there was no escape. She was forced up to sing, and Dessa unplugged the karaoke machine, telling the other girls that this song wasn't on there.

Iris watched all this unfold silently, watching the actions of both women closely. Only when the machine was unplugged did Iris realise what Charlotte was about to do. By then it was too late to try and stop it. She fidgeted in her seat, considered leaving the room, but there were innocents here. She tried to brace herself better and listened to Charlotte start singing.

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Kane made it back to the table with the drinks, completely unspilled. Ward had to begrudgingly respect that. He was sure Kane was going to be refused service in the state he was in. "There. Your drink, as easy as blinking. Though surely this is the kind of thing your talent would do best."

"Sssshhhhh" Ward hissed. "It's not that simple. Not at all that simple. It's like... like... thoughts right? That glamouring is something I can do. Like some part of me, it can just do it. But then the rest of me gets in the way, right?"

Kane laughed. "Alright then, your brains probably pretty dead. Make that chair disappear. Before that guy comes back."

Ward stared at it. He muttered under his breath as he tried to focus. He almost fell off his chair as he stopped chanting. Kane was looking confused, then managed to focus on the chair. "Ha. Nice. You can hide things even from me now?"

"Apparently." He took a swig of his beer. "It's pretty cool I guess. I mean, I could never glamour anything from Iris. Her vision is..."

Kane rocked his chair back, balancing it right before tipping. "You still all weak at the knees over her eyes?"

Ward frowned in to his beer. "Don't say that. It's not funny."

"Why not? You liked completely non-magical Iris for her eyes, why like the actual Iris for different reasons."

"Something Mark said."

"Yeah, but that guy was a creep."

"Doesn't mean he was lying though."

Kane stared at his friend. "Man, I thought you and I could have a drama free evening."

"Says the guy trying to forget his girlfriend organised a night out."

Kane snorted. "That's different. My worries make sense. They're not about magic fairy things and that nonsense."

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Charlotte glanced at Veronica again. Everyone was still a little in awe after Charlotte’s singing. Dessa was looking proud. Most of the women still seemed stunned. Iris was struggling to glare at Charlotte, but it kept getting lost between the blank expression of her empty eyes.

After Charlotte sang, they ditched the karaoke bar. Nobody had wanted to sing after hearing her. Of course, Charlotte knew Dessa could have easily bested her, but Dessa had seemed content. Probably lucky anyway. Tracey had steered the group onwards, and nobody had resisted heading out and finding a quiet bar.

Veronica had complained about the music in the bar. A subtle compliment. Tracey, who was drinking faster than she normally did, commented that she had never expected such a depth of talent from Charlotte. Charlotte chose to let the comment go without response.

With the evening beginning to mellow out, and two of Veronica’s friends heading home, Iris sat herself next to Charlotte, arms crossed in front of her, leaning on the bar. Dessa was entertaining the others, and it meant that for the first time in the evening, the two of them were alone together.

Charlotte ignored Iris. It was childish, she knew, but she really wasn't in the mood for Iris right now. Iris broke the silence though. "I can't believe you sang that song. A siren song to a group of normal people. And you tried to say that Dessa wasn't dangerous."

"It's just a nice song..."

"Like hell it is." Iris's voice was loud enough to attract a glance from Tracey. She lowered it again to a hiss. "You're really clearly still affected by her song, and now you're introducing it to other people. You shouldn't do this. What would Sam say if he found out?"

“Of course you'd go running to him. That madman kills people."

"Sam does good work. He protects people from things like Dessa."

Charlotte picked up her drink, swirling it around, considering throwing it at Iris. She settled for taking a gulp, then saying, "Dessa is the person I have met who has been the nicest to me out of anyone. You should take the time to get to know her before you condemn her. Has she been anything but charming all evening?"

“Charming. Ha." Iris studied Charlotte, and Charlotte felt her skin crawling under the gaze of those cavities where the eyes should have been. Charlotte turned to the bar, so she couldn't see Iris.

"I can't believe it, you actually love her," Iris said.

Charlotte's head whipped around sharply, and her hair flowed out. Some spun past, and masked her expression from Iris. Charlotte brushed it back with one hand. "What did you just say?"

"You love her. It's not just some infatuation, you care so much about her that-"

"You don't understand what it's like. She's been good to me. Every time we meet, she tells me that I shouldn't let go of that hate for drowning me, that she deserves it and... she helped me after. Without her I would have been lost entirely.”

Iris let Charlotte finish. "Yes. It's complex, and your feelings are complex. But you need to remember that she's a fae. She's not working on your morality, and you don't owe her anything. You need to learn to let these feelings for her go, or she's going to own you completely."

"According to the contracts, she already does. Now keep your empty eyes off my life. I don't want your help or your pity. I can live my own life."

She turned away from Iris, swept her hand over her face, then through her hair, composing her face as best she could. She heard Dessa's laugh over the sound of the bar and that loosened some of the tension. She changed how she was sitting to join the general conversation, turning her back to Iris, forcing Iris to sit on the other side of the bunch of people to join back in.

Dessa leaned herself against Charlotte, studying her face, and picking out the worry. She always did when it came to Charlotte. She put an arm around Charlotte's waist as she kept speaking. As soon as there was a gap, she leaned in so her breath tickled Charlotte's ear and asked, "You alright? That nasty seer get your heckles up?"

Charlotte shook her head, and put her arm around Dessa's waist. She sat there, not really listening to the story Veronica was telling, just enjoying being close to Dessa. Iris had entirely missed that.

Cold skin, strange features, normal people couldn't feel it exactly, but they always reacted, pulling away, subtly avoiding contact. Ever since she drowned, nobody had held a hug with Charlotte except Ward, when he was trying to make a point. She had felt him wanting to pull away even then, overriding his own flinch.

And Dessa. Dessa would tap her on the shoulder to attract her attention, would hug her goodbye, would lean against her when she was tired. And Charlotte could stumble in to Dessa when drunk, or hold her hand, or lean in close and whisper conspiratorially, and Dessa never drew away. Iris didn't understand that. She didn't understand how isolated Charlotte was, didn't understand that Dessa was the only person who still treated her as normal.

Iris placed a hand on Tracey's shoulder, attracting her attention, and having Tracey lean in closer. Iris didn't understand how that simple gesture was denied to Charlotte.

Tracey came out of her little huddle with Iris and gave Charlotte a good look up and down, her eyes lingering on Dessa's hand resting on Charlotte's hip. Charlotte waited for some comment, but there wasn't one.

"I reckon you should think less." The comment followed a patch of silence that had fallen over Kane and Ward's table. Kane put his drink back down at the comment, only a slight hint of smirk on his face. "Y'see, you spend so much time worrying, that I bet it gets in your way. Like your magic thing. You spend so much time thinking about it that you get all flustered."

Ward opened his mouth, but Kane just kept speaking. "But, when you weren't thinking about the could at all, when your mind was occupied with the terror of that warehouse, you did it, you did it well, and you did it cos you weren't thinking whether you could.”

"So?"

"I dunno. Maybe try it under more stressful circumstances sometime? Don't choke. No performance anxiety." Ward blushed, and stuttered for a second, but Kane had more to say. "It's like you and Iris too. Forget what Mark said. You sit there and you worry about it, like a dog with a bone."

He paused and frowned as he tried to reroll the sentence, "You worry at it like a dog with a bone? Anyway, if you just relaxed about it, maybe it would be easier, right? Like me and and Veronica, we-"

"You and Veronica, who you were panicking about being with your friends. Maybe I'm not the one who needs to relax."

Kane ran a hand through his hair. "Nah, you should think less and..." he repeated the gesture. "with Veronica right, it's just, I don't know. She really makes me feel, like..." Kane's arms were waving wildly as he gestured. He was drunk, and his arm movements seemed to be trying to drag the words from the air. He seemed to find them. "Veronica is kind of amazing, right? She's this girl, and she seems to like really like me, y'know?"

"And so you're nervous of her with your friends?"

Kane's leaned back on his chair, balancing it on two legs and one of his feet. "It's just so strange, don't you think? Like, dating one person, and sticking with it?"

"It's not that strange."

Kane brought one of the gesticulating hands in to point at Ward. "Well of course you don't think it's strange. But for me. It's strange. I mean, it'd been over a year since I'd wanted to date, like quiet times and commitment date, right? That's kind of the problem."

"How can that be the problem with tonight?"

Kane's chair thunked back to the floor. He spoke softly. "You gotta promise not to tell anyone."

Ward looked around at Kane's conspiratorial tones, then nodded, leaning in closer himself. "Back before, I had a thing for Tracey. It was kind of dumb, but I mooned over her.”

"Why dumb?"

"It just, it wasn't gonna work out, but I didn’t want to give up.”

Ward nodded, accepting that. "Veronica doesn't know?"

"No. Never a word. The girl is great, but she's got her insecurities. But I'm not sure what Tracey will do. And then there was New Year's Eve last year."

Ward leaned in even closer. "What happened on New Year's?"

Kane picked up his drink. "So New Year's Eve, right? A while after I'd stopped asking Tracey to go out with me." The drink wandered through the air, drawing shapes near Kane's head. "And what you've gotta remember, right, is that we were both drunk. Like really, really drunk. Like way drunker than this." Kane's arms gestured wildly, and the drink, obeying the laws of physics, splashed from the glass.

Kane brought the lighter glass back down, frowning at it. Ward was staring past him in horror. The man the beer had hit was sopping. Kane turned to look too. He spotted the guy, and said "Oh sh-"

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Veronica was wide-eyed and all smiles. She had been so flustered when the man had come over to speak with her. Rhani had tried to draw her out of the conversation immediately, while Tracey had continued to talk to him, and it had been ten minutes before Veronica had managed to explain that in fact she had a boyfriend.

He had been gallant about it, continuing to talk to the women for long enough that his departure wasn't necessarily linked, then he had slunk away to his own friends, leaving the women to laugh about it.

The experience was nearly unique for Veronica, and both Tracey and Rhani had expressed their own brands of disbelief. Iris was still being weird, but right now, Veronica was beyond worrying about that. Just for a bit, she wasn't going to let other people's problems worry her.

Veronica turned her attention to Charlotte and Dessa. She wanted to say something, to ask about whatever was between them. She wasn't sure how to broach the subject politely though. Veronica wasn't sure, but didn’t want to offend.

The problem was solved by Tracey, who had been watching Veronica's gaze. "So what's the deal with you two?" she asked, "You obviously don't see each other all that often, but are you actually going out? Or is this just some kind of a night now and then thing?"

Charlotte shifted, uncomfortable, but Dessa just laughed. "Oh I'm sorry, I forget that other people don't get quite so close to their friends. It's a platonic thing between us. I'm far too old for her anyway."

"Not to mention that I'd never sleep with you anyway," Charlotte added, getting her smile back.

Veronica jumped in to the conversation, "So does that mean you're um. Are you actually? You know?"

Charlotte's eyes flickered over the faces watching her for a reply. Tracey was enjoying herself, while Veronica was anxious, and Charlotte could guess some of the underlying cause. Iris was watching her with her unreadable gaze. "I'm straight. If that's what you were asking." Veronica nodded. "Oh. Okay. I just wasn't sure. And didn't want to say something wrong."

Tracey jumped in as she lowered her now empty glass back to the table. "Though I'm betting you've had a few waverings on that one, from time to time." Charlotte shook her head, "No, I'm just interested in men."

"Well I guess Veronica shouldn't completely let her guard down about you then." Tracey said the comment lightly. Her expression was placid, and she took several seconds longer to acknowledge the sudden awkward silence that had fallen on the group. When she finally did, she looked only a little awkward, and added, "Of course, unless Kane gets as drunk as he did on New Year's there shouldn't be a problem of that kind, I'm sure."

Veronica's voice quavered slightly as she asked, "What happened on New Year's?" Tracey's hand covered her mouth. "You mean you don't know?"

Veronica shook her head. All of them save Iris now had their attention focused on Tracey. "Well I really shouldn't tell that story. I'm sure Kane will tell you sometime."

"Come on Tracey," Rhani said, "just tell us already. Don't be a tease about it."

Tracey looked at all the faces as if only just noting the intensity of attention upon her. "Well if you all really want to know, I suppose I could tell it. I mean, it's not like Kane actually did anything wrong. It was before he met you, Veronica. He's a different person with you.”

With her deflection of responsibility done, Tracey said, “Last New Year's Eve there was a party which we were both attending. It was a good party, and it was the first time I'd seen Kane in a couple of months. Well, we spent almost the entire time talking to each other, about our lives, and how it was all going. We used to work together, you know? But we’d ended in very different places. Neither of us had brought a date, and I said, what the hell, let's share a midnight kiss."

"Well, midnight rolled around, and we were pretty drunk, and the kiss went on a little longer than expected." Tracey paused, and took a few breaths.

"Well that's a pretty tame story," Rhani said.

"Oh that's not the end of the story. At midnight we were fairly, drunk. By two, we were both completely off our rockers. The memory gets a bit hazy about how it happened, but, well, we finally slept together, in the garden of a friend's house on New Year's Eve."

There was a collective gasp from the audience as Tracey blushed with false modesty. "Of course, in the morning we talked, and I told him that it was a complete mistake, and that it still wasn't going to work. But people do such amazingly stupid things when they get really drunk."

She looked at Veronica, who seemed close to tears by this point. "Y-you dated before?"

"He asked me out for about a year. Didn't you know?"

Veronica didn't say anything. She knocked her chair over as she left. Rhani chased after her.

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Ward looked around, seeing if there were any bar staff nearby, but he couldn't spot any. He, Kane, and a very angry man still dripping slightly were all on their feet now. The man had advanced, and was currently glaring at Kane, too close. Ward was resisting stepping back.

Kane spread his hands wide. He was still holding the mostly empty glass, and a little beer came over the edge, running down his hand. "Look mate, I didn't mean anything by it."

"I'm sopping. You reckon you just apologise and go laughing with your little friend at what a mess you've made?”

"Nobody's laughing at you," Ward said, trying to disarm the situation. It was a lie. A couple of others had been. The man completely ignored Ward's comments, choosing to instead step towards Kane, who retreated.

Kane held out his glass. "Here, if you want, pour the rest on me. However you want. No harm no foul."

That put the guy off. He stared at the proffered glass with his eyes narrowed. For a brief moment, Ward began to breathe again, as the guy took the glass. His breath caught in his throat again though as the guy threw the glass to the ground. The few eyes that hadn't been on them were all watching now.

No, Ward realised, they were watching Kane and the other man. Nobody was looking at Ward at all. He let his breathe out as slow as he could, and felt for those skeins of power that let him know he was using a glamour. He gasped at the sudden well of power he found there, waiting as a tingle at his fingertips. He began a quiet chanting to focus it, trying to keep that power near and not let it fail. He began trying to tentatively shape it to coccoon Kane as well.

It was a blunt kind of magic, stopping people from noticing an object, but it was all Ward knew how to do. He tried not to think about how exactly he was doing it, because he didn't know.

"Looks like your friend scarpered. Didn't want to see me bruise that pretty face of yours."

Kane looked around, and met Ward's eyes. Ward waggled his eyebrows at Kane. Kane turned back to the man, turning his back on Kane, and said "He's always got my back. I'd be more worried about you."

Ward couldn't believe what he had heard. The wave of unnoticeability hit Kane just as the man was bringing his first fist forward. Ward knew the angry brute’s attention couldn't be entirely shaken, but whatever he saw, it was enough to confuse him in to slowing his punch. His eyes weren't tracking Kane properly as Kane dodged easily, took a swing of his own.

This blow connected hard with the man's face. The room was in an uproar, but still the security were nowhere to be seen. Ward kept trying to pull Kane out of focus, but Kane kept not taking the chance to retreat. The room seemed to watch him dance around his larger opponent, jabbing him again and again. The man didn't seem to concerned with the blows, but each one was making him angrier and angrier. The man’s face was red now, both hands balled and trying to connect with the slippery opponent.

Someone finally broke through the crowd in to the impromptu circle. Not a burly security guard though, but instead a young woman, with long red hair. Her jaw was set, giving it a strong edge. Ward hadn't seen where she'd come from.

She stepped between the two men, both taller than her, and pushed at both their chests. "Whatever this is over, this stops now." Kane took a step back, while the other man tried to take a step forward. He went to push the woman, then hesitated, his brow frowning. "That man over there spilt a drink all over me."

“Which doesn’t excuse it. But the fights over. I'm throwing him and his friend out right now. You can stay, or leave a different way, but the fight's over."

"You're not bars staff."

"Would you like me to go find one of them to talk to instead? You're all way too drunk for this. Kind of embarrassing to be fighting when you can't even see what you're trying to hit properly."

The woman didn't wait for a response, spinning, ignoring the man, looking at Kane and Ward. "The two of you, outside, now. No questions or comments."

The crowd murmured. Ward had a moment of dismay when he thought his glamour had slipped, but no, he could still feel it there. He shivered and looked at the woman again, knowing she must have an Other connection.

Kane turned and faced him. He was flushed, breathing heavy, but quiet. He walked to Ward, and put a hand on his shoulder, helping to lead him out. The woman followed, shoving past them, and walked to a park across the road. The two followed her with slightly faltering footsteps.

At the park, she rounded on them. "That was one of the most blatantly dumb things I have seen in a personal history of doing really dumb things. It was stupid and cruel and you have no idea how lucky you are right now that it was me who saw what you were doing, not someone else."

Ward was silent, but Kane spoke. "We were having a bit of fun with some brute who was spoiling for a fight. Not our fault."

"The contracts say that you must not engage in acts that might draw attention to the Other. That 'brute' knew how to fight, and he would have been wondering why he was missing. You're lucky I put the suggestion he was just drunk in his mind."

"Wait, you mean the Other has rules against using glamours? Isn’t that what all of you do all the time?” Ward asked. The woman just stared at them, lost for a moment, her mouth hanging open. "I just- how clueless are you two?"

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Tracey looked upset. It was a great look, and that twist of surprise mixed with mounting horror at Veronica's sudden departure. It had caused Rhani to pause briefly to try and reassure Tracey, before chasing after the friend she'd come with.

"I didn't think she would take it so hard. I thought her and Kane were in a good place right now." Tracey professed her innocence to the watching audience of Charlotte, Dessa and Iris. "I mean, it was a thing that happened so long ago now, and we were both so drunk. It shouldn't really have mattered."

Charlotte stepped forward, her face an ugly shade that might have been red on someone else. "You knew exactly what you were doing. Why'd you do it?"

Tracey looked at her, eyes wide. "Are you implying I intended that? I like Veronica. And Kane is an old friend. Why would I hurt them?" Charlotte blustered for a moment, unable to form the words to answer her. Tracey spoke first, "And in any case, I thought you would be glad that there might be some discord there."

"What!?"

Tracey took a sip of her drink. letting Charlotte wait for an answer. "Oh, you know. You spend a lot of time with Kane, and now that I'm pretty sure you're not a lesbian, because your friend there is making me a little bicurious, so you obviously don't swing that way, so..."

Tracey let the statement hang. She didn't need to finish it. "I would never, ever sleep with Kane." Charlotte said, her voice now raised in anger. Tracey replied in a level tone, "Why?"

"Because he's an idiot, and he's way more trouble than he's worth, and because I'm just not interested in him."

Tracey shrugged. "If you say so. But you put up with his idiocy anyway. If you had sex with him, not dating, mind, but sex, would it change anything? Wouldn't it be nice to not be alone."

Dessa put a hand on Charlotte’s shoulder before Charlotte could answer. Her face was held tight, lips pressed thin. “I was enjoying this evening. Tracey, you should be far more careful, because not everyone will put up with your poking and prodding and feigned innocence. Carry one and you’ll make plenty of enemies here.”

Tracey actually laughed. She let genuine contempt through, dropping any facade of caring to address Dessa. "Says the older lesbian hanging out with the young girls, trying to recapture her youth, trying to find a way to get some from a young woman clearly not interested."

Dessa deflated. She looked smaller, and no longer threatening. She looked sad, and weary. Iris, who had been watching Dessa, fearful that she would use some enchantment, was taken aback. She had looked at Dessa and seen what she was, and looked no further than that. This show of vulnerability made her look again.

Dessa spoke. The anger was gone, but the bitterness wasn't. "You don't know me, you couldn't. And you throw out hurtful words until you find the ones that hit. Why do you do it?"

Tracey laughed again, a small tinkle. "Can you believe how angry these two are, Iris? Over a simple misunderstanding?" Iris was still studying Dessa, and she finally saw what she hadn't seen there before. Dessa was guilty for what she had done to Charlotte. It wasn't some fringe part of her, but it was right there in the centre. It blotted out other parts of her, the all-consuming guilt.

Iris had never heard of a guilty fae before. She looked at Tracey, who was watching her, concerned, and she realised she had been asked a question and hadn't answered it yet. Iris put down her empty glass and began to speak, watching Tracey as she did.

"I can believe how angry they are. Because they're trying to find how to say what you did, and they can't quite phrase it."

"Are you really going to stoop to this too?" There was a trace of anger in Tracey’s eyes.

"I can phrase it though. You kept pushing the boundary. You made out with Kane to cause a scene, and tonight, all your little comments have been not-so-innocently trying to find where the tensions lay, and then pushing on them. You’re subtle enough to normally play the innocent, but you overstepped yourself.”

The other three were silent, absorbed in Iris's speech. "And this is what you do, time and again. You work to press the buttons and you wait to sit back and laugh as other people are made uncomfortable."

Tracey was sitting as far back on her chair as possible now. Iris said, "Tell me, when you had sex with Kane, who initiated it?"

"We were both too drunk to remember."

"Liar."

"How dare you.” But Tracey's words were shrill now. She tried to meet Iris's gaze, but she couldn't.

"Kane had a crush on you, and turning him down amused you. And then, when he got over it, you thought you could fawn over you again, just to make him wonder if there was any chance."

"We were both drunk."

"Then Kane meets this girl, and at first it's casual. But now it's all serious, and you look at how Kane thinks of her, and how she thinks of Kane, and you hate it. So you try to put little wedges between them, and after a couple of drinks you're not even subtle about it."

"Why would I do that? It's not like I want Kane. I could have had him. I turned him down."

Iris let her eyes fall away from Tracey, averting her eyes from something distasteful. "That's the worst part. You don't care at all except that now Kane's happy, and you don't want him to be. Why should he be happy without all the things you've managed to get in your life? Why should he get to be happy when, even with your money and the life you always said you wanted, you're not?"

With that final sentence everyone heard the noise of the bar again. There were tears in Tracey's eyes now, though she didn't let them fall. "Well fine then. If you're all going to gang up on me and be complete bitches, I'll head out. Good luck the three of you talking about how lonely you're all going to be tonight."

She picked up her bag as she spoke, and was halfway across the room before she turned back and added, "And I'll include you, Iris, because your boyfriend is the biggest loser I've ever met. I'm pretty sure he could never more than entertain a woman who was as clever as you think you are.”

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The woman who had stopped the fight had introduced herself as Anne, and suggested that all three of them retreat to the Ghost's Rest to talk. The bar for everyone and everything strange was a quick walk away, which Anne made the other two pay for, and now she was getting drinks, while Kane and Ward sat in an awkward silence, waiting for her to return.

Kane had to stop himself from fidgeting. Anne hadn't talked to them, and the two boys sitting in the back had exchanged a glance and remained silent. Kane felt like a child waiting to be told off by a teacher. His face was hot when he thought about it, a mix of anger and shame at how much the small woman with her square jaw had managed to frighten him.

The bar was fairly full tonight, and they had claimed a booth about half-way down the tiered structure that the bar held from its days as a theatre. Looking around, most of the others here appeared human, with the occasional oddity. One of the few completely strange things was what appeared to be a pool of water sitting on a chair, undulating slightly, which Kane tried not to look at.

Anne arrived back at the table, distributed the drink in silence, and after taking a swig from her long thin glass said, "So, the two of you were, apart from just being idiots and getting in to a fight, using magic."

"I was trying to pull him out," Ward said. Kane heard the wheedling in the voice, like talking to a teacher.

"It was fine though. I was just trying to help him learn to use his glamours more naturally. Thought the danger might draw him out." Kane was trying to lounge in the booth, but kept moving his arms, never being quite comfortable. Anne seemed skeptical of Kane's answer, but didn't address it.

"So, while I'm here, I might as well give you guys some advice. And because you seem like the kind of people who won't just accept advice," she was looking pointedly at Kane, "I'm going to explain the why of it too."

"The advice is simple. Don't use magic in public. Don't draw attention to anything extra ordinary that you can do. Whatever talents you might have, they will only get you in to trouble."

"But nobody knows when we're doing it," Kane protested. He ran a hand through his hair then placed it on the table, still not figuring out where to put it.

"Let me ask you a question then. Who introduced each of you to magic?"

Ward frowned, "A wizard taught me how to do that magic when I was a kid. I showed it to Kane."

Anne took a sharp intake of breath, staring from one to the other. "Right. Well then. Have you heard of the Fae Contracts?"

Kane shrugged. Ward answered, "My girlfriend mentioned them to me. They're a code of conduct or something for those involved with the Other."

"Sort of. The contracts are written every hundred years, and determine the rules both for specific and general laws for those within the Other. Mostly it’s esoteric points that won’t affect you if you’re staying away from places like this.”

Anne took another sip of her drink. Kane gave up trying to lounge, and sat on the seat normally, looking awkward. Anne looked at Ward, "The biggest rule that the Other has is that it is forbidden to introduce someone else to the Other.”

Kane shrugged again, moving his hands to his lap. “Yeah, we heard about that. Caused Ward some trouble with a friend of ours. What of it?”

“You were risking someone noticing the Other in that fight. You’re okay with that risk?”

“What’s the worst that could happen?” Kane asked.

“The contracts aren't big on half-measures in their punishments. It's death for breaking it."

Kane snorted, "That's crazy. That'd mean nobody would know about the Other ever. You’d keep killing everyone who found out.”

Anne turned her gaze back to Kane, her lip curled slightly, disdainful. "It assumes a perfect system for catching people. Some Other things show people the Other without revealing who they are, or they get others to keep quiet about it. And then there are people like me, who discover the Other on their own."

Anne leaned in closer, lowering her voice a bit. "I wouldn't go around telling the story of how you guys got introduced to the Other to just anyone. There are people who would tattle to Sam, the Other’s enforcer. And he’s liable to kill you on the spot.”

At the name, Ward had started. "What? I heard Sam was a good guy. He helps people out and stuff. I heard that he goes after those who cause trouble. And helps people in distress."

Anne reappraised Ward. "It's true Sam helps people orient themselves in the Other, though that's mostly to ensure that they won't introduce more people, and know how to keep their talents secret. He's not a good man exactly though. He doesn't care what people in the Other do to each other, only what you do to people outside it."

"But it's not like he'd get us in trouble for a bar room fight. It wouldn’t be our fault.”

“That wouldn’t work with Sam. If you do it, he’ll say it’s your fault. Half of the fae are terrified of him. It's not always clear that it's the contracts he's following."

Kane finally managed to get in to a position where he looked like he was lounging comfortably. "So, don't tell people too much, and don't have fun with more regular folk. Simple enough."

Anne frowned. "I don't think you're taking this very seriously."

"If I took this weirdness seriously, I'd be insane by now. What's your deal anyway? Some kind of magical school teacher?"

"Me? I can fly."

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Charlotte sat uncomfortably. She watched as Iris and Dessa studied each other. It was a frank examination by both parties. Charlotte wanted to say something, to try and calm the situation, but she didn't want to draw either's attention at the moment.

"I don't understand you," Iris said, still studying Dessa's green-sheened face. "You're a seer. Don't you just look and understand people, robbing them of their privacy."

Iris turned her face away from Dessa then, taking a seat on one side of Charlotte. "It's not that simple. A seer sees things that are true, but that's not the same as seeing things clearly."

Dessa sat down on the other side of Charlotte, and attracted the bartender's attention, getting another round of drinks. Once the bartender departed, Dessa said, "I think I know why you hate me. Your eyes, right? That's a fae's handiwork."

Iris nodded. "One of your kind."

"There isn't our kind though. The fae are a race of differences."

"No. You're all selfish. You're all the same like that. All of you put whatever that thing that's so important to you above everything. You don't even understand why people get so angry when you do it either."

Dessa's voice was tired. "People do that too. We just lie less about why we do things."

Iris paused before speaking again. "You trapped Charlotte in to loving you. You tricked her and manipulated her."

Charlotte tried to stutter a protest, but Dessa put a hand on her knee and she remained silent. "Charlotte found me by accident. She heard my song and came after me, like so many others." There were tears in Dessa's eyes now. "I mourn every single day that she died because she heard me."

"She told me to hate her for what she did to me," Charlotte added, her voice barely a whisper, her head tilted down, not looking to either side. "She wanted me to hate her, but I couldn't."

"I haven't sung that song since you heard it." Charlotte looked up at Dessa. "But why? It's your song. There’s such beauty to it."

Dessa brought her hand to Charlotte's face, gently brushing her cheek. "Dearest, it is because of it that you are cold as the ocean. That music that I am compelled to create is such a ruination. Can't you just hate me for what I've done to you?"

Charlotte shook her head. She forced a smile. "I'm through hating you. I wish you would stop hating yourself."

Dessa nodded, then turned her gaze back to Iris, who had been watching the exchange, uncertainty in her every movement. At last, Iris nodded, almost to herself. "Dessa, you truly care for your faebond. I don't understand it. Though, I think I’ll accept you.” Iris still hesitated, but tried to relax again.

There was a pause again, but this one was calmer. There was no underlying tension to it. At last Iris broke it. "I'm sorry. I mean, I should have tried to stop Tracey earlier."

Charlotte glanced at her. "Don't apologise for her."

"I knew what she was like, and I didn't jump in because I was so focused on the two of you. I let her do that to Veronica."

"Damn," Charlotte said, "I forgot about Veronica. Not that it's your fault. Tracey was the problem. But she's probably hurting pretty bad from that bit of knowledge."

Dessa looked at Iris, "Well, the truth is important, isn't it?"

Iris looked at the fae, then shook her head slowly. "Sometimes the truth can be let lie, when all it does is hurt people. Do you think she'll forgive Kane for not mentioning all that?"

All three of them took a sip of their drink in silence, then Charlotte said, "Come on, let's go find where Veronica went. See if we can offer any comfort."

Anne tried to explain flying to the two boys. It was like dancing on air, only you were almost completely still. It was like the rush of adrenaline from fear, only it was calm. It was tranquil. It changed your perspective on the world, though not just literally. There was the feel of being suspended in a cloud, with no sense what any direction was. She could see in the faces of her two new companions that they weren't really hearing it. She watched as Ward tried so hard, while Kane seemed to be putting in minimal effort.

"It's unique. I've been living in the country for a while now, practicing where nobody's going to spot me. I've got a lot better. Pretty soon I'm going to have to watch out for planes."

Ward nodded, encouragingly, then realising there was no more forthcoming, he asked, "What kind of place is this?"

"Oh, there's this wizard who lives out there, minding his own business. He's a bit of a curmudgeon, but I've been told that most old wizards are."

The look on Ward's face at the mention of the wizard reminded Anne of a child at christmas. "There's a wizard living nearly locally?"

Anne, suddenly reluctant, nodded. "Yeah, though he's a total recluse. He hates visitors. I'm up there working for my keep, and he still complains about me."

"What makes a wizard different from all these Other people around here though?” Kane asked

Anne looked at him and thought. These two were going to get themselves in to trouble, one way or another. Better getting in to trouble they understood than not. Having information withheld came with its own very specific risks.

"Well, most people in the Other can do something, or a couple of things that shouldn't work. I can fly, for example. A wizard though, he can pick what things he can do. I can't understand it all that well, but I think a wizard can do pretty much anything."

"If they're so all-powerful, why aren't they running everything then?" Kane replied

"I asked that myself once. The master just said that wizards generally didn't get along with others, so weren't really interested in command."

While she spoke, Kane's phone beeped. He pulled it out of his pocket, looked at the message, and was standing before Anne even finished what she was saying. He looked at Ward as he shoved his phone back in to a pocket. "Sorry, but I've got some drama to deal with from tonight apparently. I'd check with Iris as well, see where she is. All Tracey’s fault. Surprise surprise."

He shook Ward's hand, then did a little bow to Anne. "It's been lovely to meet you madame, but I must go. If that's permitted?"

The corner of Anne's mouth quirked up. "Yeah, you can go."

Kane left quickly, and Ward pulled out his phone, firing off a brief message before turning his attention back to Anne. "Sorry about that. Not sure what it was all about yet. Drama apparently."

"What's there to be drama about?"

"Oh, our girlfriend's were holding a girl's night out. Invited one of Kane's friends who he doesn't like, I mean, doesn't trust. Uh, this girl who Kane knows who he thought would be trouble."

Anne frowned. "Should you be heading off too?"

"Nah. I don't think it's- I should be fine. Right."

There was an awkward pause, before Ward asked, "So why are you, what brings you down to Sydney?"

"Well, I'm meeting up with a friend. Guy's just discovered the other, and he's been having some difficulties."

"Like a boyfriend?"

Anne almost laughed, but was able to hold it in. "Nah, just a good friend. I've known him forever."

"Your friend who you've known forever who now knows about the Other."

Anne looked at Ward's eyes and heard the unsaid ends of the sentence. It wasn't an accusation, but the observation was there, not needing to be said. Ward looked over Anne's shoulder, and she glanced around to see Callum, the owner of the Ghost's rest approaching them, holding a drink and his pen in one hand.

"Anne! Ward! I didn't know you were friends." He sat himself in the seat recently vacated by Kane, smiling slightly at both of them. "To be honest, I'm surprised you're back here at all," he said to Anne. "I was sure you were going to stay away for a bit longer than this."

Anne made sure she was properly relaxed. She glanced at Ward, unsure how open Callum would be in front of him. Though Ward was probably already putting the pieces in to place. She had seen him figure it out quickly enough before. "I was going to but the friend I mentioned last time I was here, you remember? He's been having some trouble, and I wanted to come and help."

Callum nodded. The pen was drawing figure eights, or infinity symbols, on the table with the back end, Callum's hands keeping themselves busy automatically. "I've met him, Isaac, right? When are you going to meet him?”

“Going to see him after this. Was going to head over now, but ran in to this idiot and his friend in another bar and thought why not get to know them.”

"And no phone. Getting used to that?"

Anne shrugged. "It's annoying, but not the end of the world."

"Well, I’d ask you not to bring Isaac here. His, ah, difficulties make him a somewhat awkward client to have around.”

Anne wasn't surprised, simply nodding. “That’s fine. I still know where he lives. No drama."

Callum turned his attention to Ward, who seemed thoroughly lost. "Sorry about the ban last time you were in here, but you understand that right? No hard feelings?"

Ward nodded, trying to catch up with the move in conversation. "No, it's fine. I think you- I understand."

Callum smiled. "I'm glad. And good to see you making friends in our little community. If you are after anything, don't hesitate to ask. I will talk to you both later." Callum finished his drink, picked it up, and moved on to another table. Ward was looking puzzled, though he waited for Callum to have moved away before speaking.

"What's the reason for not telling Callum how we actually met?"

"Remember, it's something kind of potentially illegal. And Callum's an information dealer. You shouldn't tell him things unless you have a reason to."

"He knows about your situation though?"

Anne paused again, trying to guess exactly what Ward had figured out. It was hard, but Ward didn't seem to be dangerous, just extremely curious. It was a mistake she was willing to make.

"Yeah, Callum got me out of the city. Sam's not going to worry about me if it means tangling with a wizard. A little blanket of protection when he comes to town."

"So what if he comes back while you're here?"

"I'm only in town for a couple of days. It should be fine."

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Veronica sat clutching her knees to her chest. Rhani had got her home, and got her a hot chocolate, before sitting and watching her friend from the other couch. Neither of them were speaking. Rhani had her phone out, but glanced at Veronica every few seconds to see if there was any change. There wasn't.

Tracey had offered to come over too. Apparently the others had been nasty to her, and she had stormed out to find Veronica still waiting for a taxi. They'd parted ways, Veronica no longer wanting a night out, with Tracey telling Veronica to watch out for Charlotte.

Veronica kept trying to push that to the back of her mind. It was the kind of thought that would drive someone crazy. Her phone buzzed again as she tried to think of something to do now. It was already in her clasped hands. She raised it to read the message on the screen.

'Hope you're okay. We're heading back to Newtown if you're around.'

This one was from Iris. Charlotte had sent two. Veronica hadn't replied to any of them. She didn't want to talk to any of them right now. If she talked to them, she would have to start to treat them as people again, be nice. She was always trying so hard to be nice, and she didn't have it in her at the moment. Better not to talk at all.

She went back to her previous position, her head resting on her knees, curled up. She had tucked herself as closely together as she could. After a few more minutes, Rhani got up to get herself a drink, then with a glance at Veronica, turned the TV on. Veronica didn't seem to notice.

Veronica's phone buzzed again, and this time she ignored it. It kept buzzing and she hung it up without looking. The TV nattered on for several minutes before the phone buzzed again. This time Veronica pulled it up, glaring at it, then suddenly uncertain. "It's Kane," she said.

Rhani glanced at Veronica, then focused back on the TV. "Do you want to talk to him?"

"I should talk to him."

"Yeah, but do you want to?" Rhani changed the channel. The phone rang out.

Veronica lowered her legs, then pulled her skirt down to cover her knees, realising how bare her legs had been while she sat there. She stood up, causing Rhani to watch her again. "I'm heading to bed. See you in the morning."

"Yeah. Get some rest. Goodnight.”

In her room, Veronica lay on her bed, staring at her phone held above her. Two missed calls and a voicemail message were displayed on the screen. She rubbed at her eyes with her other hand, before finally starting to tap on the phone, calling Kane back.

The phone was picked up almost instantly. "Hey, are you okay?" he asked. She could hear trains in the background.

"I'm fine. Why are you calling?"

"Charlotte told me what happened. How Tracey told the New Year's Eve story."

Of course Charlotte had told him. "What are you doing right now?"

"I'm just at central. Was going to head to your house, since I couldn't get ahold of you.””

Why?"

"I was worried."

There was a pause. Veronica let her hand fall away from her ear before bringing it back. Kane was still silent on the other end, the sound of trains the only noise. "I'm already home. Evening was kind of ruined." She couldn't keep the quaver out of her voice at that.

"Great. I should be there in about half an hour."

"Just head home Kane."

Another pause. "You sure?"

"Yeah."

"Okay then."

She hung up to stop another one of those awful pauses, then rolled over on to her side, curling up on top of her blankets. She was still in her skirt and top for the night, and she wondered how creased they would be in the morning. After a minute staring at her phone, she hit redial.

"Can you still come over?"

"Of course."

"Come over. We should talk."

There was an audible sigh. "Yeah, I'll come over. I'll be there as soon as I can, okay?"

"Yeah."

"Okay then."

They had another awful pause before Veronica hung up again. A little while later, she heard Rhani head to bed. Veronica got up, found a warm jacket, and went to sit outside and wait on the doorstep, so Kane wouldn't wake anyone up when he arrived.

It was more than half an hour before he appeared, strutting down the street, clearly slightly drunk. The sight of him caused Veronica's throat to catch, and she hugged him fiercely tight before leading him inside, past the kitchen, and in to her room.

She sat on the bed, and he copied her. He looked sad and worried as they studied each other. Veronica wondered what he was seeing in her face right then. She was sure it wasn't as pretty as she liked to keep it, but there was no point worrying about that now.

"So, we should talk," she said. Kane nodded, but didn't speak. Veronica adjusted the coat, clutching it. "Tracey said that you used to have a thing for her. That's true, right?"

Kane ran his hands through his hair. He looked ready to run at the first opportunity. That hurt Veronica, but she tried to keep it from showing. She needed to hear him speak.

"Yeah. I used to have a thing for Tracey. It was ages ago. I should have told you about the New Year's thing, but it was embarrassing. Sorry." He put on an embarrassed grin, and leaned in to give her a hug. She pulled back just slightly, and he let his arms fall.

"I don't care that you- that you slept with her. Why didn't you tell me you had a thing for her?"

Kane shrugged. "I didn't think it was that important. That passed."

"She said you liked her for quite some time."

Kane's slight grin fell away. He glanced at the door before focusing on Veronica. "Okay. Yeah. I got a little bit obsessed, but I got over it. I'm sorry for not telling you, but you don't need to worry about it."

Veronica had to push the next words out. They were barely audible. "What about you and Charlotte." She was hunched over now, not looking at Kane.

"What about Charlotte? She's a friend. That's it."

"You met her when you met me."

"Yeah, but I'm dating you."

"Did you want to date her?"

"It's crazy to even think about it. And I think Tracey's jealous because I used to fawn over her, and you've changed that, because for the first time in a while I'm not being super nice to her." He put an arm around her shoulders, and she didn't shrug him off. She still didn't look at him either. "I like you. I want to be with you. If you want me to leave, I will, but I don't want to leave."

She turned and looked him in to his eyes, more serious than she had ever seen them. It almost scared her to see his face without its normal cast of levity to it. She hugged him, and they sat turned towards each other.

"I did tell you not to invite Tracey to your party," Kane said. Veronica's grip slackened tightly. She spoke in to his chest. "But you should have told me why."

Kane sighed, holding on fiercely. "Yeah, I should have. I'm so sorry."

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Ward and Anne had been talking for almost an hour. For the first time, Ward had found someone completely unabashed about the Other. Anne could fly, and enjoyed every minute of it. Anne also knew a lot, about some of the various Fae, and about the Wizard. Ward brought little to the conversation but his own enthusiasm, but that was enough for Anne.

The conversation drifted, and Anne looked at her watch, saying she should leave. Ward asked about her friend, and Anne paused for a moment, half raised from her seat, before dropping back in to it. “Isaac’s tricky. We’ve been friends forever, since before I learned how to fly even. That’s kind of the problem. I tried for almost a year to keep it from him, but in the end it was destroying our friendship, so I told him, and proved it to him.

“That would have been fine, perhaps, though it would have been a lot to keep from Sam. But he also developed an ability, but one he can’t control. Things he walks past just appear in his possession later. Kind of funny at first, finding pens you never had.

“I left Sydney because Sam came around, and I think he knows that I introduced Isaac, and it scared me. But Isaac’s been writing letters. And he’s getting worse. The last letter I got sounded frantic, and I’m really worried what he might-“

Anne paused mid-sentence, trailing off as she looked at the door. Ward swivelled to see an old man in a long coat. His features were hard, and he had a frown on his face, which was wrinkled as if the expression never left. Silence was emanating out from him as he looked around the room, a scowl on his face. Anne swore under her breath. The room was almost silent now.

Callum met the old man half way down the stairs. The whole bar was still silent, watching. Nobody had moved from their seat. The old man's gaze passed over everyone in the room and Ward almost shrunk away from the intensity of it.

Callum walked with the man down to the bar, talking to him in whispered tones. The bar watched them all the way down, watched the old man claim a drink, and talked quietly to Callum, everyone leaning in, trying to hear what was being said. Nobody able to. Anne had her face in her hands.

Baror was the only one moving. He had approached the table Ward was sitting at, and put a hand gently on Anne's arm. She looked up at him, flinching back so violently that she bumped in to Ward. Baror spoke, keeping his voice low. "I think it's probably best for you to leave now." He reached out a hand to Anne, and she took it.

As the door closed, and Anne left, Ward noticed the old man watching her go. It had been the only sound in the whole place.

Callum said a few more words to the stranger, then turned around to address those gathered in his bar. He put on an easy smile before he began. "As most of you probably know, this man here is Sam, the enforcer of the Fae Contracts."

There were a couple of nods, but still no sound. "Today though, Sam has come to my fine establishment for the same reason all of you have. To enjoy a drink, and to relax a little from an otherwise turbulent life. I hope you give him the same respect that you would give anyone else here. Thank you all."

Very slowly, conversation returned to the room.

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Iris stumbled slightly, and Dessa caught her, steadying her. Dessa almost immediately grabbed Iris to steady herself. The three of them hadn't been able to get ahold of Veronica, though had spent some time at the last bar while waiting to leave. All three had drunk more than a few drinks, and there was a levity to the evening. Iris had been describing some of the streets around them with her true sight when she found something funny, and the three of them had been cracking up. It was proving a slow walk towards the Ghost's Rest.

"You know, I feel, kind of bad for how much fun we're having right now," Charlotte said, as she carefully navigated a sign post. "I mean, Veronica set all this up, and we can't even thank her."

"We could make her a cake or something," Iris said, not wanting to let the evening get weighed down again.

"Yeah, we can write on it, 'thanks for the help with the Other bullshit you didn't even know was going on."

Iris let herself focus a little more, and drew herself to a stop. "Hey Charlotte?"

"Yeah?" Charlotte said, turning to face Iris. Dessa leaned some weight against Iris, watching both of them.

"I'm sorry about when we met."

"Do we have to go there tonight?"

"No, I gotta get this said."

"Come on, some other time. Now you're the one being all serious. I think I'm gonna hurl."

“Actually, or metaphorically?"

Charlotte frowned for a few seconds. “Just metaphorically. Right now."

"Look, when you tackled me, the knife was just between us. I didn't mean to stab you. Total accident. And I'm sorry about it. Like, really sorry. I couldn't stab you. Hell, I couldn't even stab Mark, and he deserves it."

Charlotte put a hand on Iris's shoulder. "You never said it was an accident. Woulda made not hating you a lot easier."

"Look, you got involved with me and Mark, and he got away, and I was angry. And I should've not been so nasty about it, but I wasn't thinking straight. Mark, and the fae, they get to me. Make me a little bit crazy."

"Yeah I know. I didn't mean to let Mark escape like that. The situation was just so crazy. I didn't know what to think, or even what you were."

“Just like me. I mean, I freaked at Dessa tonight." She gave Dessa a hug. "I'm sorry about that. You're a-a nice person too. Maybe you don't need to beat yourself up so much, kay?"

Iris pulled away, looking past Dessa. She could see a red-haired woman emerging from the ghost's rest with Baror. The woman looked worried. Iris tried to pick it. There was a deep worry there, through the whole of the woman, and it was sitting right on the surface now.

The woman whispered a few words to Baror, then stepped away and moved up. Straight up past the level of the buildings, then in to the sky. She gathered speed as she went, then began to angle. Charlotte and Dessa were watching now.

As the woman got further away, it became harder to pick her out. Most of her became lost against the cloudy sky save flashes of red hair, and then she was gone. They all looked down to see Baror standing there, smiling at the three women.

"Ladies! A pleasure to see you. I am guessing that you are on your way back to your own sea, Dessa?" His hands were thrown wide, manner easy.

"Of course, it's probably not the best time to be passing through. Sam's dropped in for a drink. Completely unexpected. I'm sorry for having no warning before you came out. Perhaps it would be better to retreat elsewhere tonight?” The three women reached him, and Baror kissed Dessa's hand, while nodding to the other two.

Dessa smiled. “Sam’s got nothing on me. I should be right for a drink.”

Baror nodded. "What about you ladies? Want to come in and say hi to Sam?"

Charlotte shook her head, but Iris sighed. "I should go and see him. He might have come here in response to my summons."

Baror's grin widened. It wasn't entirely pleasant anymore. "Well by all means. This is sure to make the evening easier, now isn't it?"

Callum watched Sam closely, sitting on the seat next to him. Callum’s pen lay unmoving on the desk in front of him, placed down. It was hard to tell, but he thought Sam was hunched just a little. His rigid posture showing the first signs of wear. He had put down three drinks without seeming to think. He wasn't speaking, and he wasn't even looking around the bar.

The bar was almost silent. People were whispering whenever they spoke. They all waited. Nobody wanted to leave, in case Sam turned to watch them, in case he decided to try and stop them. Nobody here was any kind of warrior. They wanted to let somebody else move first. Half the whispering was wondering who had been ushered out.

"You really are here just to drink?"

"Your bar is open to all Other, isn't it?"

"I believe I banned you from ever entering my bar."

"And I killed the bouncer who tried to stop me coming in. I just wish it had been Baror who had tried to stop me, not one of your trolls."

Callum didn't rise to the comment. He could remind Sam how he hadn't even let the troll speak, had struck him down as soon as he stood in Sam's way. There was no point though. Sam never let the arguments of others persuade him.

Sam pulled out a cigarette, putting it in to his mouth. Before it was lit, Callum told him, "There's no smoking in the bar. It's a strict rule."

"You going to stop me, ghost?"

Callum didn't rise to that one either. Sam was often dismissive, but this scornfulness was scaring Callum. "It's a rule of entry, that we ask of all patrons. You are currently acting as a patron."

Sam shrugged, but put the cigarette down on the table. "I'm going to keep this here, in case that situation changes on us."

The door opened, and everyone looked around. Baror came back in, followed by Iris, Charlotte, and Dessa. Callum didn't let his expression change. His hand moved to rest over his pen. The movement and the noise in the quiet caused Sam to look around, and he surveyed the new entrants. Baror wandered back down, and bowed ever so slightly to Sam, then deeper to Callum. The three women spotted Ward, and joined him. Sam turned back to his seat, and Callum thought for an instant that everything would be simple. Baror turned, and began to usher another couple of people to the door at the front left of the bar.

"Those people up in that booth. I only recognise one of them," Sam said.

Callum shrugged, though Sam wasn't looking at him. "Which of the booths are you talking about?"

"That one where Iris, an old friend of mine, just set herself down. With some temptress fae, her faebond, and some boy. Who are all they?"

Sam spoke unhurriedly, swirling the amber liquid in his fourth glass around, watching the red light of the room through it. Callum shrugged again. "Just some locals. I can tell you their names and their talents if you like."

"I like to keep track of Others around. Might go up and meet them, " Sam said. He remained in his seat though, Callum still watching his every movement. "So, if they're minor talents, that explains why they know Anne."

"The red haired girl? Yeah."

"The one you had ushered out when I arrived."

"Baror ushered her out. I didn't ask him to."

Sam stood up, picking up the cigarette he'd left on the table. "I've seen at least a hundred little ventures like yours fail, Callum. I've destroyed twelve of them myself. I'd keep that in mind when deciding how helpful to be."

With that, he lit the cigarette, and walked up the tiers of tables to stand over the table with the four young people. A hushed and hurried conversation had stopped at his approach. Iris stood up and greeted him her manner easy. She averted her eyes. "Sam. Good to see you. Are you here because of my message?"

"That your brother was threatening the life of this man," he said, gesturing at Ward, "doesn't interest me in the slightest. I came here to have a drink and some quiet. Though I doubt I will get the second. Introduce the others."

Iris looked around the table, gesturing at each in turn. "This is Charlotte, she's faebond of Dessa, here. This is Ward, who's a friend of mine.”

Sam rubbed a hand over his stubble. "How long have you known Anne for, anyway?"

Callum froze. Iris’s brow was crinkling in confusion, but Ward was sweating, eyes darting around too quickly. “Iris doesn’t know her,” Callum answered. “Ward met her tonight and was just having a friendly drink.”

Sam nodded, and turned his attention back to the others. "So, how did you get involved with the Other, Ward?"

Callum watched him closely. Ward fidgeted nervously. "When I was young, like six or so. A wizard. Some guy, I think he was a wizard, he, uh, he taught me a spell to create a glamour. And then I was able to use glamours. I've got better recently."

Sam nodded, then turned away from the table, heading back to the bar with no other word. The entire table relaxed. Iris whispered to Isaac what had happened. Callum looked at the happy faces and allowed himself the slightest sigh, before returning to Sam.

Standing at the bar, Sam pulled out a second cigarette, lighting it, and stubbing the first out the bar top. Callum didn't speak. He waited for Sam to say something.

"The boy, Ward, was hiding something. What?"

Callum didn't let himself pause. "A friend, Kane. They have a complicated thing. Ward managed to give Kane the ability to see the other, without having it himself." He glanced at Baror, and Baror shook his head just slightly, out of Sam's sight.

"He introduced someone to the Other?"

"I think the case is more complicated than that. If you want to prosecute, you should find them a representative first. After all, I don’t think it’s easy to say when Ward became part of the Other.”

"No. This is simple. If you can find someone before I pass my judgment, then feel free to try. But there is nobody save me to hold court here."

Sam got up and began to walk back to the table. Callum glanced again at Baror, and again, there was the slight shake of a head. Callum frowned. His pen was in motion, weaving in and out of his fingers, as Sam reascended the stairs. He reached in to his coat, and from the recesses he pulled a sword that could not have fit. The bar was completely still.

As he drew level, Iris and Charlotte began to object. Sam ignored them. "Ward, did you introduce Kane to the Other?” Ward looked less scared than Callum expected. "No. I can't have done that. I didn't even know what the other was until..." he swallowed the end of the sentence, meeting Sam's eyes.

"Did you show him a glamour?" Sam asked. Ward sat very still for a moment. Iris reached over to hold his hand, and he gripped hers back tightly. "Yes, I did, but I didn't know what I was doing." Sam had raised his sword before Ward's sentence was finished.

Callum yelled out, as his pen stopped moving. "Wait. There is something else you must know." Sam let the blade fall, destroying the table that was between him and Ward. He half looked at Callum. "Quickly."

Callum ascended the stairs as slowly as he dared, until he was close enough to Sam so that he wouldn't have to raise his voice. "Anne was sent away on purpose. She clearly and blatantly introduced her friend to the Other.”

"Yes, I knew that. A blind fool could have figured that out. And you sent her away to escape me. That’s why I'm not even trying to be polite in your establishment."

"It's not over though. You could chase her down."

Sam turned to face Callum. He stepped in close, and Callum knew Baror would have tensed, ready to fight. Callum tried to remain calm. "Where have you sent her?" Sam asked.

Callum stared up at Sam. "If you chase her right now, you can catch her. But otherwise she'll be gone. You can't pause to finish your 'justice', which you must not do in my bar in any case."

The bar was completely silent. Sam spat out his cigarette at Callum's feet. "Tell me where she is headed."

Isaac rose behind Sam. He managed to gurgle half a yelled syllable before Baror hit him. One blow to the centre of the chest. Winded, he collapsed back to his seat to try and gasp in some air.

"Thales' little enclave," Callum said, completely ignoring Isaac.

Sam looked at Ward, and the others. "If they leave, I'm going to kill you when I get back."

He didn't even wait for a response. He shrugged off his jacket, switching which hand held the sword to do so, then he changed. Callum had to step back. He shielded his eyes, but tried to squint through. He saw before him Callum unfolding the most enormous wings from nowhere. The wings were shedding light, bright enough that it seared the sight in to the eyes of all watching, leaving a slowly fading blurred image. There was heat too. Callum felt his skin begin to burn, and saw the carpet beneath catch on fire.

The wings folded out and out, impossibly large on the wiry frame of the old man looked like a husk beneath the magnificence of those wings. They spread themselves, covering tables on both sides of the aisle. The creature that must have been Sam brought those wings down once, as he leapt upwards. He went straight through the roof as if there had been no barrier at all. That one stroke of the wings carried him up above the buildings surrounding. With a second, he was out of sight, beginning his pursuit.

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Anne was flying, looking backwards down the road beneath. Anne wondered again if her flight was affected by drag. She had lost her goggles when she had tried to put them on midair. Too terrified to turn back for them, she just hoped they hadn't hit anyone. Anne pulled the hair back from her face, spitting a curse at the wind.

Even out of the city, Anne passed several cars far below. It gave her a rough idea of the terrifying speed she was moving. After several minutes, Anne flew to the side of the road and dropped the backpack she had brought to the city. It might not help, but anything to move faster was worth a try. So much time learning how to fly, and still Anne barely understood what she could do.

There was another light in the sky now, from back behind Anne. Slowly, that light was getting brighter. Anne clenched her jaw so tight that it hurt. If that was pursuit, then she was almost certainly dead. Unwilling to give in, Anne got what she thought would be the correct bearing, Anne covered her eyes with one hand, and accelerated. After a few minutes, Anne risked a look back, where the light was closer than ever.

The fourth time Anne looked back she could make out wings, the next time she saw the fiery light of those wings reflecting off a sword. Worse was the face that was finally visible. It was Sam himself. Anne heard herself whimper.

Trying to think of a plan, Anne balled her hands at her sides, eyes streaming as they were exposed to her speed, and headed towards the clouds.

\*\*\*\*\*

The trolls had put out the fires from Sam’s destructive exit. There was a hole punched straight through the ceiling, smouldering around the edges. Everyone had run out. A couple jumped or flew through the gap. Some went for the door to stage left. Most ran for the front door.

Ward saw one man almost get trampled.

Two trolls and Callum stood over the table where Ward sat. Ward held Iris’s hand, asking how she was, trying to reassure her. Charlotte was studying Callum, who stood perfectly still, eyes closed, wooden pen pressed between his palms. Charlotte was shaking.

“What the hell do you think you are doing? What you’ve done will kill Ward. And that other woman too.”

Callum didn't move.

\*\*\*\*\*

Anne hit the clouds, relieved to finally close her eyes. Almost instantly she was soaked, though at least the cold didn’t bother her. That had been a happy result of one of her stupid decisions. So many stupid decisions. Anne should never have gone to Sydney, should never have showed her flight to Isaac in the first place, should never have been able to fly.

Anne broke through the clouds, gasping. There was no exertion to the flight, but her lungs weren't used to the air so high. Her faster breathing scared her, and she felt dizzy, but pushed that away, looking beneath her.

It was a large cloud bank. There would be plenty of places to hide up here. It might not matter though. Sam had spotted her from so far off, honed towards her. Maybe whatever Sam was would be able to see her through the clouds.

Anne became aware of a light through the clouds. At first it was hard to pick out, but soon it was a clear point. It was must be Sam.

Anne fell. She didn’t remember deciding to, but now she was, didn’t bother to try and slow herself. Breaking the bottom of the clouds, the ground came in to sight, still such a long way down. The speed added difficulty to her breathing, and Anne wondered how long it would take Sam to figure out her dodge going back through the clouds. Perhaps he already knew.

Anne looked back at the light in the clouds. It was the yellow-orange light of flame. Anne looked below, and then, without moving, the land transformed beneath her. Anne didn’t normally fly at night, or from this direction, but the land beneath her was familiar.

Anne had no energy to cheer. She pulled up, slowing her fall, and beginning to angle it. The house was too far away, but maybe if she could just reach the safety of the burning tree she could survive.

\*\*\*\*\*

Iris was studying Callum closely. She let her sight peer as deep in to Callum as she could. The man was made of mazes. The mazes had connections, but the design of each showed them to be distinct. Iris tried to peer through it, find the man's motives, but it was lost in the complexity. Iris could see no central drive or purpose either, only the endless maze of plans, constantly directing Callum, as he drew others in to them. Callum opened his eyes at last. The room was empty and silent now. He stared directly at Iris, his expression blank. "Please don't try to read me. It's rude."

Iris frowned, but didn't comment. She wiped a little blood from her eyes. The intensity of Sam always agitated them. Callum answered Charlotte’s earlier question. “I was required to tell Sam what I knew, since he asked me directly about Ward. I diverted him on to Anne as late as I could”

"But she'll be killed if Sam catches her,” Charlotte said, shocked. Callum nodded. "Yes. But she might not be caught." Callum sighed, looking down at his pen, still clasped between his hands. "I couldn't know how fast Sam would travel. I will be sorry if she is caught. I did the best I could.”

Baror approached the table, eyeing the people sitting around it. "The building’s still structurally sound. That’s at least one thing not to worry about.”

Callum nodded. "Good. How long do you think until Sam returns?”

Baror shrugged. "Could be ten minutes, could be half an hour. If he decides to fight Thales, it could be never. Do we have a plan?"

Callum nodded. Iris asked what, but he kept talking to Baror. "I want you to find Mr Alistair, and bring him here before Sam gets back. If he asks, tell him to put it on Iris Carrel's account."

"What are you trying to do!?" Iris said hoarsely, still gripping Ward's hand.

"I'm trying to save your boyfriend's life. I'm going to need your help to do so."

\*\*\*\*\*

Sam burst through the clouds above. Anne was skirting above the trees now, watching them pass at a terrifying speed. Anne watched Sam as often as she could, trying to understand how he flew, while he came closer and closer, almost above her and just losing altitude. He rarely flapped his gigantic wings.

Trying to find any advantage, Anne watched closely next time he flapped. It didn’t affect height. It didn't even affect speed. Anne frowned, and risked slowing down to swerve to one side. Almost as soon as Anne varied her course, the giant wings flapped. Anne changed back to her true course, and again the wings beat. She let herself smile. Sam was faster, but perhaps Anne had found just a small advantage of her own flight.

Anne pulled herself to a stop as fast as she could. The number of times she had run in to the ground had made her extremely good at stopping her momentum. She started to accelerate in the opposite direction, watching to see how long it took for Sam to turn and follow.

To Anne’s dismay, one flap of those wings not only stopped Sam, but entirely changed his course to match hers again. Now he was nearly on top of her. Anne blinked her eyes, trying to get a clearer look at it in the brief slow speed from the change. She almost hit a particularly tall tree as she gaped at it. It was Sam himself pursuing her, face twisted with hatred.

\*\*\*\*\*

Iris stared at the note in front of her. Everyone else was quiet, trying to read it from wherever they sat. "She'll know the note's not in my hand." Callum nodded. He was watching Iris intently. "And if you wrote it out, she would know you didn't compose it. And then if you tried to paraphrase, she would know you would never have sent it."

"So why do you want me to send it?"

"Because the message includes who wrote it, and why. Now if you're going to send it, you need to send it now. Otherwise I need to find another way to try and keep your boyfriend alive."

Iris stared at the note again, then reached out a hand towards Callum's pen. He had it away in an instant. He drew out another pen from inside his jacket, handing it to her. She crossed out the greeting Callum had written, and the sign off. She signed her name at the bottom where there was space, then folded the note swiftly, turning it into its own envelope.

Callum frowned. "Why did you alter it? I was very careful about how I wrote that."

Iris brought the note to her lips, kissing it, then as she tore it up, she said, "You said yourself, everything about the letter is going to communicate something.

\*\*\*\*\*

Anne had chased pegasi in the Other skies, forced to dodge and weave, and to watch the hooves that could lash out while trying to lay a hand on those beautiful wings. Still, it took all her will to duck in to the forest at this speed in the dark.

Branches and leaves scratched her, but Anne kept away from larger branches or trunks. Anne still had to slow down, but she hoped that perhaps Sam's wing span would force him to land, to chase her on foot.

Anne glanced behind her, and saw Sam had fallen behind, still above the trees, but paused. Anne looked back with a smile, with a trunk right in front of her. Anne managed to mostly dodge, her right shoulder hit with a crack, spinning her body out to one side. The pain caused blots of purple on her vision, but Anne didn't stop. Anne tested her fingers, making sure they still worked, flexed her arm. Painful, but fine.

Anne was just thinking she might have escaped when the glow moved closer again. Anne risked another look back, and saw Sam flying through the trees. Wings passed clean through them, trees bursting in to flame with the contact. Sam himself was lost behind a tree, then the tree exploded, Sam coming through the gap, sword held in both hands.

Sam was gaining quickly now. Anne had slowed to be able to dodge, and Sam was not bothering to. Anne couldn't look back, but she could feel the heat increasing, the light getting stronger.

Anne dodge sideways again, and saw the sword pass through where she had been. Anne jerked away as fast as she could, and hit a tree back first. Her head cracked against it. Now Anne could see Sam fully, as fire spread out behind him. There was a touch of admiration on his face. He nodded to her, taking time to turn to face her fully.

Anne stared up at the clouds where they hid the moon, the outline of it, then looked back at Sam, still waiting. "If you have accepted my judgment, I will give you a moment to say goodbye."

Anne was busy studying the midnight clouds, lit by the moon behind them, and said, “I can’t believe it’s down to this.”

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Callum relaxed back in to a chair that he had pulled up. "Well, since we have completed our preparation, I suppose it's time we talk about Sam."

"Or you could let us all go now," Charlotte said.

Callum raised his palms, pen between two fingers. "I could, I know. And I'm sorry but I can't. It would be lethal for me. I am going to do what I can to make sure nobody dies tonight. I would like to ask something in return though."

Iris narrowed her eyes. "Of course. You're no better than the fae," She glanced at Dessa, "than fae like Lady Himoto."

Callum scratched his head with the pen. "I'm going to help out here even if you refuse. But I am asking you to do something for me. And what I ask might even help me help you." He spread his hands wide, and grinned. "So are you going to help?"

Charlotte nodded, and Iris nodded after a moment's hesitation. Ward sat dumb. He was pale, and staring at nothing, holding Iris's hand too tightly.

Callum clapped his hands. "Alright then. Let's get to it. Charlotte, if you can get Kane here. We probably need him to run the trial. And Iris, I am sure you have turned your eyes on Sam before now. I want you to tell us what you see when you look at him."

\*\*\*\*\*

Anne talked. She ached, from small scratches, from her shoulder, from her back. Her eyes hurt from the wind. She stared up at the sky and she talked. "So did you chase me down just because you saw me run?"

Sam shook his head. “Callum told me what you did. I thought you were smarter than that."

Keeping secrets was too hard. I don't think you understand that."

"I am sorry that I have to do this." Sam paused. "You aren't sweating."

Anne looked down from the sky. "What? Oh. I made a deal with the burning tree."

"Did you take a faebond?"

Anne shook her head, glancing back up at the sky. "I got some of his blood, his sap, in exchange for the feather of a pegasus and some of its mane hair. It makes sure I am always warm.”

She shrugged. "I'm basically on fire now, so the heat doesn't bother me."

"You really are foolish. You deserve exactly what's coming to you."

Anne looked back at him again. The hatred had caught her off guard. "Well, I reckon I can do just fine, thanks."

He raised his wings, and began to bring them down, pushing him forward towards her. Another tree burst in to flames. Anne dodged up, back towards the clouds. The sword swing cut the shoe of her foot, nicking her heel.

\*\*\*\*\*

"I hate looking at Sam," Iris began. Everyone was silent, watching her. Ward still wasn't focusing on anything. "Sam is bright. Way too bright. The sight of him causes my eyes to bleed. It's the wings. They're both feather and flame at the same time, both almost pure white, but tinged with red. Not orange, but blood red."

She wasn't paying attention to those around her now. She was looking at her hands, trying to think how to put it in to words. She had spent so long contemplating that image. It was burned in her mind. "He hates. It's almost indiscriminate. He is singular. That's important. There always appears to be nothing around him when I look. He's not just alone, but he's separate from everything around him."

She twisted her hands, drawing Ward's closer to her. "I think he is something ancient. He looks like an angel, and I don't think he's a fae, but I've never heard of anything like him."

\*\*\*\*\*

Anne shot up as fast as she could. She added a zig-zag, forcing Sam to turn. She didn't know how much time it would reallybuy. He seemed to turn almost as soon as she did. Still she climbed towards the edge of the clouds.

The Other sky was an endless expanse. Nothing but clouds and blue, tinged orange and red and yellow by a sun that wasn't there. There was still down, but if you fell, you'd starve before you hit anything.

The burning tree had told Anne how to get there so she could chase the pegasus for it. Where the light hit the cloud, there was a passage. It was widest at dawn and at dusk, when the sun illuminated the clouds from below. Everyone used sunlight, because it made it easy, but perhaps there was another way. Then Anne had seen the moon, giving her a silver lining.

As she neared the clouds Sam drew closer, the light from those wings started to hit the clouds, and Anne let out a cry of frustration. She started to see the clouds lightening, the line disappearing as the red-white light of the wings illuminated them.

Anne hit the clouds where she had seen her entrance only a second before, but it was just water and dark. Anne came out the other side, and stared back at the cloud, as it began to light from within. She felt light-headed.

Then as the light from Sam’s wings came from within the cloud she thought she saw the gate to the Other skies. It was moving with the light. She dove towards that moving entrance. She dove at the clouds again just as she saw Sam burst through, barely a meter away, his light catching the curve of the clouds in full.

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"It has been a puzzle I've been trying to solve for a while," Callum said. He looked satisfied, the ruins of his bar not worrying him at all. "It's nice to finally know that he really is an angel."

Dessa frowned, "No, he can't be an angel. They're all dead."

"Have been for 700 years. Yet here's one running around acting as the fae's personal enforcer. Interesting isn't it?" Callum was completely unworried by the blank stares he was getting. "Perhaps if we have time later, we can all sit down and talk about it, but for now, perhaps we should just be thankful that he is still bound by the contracts. If he were a surviving angel, it would explain why there are so many specific rules about him.

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Kane's phone had been ringing for five minutes. Veronica was staring at it in annoyance, watching Charlotte's name flashing on the screen. Kane was asleep. The phone finally rang out again, and Veronica put it back down on the blankets, so it wouldn't make too much noise against the wood.

The phone flashed again with a text message, still from Charlotte. 'Hey, this can't be a good time, but Ward needs...'

The rest of the message was cut off. Veronica lay there, staring at the phone. She opened up the message to see what it said.

'Hey, this can't be a good time, but Ward needs your help really badly. If you can come back to the Ghost's Rest now, or call me back, please.’

Unknown places, and that was the second time Veronica had heard of Ward being in some kind of trouble. Kane hadn't explained the last time. Veronica had her guesses, but what if they were wrong? Veronica looked down at Kane, absent-mindedly biting her thumb nail.

When the screen began to flash with another incoming call, Veronica shook Kane awake. He resisted, but she told him that Charlotte was calling. He told her not to worry, and then she said that it sounded kind of urgent. Kane had managed to lever himself up enough to answer the phone.

He said hello, heard Charlotte's first line, that Veronica couldn't make out, then got out of bed. He wandered to the door of her room to hold his conversation. Veronica could only hear one side of it.

"I know it might be important buy I'm busy...no not like that... What, really?" He glanced over at Veronica, who was propped up on her side, watching him. "Well if that's the case, then sure, I'll come first thing in the morning...Like, now?" He ran his hands over his face. "Yeah, no I get it. I do... Yes I'm taking it seriously. What kind of person do you take me for?... Fine. Yeah, good...No, I'll get a taxi." Kane hung up. He stayed leaning in the doorway, looking back at Veronica, then he returned to sit on the edge of the bed.

"That probably didn't sound too good, did it?"

Veronica shook her head slightly. "Is Ward seriously in trouble?"

Kane ran his hand through her hair. "Yeah, I think it's. It's some legal difficulties. He's being held now and..."

Kane let his hand fall away from her. "It's hard to explain."

Veronica lay back down. "It's fine. If your friend needs your help, then you should help him."

He bent over her until she could see him again, and said, "I'm going to go sort this out, but after that, I'll explain it. This time, I'm going to explain it properly, okay?"

"Yeah," she said, not meeting his eyes. "I really mean it,” he said, “I want to make this okay." She looked at him, and said, "Yeah. Okay. Go help your friend."

He bent and kissed her, and she closed her eyes, lifting herself slightly in to the kiss. Then he was gone. She opened her eyes, and watched him pull his clothes on, admiring him getting dressed in a way he had admired her so many times. He left slowly, reluctantly, but he left. Veronica lay back, wondering when he would be back.

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Sam stared at the cloud. His own light was playing havoc with the doorway, forcing him to try and get a look from the most awkward angles. Still, he could see it if he looked. Each time the light moved, the doorway moved too. If Same went through it, he wouldn't know how far away from his target he would be.

Sam still thought about it, but no. This was a time to let the target escape justice. She had shown herself to be foolish, so she would be back. He spat, and watched it fall out of sight, then reached for a cigarette, before realising they had been in his jacket.

Sam laughed, three short bitter bursts. No point worrying about the girl now. There were others to go after. He went down, and landed a little way away from a petrol station still open. He walked in, shirtless, and in bare feet, took a packet of cigarettes and a lighter, then walked out again, lighting up, and stretching himself out.

This was better, the wingless body. This was a practical body, one he could get things done in. He shouldn't have drawn his wings, he knew. He had just been so sick of Callum's smugness. He was sure Callum wasn't laughing anymore, his precious bar destroyed, and hopefully his reputation. Callum stopped the next car that came along, and made them take him to Sydney. They didn't argue.

Getting in, he realised he was still carrying his sword.

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Callum smiled as Charlotte conveyed the good news. She was huddled with Dessa, Iris and Ward, and she tried to speak a little life back in to Ward, who continued to sit, mostly stunned.

There was a game to be had here, and Callum was looking forward to it. Sam had always been so careful keeping his wings hidden, and now he had shown them to a crowd. Sam was growing old, and all the harshness in the world wouldn't keep him going forever. Callum thought of all the plans, and slowly, in his mind, the night's developments began to weave in to them.

**Part 4: Other Judgment**

Ward tried to sit still, to relax in his seat. If Kane were the one sitting here, then he was sure Kane would have found a way to relax in the uncomfortable chair, but Ward wasn't Kane.

Ward wished he could sit with his friends, in the pews, or whatever the seats in a court room were called. It would have made it easier had he been allowed to sit with Iris, to hold her hand. Watching her was never quite as comforting. Ward could never read her eyes. Of course Ward couldn't though. Iris had no eyes, and he was the only person in this room who wasn't able to see that. What he got was a fuzzy memory, and if he tried too hard, a blinding headache.

Right now, Iris was flicking through a large ornate book, one of several volumes around her. Ward looked at the other people sitting around. Kane he could see clearly, but Charlotte and Dessa he knew wouldn't look like that. Ward hadn't had time to ask anyone what Dessa really looked like. Sam wasn't a patient man, so they had been forced to move quickly.

Ward hadn't even talked to Mr Alistair, an old man with smooth dry skin, and threadbare hair. Mr Alistair would be representing him in what Ward was forced to accept would be his trial. Mr Alistair was to be the prosecutor too, as far as Ward understood. It was Mr Alistair's job while the court was working to discern the truth as best he could. In the taxi, Iris and Dessa had tried to explain it to him, but there was so much to explain that it had been impossible to absorb it all.

There was a representative picked to conduct the investigation. There was no investigation separate to the trial. If those involved in the events did not know them, they were taken to be unknowable. If you couldn't bring in someone to explain something, it would be taken as unexplained. Nobody had explained what happened if stories contradicted one another. Perhaps they just talked it out. Perhaps since the were never meant to lie, they didn’t consider the possibility.

Ward watched Sam for a bit, pacing backwards and forwards, sword left on a table, coat draped on a chair, feet still bare against the carpet of the court room floor. Occasionally Sam would stop to glare at someone in the room. Most frequently it was the woman sitting in the place of a judge.

Without her, Ward would already be dead.

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Sam had kicked in the door of the burnt-out husk that had been the Ghost's Rest, stalking in to the room, sword rising to strike Ward. Callum had yelled out, but Sam had just ignored him. One of the trolls had stepped in front of Sam's advance, and had been cut down without Sam even slowing down.

Ward had seen the sword rise, heard screaming in his ears, felt Iris's hand, both holding on as tight as they could. Ward hadn't even moved. He'd been too dumbfounded. Then a soft feminine voice had cut through all the other people making noise with a single word.

"Stop."

Ward had stared at the sword. It had stopped mid-swing, instantly with that one word. Sam wasn't looking at Ward anymore. Other people had turned to look as well, and at last as the sword arm lowered, Ward turned to look for his saviour.

She stood at the door to stage left, the door to the strange Other place. She wore a red dress that touched the floor, but still left her shoulders bare. Her deep black hair came nearly to her waist, and she wore a crown of gold at her brow. Later he would see how the forepiece broke up in to cords, then thinner strands, that twisted all the way down through her hair, until they were gold threads. Her eyes were a brilliant green as they examined those already in the bar. She walked towards them, starting up the tiers of the bar. "Sam, what are you doing to Ward?"

Sam glanced at Callum, his body almost complete still, with the sword held down beside him, tip resting on the ground. "Lady Himoto. I was just about to deliver justice to this man who spread the Other to another person. May I proceed?"

"Of course you may not proceed. I demand a court hearing to settle this."

Sam shrugged. "I accept the signatory's request, on the condition that justice be settled tonight."

Lady Himoto had paused and though. "If those are the terms, then it is settle. We shall hold court, as soon as a location can be found."

Baror had arrived with Mr Alistair soon after, and Mr Alistair had seemed entirely relaxed about the situation. Despite having been roused after midnight, he was in a perfectly neat suit, and looked alert. Mr Alistair had been on his phone when he walked in, and didn't stop talking on it while shaking hands, and being introduced by Callum. He had managed to get off the phone to stiffly bend and kiss Lady Himoto's hand, and then had wandered out, gesturing for the others to follow him without even a backward glance.

Mr Alistair had led them all to the courtroom. The room had surprised Ward. The court building looked like an office building, sitting near the top of the city. At the bottom floor, only the metal detectors in the lobby gave anything away. Inside, it was a modern building, with green carpet, and a soft look. The seats were a light wood, and the dais that the judge sat on barely elevated them. It looked too normal.

A noise in the quiet room drew Ward's attention. It was Callum’s pen, tapping lightly against the back wall. The tick was starting to annoy Ward. Once, Ward had thought Callum a nice person, helping people in need. This whole situation was because of him though.

Ward couldn't hate him though. Ward was too dazed. Perhaps later, if Ward got a later, he would hate Callum. Right now, he just wanted to rest. It was too late for this. Callum had simply been watching the court room be set up.

At last, Mr Alistair was satisfied everything was in order, and ushered Sam up to sit beside Lady Himoto. The two judges did not look at each other. Of course, there was meant to be another judge for any conflict with the contracts. Dessa had volunteered, but been disallowed. The judge needed to be a 'signatory'. Ward didn't even know what that meant. It was a bitter irony that he finally had access to so much information about all the Other and he mightn't even live long enough to understand it.

Mr Alistair began to speak. "We bring before the signatories the matter of Mister Ward Hobson, an amateur glamourist, who attempted to prove a glamour would work to his friend, Kane, who had no prior experience with the Other. Through doing so, Mister Hobson may introduced Kane to the other. In this instance, the deliberate or accidental nature of the event is not to be drawn in to question, and we must instead examine whether this event is really causally linked.”

Mr Alistair droned on, as Ward watched Iris. She was bent over the Contracts, flicking through the pages, biting her lip as she read. Ward wondered if her eyes gave her any advantage. Ward hadn't seen her look at Lady Himoto once.

"In this trial, if a majority can be given to dismiss the accusations against Mister Hobson did by all signatories present before dawn, Mister Hobson will be permitted to go free. If a majority finds that he is responsible for introducing someone to the Other, or dawn arrives and no majority is met, then Sam, Signatory of the Contracts, and Guardian of this particular Contract, will be allowed to enact justice as he sees fit."

With that, the trial was underway. Ward was called on to speak. First, he gave a full account of the night he had tried to show Kane the glamour. Ward tried to hold back his hurt and bitterness at his failure, sticking to the facts of the evening. Ward expanded with the story of helping Kane against the creature that had taken up home in Veronica’s house. Ward was encouraged by Lady Himoto to talk on, of meeting Charlotte, of having Charlotte refuse to tell him about the Other. Nobody interrupted Ward, and once he had finished that, everyone else was silent. Everyone was focused on him, save Iris, who was still flicking through one of the thick volumes in front of her. Ward kept speaking.

"So after, after all that, I went on a date with Iris, after which Mark, Iris’s brother approached me and tried to convince me to leave Iris alone. I realised by what he was talking about that he couldn’t be a normal human, so accused him of being part of the Other. He kidnapped me. I found out about Iris after that.”

Iris looked up at that part of the story, expression unreadable from where Ward was sitting, before turning back to flickering through the volume in front of her. Mr Alistair stood still, watching. When it was clear that Ward wasn't going to continue, he asked, "So these are all the times you have come in to contact with anything Other?"

Ward looked around, uncertain. Everyone else was just watching him still. No idea what was expected, what would help him. He realised he hadn't had to swear on anything that he wouldn't lie. He wondered why that was. He nodded once, then again. Callum raised his voice from the back of the room, "If that is true, then how did he learn to glamour in the first place?"

Ward's cheeks began to burn. Of course, that had been a stupid thing to forget. "When I was, I was seven, I met a man who was doing magic tricks at a birthday party. Most of the details are foggy. But after he finished his show, I asked him how it was done. He looked at me, and said that he could show me, but it would be hard. He said he could give me words that if I said them, and could concentrate in just the right way, I would be able to make people not notice things. He told me what they were, then took off his hat, and asked me to concentrate on it, and say the words.

"So I did, and he nodded at me, and smiled. He told me that if I could do that, then maybe one day I could be a wizard like he was. That maybe-"

"What did this man look like?" Sam interrupted. Ward started back, as if struck. Mr Alistair rounded on Sam, his voice raising to a loud crackle. "Is this something relevant to our current concerns, or to possible other investigations?"

Sam glared at Mr Alistair, but Mr Alistair met his gaze calmly. Finally Sam answered, "It is relevant to another investigation. Though I would say a more important one. I would appreciate it if you would ask the boy what the man looked like."

Mr Alistair turned back to Ward. "Would you please describe what the person who taught you the glamour for us?”

"He, he was old. I don't know, grey hair, long beard, cheap costume. He was, he was quite fat. Tanned skin. Like he spent time at the beach or... I don't know. The details of him are a little hazy."

Mr Alistair nodded. "So, beyond these interactions, you have had no interactions with the Other?" Ward began to nod, but Callum spoke out again from the back of the room, "The question is flawed, Alistair. The boy cannot see the Other. It is entirely possible he has had interactions without knowing it."

"Beyond the above listed interactions, you have had no interactions with the Other that you know of?" Ward looked at Callum, to see if he would object again, then nodded.

"Does anybody in this room have anything further they wish to know from Ward, amateur glamourist?"

Lady Himoto spoke. Her voice rolled the words slightly, her tongue savouring each syllable. "Can you ask him to clarify how a glamourist can function unable to see the Other? Shouldn't a glamourist be aware of the natural glamours that keep the Other out of most people's minds?"

Mr Alistair smiled. "Of course milady. Ward, can you explain in full, the extent of your glamours, as well as the extent of your ability to pierce them?"

Ward looked at his hands as he spoke. "I am capable of occasionally glamouring an object, so that only myself and anyone who can see the Other knows it's there. I have no ability to see through the glamours of others, so can never observe the Other."

Lady Himoto asked Alistair to ask Ward to expand on what he saw of Dessa, and Alistair relayed the request again. "When I look at Dessa I see... a woman, with dyed hair. I think it's a silvery green. And, and she has a lot of silver jewellery, and a green and silver dress. No. They're pants. I think." He glanced at Lady Himoto to try and see what she was thinking, but she sat, impassive. After a moment, she gave him a smile, thin, just her lips angling upwards. The little sign of warmth on that face completely changed her. Before he had been uncertain she was truly here to help, with that simple smile he knew she was on his side.

Not that this would mean much unless they could somehow convince Sam.

With Ward's speaking finished, Kane was called on to speak. He wasn't forced to stand up, nor to sit in the little box, where Ward still sat, unsure if he was allowed to leave. Instead, he continued to lounge in one of the seats, as he was asked to explain what had happened when he had gained his clearer sight.

"Ward tried to show me a glamour, like he said. It didn't work though. He was trying to hide a chair. Well, I saw it. We had a little argument about it, and then I went home. It wasn't until later that night, when I saw Charlotte, that I had any indication that I could see things that others couldn't."

"You saw her on your way home?" Alistair asked.

Kane nodded.

“Did you have any other indication of the Other around that time?”

Kane shook his head slowly. "I thought I heard a cat speaking, but that was just craziness. It wasn't anything Other. I mean, the cat has never spoken again."

Ward glanced at the two signatories, sitting as the judges. Ward hadn't heard that part before. He wondered if Kane had been trying to lie to the judges. If he had, what they would do. They let Kane continue on. "I spent a couple of weeks seeing weird things or weird people around, and the colour or shape of things seemed warped," Kane shrugged, "I thought I was going mad for a while, but when I properly met Charlotte she was able to explain to me what I was seeing. I introduced Ward to Charlotte, but Charlotte didn't want to talk to him about the Other. Is there anything else you need to know?" He looked back at Callum as he said this. Alistair coughed pointedly, but waited for any questions before speaking.

When none was forthcoming, Alistair spoke. "This is the evidence provided by the two involved directly. Does anybody else wish to speak on the matter before the signatories discuss amongst themselves?"

Iris raised a tentative hand, and Mr Alistair acknowledged her with a nod. "I was just wondering, which of the contracts details the role Sam plays in these matters?"

"The twelfth,” Mr Alistair said without even stopping to think, "though the contract that details the treatment of introducing people to the Other is the second contract. The twelfth is signed by eight-hundred and twelve signatories, while the second is signed by two-thousand and eighty-six signatories."

Both Iris and Charlotte opened the same Tome, and began reading from different pages of it. Mr Alistair continued speaking. "There is also contract five-hundred and one, in which a collection of eight-hundred and twenty-six signatories expressed a desire for the altering of the second contract. The second contract has remained the same since-"

"Thankyou, Alistair, but I believe Iris would have more than enough detail on that now," Lady Himoto slipped in smoothly, stopping the lawyer from continuing on. "Perhaps you should see if anyone else had anything else to say? Though I am surprised the person who arranged for us all to be here has not had more to say.” She was looking at Callum as she spoke. Callum pushed himself off the back wall, and walked to the front, to stand at level with Alistair.

Callum said to Lady Himoto, "I have an idea to present. I have no other facts to give, but instead, an interpretation." He glanced at Mr Alistair, who nodded at him to continue. Callum looked around the room, and put his pen in a pocket of his suit.

"You all know me. I was, until recently, the owner of a bar. I helped people when they needed it, both with favours and with information. I have been slandered several times for what I do, but I would say that my opinion is considered well educated on any number of things to do with the Other."

Sam rolled his eyes, and Mr Alistair said, "Callum, the ghost-man. You are here to make a point, not waste precious time."

Callum nodded, arms wide, disarming. "Of course. I am here because while both people involved have presented the facts to the best of their knowledge, there are some missing links. Unorthodox, I know, but I was wondering if I could ask some questions personally to Ward, and possibly Kane?"

Himoto nodded, and Sam said, "Just get on with it." Mr Alistair looked even more offended, and retreated right to the other side of the room. Callum ignored him, turning his full attention to Ward, and smiling. "So Ward, you learned how to glamour when you were seven. Have these glamours ever failed?"

"Well sometimes. Sometimes someone would notice and use whatever I glamoured."

Callum nodded, encouragingly. "There's no shame in that. Spellcraft, I am given to understand, is an incredibly difficult thing to practice. Now think for me, before you tested your glamours by showing them to Kane, where you made another person aware of your glamours?"

"I've never introduced anyone else."

"No, of course not. That's not what I was asking. Has there ever been a time that would be considered a true test of what you could or could not do with your glamours?"

Ward didn’t meet Callum’s smile. "There was this one time, with this girl in high school. I hid her from my dad when he came in to my room when she wasn't meant to be there." He glanced up at Iris, who had stopped reading, and was watching him and Callum closely. "My dad got-"

Callum gestured him to silence. "We don't need the details of embarrassing teenage escapades, don't worry. But I am curious, did you glamour the girl?"

"Well, yes."

"And did you talk to her about it later?"

Ward frowned. "Once. A couple of years later. She was drunk. She mentioned the time my dad had come home, and she'd hidden behind the door because..." he trailed off.

"I was also curious, has your glamour failed to work, even failed regularly?"

Ward scowled, but answered, " Sometimes someone would notice anyway. Nothing I could do about it. I was never sure if they were just more observant or whether the spell failed entirely."

Callum nodded to himself this time, then turned to the judges. "I believe the contracts say that one who is not part of the Other is incapable of being responsible for introducing somebody to the Other, is that not so?" Alistair nodded, Callum continued. "The evidence we have that Ward can in fact glamour is interesting. It comes mostly from his own testimonial that he can do glamours, and we have no reports from anyone of him using glamours effectively."

Ward glanced from Callum to Iris. She wasn't sure what Callum knew, but Iris had seen him use a glamour to win a fight before. For that matter, so had Kane. They were both remaining completely silent. Iris was shaking slightly.

"If that is the case, then it is entirely possible that Ward, despite some personal belief, has never, in fact, been able to use glamours at all. It could be the case that Ward has been mistaken in his belief all along. If that is the case, then he cannot be responsible for introducing Kane to the Other, because he himself is not part of it."

There was silence. Callum walked to the back of the room, and took up his previously leaning post. He drew out his pen, and began tapping it against the wall. Alistair asked if anyone else would like to speak, but nobody rose to say anything.

Ward thought there might be some adjournment to allow Sam and Lady Himoto to talk, but instead they simply began to talk quietly up at the dais. Lady Himoto was so contained it was impossible to read what she was thinking. Sam's face was a perpetual scowl, which, while emotive, was completely useless.

They called Mr Alistair over to talk with them as well. Alistair leaned up and talked to them. Ward glanced at his friends, and they had stopped their reading. Kane was even sitting forward. When Kane saw Ward looking, he gave him a weak smile.

Mr Alistair walked away, and the discussion continued. Ward glanced at Callum, wondering if Callum really believed what he had said, whether the man had had this plan all along, or whether he had made it up on the spot. He wondered whether it was a defence at all.

Iris got up, and walked to Ward. Charlotte went to follow, but Kane touched her shoulder, and motioned her to stay. "Guess this is kind of a mess, eh?" Iris said, reaching out a hand to Ward, who took it in his own. "It's... not ideal. Looks like it might work out now at least. And, I mean, Lady Himoto has helped, right?" Ward said, trying to sound confident.

Iris looked at the judge for a long moment. "Those eyes she has? Those are my eyes. I’m half convinced she came just to show me what she'd done."

Ward went pale, watching the judge's talk. "She's...wearing? your eyes?"

"Yeah. Not the nicest thing for someone who just wants to talk."

The two judges stopped speaking, and Sam turned to speak to those gathered. "It has been decided that Ward is not of the Other, and so cannot be responsible for introducing Kane to it. Kane's experience of the other is to be regarded as spontaneous, with nobody responsible for it."

Kane cheered, before looking around the court room, embarrassed. Iris gave Ward a hug, and Dessa and Charlotte were smiling. Sam continued though. "As such, he is to be removed from the court room immediately, and, given his particular knowledge already gained, those of the Other are to cease all communication with him."

"What?!" Iris cried out. Sam looked at her. He looked tired. "Due to the nature of Ward's strange situation, we agreed on this extra rule for him. It is for the protection of anyone who would have regular contact with him."

"And what's the cost of breaking the rule?" Iris asked. Sam remained silent for some time, finally saying, "Ward is to leave before we discuss anything else he is not meant to hear."

Iris began to tell him not to leave, but he shook his head. "They're not going to allow me to stay. Just-just try and solve it so you can talk to me, and that Kane, and Charlotte, that they can too. But hey, if you can't, at least I didn't die."

“Youd keep your life, but to have you taken away from me anyway." She leaned in and hugged him. "I'm going to get Lady Himoto back for this." Ward hugged her. He wanted to say that maybe this was Sam's doing, but didn't have the heart. He held Iris tightly for as long as he thought he could get away with. He said goodbye to Charlotte, to Kane, and to Dessa. He put on a smile for them, and then he was gone, out of the court room.

Iris had been quiet. She had insisted they all stay. Dessa had tried to console her, while Charlotte looked through the contracts, and Kane threw out the occasional wild suggestion. Mr Alistair had been prepared for them all to leave, but Iris had insisted they stay. While they were convened, they could hear her concerns. Mr Alistair objected that this wasn't an open court, but both Sam and Lady Himoto were willing to listen to Iris, so they had all stayed.

All Kane's answers had seemed feeble. He asked if by talking they only meant talking aloud, but Dessa had said that while written fae contracts relied on the wording, this one wouldn't. In any case, it hadn't been expressed in the technical language of the fae, where the distinction could be eliminated by the correct word choice. Not a loophole to exploit.

Kane and Charlotte started bickering over whether they should try and get the language formalised or not before they tried to challenge it. Kane couldn't see how it would help. Iris got up, and walked to the back of the room. The others let her go. Callum was standing there, with a faint smile on his face. He waved to Iris to attract her attention.

"Why so glum and gloomy? We won the case."

Iris leaned against the wall next to him. "We didn't win. Ward's banned from seeing with us. That's not a win at all."

"I'd say that I was able to stop him being killed was certainly a win."

"So you want to claim credit for this situation? What about causing it in the first place?"

Callum looked unconcerned. "I had to. I needed to try and avoid Sam causing a scene in my bar."

"Because that worked out well for you."

Callum was unphased. His pen tapped out a rhythm on the wall. "Nobody was hurt in my bar. That's a pretty huge success for me. Combine that with a couple of other small victories, and I'm not complaining. And I lost my bar. Perhaps you should just let it go."

Iris slumped to the floor, and Callum sunk to sit next to her. "It'll be alright. He'll go back to being normal, and you, well, there are other fish in the sea."

"He'll fight it."

"Yeah, well that's his fight. You don't want to be the one to help him win it."

"It's already ridiculous. He can use glamours. If it weren't for his glamours, my brother Mark would have killed us both."

Callum paused with the tapping of his pen on this one. It instead spun between his fingers. "I don't think anyone mentioned that to me. Which was lucky, considering how we saved him."

Iris nodded. "But he can. Powerful ones if he needs to. What happens if I go and tell them that?”

"This is a contracts tribunal. I can't predict what would happen."

"Try."

Callum paused. Even his pen was still, held before his eyes, his vision focused on it. "Well, I would imagine if it could be proven that he can in fact create a glamour, he would be accepted as Other, and he would be executed as before."

"What if, what if he only gained the ability to glamour afterwards? After Kane was considered Other?”

"Then most likely Charlotte or Kane would be executed for introducing him."

Iris stood up. "Thanks for the advice." She was walking back when Callum spoke again, still so soft that only she could hear him. "Even if you got him considered Other, if you threw one of his friends out like that, you wouldn't get him back."

Iris didn't turn back to him, but went and rejoined the others, examining the contracts.

Mr Alistair was consulting with them now, answering questions. The old man knew the contracts well. Kane was just asking, "So how exactly can one be introduced to the Other?"

"Normally unlawfully, but uncaught. Sam needs some evidence. Otherwise by beings outside of Sam's power. But those are normally other signatories, or beings who live entirely in the Other. Even then, they are discouraged."

"So what about faebonding?" Charlotte asked, "Why can fae create faebonds safely?"

"The thirty-fifth contract allows a fae to create a bond with a regular person, and this binding is not subject to most other contracts, but instead its own subsection. The exceptions are listed."

They continued to ask questions for a few minutes, with Iris only half-listening. She caught Charlotte saying, "Well if I introduced him, could Dessa protect me?"

Mr Alistair shook his head. "While in most cases, the fae has right to punish the faebond as they see fit, introducing people to the Other is exempt. If you were to go out and introduce Ward to the Other, you would certainly be killed."

Dessa gave Charlotte a hug. "Definitely not worth it.” Iris looked around at them. "I think I have a plan."

Charlotte smiled nervously at Iris. She had almost forgotten she was there, she had been so quiet. "Is it to use your magic sight to read the judges and find the magic word? Because that's about the best plan we have so far?" Kane said

Iris managed a smile. "No, it's not quite that strange. But... it's got some risk involved. To pretty much all three of us."

Kane leaned towards Iris. "Well don't just sit there, share the plan."

Iris glanced from one to the other, and then smiled. "Okay, this might work."

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Sam sat and watched the young people talk, keeping an eye on Dessa at all times. He didn't bother to watch Lady Himoto, he wouldn't be able to read her. Even if she had been doing something untoward, it would just mean a political squabble. She might lose clout with the signatories, but those squabbles weren't Sam's fights. He hadn't got involved in one of those for almost 600 years now.

But Dessa was sitting there among the humans and involving herself in their lives. That was dangerous. Sam didn't like it. Fae befriending humans, becoming close to them, you never knew what was going to happen.

As Sam watched though, he saw Dessa draw away from the others. Mr Alistair was sent away from the group, and Dessa began to colour, a strange purpling. Sam guessed it was Rage. Her fins were flaring, and her voice was almost audible now.

"They're going to try something foolish." Lady Himoto's comment drew Sam's focus away from the growing argument. He looked at Lady Himoto, with her beautifully crafted features and her dress, some Other weave with no real edges, but all a bright red that matched her lips. "What makes you think that?"

"Dessa's only real concern here would be Charlotte's safety. Their plan is going to put her in danger."

Sam didn't bother trying to question her. Lady Himoto was better at reading people than he would ever be. He mostly didn't bother to try. It took too long, and made things too complicated.

"What do you really want out of this?" Lady Himoto asked when Sam didn't respond. Sam looked at her, drawing his entire attention to her. "Out of this little tribunal Callum forced us in to? I want to see Callum suffer."

Lady Himoto arched and eyebrow. "We were both forced in to it, were we?"

"You're not here out of the goodness of your heart. Callum dangled something in front of you that you wanted."

Lady Himoto let the eyebrow rest. "You know, sometimes it's possible to have everyone benefit. That Callum wanted me here doesn't mean I didn't want to to be here."

Sam opened his mouth to respond, but then closed it again, frowning with thought. "You must have been fairly close by to get here in time."

Lady Himoto smiled, lips pressed together. She turned her focus back to the others in the room just in time to see Dessa stalking out, not looking back. Charlotte stood in the aisle, watching her go. "It looks like we are about to be called upon again."

Sam grunted. Lady Himoto tsked once. "Perhaps you should keep in mind that the contracts do not provide all the answers. And think about what you want for these children, not just for Callum, when passing a judgment, hm?"

Sam wanted to slam her face in to the desk, to scream at her, to wipe the smugness from her beneficent expression as Mr Alistair began to drone on again. He couldn't though. Each of those things had been forbidden, would stop Sam doing what needed to be done. Sam grit his teeth and tried to focus as Iris came to speak before them. He had always liked Iris. He had always believed she would be smart enough to avoid situations like this.

She alternated her eyeless gaze between both judges as she spoke. That surprised Sam. The sight of him caused her eyes to bleed in their present state, and the eyes so cruelly taken were in Lady Himoto's head. He hadn't thought Iris would have been able to look at the judges.

"My lord, my lady. Or whatever your title is here."

"Signatories," Mr Alistair provided. Iris didn't even look at him. "Signatories, I have come before you to tell you that Callum made a mistake, based on not knowing the full circumstances involved with Ward. There are at least four people who can personally attest that Ward is capable of glamours."

Iris paused, as if expecting some shocked reaction. Lady Himoto just leaned in slightly. "Continue."

“When my brother kidnapped Ward, and I was fighting my brother over Ward’s safety, Ward was able to glamour me, hiding me from my brother. This gives us two people who have observed his glamours firsthand, both my brother and I." She smiled thinly.

"Then, just this evening, Kane placed Ward in a position of high stress, where he was able to glamour Kane from a man during a fist fight in a crowded bar, as well as hide himself. This incident was observed by both Kane and Anne, who unfortunately can't be here due to the fact that Sam would kill her if she was."

"So," Lady Himoto said, steepling her fingers to one side of her face, "Are you trying to tell us that we should be going after that young man, and that Sam should execute him?"

"No, because there is no evidence that Ward knew magic before he met Kane."

A pen dropped in the back of the room. Possibly nobody but Lady Himoto noticed. Callum didn't even pick it up. He just stood and watched as Iris tried to stare down the signatories. "So," Sam said, frowning, "you are saying somebody introduced him afterwards?"

"Yes," Iris said. She tried to keep her voice quiet. "I believe the fault is my brother’s.”

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It was now so late it was early. The sun wasn't visible, but the sky was getting lighter, and there was a cafe open near the exit to the court, where Ward had been able to buy some coffee, and take a seat. This was it then. It hadn't been a grand adventure. It had been complicated and difficult, and painful. Ward still didn't understand most of what had happened to him, but it was over now.

Still, Ward waited, to watch the people who would no longer be his friends walk out of the court. It was so unfair. Ward wondered how much of the evening Callum had been planning. The man had been so calm through all of it. Maybe he had wanted Ward out of the way. Ward wanted to try and build it up, but Ward knew he wasn't important. He doubted Callum had even really cared what happened to him

Ward didn't really believe that Iris would be able to sort everything out. The judgment had been so final. Ward just wanted to see them one more time, to share a look with them. Ward’s eyes drooped, and his coffee almost spilled in his hands. He felt someone catch it, and his eyes shot open, staring in to an unfamiliar face.

Not quite unfamiliar. Despite being clean shaven, washed overall, despite longer hair, and despite a collection of red welts on his forehead, the nasty grin, with the cigarette perched in the side of the mouth was very definitely Mark.

Ward flinched back and the cup fell to the ground. Mark laughed. Ward wanted to punch him. He made it half way out of his seat before Mark grabbed Ward's arm. Mark stubbed out the cigarette on the table. "I was going to wait till I finished the cigarette before I told you I was here, but thought I'd try and save the cup." Mark shrugged, pulling out another cigarette. "If you're thinking of running, I'd remember that I could have throttled you in your chair. You would barely have known I was there. Nobody else would have noticed until I was long gone."

Ward slowly lowered himself back in to his seat. He looked around to see if the waitress was going to come over about the broken cup, but she seemed oblivious. "Lady Himoto was holding you."

Mark tapped his brow. "She did a pretty good job. Had me sprawled naked on grass that grew up in to me. Pulling myself out of that hurt. She underestimated me though. I've had the chance to experience a lot of pain."

"You just broke out, and came here?"

"I stole all the papers from her desk as well. She's going to be pissed when she finds out. So why are you out here when they're all still in there?"

Ward mopped up some of the coffee with a napkin, trying to stop it dripping on him. "None of your business. You should leave before anyone else comes out."

Mark sniffed with mock sorrow. "Well I suppose if you want to keep things to yourself, then I can't pry it out of you." He paused. "Well, I probably could pry it out of you if I wanted to, but I'm not going to. You're practically family after all."

"I know how you treat family."

Mark laughed at that one. "Fair call. I'm glad I found you. You were the one I really wanted to come see.”

"What's so special about me?"

"You're like family. And unlike my sister, you can't beat me near to death."

Ward tensed, and Mark settled further in to his chair. "Ah yes. The clenching. It's so nice to feel all those little things a person's body does when they're afraid." He stared at Ward, "Sorry, does that unnerve you? I've been trapped so long, and it's been so long since I've got a chance to really spread my senses."

“Go away."

"I'd really rather stay. I think we have quite a lot to talk about."

"If you stay, you’ll end up dead."

“Such childish threats. I came to speak to you mano a mano.” Mark stared at him. "I can feel it in the way you're sitting. You're not going to attack me."

"I'm not part of the Other. Sam will kill you for talking to me."

"My sister has been trying to make Sam kill me for years"

"Maybe she'll get her wish."

Mark leaned back in his chair. "I had quite a lot of time to think, while I was being held prisoner. I couldn't move, you see. It was one of the most awful things that I have ever experienced. Let me tell you right now, if you ever meet Lady Himoto, and I hope you will, she can think of something worse to do to you than you could imagine for yourself.”

Mark paused to take a long drag of his cigarette. Ward refused to fill the silence for him, so Mark continued. “What I tended to think about, was how exactly I ended up screwed over so badly. At first I just blamed Himoto for it. She was the one holding me. Then I thought about my sister. Really, maybe, it was all her fault. If she hadn’t hated me, if she hadn’t had her precious gift. Then I realised someone else who’s fault it was.”

He pointed his cigarette at Ward, whose nose curled up at the smoke, leaning back as far as possible, every muscle clenching. “It was you, you little bastard. Your little parlour trick cost me my salvation.”

The corner of Ward’s mouth twitched up. “So what, you’re here to fight me? Because I, because I stopped you abducting my girlfriend, and maybe killing me?”

Mark shrugged. “You stopped me.”

“So what? You’ve come to sit pick a fight?”

Mark sat back in his chair, dropping his cigarette, and running his hand over his face. His vicious energy had left him. “Do you hate me, Ward?”

“Yes. Of course.”

“Do you wish I were dead?”

Ward paused a moment, then said, “Yes. I really do.”

Mark looked at Ward, eyes sunk in to his head. One of the scabs on his forehead had been broken, and blood had begun to seep on to his brow. “I’m here because I’m a marked man, Ward. As marked as you are. Callum would kill me, Lady Himoto would do worse. And I found a way out.

“It’s so simple. If I am engaged to be in a duel, no past grievance against me can be pursued until the duel has occurred. Do you understand? Until the date the duel is set for, all of them, all of you, will have to leave me alone.”

Mark pulled out another cigarette, but didn’t light it. “That’s why I’m talking to you, not anyone else, you.”

Ward stared, baffled by this change of events. “So, so why tell me all of this?”

Mark blinked as the trickle of blood reached his eye, then wiped his forehead on his sleeve. “I want you to duel me. New years eve, the latest date we’re allowed to schedule a duel for.”

Ward went white. “Why would I do that?”

“There are three reasons. Firstly, this is an Other duel. You know what that means? It means you’re part of the Other, fully recognised, all peachy. It’s your way back in to all that. Secondly, just think how much Iris would love you if you finally gutted me. And finally, if you don’t agree, I’m going to gut you here and leave your cooling body on this table.” Mark flicked out his lighter, and his smirk came back just a little. “Answer by the time I finish this.”

Ward stared at Mark, studying his thin face, watching the smoke coil about it. Ward’s hands hurt from gripping his chair too tightly, and he barely breathed, trying to read those green eyes. There was no way out. Perhaps with more time to think about it, but there simply wasn’t any. Mark tapped more ashes on the table.

“What difference does it make if you kill me now, or kill me in three months?”

“Three months for both of us.”

“You can glamour yourself anyway. I can’t win, so why agree?”

“Three months. Or two more pulls. Your choice. If you want to think you have a chance, then I’ll agree to no using glamours on the other person’s senses in the duel.”

Ward slumped in his seat. “Fine. I’ll do it. We’ll duel.”

Mark smiled, all his energy coming back to him. He stubbed the cigarette out on the table. “Excellent. I can’t wait to see my sister’s face.”

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"You think you can blameMark for this?” Sam looked angrier than normal, mixed with incredulity.

Iris looked back at her friends, who gave her encouraging nods, save for Dessa who just glared. "If we look at it, Kane was unaware of the Other, with his only talent being his own perception. He had no way to introduce Kane to the Other, since he had no knowledge. Charlotte outright refused to try and help introduce him to the Other.”

Sam nodded, and Lady Himoto smiled at Iris. "So it wasn't Charlotte, and it wasn't Kane, but why not you?"

Iris paused. "You are both aware that my brother kidnapped Ward, and used him as bait for me?" She spat the words out through tight lips.

Lady Himoto nodded, and Sam grunted assent. "Well, when that happened, my brother used glamours to confuse Ward, openly and without any pretence.”

Lady Himoto was smiling encouragingly at Iris, and it was so hard for Iris to keep watching the two judges. Red streaks had started to run down her face from watching Sam too long. "I am aware, but both Kane and Charlotte had talked more or less candidly to Ward about the Other. It cannot be of no consequence for them, and a crime for your brother.”

"None of them introduced Ward, because it was in the warehouse that anyone proved Ward could use glamours. It was only after meeting my brother that anyone knows for certain that Ward can use magic."

Sam was scowling, but Lady Himoto was smiling. "That's a very clever little story you've made." Iris scowled at her. “Each word and sentence very carefully true, but I can't help but think that the picture itself might be incomplete. Do you have anything else you would like to add?" Iris glared at Lady Himoto, meeting her own eyes. She stared at Lady Himoto until Lady Himoto cast her own gaze down. Iris turned, and resumed her seat.

Lady Himoto glance at Sam, and said quietly, "Are you convinced by this story?" Sam was frowning. "You just said she was lying."

“I certainly didn’t. I said that everything she said was true. We can even see it in how uncertain Ward was at admitting his inability to glamour at times. He knew it was false, but he said it because he thought he needed to."

"You let him lie to us?"

“Once again, that would be scandal. Likely he believes it, but you must have seen his doubts. The truth is lost, but at least we can deal in something close enough. And do a kindness to this girl who both of us have had an affection for."

"You want to blame your faebond?"

Lady Himoto nodded. Sam looked down at the bench in front of him. He knew the story should be considered false. He just couldn't find where he could fault it. Lady Himoto was watching him closely. Sam banged a fist on the bench once. "Bring Mark here. He needs to speak on this."

Lady Himoto looked unfocused for a second, then looked at the people in the room. She spoke loudly, letting her voice carry. "It appears that the final person to speak will be Mark, speaking in his own defence. He has even saved me the trouble of fetching him, by handily escaping my hold on him.”

One of the two large doors was pushed open, and Mark slid in to the gap. Mark looked at all the glares that were focused on him. Only the two judges were doing anything else. "Good morning. It's a pleasure to be here. Lucky I arrived just in time for my own conviction, eh?"

He went to light a cigarette, but Mr Alistair hurried forwards. "The smoke alarms in here still work, sir." Mark looked a the old lawyer, then put his lighter slowly back in his pocket. Then, quick as a snake, he punched the lawyer. Alistair fell backwards clutching his nose. It could have been comical. Mark shook his fist out. "I've been wanting to do that for so long. You wouldn’t believe how boring he is. He never did get the inheritance right.”

Mark stepped over the lawyer, and walked forward. "I am happy to accept all blame for Ward becoming aware of the Other. It was all me, I am the guilty party come to confession at last.” Still, Mark was grinning, posture easy. Nobody moved, so Mark turned to walk out.

Sam stood up, pulling his sword out, yelling, “You turn your back on your death?”

Mark turned back, and watched Sam advance. “I have an amnesty.”

Sam raised his sword, as Mark said, “I have a duel to finish, before these charges fall.” The sword stopped suddenly, an inch from Marks’ head. Mark still stood relaxed, and looked past Sam to Lady Himoto. “That applies to you too. Past transgressions will have to wait until after this matter of honour is settle between me and my new companion.”

Lady Himoto pursed her lips, but did not speak. Sam pulled his sword back slowly. “If it’s a duel, then what fool agreed to that?”

“Just some young man, waiting downstairs for a trial to finish.”

Ward sat opposite the court as the building spun in and out of focus. The grey of early morning hid the shadows from everything, as Ward waited, rocking backwards and forwards on his feet, for someone to come out of the court building.

He didn't have to wait long. Mark let himself be seen exiting, even waving to Ward. A minute later and there was Charlotte, Kane, Dessa and, of course, Iris. Iris walked up to him, her face red with anger. The others stayed near the door of the court building.

Ward opened his arms to try and hug her, to sap some of the anger. Instead, he got a slap full on his cheek. "You let him tell you what to do?"

"No, I didn't-" She slapped him again. “And then you made that stupid, idiotic deal, after I've saved your life from him, you're going to let him kill you, and you didn’t even put up a fight.”

"If, if I hadn't, he would have killed me there and then.”

"So you accepted a duel you can't win?"

“If I refused, he would have just killed me any-“

“In broad daylight? With people around?”

“But with a glamour…” Ward trailed, off. A few men in suits hurried past the yelling couple.

“He could not have killed you here. Glamours do not just keep everything hidden. Mark could not have glamoured your murder.” Iris enunciated each word with the crisp clarity of anger.

Ward gaped. “But, but but.”

“But you listened to what Mark told you. I had sold Sam that Mark was the one who had introduced you to the Other. Everything would have been fine. Except you listened to him.”

“Well how was I to know better!?” Ward exploded. “You’re worse than Charlotte was, refusing to talk about the Other, about how any of this works, or what it can do. I didn’t know!” Ward stopped, and took several deep breaths, watching Iris’s shocked face. “I didn’t know. And because of that… because of that I’m going to die.”

Ward turned away from his friends and walked away, in to the city. Iris scrunched her eyelids shut, then turned, heading back to the court building. Charlotte looked both directions, then went after Ward, trailing Dessa and Kane behind her.

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Mister Alistair stood with a white handkerchief held up to a bleeding nose. His wrinkled face was scrunched in pain, while his free hand collected his documents in to his briefcase. Lady Himoto was sitting in the judge’s high seat, watching the others in the room. Sam strode over to Callum and stood too close to him, glaring. "This is all your fault."

Callum pulled himself off his lean, now nearly nose to nose with Sam. "That justice was done properly and officially? Going to kill me?"

"This should have all been so simple. You muddied it. You complicated it when it didn't need to be. Why?"

Callum looked over Sam's shoulder. "Lady Himoto, do you have anything against me going about my business from here?"

"No. You are free to go. You’ve been free to go all this time.”

"And do you plan to award any damages for Sam destroying my safe haven? Bringing violence in to a safe haven is a serious thing."

"And if it were anyone other than Sam, you'd probably get your way. But no, Sam's actions are exempt."

Sam smirked at that, but stepped back. Sam’s hand was on the door when Lady Himoto called out his name, clear and crisp. "I just want a moment to talk to you about something that has been worrying me."

Sam turned, not moving any closer. "Callum," Lady Himoto said, "You may leave now."

Callum ducked out under Sam’s arm, in to the empty corridor that connected all the various court rooms on the floor. Sam let the door close, and Mr Alistair began neatly stacking the books in one corner of the room.

Lady Himoto examined Sam, just for the show of it. "You were acting hastily there. I thought you were meant to fully explore a situation before leaping to punishment.”

"There were things that needed doing, so I decided to do them." There wasn't a hint of contrition in Sam's voice.

Lady Himoto shook her head. “This is sad. I really thought you might be willing to work with us, but I think you need to stop your duties until all the first signatories have thought on this.

"Damn your signatories! Callum was baiting me. He's scheming, and when someone schemes against me, you can be sure he's got plans for you fae as well."

Lady Himoto tilted her head slightly. "Yes, of course he has plans. But that doesn't mean you needed to rise to his bait. You haven't always been so quick to pounce when you didn't need to. What is it?"

"There's nothing. I'm doing the right thing."

"No, you are acting brashly. You shall not draw your wings, nor use your sword, until such time as I say so.

Sam tried to stare down Lady Himoto, but his ferocity was lost on her serene face. He grunted, and stalked out of the room. A few moments later, only Mr Alistair, carefully arranging the books, was left in the room.

Near the elevator, Sam found Callum standing, scribbling in his little notebook with that stupid pen. Sam didn't trust that pen. "What are you still doing here? Trying to listen in?"

Callum sighed. "Baror left without me, so I had to wait for someone else."

Sam glared, but accepted it. He stabbed the down button on the elevator and glared at the lights, waiting for an elevator to arrive. "So what's happening then? I don't get damages, but you certainly aren’t gloating.”

"Today has been a complete mess, and I can't help think that it's all your fault. And I'm not allowed to just solve the problem. Instead I have to sit around uselessly.”

“You’ve ruined my bar, possibly trapping creatures here that would have passed to the Other through there. I’m sure you’ll find somewhere to make trouble.”

The elevator opened, and Iris stepped out, face streaked with blood. “Sam. Good, you’re still here.”

Sam shoved past Iris in to the elevator, forcing Iris to retreat before the doors closed on her. Callum slipped in too, watching Iris with interest. Iris looked tired, face held tense, but shoulders dropping. She shifted her weight, biting her tongue until Callum was gone. Deciding for once not to pry, Callum quickly found the exit, however had to wait again for someone to open the door. Callum couldn’t help but overhear Iris talking to Sam.

“You have to kill Mark.”

Sam went to move past, but Iris grabbed his arm and held on to his sleeve. Sam turned away from Callum swiftly. Iris flinched back, but didn’t let go, and continued to glare at Sam. Blood was seeping from her eyes now.

“I have to do nothing,” Sam said, voice low and terse. “Your boyfriend will die. Move on.”

Sam shook his arm free. “This isn’t my fault.” Sam went to walk away. Iris cried, “So you’re just going to leave? Again? Do you even care?” Sam rounded on her. “Of course I care. I cared when your parents died. I cared when you were injured. I care that you almost died. But Ward? He did the wrong thing. He deserves it.”

“So you want Mark to win?”

Sam shook his head. “No. He will though. Easy case. And what do you want? I can’t fight the duel for him.”

“Train him, or protect him.”

Sam stood quietly, back still turned on Callum. Iris heaved several breaths, trying to clear the red from her face. She wiped her sleeve across it, and walked past Sam. “Fine then. Go murder some more people. For justice, or whatever you think you serve.”

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Kane, Ward and Charlotte sat in the park. Dawn caught the fountain, making it sparkle as it fell. None of them noticed. Ward held his head in his hands. Kane stared at the pale blue sky, and Charlotte watched the other two. Nobody had anything to say.

Charlotte had quickly explained what had happened after Ward left, and how things had been resolved. Kane had added that Sam had punched the lawyer.

Eventually, Kane spoke. "I promised I was going to explain things to Veronica when I got back." His head was hung. Charlotte's brow wrinkled. "Why?"

"Because she deserves to know something of what I keep getting up to. She's... I think she worries that sometimes I'm trying to exclude her. But after this ordeal. Plus, after seeing how quick Sam was to point swords.”

A shadow was cast over the group, and Kane sighed, "Speak of the devil..."

Sam stood before them. He held his sword in one hand. “I am not the devil, and you would do well to remember it."

Sam studied them, while Kane glared at him. After meeting the gaze of all three of them, Sam turned his attention back to Ward. “Have you ever held a weapon before?”

“No. Why?”

“Have you ever hit someone? Has anyone ever beaten the snot out of you?”

Ward was glaring now. “Shove off. You can’t touch me.”

Sam dropped his sword, and it clanged on the ground. “Get up and fight me.”

Ward sat forward, but didn’t rise. “Why?”

“Because I can beat you far more easily when you’re sitting down.”

Ward sat for a second longer before trying to vault over the back of the chair. His left foot caught on the seat. Sam grabbed his shirt, and hauled him backwards. In a second, Ward was thrown to the ground. His shoulders cracked the pavement then his head bounced off it. He barely missed the sword Ward tried to blink his vision clear. Charlotte had risen, coming at Sam, but Sam stepped aside, pushing Charlotte past, stumbling her.

Ward picked up the sword. It was heavy, and he almost swept it past, but managed to point it shakily at Sam, who stood over him, watching through slitted eyes. “You going to run me through from down there? The angle’s wrong. You need to stand up.”

“People will see this. Someone will call the police.”

“So what? They couldn’t get here in time to save you.”

Sam reached down, and Ward flinched. Sam was fast, and Ward was stupid. Sam sidestepped the sword, and pulled it from Ward’s grasp by the cross-guard. “That was sloppy, unorganised, and panicked. Not completely hopeless though.”

“What are you raving about?” Charlotte said, setting her feet ready to spring at Sam.

“I’m going to teach Ward how to fight and kill Mark. Find yourself a weapon to learn with." He glanced over at Kane. "You too. The learning will go faster if both of you are doing it."

"What about me?" Charlotte said. Sam looked at her, shaking his head. "No. You wouldn't help. I’ll find you, Ward, when I have a place to train.” Sam turned to walk away, but Kane called after him. "Wait! How much time is this all going to take. I've got other things that need looking after." Sam turned and got so close to Kane, that Kane leaned backwards away from that gaze. "Boy, try and have some dignity. Tell your friend why you won't help him avoid death, don't beg me."

Then Sam stepped back, and walked off. They all watched him go. "Well, Kane, are you going to tell Ward why you don't want to help him out?"

Kane stood up, and stifled a yawn. "I'm going to head back to Veronica's. Hopefully she hasn't been waiting up. On the way, I'm going to try to come up with a plausible lie, and since the big bad murderer seems to be staying in town, I'm going to have to keep lying to her. I'd like to do it as little as possible, but you know how things can be. I'll talk to you all later.”

He walked off too, leaving Charlotte with Ward. Charlotte sighed. "We should get some sleep. Maybe things will look better in the morning." She looked around. "Well, the afternoon anyway."

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Kane stood outside the door to Veronica's house for the second time in so long. Veronica would be getting up about now, if she had slept. He hoped she had. He didn't want to knock on the door, in case one of her flatmates answered. His phone had died on the bus ride here.

Kane had fallen asleep on the bus, leaning his head against the window, only waking up one stop away. Too much had happened too fast. Sam's face kept appearing in front of his mind. It was a face that would cause nightmares. It was the face of a man who would happily track him down and kill him for just a few words.

What could he tell Veronica? The truth was now unthinkable. If she didn't believe him, that would be bad. If she did, that could be far, far worse. He would have to tell some story to her and then if she believed that, that could be worse still. If he lied, he would have to tell the others what the lie was, and he didn't think Ward could lie to save his life. The poor boy could barely speak most of the time.

And now he was going to be duelling someone who could do magic or something. It was all pointless. Kane just wanted a quiet life. He really didn't care about all the magic stuff anymore. He just wanted to curl up next to Veronica and rest, and have pleasant silences.

His circling thoughts were broken as the door opened, and Rhani stepped out in her suit, ready for work. She looked at him with distaste. "Oh, so you're here on the doorstep, bright and early. Go in. Veronica hasn't got out of bed yet."

She left the door open for him and walked past Kane without saying another word. Kane walked up the steps once she was past and closed the door, keeping the cold out of the house. He leaned against it for a second, then went to Veronica's room.

Veronica’s door creaked as Kane opened it. Veronica was still lying in bed, back to the door. Kane waited to see if Veronica would roll over. She didn’t. Kane closed the door again, with another creak, then sat on the edge of the bed, easing himself to lie down next to her, hesitant to touch her.

Kane woke up to find Veronica pressed against him. He tensed in surprise and Veronica’s eyes opened. They looked at each other for a few moments, then she lowered her gaze, not talking, just holding him. Kane pushed her back just a little to look in to her eyes. "You're not going to tell me what that was about, are you?"

"I'm... going to tell you a part of it. I think."

Veronica waited for him to continue. He took a deep breath and let whatever he was going to say flow out. "Ward's always had a thing for magic, believing it's real and stuff. I mostly thought of it as harmless, but apparently, he hasn't always dealt with sane and friendly people. And now some of them have got him in to some trouble. Real and dangerous trouble. And he wants my help getting out. And even though none of the magic is real, the trouble still is."

Veronica stared for several seconds. "So you're going to help him?"

Looking in to those eyes, the only answer Kane could possibly give was 'yes'. It was what those eyes expected of him, and he couldn't dream of being less than what they saw. "I might get hurt though, definitely some bruises involved." Veronica squeezes him. "If it's for Ward…”

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Lady Himoto sat in the other of the cheap metal and plastic chairs that occupied Ward’s dining room table. Ward had not seen her sit, or arrive, yet there she was. It was the first time Ward had seen her up close. Her hair was black and incredibly long, interwoven with gold threads that coalesced to form a crown at her brow. Her lips were a vibrant red, and her perfect eyebrows helped sculpt an expression of concern in those stolen eyes. Her dress looked made of one giant leaf, wrapped around her, and then cut to form a delicate design. Almost modest in its elegance, with the veins of the leaf directing the eye.

“What do you want?” Ward asked, too tired for anything else.

“I’m worried about you, Ward. I owe you a favour from when you assisted Iris before, and I am obligated to repay that debt.”

“I don’t want your help.”

“Perhaps not. But you may need it. No, don’t answer now. I wanted to let you know how sorry I am that this occurred. I offer my help, and you may choose to take up this offer at your own leisure. I know you have heard awful things about me, but I want to help you. Let me know if you change your mind.”

She stood and left silently. Ward noted that. The exit was devoid of sound, and only after she passed did the sound of a plane passing overhead invade Ward’s kitchen where he now sat alone. There was an unopened bottle of wine on the table in front of him.

The offer of the fae was so tempting now. Surely, it was preferable to death. Even Iris could not fault him if he accepted this help. The thought of her hurt Ward. What Iris thought might not matter anymore. The image of those eyes lingered though, and warned against any such agreement. Ward sat for nearly two hours before standing, and heading to bed. The wine bottle sat untouched on the table.

**Part 5: Training Days**

The pipe stabbed Ward in the stomach, lifting him off his feet. Landing badly, he fell, impacting the uneven concrete floor, barely braced. Ward curled up in pain, trying to breath after the force of the blow. Kane was floored as well, clutching his side, teeth gritted. Sam poked Ward lightly with the pipe. "Come on. Get back up. This time don't let go of the sword."

Ward just stared up at him, tears welling in his eyes. Kane managed to wheeze, "Those were kill blows, so maybe we'll just lie here."

"You'll get back up, or you'll soon wish you had."

Ward managed to lever himself to his feet, glaring through the tears, and looked around for his sword. Almost as soon as Ward touched it, Sam’s pipe rapped his hand, and Ward dropped it, jumping back. "That's no fair! You didn't let me retrieve it." The words wheezed out of him.

Kane picked up his sword while Sam was focused elsewhere. Sam turned slowly. Ward thought the movement looked creaky, careful. It was so easy to forget how old Sam was. The moment of seeming fragility was lost as Sam swung the pipe at Kane’s head, fast. Kane's sword was swept aside. The blow hit Kane, stumbling him, making him lose his grip. The sword clattered on the ground.

Sam turned back to Ward. "You didn't pick your sword up."

"You hit my hand!"

"Then I turned my attention away from you. It was an opportunity and you missed it."

With that Sam stepped towards Ward, pipe rising above his head. Ward stepped back, and Sam jeered. "You want to learn to fight, not how to run, right?"

"This isn't learning."

"Then let's run."

Sam was not fast, but Ward was not fit, and was soon puffing from the effort. Whenever Ward hit a wall he had to turn, and each time Sam got closer. One last turn, and Sam tripped Ward with the pipe. Ward barely got his hands up in time to brace against the cold cement floor. He landed badly a second time. There is a ring of metal on metal, then a thump. Kane had joined him on the ground again. Kane still clutched his sword.

It stretched on. Ward managed to get back to his sword. The impact of pipe against sword swung it from Ward’s bloodied palms. A hard blow to Ward’s shin. Ward did not get up. He lay, trying not to sob. Sam told him to get up, kicked him once, then moved on.

Ward watched Kane be easily disarmed, and another blow to Kane’s head makes him fall, not bracing himself. Ward forced himself in to a sitting position, trying to ignore the pain, to have enough balance and strength. There was a taste of blood, and spots on his vision. Standing up took Ward an age of agony.

Sam ignored Ward, walking to the wall of the large space. Sam retrieved the water bottles left there, handing one to Ward and leaving the other next to Kane’s body. "We'll start again when both of oyu can stand.”

It took almost two hours. Ward did not know what to check Kane for, and instead just sat next to him, hoping Kane recovered. Sitting back down hurt slightly less than standing, though moving from one to the other was a world of nausea and bursts of agony. Kane came to slowly, still very groggy, but Ward helped him up, helps him get his mind in order.

"The brute just pummelled us. This isn't learning. This is slow murder." Kane said it softly, as he worked slowly on his apple. Sam answers from the other side of the room, "That was a test." The two boys start. Sam shouldn't have been able to hear that, but he wasn't normal.

Ward had asked Charlotte about it, but she had known very little. The angels were said to have all died in the fourteenth century, though Charlotte could not explain how. Everything was frustratingly vague when it came to the group. Sam was easier though. Everyone in the Other knew Sam, or knew of him. Mention of him hushed voices. Everyone seemed terrified of him. The enforcer.

If you met him on the street you would likely ignore him. An old man in an old suit, well worn, and long coat already out of season in the Australian spring. His face was creased and crinkled from a constant scowl, and his hands were leathery. Even his frame was unimposing. Not tall, his limbs were thin, almost skeletal. The only thing that you might notice was how angry this old man seemed to be. Nothing like you would imagine an angel. In motion, Sam was different. He moved with vigour, and there was strength in those thin arms. He was unyielding, applying intensity to an object until it broke.

Sam walked over and threw them a water bottle. "Split it. Then we can begin the training."

"Did we pass the test?" Kane asks. Sam sighs. "This wasn't a test for passing. It was to learn what we need to do. Too much”

That stung. Ward knew it was true, but it stole none of the harshness from Sam’s voice.

"Training will be every day from six till ten, then all day on Sundays. If either of you don't turn up, you'll miss out." Sam said it as if there could be nothing worse. "Now back on your feet. I'm going to start teaching you how to hold a sword, then basic cuts and stabs.”

The day was hard. Ward had been surprised how heavy the swords were at the start, and by the end, holding it up was an agony. Not even Sam’s harsh commands had helped. Kane did just slightly better, face set in a grimace.

Sam left immediately after one last burst of scorn. Kane and Ward collapsed next to their bags, sucking down water, and trying to find the energy to head home. "That guy's teaching us for three months?" Kane asked. Ward nodded. "Yeah. I guess we better get used to some bruises." He intended it to be a light comment, but tiredness makes it sound bitter.

"Screw that. That first part he gave us no preparation. He beat me senseless. Literally! It was humiliating, and we learnt nothing from it.”

Ward sighed. His sides ached with the out-breath. "We learned that he could kill us with a pipe. That it wouldn't even be hard for him."

"I can see why everyone's terrified of him. He's unhinged." Kane prodded his head and winced. His hand came away slightly bloodied. "And six every morning? I don't remember when I last got up that early. Not even when I'm staying with Veronica."

"He's helping us. We need the training."

"No. He's helping you and I'm helping you." Kane saw the shock on Ward's face at the comment and adds, "And with our help, we're going to make sure that you win that duel. No question, alright?"

Ward didn’t meet his eye. He managed to get back to his feet, and picks up his bag, ignoring their protest at the weight. "Come on. We've got an early start tomorrow."

They said goodbye at the train station. Both were too tired for any enthusiasm, then Ward walked home. It felt like a long walk, after the day he had. He touched his palms with his fingers. A light touch sent pain up his arm. He had fallen on them hard.

It was going to be a hard three months, but he couldn't look forward to it being over. Afterwards, he might be dead.

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Ward woke up to a knocking at his front door. He realised he had fallen asleep on his couch as soon as he had made it home. His phone was in his hand, and as he tried to collect his thoughts it began to ring. As the screen flashed, he saw the three text messages waiting, and five missed calls.

He answered, and heard Charlotte’s voice in stereo, from the phone and from his front door. She sounded worried. "Are you at home?"

"Yeah. I'm- I'll let you in."

He got up, and almost fell over when he put weight on his legs. He stumbled to the front door and got it open to see Charlotte, who gave him a half-hearted smile. "Sorry, were you sleeping? Was just checking you survived your first day."

"Barely," Ward murmured. He leaned agains the hallway wall, and trying not to let his legs give way. He watched Iris try to keep the concern from her face. "Sleeping, yeah. I meant to text, but think I just-y'know- I sort of just fell asleep."

"Better get up to bed then. Have you eaten yet?" Ward had to think about that, then shook his head. Charlotte looked at him again then lowered her light disposition. She hugged him gently. "I'll figure out some food then. Is Kane as bad off as you?”

“Not sure. Think he’s better. He’s fitter.”

Food ended up being pizza, which Ward ate without complaint. He tried to make sure he was sitting up, tried to talk, but he just wanted to sleep. Charlotte seemed to recognise it and talked about small things to let him sit and rest. At last she couldn't help herself. "How long did he keep you there for?"

"Until six."

"No wonder you're tired."

Ward nodded. "And what happened to your hands? You fell?"

"He tripped me. Got my hands out in time though." He felt Charlotte tense beside him, and she asked what exactly they had done in training. Ward began to explain, but only got as far as the opening when Iris interrupted. There was fury on her face. "That's terrible. And stupid too. You can't learn just by being beaten about when you don't know how to defend yourself."

"I'll be sure to tell him that when I see him tomorrow." Ward glanced at the clock. It was 10:30 and he was suddenly certain that tomorrow was going to be even harder. He should be sleeping.

"So you're really going to be going back tomorrow?"

"I don't have a lot of people who can teach me how to use a sword."

"Tomorrow I might go and have a talk to him about how you train someone."

Charlotte let them sit in silence awhile, before asking, “Have you talked to Iris yet?” The slump in Ward’s shoulders was the only answer. Charlotte didn’t press it.

Ward wanted to argue, but he was too tired. He fell asleep soon after that, unaware of when Charlotte let herself out.

Ward woke up as someone called his name. They were telling him he needed to get up now for another big day. He blearily opened his eyes and thought he saw green eyes watching him. For a moment he thought they were Iris’s, then he remembered Iris was not there. He glanced at his alarm clock and saw the display of 5:40.

It was lucky he had woken. He hadd forgotten to set an alarm the night before, and needed to get to the old train workshop. He probably needed a shower, but there was no time. It was almost another full minute before brought himself to move. He tried to stretch. Everything was stiff, moving less than it should. Every movement hurt even when it didn't tug at a bruise. He got up anyway, now definitely going to be late.

The closer they got to the shed, the less Ward wanted to be there. The walk was a litany of small agonies. He had taken time to change his clothes, but this didn't make him clean, and his head was still fuzzy from tiredness. Standing near the door of the shed, Ward spotted Charlotte, looking worried.

“Are you sure you’re up for this? You look dead.”

“Thanks,” Ward said, voice rasping. “I need to do this.” Ward walked in, Charlotte trailing, looking grim.

It was nearly six thirty, but the only person in the room was Sam, who was sitting opposite the door. There was nothing near him save the pipe and the two swords. Ward stood, waiting for Sam to do something. Charlotte didn’t.

“This is inhumane, even for you,” she said, striding towards Sam.

"I didn't offer to train you,” Sam said, not standing up.

"I'm not here to learn. I'm here to make sure what you did yesterday isn't repeated.” Charlotte loomed over Sam, who was looking at her. He kept his voice low and calm. "Which part?"

"The part where you beat up two boys for no reason." Charlotte loomed over Sam

At last Sam stood up. For the first time, Ward noticed that Sam was shorter than him. It's such an odd thing, but Sam was looked small next to Charlotte. "Your little friends doesn't know pain."

"So what? You thought beating him up would help him?"

"He has to fight and kill Mark, and unless I can work miracles he's going to get hurt. Mark knows pain. He knows it better than anyone else. Ward needs to know pain too."

Charlotte glared at him. "If you push them too hard, then Ward will be too battered to fight. Teach him. Don't break him. People aren't as hard as you."

Sam shrugged. "If you want to teach him to fight your way, then he gets your lessons. If you hadn’t interfered, Mark would already be dead.” Charlotte stood still, eyes wide, then walked out. Finally Ward felt awake, glaring at Sam.

"Why did you say that to her?"

"Because it's true. Though really, it’s your girlfriend’s fault. If she had killed Mark when she had the chance, Charlotte’s confusion wouldn’t have mattered.”

"She couldn't bring herself to kill him, to become a murderer. That's nothing for her to be ashamed of."

"Yes, it is. And you better hope you don’t have that weakness."

The training went badly. Kane arrived at eight, complaining right from the start. He wasn’t embarrassed about being late, and every chance he got he made some snide comment about Sam. Ward dropped his sword as soon as ten hit, unable to struggle on anymore. Sam took the opportunity to punch him in the stomach. A warning about dropping your guard is how he explained it. Ward didn't care how it was justified anymore. He just wanted to go home.

Kane walked Ward home. Neither of them felt like speaking. Neither of them had the energy anyway. It was not until they're inside Ward's house that Kane finally broke the weary silence between them. "I hate him. I hate him more than anything. He's a brute, and we're not learning." Ward tried to make them both tea. It took awhile. His arms were so sore from holding the sword up.

"I think it will get better. We-I- need to learn quickly. I've got catching up to do." Ward looked at Kane and saw the despair already forming on his face. "Stop with the long face. Let's try for a week, and then maybe start judging."

"The bumps and bruises are hard. I'm going to need to explain them to Veronica at some point."

"Maybe just get good enough to not collect any more." Both of them smiled just a little.

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Charlotte called them the war council as a joke when they were organising the dinner, but the name stuck. Ward, Kane and Charlotte all gathered together in Ward's tiny little kitchen. Charlotte had to remain standing as there wasn't a third chair in the kitchen.

Charlotte had tried to invite Iris along, but Iris had sent a short text saying, ’No. Not interested.’ Charlotte had not told Ward about it. Charlotte was worried that Iris still did not want to see Ward, even after there was time to cool off, but there was nothing she could do.

"So, how has a week of sword practice gone?" Charlotte asked.

Ward and Kane talked over each other, cutting one another off, and everything they said is about every place they're sore, every way they were beaten. There was a lot to list, but they go in to a lot of detail. Nothing they say is good.

Charlotte tried to keep a cheery demeanour. "So it's hard going, but that probably means you're learning. Who knows, maybe you'll both come out of this with some muscle to show for it." Neither of them laugh at the joke. Charlotte, who moved on.

"So, Ward has to fight the duel, but he will have our help. I've spent some time reading over parts of the contracts, trying to find out what help we can get, and I even bought a couple of stories of other duels off Callum."

The boys just looked tired. Ward dutifully asked, "So have we learned anything that will help?"

Charlotte kept her voice cheerful. "Well, I looked in to what happens if you forfeit the duel beforehand, once the challenge has been accepted. We can probably write that off as a possibility I'm afraid."

"Are you sure?" Kane asked, trying not to sound too disappointed.

"If he forfeits, then his opponent is allowed the opportunity to perform an execution. The same if he yields at any point during the duel. The stories seem to suggest that it is the honourable thing to accept a surrender with no penalty, but I doubt Mark would be honourable about it."

There was a slight murmuring of agreement. "So, with that looked in to, we can focus entirely on making sure Ward wins. So let's talk about weapons."

"I was wondering about that," Kane said, "Swords to fight with instead of guns?"

Charlotte nods. "Swords instead of guns. Guns don't always work in the Other, and being relatively new, there are far fewer magical guns floating around than there are magical swords. That's, ah, actually pretty important. In almost every duel, the contestants will use a personal sword, and often a magical one. You cannot use any weapon you have bought, and it is poor form if it is a sword given to you."

"Do we care about poor form?" Kane interrupted. "Who cares what the fae say about the duel afterwards, as long as we win."

"Not the form, but the substance. I'd guess Mark knows a bit about duels. And he has some of, uh, that lady's papers. He might turn up to fight with a magical sword. It might be able to slice clean through a more conventionally made one. So we need to find a magic sword."

"I thought I just turned up and fought him?"

Charlotte shook her head. "This is the Other, where all kinds of unique and difficult creatures live. The rules, and the customs are more complicated than that."

Nobody else spoke, so Charlotte continued, her voice squeaking a little bit now. “A final thing to note is the question of whether we should explore Ward's own talent, see if we can find a way to make use of it."

“I already agreed that glamours are banned though.” Ward said. Charlotte saw the hunger in his eyes though at the mention of learning more about glamours. It's the first time since the challenge she's seen him excited about doing something.

Charlotte nodded. “I hate to suggest it, but that zombie who patched you up seems the best person to talk to first. He’s easy to find just around uni. I’ll try and find someone more suitable from Callum though.”

"Sounds good," Ward said.

Charlotte approached the burnt out shell of the ghost's rest, and eased herself through the door. The building's facade was mostly fine, but the roof was exploded, beams splintered, and tin melted. With full daylight pouring in, the bar looked dulled. Charlotte wondered how much of it was damage, and how much was just seeing the bar without the dim red-tinted lighting that had always illuminated the place.

Charlotte walked down through the tiered seating and past the bar itself. Open like this, the theatre shape was more obvious, with the bar the stage. The door to stage right was boarded up. Charlotte went instead to the door on stage left, and knocked. She waited so long she was considering opening it when it was pulled inwards, and Baror's face was pushed out towards her. Seeing Charlotte, Baror frowned, then closed the door in her face. After a few more minutes, the door opened, and Callum stepped out, followed by Baror. Baror got out a drink for Callum and a drink for Charlotte. They looked similar, but were from different bottles. Charlotte ignored the drink that was offered to her, but greeted Callum warmly.

"It's always good to see one of my best customers come in," Callum said, eyes twinkling slightly. Charlotte could see the bags under them though. "I've barely ever come here,” she said.

"Ever since my place was so impressively burst we have had a certain lack of business, even of the information kind. Of course, Sam staying in town is hardly helping matters. Everyone's running to the hills, retreating into their own little worlds."

"Always a problem for a bartender. Though I don't think the new decor suits the place."

Callum nodded, tapping his wooden pen on the table in front of him. "You're right of course. Still, the rebuilding will take time, and cost money."

"You plan to rebuild it?"

"Oh yes. I was already looking in to renovating. This just makes them a little more urgent."

Charlotte nodded. "But you are still open for business?"

"As long as that business is information, not drinks and a night out. Are you looking to buy or sell today?"

"I'd like to buy, or trade. We need help with the duel. Someone who can help us gain a leg up. Particularly if there’s any wizards…”

Callum shook his head, that twinkle still in his eyes. "I'm not putting you in contact with any wizards. The one who lives near here is insular to the extreme. They wouldn’t help you if I did tell you where to find them.”

"If, on the other hand, you wanted to make a faebond, I know several fae who..." He trailed off as Charlotte shook her head. “I asked Ward. He won't make a faebond. He said Iris wouldn’t approve.”

"This is Ward's life. You're not telling me that his girlfriend is going to stop him using every resource he can get to keep it?”

Seeing Callum shocked is a fun little moment. It happened rarely enough. “They haven’t even talked since the duel was made. But Ward was adamant when I suggested it. We’re not letting any fae help us out.”

Callum taps the pen in to the palm of his hand as he thinks. "Well that's going to change things some. I suppose I could give you a mortal contact if you like.”

“I was actually going to look for the professor,” Charlotte said, then sighed. “If he was willing to see me.”

“I’m sure I can put in a good word with him for the right price.” Callum grinned, pen stopping its motions to rest against Callum’s notepad. “Now what do you have to trade me?”

Charlotte tried to study him. She had once said he was nearly a fae in his trickery, and remembered that now. "I have a song, Dessa's song, if you want it."

Callum raised both an eyebrow at her. "Can you really give that to me?"

"I know the melody, and can sing it passably."

"But could you record it, or write it down? Could you teach it to me so that I too would remember it?"

"I-I think so."

Callum looked skeptical. "No, I don't think that would quite do as a trade. How about something smaller. A single fact that I want to know."

Now Charlotte raised an eyebrow, waiting for him to continue. "I want to know where the duel will take place."

"Why? What are you going to do?"

"That will certainly cost extra. Just the place. If you don't know it, then you can tell me later, when you do. But I would have the promise of that knowledge now."

Charlotte took a sip of her drink while she thought, then another. "Fine. The location in exchange for an introduction to the professor.”

As soon as she had said fine, Callum had been writing, putting down an address and the words, ‘Remember our visit to Brisbane’. It had been almost too easy this time. Charlotte distrusted it, but still, the deal was done, and she had what she wanted.

Charlotte got up to go, leaving her mostly full drink, and hoisting her backpack on to her shoulder. As she began to walk away though, Callum said, "I would remember who Mark has made an enemy of if I were you. He's made quite a few, and most would be willing to help you."

She turned back. "I thought he made an enemy of you." Callum laughed then, and the smile he showed her seemed more casual than normal. "Too right you are. And if he's still alive after the duel, I'm thinking I might let Baror challenge him."

Charlotte returned the smile more weakly, then was gone, off to try and convince the professor to help them.

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"Alright," Sam said, "now you aren’t as weak, it's time we worked on the largest edge that I can give you in this fight."

The three of them stood in the center of the old workshop. Kane and Ward were balancing on the tracks that still ran through, while Sam paced before them. He had made them stand to attention when he talked, the pipe ready if either of them slouched. This had been a new rule today, and Kane had run afoul of it a dozen times already.

"In three months though, you will be mediocre swordsmen. Mark has been a faebond for six years. He will have learned how to use a sword, and Mark learns things fast, even if he is lazy and disobedient.”

Sam turned to glare at both of them, as if daring them to show any cheer at the assessment. Not that Ward was feeling any cheer. "In the next three months, he will take up practicing again. He will not work as hard as you, because he will know he doesn't need to. His talent allows him to know how a master does something from inside.”

Sam glanced from one to the other. For the first time since Ward had seen him, he thought he saw a faint trace of worry. "What he will not have is a companion to learn with, and we are going to take full advantage of it. I am going to help the two of you connect your souls.”

He paused, as if waiting for a reaction, but Ward and Kane just stood there, slightly confused. Sam sighed. "Get down from there, come close to me, and hold hands."

Ward began to object, but Kane rolled his eyes and grabbed Ward's hand, leading him towards Sam. "This good enough, for this soul merge, or whatever?"

Sam frowned, but nodded. He placed a hand in the centre of each of their chests. They stood like this for several seconds, then Sam said, "Try breathing together. Create common traits. It should make it easier."

Ward started to listen to Kane's breathing, and tried to match the in and the out. It was hard to do. Kane was trying to do the same. Eventually, they settled in to a rhythm. It was meditative. Ward became aware of the warmth of the hand on his chest. Kane's breath caught for just a second, but then he steadied it again. Slowly, Sam drew his hands to the respective shoulders, then down to the held hands.

As Sam's hands came together, Ward felt for an instant the largest sensation he had ever experienced. It was gone in a flash, too quick to even begin to understand it, and then he was two.

Sam watched them, and Ward tried not to think about being two people. No, he wasn't two people. He could still feel himself, his hands, his feet. He could see Sam once, and that was through his eyes. Yet at the same time, some sense he never knew was there knew exactly where Kane was. He could even feel something of Kane. Perhaps these were thoughts. But no, that wasn't quite right either. This was closer than thoughts.

They were breathing in time now. Ward knew it even without listening, without thinking about it. They glanced at each other, and then both smiled, before looking back at Sam. "Well this is interesting," Ward said, and Kane spoke in unison. Of course he had. They were together now.

Sam was frowning at them though. "Well the connection obviously works. Let go of each other's hands and see if it stays."

They released at almost the same time. Ward pulled away slightly faster, and a pang of unease went through him at that. Letting go didn't change anything else though. This togetherness wasn't about being physically close.

"So how does this help us?" they both asked at the same time. Sam's frown deepened. "It doesn't if the mirroring continues. Your souls are touching, not merging. Make sure you keep yourselves clear from each other. Kane, try going for a walk while Ward, you hold still."

Ward forced himself to stay still as his companion walked around, and that sense of unease returned. He shuffled his feet slightly, to try and make that unease go away. Kane was walking, so he should be too.

Then all of a sudden he was just Ward again, and Kane was a person on the far side of the room, and that sense of connection was gone. Kane tripped over his own feet, and didn't move from where he lay. Ward threw up.

It was twenty minutes both of them were well enough that Sam got angry at their failure. He had dragged them both to one of the walls and propped them against it. "So the connection was made easily enough. What happened to it?"

Ward just looked at Kane, too embarrassed by everything that he had felt in that bond to speak. Kane spoke. "There was a- it- when I was- as I was moving. It felt wrong. We were so close, but we weren't the same. And we should have..." he trailed off. He glanced at Ward. "I'm sorry I don't mean- I'm not mocking. You stutter when you're, when you're nervous. Think I got- think I picked it up. For a bit."

Ward just slouched against the wall and stared at him. Sam said, "Well, that is bad. I thought if I made the link it would work, but looks like we need to work on learning this as well. We're going to have to add an hour a day to try and practice in.” Ward and Kane groan in unison, but was Ward who asks, "Do we really need to learn it? I can't see how it would be useful."

Sam just stared at him, until Ward asked, "I mean, it's a cool bit of magic, but it's not as useful as glamouring, or-or, conjuring fire, or something like that.”

"This is one of the most important and powerful things you can learn. If you can learn to distinguish yourselves while you were doing it."

"That's not too hard," Ward said. "I could still tell there were two of me. Us."

The rest of the morning was spent trying to make the same connection while remaining separate enough to think, and act alone. By ten, both of them were feeling nauseous and disoriented. Some links were too weak and failed almost instantly. Others left both of them acting identically. One time, Ward passed out because he matched his motions too closely to Kane's when their bodies were not identical.

Sam seemed angry about the results. He cursed them again and again. Every time they failed, Sam seemed astounded that they could not make it work. His astonishment turned back in to anger, and when the day was over, Sam threw down his pipe, before stomping out.

Ward crawled over to where his bag was, saying, "Well that was the day from hell."

Kane nodded. "It was-yeah- a complete nightmare."

Ward watched him. Kane didn't even seem to have noticed the stammer. He was helping himself to some water. "You need to get to class now, don't you?" Kane asked. Ward nodded, and Kane nodded just slightly after him. Ward managed to lever himself up, and saw that Kane still wasn't moving. "Don't you have work?"

"In a bit. I'm just gonna sit for a while. See you tomorrow."

Ward walked out, still feeling some trace of that connection they had been trying to make. There were details to it though, and sunlight helped bring him back to himself, as he hurried up towards the university.

In class, he completely ignored the lecturer. Instead he tried to slowly pull apart what had been going on with that magic. He knew that every time he tried to focus on what he was doing with magic, it disrupted it, but now, afterwards, he needed to understand. He jotted a few things down, but every time he read over them, deleted the whole lot and started again.

There was another sensation to think of too. The moment of connection, which Sam had made for them every time had been vast. Ward guessed that Sam was, for an instant, part of the connection, but the moment was so short, and the sensation so massive, it was hard to understand.

Ward gave up on that, and spent the rest of the lecture trying to glamour objects on the teacher's desk, to stop him from finding them. He was more successful than normal, and that at least made him feel like he was making some progress. Not that it would matter, since he was not allowed to use glamours. He really needed to learn some other magic, something useful, before the duel.

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That night, Ward dreamed of flying. He was in the sky, wearing armour made of a golden light, with flaming wings keeping him aloft. He felt a host of others around him, as he watched the world below. He dove towards it, and then found himself jolting awake, the sensation of falling causing him to try and catch himself.

Ward sat there, alone in his bed, for the rest of the night thinking about that moment, trying to hold on to every fragment of it. That hadn't been a dream, he was sure. That had been important, and he dared not sleep unless he lost the sense of it. He got up at five, and beat even Sam to the train shed.

Sam looked surprised at seeing him. He stalked in, and picked up his metal pipe from where he had thrown it. "You're here early. I haven’t pushed you enough?"

Ward flexed his fingers. They still hurt from the impact of the pipe now more than a week ago. "I couldn't sleep. I was- You formed a bond with us, just for a second. When you joined us together."

Sam narrowed his eyes. "What do you mean?"

"I dreamt last night of flying on wings of fire. I felt myself surrounded by so many others who were all so close to me. And when you joined us it was- there was a moment where I felt so alone, so incredibly alone."

The pipe fell from Sam's hand, the noise echoing through the room. He stalked up to Ward, and Ward took a step back. Sam kept coming until Ward was pushed back against a wall. "What I am trying to give you is special. You are lucky for it. Use it to pry and I will stop helping, and you will certainly die.”

He backed away, and for the first time in their training, Sam pulled out a cigarette and lit it, Ward couldn't see with what. He inhaled deeply.

"Doesn't someone who lives as long as you worry about cancer?"

"Boy, you have no idea how hard it would be to kill me."

Ward paused, but he still had one more thing he needed to ask. "Have you ever helped people connect their souls before?"

Sam didn't answer, so Ward continued, "Because if you're, you know, learning as we go. Maybe we should try and work it out together, rather than you just getting frustrated.

Sam didn't answer. He just walked out. He still wasn't back when Kane arrived at six thirty, and by eight, Kane was sick of waiting, and managed to drag Ward away. Ward didn't mention his dream to Kane. Ward didn't know what he would say about it. They found somewhere to eat breakfast, and Kane spent most of it saying how lucky they were that they had a day off, how nice it was to relax, and to collect no more bruises.

"Have you had to try and explain the bruises to Veronica yet?"

Kane shook his head. "She's busy, and now I'm busy too. We had lunch the other day, but haven't seen much of each other. Just had to try not to wince when she hugged me." Kane shrugged. "Knowing her, she would have misinterpreted that anyway."

Having eaten, and still having nothing else to do, they decided to play a game of chess. It had been weeks since they had had the time to play. They set the board up quickly, and Kane took the first move. The game flowed faster than normal, both of them thinking faster on their feet. Despite the quick moves though, the game was a long one. Both players manoeuvred masterfully around each other's pieces, and it wasn't until Kane set off a long chain of pieces being taken that the game was able to draw to a close. Ward won. The board had been so perfectly set, that the first aggressor was guaranteed to lose.

"Close game," Ward said. His remaining rook clicked in to place, ending it at last. "You should have been more patient though."

"That game was so dull. Almost an hour of carefully moving pieces so that nothing happens. No thanks."

Kane got up and stretched himself out. "Well, that was fun and all, but I should probably be off. We going to show up tomorrow as well?" Ward nodded after only a moment's hesitation.

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Professor Welkins was surprisingly hard to track down. Having seen him as a doctor, Charlotte had assumed he would be part of the medicine faculty, which he was, but he was isolated over with the two other psychiatrists. That specialty she hadn't expected.

Having confirmed that the room in front of her was the office, Charlotte knocked on the professor's door, holding her breath. She waited several seconds, and was turning to leave when the door opened just a crack. The professor blinked at his guest, then opened the door and quickly ushered them in to a small room, outfitted with the cheap plastic furniture found in offices everywhere. The one furnishing exception was a leather-covered swivel chair behind the desk, that the professor lowered himself in to.

"Good day miss. What compelled you to come see me?” Charlotte opened her mouth to respond, but the professor continued, "And I trust you will be respecting me here where you have sought me out, unlike last time where you rather callously disregarded me.”

Charlotte carefully sat in the cheap plastic chair on her side of the desk, watching the zombie, suppressing her own repugnance. He looked like a plump middle aged man, with brown hair combed down, though starting to escape, and glasses that screamed professor even louder than his clothes. Most people would see nothing else, and Charlotte wasn't sure how she would describe the sense of him. Maybe it was a slight difference in how he moved, or some pallor to his skin.

Charlotte realised she had been staring, and brought herself back to the present. “I’m sorry for how you were treated last time. It wasn’t a good time all around.”

The professor nodded. He did not seem offended, but still added, “I’m not as lucky as you are. I can’t have my throat cut and recover.”

Charlotte ignored the comment and pressed on. “I wanted to come see you, because one of my friends is in trouble. I thought you could help him.”

The professor turned on a small electric kettle, then waited, Charlotte waited too, until the professor prompted, “Continue.”

“Oh, I thought we were waiting.”

“You can talk while I make tea. Now what trouble, and which friend?”

“Do you remember the boy who helped you up? He has challenged Mark, the one who took you hostage, to a duel. Full official Fae duelling. With swords and any magic save glamours.”

The professor frowned, pressing a thumb to pursed lips. “That is a very serious problem. I wish him all the best. Beyond that though, you should find him a swordmaster, not a university professor.”

The kettle boiled, and Charlotte watched the professor pour water in to a mug, before dropping a teabag in. “It isn’t quite that simple. Ward needs to learn magic. Anything you could teach him would give him such an amazing edge in the fight. It would be an incredible help.”

“Would it indeed?” The professor slurped his tea. “Well, in that circumstance, why did the young man not come down himself? Surely he could have saved you the trip.”

“He’s busy, learning how to use a sword. I wanted to sound you out on it first before troubling him.”

“And you have no problems working with me?”

The professor’s eyes scrutinised Charlotte, who met his gaze. “I don’t like what you are. You and I are nothing alike. But Ward needs your help. And by what I have seen, you act like a nice person.”

“Well what more could any of us hope to do.”

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It had been four days since Sam had appeared. Ward was there every morning waiting. After the second, Kane had told Ward to call him if Sam showed up, and gone back to bed. Ward had spent two mornings alone, uncertainly swinging one of the swords that had been left there, just in case he would learn anything. The sword was heavy, but apart from feeling more used to the weight, Ward wasn't sure if there was any benefit at all.

After another frustrating four hours of waiting, Ward headed towards the university. He didn't have any classes to attend, but Charlotte had told him to meet the professor for possible magical training. It put a spring in Ward’s step as he hurried towards the professor’s room.

He knocked on the professor's door very lightly and waited for several minutes before knocking again, this time only slightly harder. The door was opened only a few seconds later, the professor looking slightly annoyed, but on seeing Ward his face broke in to a grin. "Glad you came. Come in. I'll make tea."

As Ward sat down, the professor poured water from an electric kettle in to two mugs. “Do you like tea? I’m afraid it’s just cheap tea, no milk, though I have some sugar.” Ward accepted his cup of tea, and took a sip, scalding his tongue. “It’s nice. I do. I mean, thank you.”

The professor blew on his own tea, then sat it down to cool without taking a sip. “Now, let’s get to it. What can I do for you?”

“Well, I wanted to learn magic…” Ward trailed off, unsure what else he should say.

“Of course, learn magic. Sounds simple enough. But! What magic? How magic? All the important details. Do you have any of them?”

Ward shook his head, no longer happy about being here. “No. No, I was hoping you knew something.”

“Do you have any natural talents that we can work on?”

Ward stared at his tea. “I can glamour. A little. No glamours in the duel though. Which is good. I can’t even see through glamours.”

“What do you mean? You lose track of things you glamour?” the professor said, lips pursing as he concentrated.

Ward shook his head. “Anything else. Like, Other things. I can’t see them. Or I see them as something normal. Like Charlotte. I can’t see how she looks. Really looks. Or you.”

The professor took a careful sip of his tea. “What do you think I look like then? Don’t panic. I won’t be offended, just speak honestly.”

“Like Charlotte must look. She’s dead too, so you must have some signs of it.”

The professor’s mouth quirked up at the side. “An interesting thought, but no. I have a body that is as fully functional as yours, and appear, most likely, exactly as you yourself see me. Being a zombie is not about an affliction of the flesh.”

Ward was quiet, trying to puzzle it out. A zombie, the name must be connected, meant the walking dead. Yet the professor looked alive, and perfectly healthy, if a little too heavy. Yes Charlotte and Iris had both spoken of him with disdain, as if he were less than human. His attempts to unravel this were interrupted by the professor.

“Before we continue, I was wondering if you could describe what you see in these couple of images for me?"

The professor opened up a drawer, not waiting for Ward to respond, and drew out a photo that he placed on the desk in front of Ward. Ward stared at it for a few seconds. "It's a woman in a silver dress."

The professor whisked the photo away and replaced it with another. "That one's Baror in his gold-coloured suit."

And again and again, the photo was taken away and replaced. "That's a snake of some kind? I'm not familiar with snakes... Is that a wolf?... That's the transient building... that's a photo of Sydney harbour with, a, uh, bird near the sun?"

It took under a minute to run through the photos before they were tucked away again. Ward's cheeks were burning. He was sure there had been more to the photos that he simply hadn't caught. Even if it was pinned down by a camera he apparently still couldn't see the Other.

"So that test was pretty clear. You really won't be able to see through any glamours, no matter what they are. Not a great start, but at least we know your limitations from the beginning.”

Ward nodded mutely, and the professor said, "Chin up there. It's fine to have a weakness, now let us explore your strength. You can create glamours, can't you?"

Ward nodded, but frowned. “Not very well. They can’t be used in the duel anyway.”

"Possibly, but there are often little side tricks to the talents people have." The professor held up a book. "I want you to make me unable to read this book. Do you think you can do that?"

Ward shook his head. "I can't force things out of people's attention."

"Then we'll start with the book on the table in front of me. When you think you've got it, pick the book up. I'll stop you if I can still remember it."

"What's the point of this?"

“I need to understand your talent. What you can and can’t do. That is how we start learning, by trying things, and seeing what works, and most importantly what we need to work on. Now come on, let’s try this out.”

Ward began trying to concentrate on the book, trying to force it to be unnoticeable. He began muttering under his breath the words he associated with vanishing something. The professor calmly opened up a different book, and began reading it. Ward kept glancing at the clock, watching time slip by as he wavered in an out of certainty. At three minutes he wondered if the professor was going to comment at any point. At five minutes he finally made a grab for the book.

The professor reached out at the same time, and pushed his hand away. "Try it again when you're ready."

Another minute later, Ward tried it again. The professor deflected his hand again, and then when he tried to grab it swiftly fifteen seconds later, the professor picked up the book, and put it away. Ward slumped in his chair. "Yeah. Sorry. I was a complete failure."

"Not at all. Certainly not a full success, but think about what I did to stop you.”

Ward sat there for a bit as the professor began typing. "You- you deflected my hand the first two times, but didn't touch the book."

“Quite so. What does this tell you?"

"That you weren't able to observe the book properly? But, but because you were still paying attention to me, you were able to stop me."

"And then you got flustered and your concentration slipped."

"But I thought most people involved in the Other can see through glamours."

“Yes, and no. Glamours are a way of imposing your will on someone else’s perception. The Other does this naturally, unconsciously. With you, it is deliberate, and so effort comes in to it. I believe you could hide anything from anyone if you worked hard enough at that skill.

Ward nodded slowly. "Yeah. I think, I think I have done that before. But I always thought it was something different. Like I was actually making them invisible to everyone but me."

"It's the same trick. It’s an interesting talent you have there. And your difficulties with the Other are rather fascinating.”

“Thanks.”

The professor chuckled. “I know it’s not what you want to hear, but it is rather unprecedented. It could lead to learning a lot more about the Other.”

“Do you actually research the other?” Ward asked, sitting up a little straighter.

The professor smiled, pleased at the interest. “When I can. It’s both a wonderful and a terrible topic to explore. Every time you learn some rule about it, there’s an exception or contradiction. Yet, if it could be explained, understood, it would be amazing. And you do get to see things that are, quite literally, impossible.”

“Not really literally impossible. They do exist.”

The professor glanced at his clock. “I would love to continue this discussion, but my time is a touch limited. I would like to try a few other major talents before I depart.”

They spent the almost an hour trying various different techniques to see if Ward could use any other talents. Stepping off chairs and not falling, conjuring flame, or cooling water. Not one yielded any result for Ward. The worst was the attempt at symbolic magic, towards the end. The professor drew several symbols while explaining what they did, and Ward concentrated on them, trying to copy them. The symbols swam in front of his eyes, but he tried to focus through that. A splitting headache

“Unfortunately I have a class to teach now, otherwise I would love to sit here and discuss literal possibility and the Other. You should come back though. We can try you at other possible talents. Maybe even continue our discussion. And of course, I can try and help you strengthen your glamours. What do you say?”

“I can come by tomorrow if you want? Similar time?”

“Excellent, I look forward to it.”

Charlotte woke to a call ringing loudly in her room. She was never far from consciousness anyway, but it was not a great way to wake up. She looked at her phone, and saw an unknown number on the screen. She punched the answer button and managed to say, "ullo?"

"Hey, Charlotte. Sorry to call you early on a Sunday morning, but I was hoping you could help me with something. A return of favour as it were.” Charlotte recognised the rolling voice of the professor, and tried to gather her thoughts up.

“How’d you get my number?”

“I asked Callum for it, I hope that’s alright?”

Charlotte had never given her number to Callum, and had no idea how he had it. Sometimes it was easy to forget that as much as Callum knew facts about other people, there were certainly plenty of facts Callum knew about her.

"S'fine," she said, stifling a yawn, and sitting up to try and feel more awake. "What's up?"

“I have been helping out a young man called Isaac. Poor soul has a rather unique talent, but can’t really control it. I was wondering if you, and particularly, Ward, were able to go and see him. He was having a bit of a panic today.”

Charlotte got out of bed and walked to the kitchen. “Uh, yeah I guess we can help? What’s the problem?”

“The poor boy has managed to trap a car in his apartment.”

Charlotte paused, fridge door open, bottle of juice half-raised towards her mouth. “A what?”

The professor sounded sad. “I promise it will be explained. But he is in a bit of bother. His landlord is coming over, an inspection of the property. Needless to say the landlord would not be pleased by the car. If you could head over right now and try and find a solution, that would be marvellous. The landlord comes by in three hours.”

“What do you expect me to do? It’s not like I’m some kind of wizard.” Charlotte slowly placed the juice on the bench top.”

“I don’t really know. But if you could do anything to help, that would be fantastic.”

Charlotte rubbed her face. This should not be the problem that faced you first thing on a Sunday morning. This kind of problem was not one that you should have to face when you were awake. “Fine. Tell me where to go and I’ll see what I can do to help.”

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Charlotte pressed the buzzer for apartment 12, with Ward standing nervously behind her. Kane hadn't answered his phone, so it was just the two of them. They had rushed over to this person’a apartment, someone called Isaac. A nervous voice chimed out of the intercom, asking who it was. Charlotte mentioned the professor and the two of them were buzzed up.

The door to number twelve was slightly open, and swung open when Charlotte knocked. They could see in to the apartment, a tiny space, with the bathroom right to the left, and then a combined room with a kitchen on one side and a bed on the other. All other details were ignored to focus on the volkswagon in the middle of the room. Ward gaped. Charlotte frowned.

A voice called out. “Come in. As you can see, I have a bit of a problem here.”

As Charlotte and Ward entered the room, Charlotte began to notice some of the other factors. Every surface in the room was covered in clutter. Collections of novelty mugs sat next to a pile of hats, and some yarn on a desk that was overflowing with assorted pens, pencils and markers. On the floor were piles of newspapers, several milk crates that had been filled with bottles and cans, and so much miscellany Charlotte struggled to identify it all. The bed was the only clear spot. The only thing on the bed were the sheets, two pillows, and a man with scraggly black hair, a gloomy expression, and a blindfold on.

Charlotte stopped on the other side of the car. “Hello? Are you Isaac?”

The man turned his head, and nodded. “Yeah. Nice to meet you…?”

“Charlotte. And I’ve got my friend Ward along as well.”

Ward stammered hello, and Isaac nodded in his direction. “Sorry about the clutter. It comes naturally with being me these days.” The man hung his head. “I’d get up and shake your hand, but I’m afraid I might steal your watch.”

Charlotte walked around the car. “I’m not wearing one. Why would you steal it though?”

Isaac swept his arms out, gesturing towards the whole room. “All this stuff, stuff I’ve stolen. I’ve got a problem, you see? It’s like kleptomania. Only, well, you’re from the professor. I don’t need to actually take stuff. If I can figure out a way to take something, then when I get home, it’s turned up in my bag, or on my desk, or something.” Isaac’s voice had a touch of mania, and Charlotte felt immediate sympathy for the man. “So you’ve blindfolded yourself so you can’t steal anything?”

Isaac nodded, then let his chin just sink to his chest. “And the car. That I can’t explain, but it’s linked to this wretched curse and I have no damn idea how it got in here, let alone how to get it out.”

Charlotte walked around the car, and sat on the edge of the bed. “So what then?”

Ward was standing, just gawping at the room. Isaac pointed his face in Charlotte’s direction. “The landlord shows up, and I get kicked out. Then the car is somebody else’s problem.” The despair in his voice spoke to Charlotte, and she reached out a hand to Isaac, to pat his shoulder, offer comfort. She drew her cold hand back before it touched though.

“We can clean the place up.” The suggestion came from Ward. “It wouldn’t be that hard. We can move stuff out quick enough.”

Isaac snorted. “Oh yes. And that would do a lot of good. What about the car? Just move that out?”

Charlotte looked at Ward too, skeptical. “It’s not like we can just throw a sheet over it and hope the landlord doesn’t notice.”

Ward opened his mouth, stammered thrice, then closed it again. “Get ahold of Kane? He said he worked at a hardware store once. Maybe he’d have some idea how to dissemble the car?”

It was a bad idea, an idea almost guaranteed not to work, but Charlotte had no better suggestion. She looked at Isaac. “We may as well start with that while we figure things out. Who knows, maybe the professor will think of something else and help out?”

Isaac looked uncertain, face turning as the different voices spoke. “Well, maybe…”

“You’ll need to take the blindfold off though, if you’re going to help out,” Charlotte said. Isaac raised his hand, then hesitated. “But what if I steal something.”

“We’ll understand you didn’t mean it,” Charlotte said. “It’s not like you can face your landlord like that anyway. Ward, can you call Kane?”

Ward walked out to call Kane. Isaac slowly reached up, then peeled back his blindfold, eyes still closed under it. Isaac opened one eye slowly, as if waiting for something dreadful to happen. He saw Charlotte and his other eye shot open and Isaac sat straight, suddenly fully alert, before relaxing a bit.

“Sorry. I didn’t mean to react to… um…to…”

“To my appearance? Don’t worry about it. It is a bit strange. Now let’s get cleaning.”

Ward leaned on the corridor wall just outside the apartment, listening to Kane’s phone ring out again. On the third dial, Kane picked up. His voice was clipped, and irritated. “Yes? What now?”

“Uh, hey, I was wondering if you could help us out with something?”

“Little busy now Ward. Trying to… you’re doing something right now? Call me when you’re done. I’ve found something. Just call me later, okay?”

“This guy is in trouble, and if we don’t help him out-“

“If I don’t help him, I’m sure you’ll do it. Later Ward, I’ve got my own problems right now.” Kane hung up. Ward walked back in to the flat, despondent. “Kane isn’t going to help. Sorry. He sounded annoyed.”

Charlotte stopped moving items from the desk in to the milk crate and sighed. “Well, I guess we’ll just have to try and think of another solution while we work.”

The room looked far worse than it was. It took only half an hour to tidy all the various items in to containers. At first, they forced boxes and bags of stuff in to cupboards, but there simply was not enough space. After finding that the car doors opened, Ward suggested putting the extra bags in the boot or the back of the car, and the other two agreed. The car needed to be moved anyway, so there was no harm in putting anything in there.

As they were nearing an end to the cleaning Charlotte had finally come to accept the best course of action. She did not like the idea, but when you needed help, sometimes you just needed to turn to whatever help might be on offer. She told Ward her plan first, and while Ward was not happy with it, he had no better plan. Charlotte told Isaac that she was going out to see Callum, and see if they could buy his help in disposing of the car.

Charlotte left, and soon after, Issac and Ward finished. Ward sat on the stool at the kitchen bench, while Isaac sat back on the bed, staring despondently at the car. The silence got awkward too quickly. Ward licked his lips, readying the first thought that came to mind. “So what, when your landlord does arrive, are you, how are you going to stop yourself with the stealing of things?”

Isaac looked even more dejected. "I hadn't really thought. I mean, there's a car in my flat. Kind of have to worry about that first."

"I'm sure Charlotte will deal with that. She does that. You give her some problem and she’ll work it out for you if you let her.”

"She really seems to put her neck out for people."

Ward nodded, "But she might not think of the stealing things. Like you said, she's got a whole car to worry about."

"Well, I suppose I could try blurring my vision somehow,” Isaac said, uncertain.

"That... could work. Any idea how to partially blind yourself?"

"Not really. I guess we could check the internet?"

"No. That couldn’t end well." Ward said that and then sat still. There was nothing else he had to say, so he simply sat and felt inadequate. Discomforting and uncomfortable, waiting for someone else to come back and solve the situation, or offer sympathy that seemed to work. With Just Ward though, he sat and was quiet.

Ward was still sitting there when the buzzer rang. Isaac got up and punched the intercom. "Hey, you back already?"

The voice that came back was not Charlotte. "Mr Walketer, yes. I am here for your inspection as we agreed. Would you mind letting me in?"

Isaac paused, and looked at Ward in a panic. He mouthed a question at Ward who didn't quite catch it. Ward shrugged. The man on the other end of the speaker spoke again. "Mr Walketer, I said would you please let me in?"

Isaac pressed the button, then immediately turned to Ward, eyes wide. "I am so screwed. Oh god, what if they arrest me for all this."

Ward was almost equally wide eyed. The worst scenario, and no plan. Ward looked around. An idea, small as a whisper came to him. Ward thought he saw green eyes in the car as his head whipped back around. Ward said. "I'm going to try my best to get you out of this, but you'll just have to trust me."

"But there's no way he won't notice."

"Just act like everything is normal, okay? Don't mention the car. Don't think about it. It could all still work out."

There was a knock on the apartment door, and Isaac walked slowly over, watching Ward clamber awkwardly on to the roof of the car. Isaac mouthed something else at Ward who was ignoring him, then with a final shrug opened the door.

Ward could see an old man with a much wrinkled smile from his perch, but tried to ignore that, instead trying to organise his own mind. Isaac led the man back in to the apartment, and the old man looked at it, appraising the changes to the place. There was a definite frown on his face as he surveyed what had become of the place, and Isaac looked like he wanted to run out the door and never come back, so dejected, so worried.

"Well," the man said, "It's a little cramped in here isn't it. Time to do some cleaning too."

Isaac stared at Ward, who waved his hands in a no gesture. The old man's frown increased, and Ward tried to sit completely still on top of the car. Isaac seemed to get the message, and stammered, "Y-yeah. It's a little cramped I know. I was planning on getting rid of some of it but just haven't found the time to take it out yet."

"Well, I hear moving out is always a good time to get some cleaning done."

Isaac went white, and the old man sniggered. "Oh I don't mean that. Just having some fun with you. You're a good one for someone so young. Never any noise complaints about you. Now how about a cup of tea while we discuss rates for a new lease, if you're wanting to stay."

Ward tried to attract Isaac's eye, and shake his head, but he couldn't manage it. Ward was holding his breath now, face turning red under the strain. Both of them watched as the man squeezed past the car to reach a chair, and sat waiting for a cup of tea.

Isaac finally started to move again, making tea hastily and clumsily, and at one point pulling out a third mug which he had to put back, but then got out again when he broke the first one.

As Isaac squeezed over to the man, the man frowned. "You know sometimes I think my old eyes play tricks on me." He took his glasses off and cleaned them, then picked them up again and said, "Now where were we."

The old man began to list all the various changes that were being offered in the new lease. There was an adjustment to the utilities, a number of options for more or less time, and a note about a new rule restricting bringing pets in to apartments even for only short periods. Isaac nodded, trying to get through it quickly. Isaac kept glancing at Ward, and each time he did, Ward saw the old man glance up as well. He wanted to tell Isaac to stop it, but he wouldn't risk speaking. By now Ward’s eyes were bulging slightly. Ward risked five sharp breaths in.

At last, the old man offered Isaac a pen, and he took it and signed a six month lease without reading a word of the agreement. The land lord got up, shook Isaac's hand, which he referred to as the real way to agree between two men, and then headed towards the door. As he was squeezing past the car again though, he noticed the wooden box, which was still sitting on the table. "Hm? What's this?"

"Oh, just a box a friend gave me, nothing special at all."

"On the contrary, the carving on this is exquisite. And it's elm too. Quite rare to find this kind of thing in Australia." He opened it up and looked inside. He frowned before closing it, and swayed where he stood. He came to rest sitting on the car bonnet. "I'm sorry, I don't know what came over me."

Ward risked extending his focus to the box, and Isaac almost lifted the old man up. "Oh, just my decorating again." With a little push from Isaac, the man was past the car. "Oh yes, I really do think you need to do something else, because what you have now really just isn't working."

He continued to talk all the way out the door, and Isaac almost slamming it in his face to end the conversation. Isaac slumped to the floor, and Ward breathed for the first time in what felt like minutes. He almost fell off the top of the car, and was panting heavily.

"Okay, I'm not complaining, don’t think I’m complaining, but what the hell just happened?"

Ward half fell, half climbed off the car. "I know this one spell. And when stressed I can generally do it a little better. So I did that. It keeps things unnoticed.”

"That was incredible though. You made someone not notice a car sitting in the middle of an apartment.”

"Yeah." Ward, still red-faced and panting, smiled, just a little proud.

"And you just did that? No planning, just like that?"

"I considered it when I got here, but didn't think I could pull it off. Didn't get much choice in the end."

Isaac was glowing, energetic and unrecognisable from that first impression. He bounced around the apartment, praising Ward, and offering to get him things, or give him things, offers Ward rebuffed all of, far too embarrassed, but still warm to the idea that anyone would think so highly of him, no matter what the cause.

After enough time, and Ward had been browbeaten in to accepting celebratory biscuits and juice, and Isaac was talking happily about himself, mentioning how he had got in to the Other in the first place, all because of his best friend, Caroline. The sentence got through to Ward. “You know Caroline?”

Isaac paused. “Yeah. Carrie is my best friend going on nine years now. You know her?”

Ward shifted in his seat, suddenly uncomfortable. “I met her once. She was chased out of the Ghost’s Rest by Sam.”

Isaac’s hands trembled. “Damnit. Damn damn damn. What happened? Did he catch her?”

Ward did not meet Isaac’s eyes. “I don’t know.”

Isaac was on his feet now, pacing, comically turning every three steps. “My fault. I sent her a letter, saying my talent was getting worse, and… damn. Damnit!” The shout made Ward flinch.

“I’ll ask Sam when I see him.”

Isaac stopped his pacing, aghast. “You’re actually talking to that monster? Regularly?”

“It’s complicated, I…” Ward cast his eyes around the room, looking for anything else to talk about. He found it. Pointing at the wooden box, Ward asked, “What is this thing anyway?”

Isaac barely gave it a glance. “Oh just some piece of rubbish I picked up. I get so many random things.”

Ward picked it up and looked inside and felt immediately nauseous, unable to see what’s in it. “I think it’s something magic.” Ward leaned against the bonnet, steadying himself, letting the world come back in to focus. “I might take it to Charlotte. Maybe this is what caused the whole uh, car problem.”

Isaac sat down on his bed, folding his legs up on to it. “Sure. Take what you like.”

“When Sam came back he was really angry. I really do think that Caroline is alright.”

“If she’s alright, then where is she? I haven’t heard from her in weeks.” Ward had no comforting answer to that, so let himself out, taking the box with him.

Outside, his musing over the fate of the flying woman was distracted by noticing the professor leaning against a car opposite. “Nicely done, Ward. I trust by the look on Greg’s face that the whole event went well?” Ward paused between two parked cars, resisting crossing the street till he had thought. He let a car pass by then walked to the professor.

“That was all a test?”

The professor stood up straight, a smile showing through his beard. “Not just a test. Though that was part of it. You needed something to boost your confidence. To show you that you *can* do this. You just need a push.”

Ward frowned. It stung to have been played with. “So this was all acted out?” Even the worry about Caroline?

The professor shook his head. “Isaac really did need the help, and I really did think you were the best person to provide it. I asked Charlotte so you wouldn’t think it was a test. Less pressure to perform.”

“Less pressure than being responsible for someone else’s home?”

The professor unlocked the car he had been leaning on. “Well that’s the funny thing. I listened to when you achieved something remarkable, and it is never when you yourself are at risk. There is always someone else. Now we have shown that you can do far more than you dream, we can work on making you do it. This was a confidence boost you needed.”

Ward hesitated before his last question, but needed the answer. “So if I had failed, what then?”

The professor looked at him for a good second before answering. “Then likely you would have broken your confidence. It would have taken months to get your talents to where they were. Months you do not have.”

Ward nodded, shivered, and walked away. Find Charlotte and celebrate. Worry about impending death later.

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At The Ghost’s Rest, Charlotte was bickering with Callum about what help could be provided. It had been half an hour now, and still no progress. Callum said all help would be too expensive or too slow, and Charlotte had been trying to find other solutions. By the time Ward arrived, Callum was starting to get tetchy, answering queries before Charlotte had finished forming them, dismissing the half-formed desperate ideas. Seeing Ward arrive, Charlotte stood up. “What happened? Why are you here?”

Ward smiled slightly. “I solved it. The landlord didn’t even know the car was there.”

Callum threw his hands up. “You left the glamourist there and didn’t tell me? Why were you even worrying?”

Charlotte blushed slightly. “I didn’t think it was the kind of thing Ward did.”

“That’s because everybody has been underestimating him. There’s more depth there than we normally acknowledge, isn’t there boy?” Ward did not answer Callum back, but smiled. Baror stood and stared at Ward for several seconds, face serious. “The boy has merits. Perhaps he can keep the suit of mine he borrowed, and I won’t have to gut him.”

There were several long seconds before Callum snorted. “I’m sorry, but the look on both your faces. You would think you would believe that of Baror. Baror cracked a smile, and sat back down, perfect golden locks bouncing slightly. “I actually came here for something else,” Ward said, placing the box on the table. “Do either of you know what this is?”

Callum stared at the box, prodded it gingerly with the end of his pen, then after it shifted an inch, happily picked it up, rotating it, examining all sides. The room was silent as Callum studied ever surface. “Well, I’m pretty certain it’s a portable chest.”

Ward frowned. Charlotte said, “We can see that. So what does it do?”

“If I understand the design, anything you put in the box, will appear somewhere else. A handy way to put valuables in a chest, without lugging the whole damn thing around with you. Judging by the writings, it automatically tunes itself to its owner’s home. One way of course. Two way chests like this are harder since this just lets you throw things in a room, and it is hard to fish things out of a whole room. Originally used by warriors wanting to send spoils home to their families. Not that many remembered to use them, mind.” Callum keeps spinning it, admiring every facet.

“Would it be able to get a car in to a room?” Ward asked. Callum sucked in his breath, putting the box down, and tapping it with his pen, maybe listening to the sound it made. “A tall order. Depends on the make of the… ah, here it is. Shrinking rune, allows you to put larger objects in it. That would about do it, though a car would be the upper limit.”

Ward nodded, for once not interested in the magics at work. “So then, could you use it to get a car out of a room.”

Callum, satisfied with his examination of the box pushed it back to Ward. “Well, I couldn’t do it, but Baror probably could.”

“Would you do it for the box?” It was Charlotte’s audible intake that drew attention this time, but only a flicker of the eyes from Callum, who was studying Ward intently. “You want to make that deal? We can sign on it.”

Ward shook his head. “I trust you not to break it.”

Charlotte’s head was spinning at the implication. Ward had offered a hand to shake on the agreement, which Baror had accepted, Ward wringing his hand out afterwards. Soon they were on their way back to Isaac to share the good news.

On the way, Ward filled Charlotte in on the Caroline connection, and Charlotte commiserated with him. There was nothing they could do. They needed Sam, and they could absolutely not fight Sam if they wanted to. If they could find him again.

“I’m impressed that you pulled off that bit of magic. It shows real depth, when you set your mind to it. When you don’t think so much about if you can.”

Ward looked happy at that, an excited puppy told it was good. “Thanks. You don’t know how much that means to me.”

Ward began to say more, but his phone rang. The sight of the screen brought puzzlement to his face. Ward looked at the screen, startled. “It’s Iris,” he said, before pressing the answer button with a certain trepidation.

Charlotte heard the voice that purred back. It was not Iris. It was Mark.

Ward took the stairs three at a time, breathing hard, but ignoring that. Now he could not be out of breath, as if sheer force of will could overcome bodily limitations. The door came in to view and he ran in to it. Hard thud, no good. His should sung with pain where he hit it, but it was no good. Ward kicked at the handle, but the door still held against him, signs of stress. He readied a second kick, but the door was wrenched open. Iris stared out at him, quizzical, shocked, hands lowering from fists.

Ward stood, panting. His vision was blurring slightly. It had been a long run, longer than Ward had run in years. Iris, face red with anger, hands balling, stepped aside to let Ward walk in. The house was pristine, untouched. Ward sat on the couch, finally forced to acknowledge his legs trying to give way, and the pain in his shoulder.

“What are you doing?” Iris hissed, closing the door.

“Mark called from your phone.” Iris froze, then scrambled through the house to find her phone. Coming back, phone in hand, she said, “It’s been here all along. No danger, nothing to play hero to. And if Mark was waiting? Then what. You can’t stand. You couldn’t fight.” Iris’s voice softened and she sat down next to Ward. “You really were ready to play the big dumb hero. Just like before.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to…” Ward could not find the words. It was not the wheezing, just an inability to explain what precisely he was so sorry for here. “I thought he was going to hurt you.”

Iris stood, and fetched both of them glasses of water. They sat while Ward finished recovering his breath. “So training must be going well then?” Iris said.

Ward looked at her, trying to read the face. With the eyes completely obscured, it was harder. The inability to see those eyes was so obvious now. It had been nearly three weeks since the two of them had seen each other, two weeks since their last brief communication. “Training was going well. I think I angered Sam.”

Iris sighed. “Sam is easy to anger. You don’t get much worse than him, in some ways.”

“I have been improving my glamours though. Today I managed to hide a car inside an apartment for fifteen minutes.” Iris looked a touch surprised. “Fairly irrelevant. You are banned by the terms of your agreement not to use magic to hide yourself from your opponent. You agreed to that stricture.”

The words were cold, and they cut. Ward tried to keep his temper, but could not help saying “So are you going to help then, provide some better suggestions for how to direct my energy?”

“Well with Sam gone, forfeiting the duel seems about as well as you can do.”

“Why are you making this so hard? I could use your help so badly, and it is against your own brother, and you won’t even lift a finger to help.”

Iris’s cheeks flushed. “They’re dressing you in armour, and giving you a sword, but you’re not a gallant knight, and they’ll make a fool of you. You’re young, and don’t understand, and you got yourself killed thinking you’re something special. And you are something special, and every time you run in to save me from something and you get hurt because you were too stupid, too brave to run you prove it, and you prove how much talking to you was a mistake.”

There are tears on her face now, red. An idle thought make Ward wonder if she cries more with her wounds. More though, he wants to hug her and tell her it’s alright and even though he knows that is not the truth at all he does it. Taking her in his arms as she hold him, and despite her small frame her hug is near crushing. “Why couldn’t I just keep you safe, or be smart enough to stay away.” With that burden unloaded, the barrier between them seems to be down. They stay frozen until Ward is stiff, and then Iris finally shakes out her limbs. They talk about Marks’ prank call, then university, Ward’s struggles focusing while still getting his training, the argument with Sam.

Iris told her own story. She started with her studies, her job, then finally moved to the contracts. Every moment not in a class or at work she had been reading them, studying them for some loophole, some way around, and some override. There was the despair. To interfere in a duel once it was announced was a death sentence, one of the greatest slights to the community. Once a duel was announced, all other grievances were to wait.

Then Iris talked, quietly, about how she could break that still, get Ward out, maybe run after it was done. Ward hushed her. “We should not even consider it.”

“But if you die, I’d never forgive myself.”

“And if you died, I’d be the same. So let’s both survive this if just for the other’s sake.”

“Oh sweet, dumb, honest, brave man. You make it so hard to be angry.”

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Kane sat in Veronica’s living room, TV on, remote hefted, but pressing no buttons. He had been that way for twenty minutes now, and his hand was cramping. His thoughts were elsewhere, still lingering on the events of previous evening. Every time Kane remembered that first moment he shuddered imperceptibly, and then his eyes would flicker to the hallway.

Last night, Kane had been happy. Arrived at Veronica’s early, before Veronica herself, he had been cooking dinner. Veronica arrived, kissed him, looked grateful through the tiredness of her long day. Sitting down on a stool at the kitchen bench, she had mentioned off-handedly that Rhani and her new boyfriend would be joining them. Kane barely heard the comment, instead focusing on keeping the sleepy woman in front of him entertained, keeping that smile on her face. He added to the pasta though.

Rhani walked in first, all smiles and slight nervous watching, ready to introduce someone now important to her to those who already knew her. Ready to be embarrassed by happy acknowledgements, and slightly worried if there was some clash. Following her was a face that Kane has seen in nightmares. Mark, in a nice dress shirt and wearing a voluminous smile sauntered in, dropping a backpack to the ground. He nodded a greeting to Kane, then gave Veronica a hug. Kane was frozen in place, waiting for the chaos that had to follow.

“Kane, Veronica, this is Mark,” Rhani introduced him. “Oh don’t worry, I’ve met Kane before. We’re quite the pair of rogues together.” Kane, mouth dry, managed a reply. A simple greeting, and the terror of whatever Mark was going to do to him.

Kane had seen Mark threaten a man’s life, knew him to threaten torture, and those who had been beaten by Mark’s free and easy violence. What Mark did now was worse. Mark was charming. Dinner went smoothly. The food was enjoyed by all. Mark told stories of travels to Europe, and the excitement of it. Kane remained subdued throughout, trying to guess what Mark would do. After dinner finished, they all sat down to watch a movie together, and Mark, the bastard, acted as the perfect gentleman.

All throughout, Kane remembered what Mark could do. Every touch of Veronica’s hand, Mark would feel. Every whispered word, Mark would hear. Nothing for Kane to do but smile and watch and wait in the suburban home, and hope that the whole evening did not end up in bloodshed.

Rhani and Mark retired first. Veronica leaned against Kane’s shoulder, sleepy, and suggested they retreat as well, and Kane did, wondering if he should say anything against Mark now. Perhaps, but there was no way to prove anything. Better to wait till later, when Kane could risk saying more. When Mark was less nearby and able to eavesdrop.

Now the next day, Kane was sitting in the loungeroom, tired. He had not slept well. Veronica had been sad that he had kept out of contact most of the night. Kane would need to explain that at some point. A difficult task in itself. Kane stared at the clean ceiling, wondering what he was still doing here. Charlotte had called to ask with help, but right now, Kane suspected he was in a worse fix.

Mark sat down next to Kane, startling him. “Your girl gone to work too? Looks like they trust us enough to look after the house then. How are you, Kane?”

Kane moved as far away as the narrow couch would allow. “What do you want, Mark? Why are you here?”

Mark laughed. “Would you relax? If I wanted to murder you, I would have.”

“There’s more than murder that you can do to someone.” Mark conceded the point with a nod. “You should keep away from Rhani.”

Mark did not answer, intent on the TV, as it blathered a news update. Once it finished, Mark turned back to Kane. “You should stay away from Veronica. It will all end in tears. Going to threaten me now?”

Kane sat silent, witty repartee evaporated. Mark continued to speak. “Did Rhani look unhappy to you? We get along well, and I please her with, I consider, amazing indulgence. Your bed was quiet last night, but I assure you ours wasn’t.”

Kane’s face reddened. “You stay out of my feelings.”

“Senses,” Mark corrected. “And there was the outraged commands I was looking for. Maybe you should have got closer to Veronica last night. I could have told you how much she enjoyed herself. Though I can tell you about the evening anyway. When she was bored, or how uncomfy your bony shoulder is. Do you want to know what she really thought of the food?”

“Stop! I want to you gone. Now.”

Mark reached towards Kane,who almost fell off the couch, but Mark merely picked up the remote, and turned off the television. “You’re scared. It’s understandable. You shouldn’t be a part of any of this. I give you this opportunity to stop helping, and I won’t hurt you.”

“Will you never come to this house again?”

Mark cocked his head, thinking. “I’m surprised. I was expecting all bluster and never wanting to leave your friends. I hadn’t considered you helping me.”

“I would never help you.”

“Your body says otherwise. All you want to do is run. But I don’t want your help. I have no need for it. Stay out of this duel, and nobody who lives here gets hurt by me. Now if you’ll excuse me, I have other mayhem to cause.”

Mark stood up, stretching. His frame held more muscle than when Kane had seen him last. Mark winked at Kane, then left, slamming the front door behind him. Kane stood and paced the house. First the kitchen, looking at the food in the cupboards, eating nothing, then in to Veronica’s room, with the motivational cat poster on the wall, and the desk with every item neatly arranged, a gap where the laptop sat. Then through the loungeroom and out in to the backyard. Creepy rat-spiders had been easier than this.

Kane’s wandering took him finally to stand outside the closed door of Rhani’s room, a place he had never seen. Looking slightly guilty, Kane opened the door slowly, and peered in. The room was dark, curtains drawn, and the corridor light barely illuminated it. After he was sure no one was there, Kane flicked on the light. Unlike Veronica’s room, this room was a mess. Clothes sat in three distinct piles. There was no desk, but instead the top of the drawers, along with a bookshelf had been covered in a large assortment of oddities. From small sculptures to a mass collection of hair pins and hair ties. A low table held a TV with a mirror placed directly in front of it.

Kane rummaged, looking for Mark’s backpack. After peering cautiously in to the wardrobe, Kane got down on his hands and knees and peered under the bed. There was something in the darkness down there, out of sight, well back. Kane looked over his shoulder at the door, then reached under. His stretching fingers came in contact with metal, oddly warm. Kane drew back his fingers, then pressed them down again, trying to feel out what was there. Kane barely avoided nicking himself on the edge, then traced it down, awkwardly shuffling. His arm brushed the canvas that was probably the bag, but Kane kept going until he found a hilt then a handle.

Carefully, Kane drew the sword out. The red-tinted metal gave off the tiniest amount of heat as he held it. Kane stared at it, examining it, testing its weight. The blade was heavy, and felt unwieldy to him. Clearly not a normal weapon, the discovery made Kane’s heart beat quickly. The audacity of Mark to bring it here, and just leave it. Mark must think nothing of Kane at all, completely irrelevant.

Kane lay the sword on the bed, carefully, and then reached in, confirming the backpack. Kane quickly flicked through the backpack, finding a collection of loose paper in there. A scan showed them to be about duels and duelling. A couple of bits of advice, a couple of notes on the rules. Kane stood up, feeling dizzy from the discovery, and figured out what he was going to do next.

Getting the sword to the Ghost’s Rest had been tricky. Ever wrapped in newspaper it was conspicuous, and the bus driver gave Kane a suspicious glare, which Kane ignored, dipping his ticket, and carefully gripping the sword, trying to keep his hands steady. The blade cut the paper with the slightest pressure, and Kane cradled the sword with as much care as possible.

Once inside the dilapidated interior of the exploded bar, Kane found Callum, gave quiet hurried instructions, then left the sword, before texting Charlotte, organising to meet up that evening. Kane consumed two quick drinks, then went out in to the heat to meet up with Charlotte.

They sat in a park as the last daylight faded away. Kane had not realised how late it was getting. When Charlotte arrived, Kane had begun to shiver in the cooling air. Charlotte, hair pooling around her face as she stopped, frowned at him. “You’re not looking so good.”

“Not feeling great either. Ran in to the psychopath today. He was sleeping with Rhani.”

Charlotte sat next to him, horror on her face. “He dared to do that? Did he hurt anyone?”

“Not yet. Though I wouldn’t hold my breath.”

Charlotte frowned. “Well at least we know where he is. Though it’s not ideal. If he picks a fight, that gives us a reason to fight him before the duel, so he can’t do anything too bad, just be malicious and annoying. Are you going to be okay?”

Kane nodded, not looking at Charlotte. He hoisted the backpack on to the bench between them. “I found this in Rhani’s room. It’s his. I’m hoping it would be useful.”

Charlotte looked at Kane unbelievingly, and pulled out the papers, and looked through them. “These are interesting. I’ll need to study them to see if it helps. But this is amazing. Thanks Kane. You really stuck your neck out for us today.”

Kane looked back at her, smile on his face. “Sorry for not helping today. Was dealing with my own things. Did it all work out in the end?”

Charlotte met his smile, putting the papers and bag aside for now. “Yeah. Poor kid stole stuff on instinct. Had a car in his room through some magic box. Ward solved it. Managed to hide a car in an apartment.”

Kane whistled, impressed. “I didn’t think he was that good.”

“I didn’t either. Neither did Ward, I think.”

Charlotte looked just past Kane. “Honestly, I didn’t expect you to be so calm about Mark.”

Mark shrugged, looking in to the middle distance. “I just, well. What else could I do? I couldn’t cut and run on Ward.”

For a moment Mark thought there was something more than admiration in Charlotte’s gaze. She blinked, and looked away from Mark. “So how is Veronica? Does she know anything about it?”

Kane ignored the stab of guilt. “No. How do you tell someone about this. I’ll say something to her tonight. I’ll figure out some way to convince her Mark is a bad man.”

“Have you considered the truth?”

“If I introduce her to the Other, I’ll die. And I see the person responsible for those executions daily. Seems a poor plan.”

“Don’t mention the Other, but explain the rest. The duel, the fact that you can’t go to the police.”

“She’d think I was crazy, leave me.”

“And that’s more important than honesty?”

Kane didn’t have an easy answer. He changed the topic, talking about sword practice, before getting out of the conversation as soon as possible, and heading home. There was far too much to think about on the journey, none of it pleasant.

A nasty surprise was waiting for Kane at home. It was not another bill, nor his housemate asking for the rent, now a week late. It was Mark, angry, fists clenched. Kane came to a halt when he spotted him. “You goddamn thief. I’d be impressed at your backbone if I didn’t want to tear it out. Where is it.”

“I don’t have it. I gave the notes to Charlotte to use against you. You’re wrong about me.”

Mark began to close the distance between the two. “Fine. Now the sword? Don’t think I won’t torture you, or your little girly to get it back.”

Kane stood his ground. “You won’t hurt any of us.”

“Then you don’t know me very well.” Mark stood less than a meter away, and keeping from stepping back made Kane shake. “It was a nice quenched blade. Callum wondered how many times quenched?”

Mark paused. “A thrice-quenched blade. What are you playing at?”

“It’s simple. You do not come near me, or Veronica or Iris, or Charlotte, or Ward. You do not feel our feelings, you do not talk to us, you do not watch us. This conversation is your last contact. You get your sword back the day of the duel. Callum has it. You know you can’t force it from me. Walk away. Now.”

Mark stood still, and Kane was sure that in whatever passed for Mark’s mind there was the start of violence. That Mark would not care, would lash out. Kane stepped back a step, preparing to run. Mark spat at Kane’s feet, and walked away.

Chapter Next

"Time to get up," a soft voice whispered. Ward opened his eyes, and blurrily saw his alarm clock flashing 5:30. Too early by half. He closed his eyes, and began to dream that the numbers had turned green just before he had rolled over. An image of a green tiger began to filter through his near-sleeping mind.

"What if he comes back today? Don't want to be late."

Ward opened his eyes slowly, and stared at Iris lying next to him. Neither had planned to stay together tonight, but still, here he found himself. A pleasant surprise. Iris’s breathing was slow, and her eyes were closed. Ward looked at them and marvelled how normal her eyes looked when they were closed, as if there were nothing wrong at all.

Last night, Charlotte had called him, told him Kane had run in to Mark, stolen some notes. Charlotte had come over, saying Kane was with Veronica. The three of them had dinner, a bottle of wine, and then perused the start of the notes. An interesting collection. They were not in Mark’s hand, put instead Iris was able to identify the writing as Lady Himoto’s. Likely Mark had stolen them from her.

He levered himself out of the bed, and quietly padded in to the living area, sitting at the bench. The room was almost exactly as he had left it. Ward blinked the sleep from his eyes, trying to place the difference, then he saw the empty coffee table where they had laid out the papers. Ward did not react at once, instead he thought of all the places they might have gone. The apartment had been locked. He dismissed that Iris had moved them.

Ward addressed the air in a hushed tone. "Alright, no more tricks. Show yourself."

He blinked, and standing up on the other side of the bench was Lady Himoto, her head cocked slightly sideways. "You're going to be late, you know. Today will be important."

"Ssshh. If Iris learns you're here she'll throw a fit."

Lady Himoto laughed loudly. It showed her perfect white teeth behind her red lips. "You should call your friend, tell him to be there too. Say it's a hunch."

"What are you doing here?"

"Time's wasting."

"What are you doing here?" He said it a little too loudly, and heard Iris stir. He glanced from the bedroom door, to Lady Himoto, and then went back in to the bedroom. There was no point being afraid of turning his back on the woman. If she had wanted to sneak up on him, he would have never known she was there.

He shook Iris lightly, who opened her eyes, nose wrinkling. "What time izzet?"

"It's 5:30. I was thinking I might try seeing if Sam turned up again today or not."

"Thought you weren't going at six anymore. Wazzn worth it."

"Thought I'd just check. Woke up anyway, and it's good for appearances."

She studied Ward for a moment, then nodded. "Sure. But come back when you're done playing soldier, okay? I’ll make breakfast.” She lay back down, and Ward rose. Lady Himoto was standing where he had left her, and he gestured for her to follow, before wandering out the door, and closing it behind her.

"What are you doing here?"

"I didn't mean to intrude, but I wanted to make sure you were there today. Sam's coming back, and you must be there.”

"Why?"

“Sam is delicate. Hard to control, and worse, resents it. If you miss him, he may not come back again.”

“That’s not what I meant. Why are you helping me?”

"Because if you lose, I have to keep Mark as a faebond, and he's proved a very ungrateful for everything I have given him. He is a liability to me.”

Ward didn't question it. "But this isn't the first time you've been there, helping me. Flashes of green eyes and words that are almost too subtle to notice."

Lady Himoto beamed at him, looking suddenly childish. "You're really quite a remarkable person. You can't see the Other at all, but you do try and keep track of the small things you do catch, and you think about them. When did you figure out what those were?"

Ward couldn't help filling with pride. "It was at Isaac's. It was the first time you were talking to me while I was fully awake."

"Of course. But you had suspicions before that?"

"Well, I had some."

"Truly brilliant. Oh, if you had the sight, this whole fight would be over so quickly. That would be so much nicer."

Ward watched her now. She was moving oddly. Trying to look at how was giving him a headache, but he tried to focus through that. Better to try and keep talking though. “If Iris had seen you…”

"Oh she wouldn't have seen me."

"But she sees everything. That's why you're interested in her."

Lady Himoto nodded, "She sees everything that's there, certainly. But I have been around a good sight longer than her. I can outfox her little tricks if I want."

Ward watched her for several seconds. "You're a glamour."

She laughed again. It was a throaty full laugh. "And you're just on fire aren't you. But there are a whole lot of things that won't explain."

Ward frowned, as he tried to focus. "So, you're... you're making me believe something is there when it isn't, and you're doing it for all my senses. But then," he looked around, "where are you?"

"You think I must be close, but that shows a boringly terestrial view. I work through other kinds of proximity.”

"So not here at all. But then... you must be spying on this area somehow. You're hearing me, so you're..."

He came to a sudden stop. "How are you hearing me?"

Lady Himoto stopped in front of him and turned around. "Oh don't worry so. Nobody can get inside your mind." She tapped him on the nose as she said this and he felt the slight impact. "It's safe as houses even from me. I'm sure you can solve this problem if you try."

Ward was silent, thinking. Lady Himoto walked beside him and Ward noticed how none of the other people seemed to see her. She walked around them, and it looked natural, but they certainly weren't deviating around her.

They arrived at the train shed, and Lady Himoto raised her eyebrows. "You'll need to concentrate properly in there, so I'm going to promise to leave you. Did you figure out how I'm hearing you yet?"

Ward nodded slowly. "I think so. You taught Mark about how to use his talent, didn't you?"

"I helped him expand it, yes."

"So, so if you were teaching him, do you know how to experience the world through other people's senses too?"

“Marvellously correct.”

Ward shivered, despite the warmth now seeping in to the day. "So that means, that you can watch, or feel, anything I'm doing?"

Her green eyes sparkled in the early morning light. "If I want to, yes."

To his surprise, Lady Himoto darted forward and gave him a hug. She brought her lips that weren't real close to his ear, and whispered, "and, if you're really clever, you'll remember I told you all this freely and openly. Hopefully this will help convince you I'm on your side. Good luck, Ward."

She raced off with Ward still stunned. He had to remind herself that she just appeared to race off. She wasn't moving in an entirely human manner, and that was causing a touch of a headache, but he ignored it. She had given him a lot to think about, which wouldn't be at all useful, if she was right about Sam being back.

Ward was waiting inside when Sam arrived. He was late, but Ward didn't comment, instead he immediately stood, nodded to Sam, and picked up one of the swords. Sam eyed him warily. "I was thinking you might not be here."

"I wasn't going to be, but someone said you might be coming back. Are we training again?"

Sam looked sour at the news, but grunted. Ward took as assent. He readied himself, sword in one hand, body turned sideways. "So what are we doing first?”

"Your training partner isn't here."

"No. I'll try and make sure he's here tomorrow."

Sam nodded, reached in to his coat, and pulled out his sword. Ward didn't flinch. "Now that you've had a week to recover, I am going to be working on demonstrating technique. No sparring for now. I want to you to work entirely on how you stand, how you hold the sword, going through set patterns."

"Yes, of course."

"Tomorrow we will try linking the two of you again. It should help you both learn faster." He paused, then begrudgingly added, "though I cannot be certain of this yet."

Sam began to walk Ward through a set series of strokes and steps, with Ward watching, and trying to follow along. Sam moved quickly, and it took almost an hour before Ward was able to stay with him through the entire set. Sam did it once more after that, and began to teach Ward a second set. Ward tried that as well. This one was more complex though, and by the time ten o'clock came, Ward's arms ached, yet he still hadn't managed to finish the form. He had cut his arm twice on his own sword, although Sam had declared both gashes easily treatable, and had Ward continue. The sword still felt unwieldy. Always too heavy, the momentum seemed to work to drag him out of his stance.

At the end of it, Sam was frowning. "I had been hoping to get through another several sets today."

"I just can't keep up. Every movement feels unnatural."

Sam nodded. "Very well. Can you demonstrate the first one again?"

Ward tried to remember it. There were ten steps and nine strokes. He caught Sam's face as he worked through it, and there was a definite grimace on it. He accidentally threw the sword on his final stab, and it clattered near Sam's feet.

"Is that really the best you can do?” Sam asked.

Ward didn't meet his eyes, and went to retrieve his sword, mumbling an apology. "I didn't want you cowed. Is that the best you can do?"

Ward shook his head. "I'll try again. I'll try to do better."

Ward set his position again, and started the routine. He almost tripped on the fourth step. Sam caught his arm, and steadied him, taking the sword off him so swiftly Ward didn't have time to resist. Ward sprung away, expecting a sudden duelling exercise.

"That was the best you could do. Don't tell me what I want to hear and don't bluster. We won't get there that way."

"I'm sorry, I'm just tired after four hours."

"Yes. Make sure Kane is here tomorrow. He should make things faster."

Sam went to leave, and Ward called after him. "I just had one question I needed to ask you."

Sam stopped, and looked at him. He didn't speak. Ward hesitated, thinking about Lady Himoto’s warning. He had done his best to cater to Sam all day. Yet this was something he said he would do. “I need to know if you killed Anne."

Sam his head once, then walked out, leaving Ward on his own, relieved at the knowledge, and relieved Sam had not turned to anger. Ward retrieved some water from his bag, sat for several minutes, letting himself cool. Even as summer approached, the old train yard stayed cold, and he was up soon, shivering from the sweat. He set to work almost immediately, walking himself through the steps slowly, and trying to get a better grasp of the first set. It was another fourty minutes until he felt satisfied, and left, heading back towards Iris's.

She was already up and about when he got back, having eaten her own breakfast. "How was it?" she asked as soon as he walked in, putting down the book she had been studying from. He smiled at her, and walked over and gave her a hug. "Good, I think. He started teaching me forms. No sparring, and basically no bruising."

"Basically no bruising?"

He showed her his arm, and she frowned. "I'm going to get the some disinfectant for those."

She came back with a full first aid kit. “You have a whole first aid kit? he said, taking a seat.

"It became a priority after you got kidnapped by my mad brother and I had to knock him out with him swinging a knife around." She came back in to the room with cotton balls and dabbed disinfectant on his cuts. Ward flinched. "Don't be a baby about it."

"Sorry. I think you mentioned breakfast? I'm absolutely starving after that."

Iris took her time with the cuts, long and narrow. After disinfecting them, she bandaged them, and was only then satisfied, setting about scrounging up some toast and eggs for Ward.

“Oh great. Wandering around like this I’m going to look like a mummy.”

“You could wear long sleeves?”

“In this heat? Not likely.”

“Well it’s better than having scary looking cuts visible.”

Ward ate in silence, completely intent on the food. Iris seemed happy enough to sit, and only once he finished, looking up at her did she comment, "You know, with all this exercise you're getting, you're looking less and less like the lovable dork I first met."

Ward tried to form a response. Iris laughed. "It wasn't a criticism, you know. Just, just thinking about it."

"Well, with some help from the professor, I think I can get my glamours up to a pretty high standard too. I mean, I already pulled the trick with the car."

She nodded agreement with his enthusiasm. He spoke as he began preparing the next mouthful. "I was even thinking I might try and learn something else, if the professor will teach me."

Iris stiffened. “Just for the fight, though."

Ward didn’t notice. Looking at the wall as he imagined. “What? Oh. Not just for the fight. I was thinking it would be fun to try and learn more magic. I mean, not being able to see anything Other isn't going to help with that, but that's okay, I can manage to..."

He stopped, seeing the look on Iris's face. "What's wrong?"

"You really want more things like this?"

"Well not like the duel, but otherwise I wouldn't mind."

Iris sniffed. “That's what the Other is! It's things like the duel, things that take from you, and hurt you. It's not a fun little fairyland of adventures. It’s pain and hurt and suffering.”

"Well, it can be like that, but that doesn't mean it has to be?” Ward tried to look at Iris’s eyes, but his headache resurfaced.

"Think of all the people you know involved with it. Charlotte died, I lost my eyes, Caroline is probably dead, and Isaac can't leave the house for fear of what he might steal. The professor isn't even a real person anymore, isn't that enough to know you don't want this in your life?"

Ward put his cutlery down. "Firstly, Caroline is still alive-“

"Then where is she." Iris interrupted.

"I didn't ask, but Sam didn't kill her."

"That's not the same thing."

"Well isn't it enough? And you keep speaking of the professor as if some horrific fate has befallen him, but he seems a perfectly nice, normal human being. Whatever this soullessness stuff means."

Iris looked at the table in front of her. "I-I really can't explain that one to you Ward. I wish I could, but there's no analog. Maybe it's like looking at where a person should be and just seeing a computer and-"

"So what? If the computer acts exactly like a person, even gets upset when people flinch from him, what right do we have to treat him as if he wasn't a person!"

They stared at each other. Ward had been too loud, and neither knew how to say anything next. Iris ruffled her hair, embarrassed. "Look, I know it must seem frustrating, but trust me, you want no part in the Other."

Ward nodded. It was not quite agreement, but it was an acknowledgement. This conversation was over for now. Both of them let it go. Later, they would come back to it. “So how'd you know to get up this morning?" Iris asked, changing the topic.

Ward chewed his food slowly, as he thought about how to answer. “It was, well, Lady Himoto woke me up.” Ward quickly continued, not letting Iris interrupt. “She wasn’t there, but she just glamoured it to make me see and hear her. She was using a trick like Kane’s too, meaning she learned it, which is interesting, and it means she wasn’t really a threat. She was helping me.”

Iris’s mouth was pressed thinly. Her hands gripped the edge of the table. Ward shuddered under her gaze.”

“Did you talk to her?”

"For a little bit, while I tried to figure out what she was doing, and how she was doing it."

"You shouldn't have. She's fae. And she's clever. She twists things to make them better for her and she really doesn't need to have much to start it." Iris balled and unballed her hands.

"Because making sure I was there to meet Sam, a couple of times is wicked and villainous?"

"Because she's trying to earn your trust, and who knows what she'll do once she has it."

"You sound so paranoid. She wants me to win this duel."

"Yes, and I don't know why." Only then did Ward see past the anger, and the bitterness. Iris looked weary, hands pressed tight to stop them flopping, shoulders tight so they did not slump.

"Maybe she actually wants to make amends for what she did to you?" Ward said, trying to offer some comfort.

Iris leaned forward, and grabbed Wards hand. She looked right in to his eyes, and he was keenly aware that he couldn't quite see back in to where hers should be. "She wants to have access to my talent. That's all this is about for her. Don't make any deals with her, and don't ever trust her."

Ward nodded. “I promise. I won’t deal with her.”

Just a little bit of the tension eased in Iris, and it loosened a tightness Ward had not noticed in his chest. They sat in silence as Ward finished his meal, but it was a pleasant silence where enough had been said.

Ward smiled at Kane as he wandered in to the warehouse at 5:55. "Someone's an eager beaver" Kane commented, slumping down against the wall. "You sure he'll be here?"

"Yeah. He'll be here."

It was 6:05 when Sam arrived. Kane had to be nudged out of a light sleep, and stood up yawning. Sam was scowling at both of them, but there was nothing unusual there. "Alright, now that both of you are here, we are going to try the link again."

Kane scowled. "Really? But it didn't do anything other than cause confusion last time."

"You don't share thoughts through the link, but you can share some instincts. Being able to form a link will allow you to learn faster as a unit, and even give you an edge co operating in sparring."

"Only if it isn't some incompatibility thing, and we don't just end up mirroring each other like some idiot twins,” Kane said.

Ward almost flinched, waiting for Sam to storm out, but Sam just nodded once. "If that's all a human can do, then we will have to abandon it. But for now, if the two of you can learn it properly, then you need to. If we succeed it will be worth months of training, and that's something we sorely need."

Kane kept scowling, but grabbed Ward's hand. Ward almost pulled away, but managed not to. Sam waited till their breathing was mostly in time, and then went through the motion to form the link. Ward ignored the brief moment where he could feel Sam in the bond.

Immediately Ward felt that there was something wrong with it. He looked around him, and realised that Kane hadn't looked too. "What's going on?" he said. Kane asked, "What's happening?" at the same time.

The link failed. Ward felt the terrible sense of loss, but managed to keep his feet. That had been diminished too. "That felt wrong. Very wrong," Ward said.

"That was closer to what we needed though. Could you feel each other?"

"Yes, but..." Kane answered. He was leaning against the wall. "He was just..."

Neither could explain. At Sam's instruction, they tentatively held hands again, and there was the exact same experience. The same break. On a third try, Ward felt dizzy as soon as the link was formed. The sense of loss afterwards was a release.

"I don't understand what your problem is. You had it so easy last time." Sam was looking at them now, concerned. "Tell me what is going wrong."

Ward and Kane stared at each other. They didn't have words for what they were experiencing. "There's prickliness?" Ward ventured.

Kane nodded. "It's like a pulling"

"Like sandpaper on the connection."

"A, um, a sliding past."

"A miss."

They fell silent, waiting for Sam to speak.

Sam rubbed his chin. “It appears that the reason I picked you, that I believe you to be similar enough for this to work, may be becoming less true. What are you thinking of when you try and form the link?”

They both stood silent. "Speak up. We need to work through this."

"I feel a little bit stupid holding a guy's hand," Ward volunteered. "And anxious that it won't work."

Sam turned his gaze to Kane. "I- I feel scared. The first time we did it I felt like I was Ward. I thought of Iris and,” Kane blushed, “and I don’t want Ward in my head like that.”

That one surprised Sam. "Have both of you been experiencing a bleeding effect?" Ward hesitated, then nodded.

"That’s worrying. The first links you formed were too strong. These ones too weak."

Sam began to pace, then stopped. "Is there some activity the two of you do together?”

"We play chess?"

"Then tomorrow bring a chess board. That's enough of trying that for now. I think it's time we got the swords out and began working on forms."

They spent the entire of the training session trying to learn sets with their swords. Ward followed fairly closely, but Sam was constantly stopping them to adjust Kane's grip, and Kane's posture. Every time he turned a comment to Ward, it was to criticise how weak his stroke, or how slowly he was moving.

At the end of it all, Sam had them try the bond again. This time, he couldn't even establish it. He tried twice, then walked out without a word. Ward pulled his hand out of Kane's grip. Kane sighed, and sat down on the concrete floor.

"Man, what an arse. You reckon he could try being nice to us."

"He's training us to fight, not to be well-mannered.”

"So what? He's still an arse. I mean, he kills people for a living.”

"Charlotte was saying the fae don't pay him."

"So he kills people for a hobby. That’s much better.”

Ward sat down next to Kane, frowning. "Do you feel the connection with him when he connects us?"

Kane raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"When he connects us, there's just a moment when you can feel what it's like to be him, when he's in the connection with us."

"Well, I don't know what you're feeling, but all I've felt is his hand caressing my chest." Ward blushed, and Kane snorted. "Seriously, I wouldn't let that bother you. I mean, if we can't even form a link we'll just have to give up on it."

Kane rolled his shoulders, trying to get the stiffness out of them. “You haven’t felt anything from me, my mind have you?” Kane said, sounding slightly strained. Ward shook his head, wondering what could be worrying his friend.

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The next day, Kane had brought his chess set, and Sam had them set out a game as soon as they both arrived. "I want you to play the game as you normally would, only you are to hold hands while you do it."

Ward grunted agreement, which Kane imitated. They set up the board, and Kane held out his hand, a smile on his face. Ward slowly grabbed it, and Kane made sure it was a good grip. Then the game began.

They played faster than they normally would, and in only a few turns, the found the board a complex web. Soon, Ward had forgotten Sam was there, forgotten about the hand- holding, and was instead entirely absorbed in the game. He kept wishing there was better light for it.

Ward barely felt the touch on his hand as Sam applied pressure to them. He felt the gap of connecting ever so briefly with Sam though. And then the connection with Kane. There was so little disruption, that both of them still had their focus on the game. Ward saw the game change in front of him. He saw new paths that he hadn't seen both for him and for Kane.

They both looked up at Sam who said, "Well, keep playing."

The game got harder. Neither of them threw away any pieces. Kane didn't take a risky attack Ward expected him to. It took twenty minutes before, with 3 pieces left on the board, Kane finally cornered Ward's king.

Ward looked up at Sam then. "What's this? What's going on?"

"We got balance. You're not focusing on the bond. Stopped it being too important. It needs to be background."

Kane nodded. "That was... different. This is different. This, I can see helping us."

"No time to celebrate. Time to work on holding a sword so your opponent can't just slap it out of your grip."

Sam walked them through their set moves again and again. Ward began to feel it slowly, but surely. He could feel Kane moving faster through the same motions. He could feel his own difference in weight and balance. Not quite being in two places, but aware of two places.

There was no warning this time. There was a snap, and Ward was alone. He whimpered, and dropped his sword. He heard someone cry out. It was Kane. Kane was hurt too. Kane had been separated.

Ward looked around, and saw Kane, blood dripping from his hand, face white. "Stabbed myself," he said, voice hollow. Sam stepped in quickly, picking up the swords, and bandaging Kane's hand. "That was good. You were learning the forms faster. What caused the break?”

"He spun too slowly," Kane said. Ward shook his head. "No, your feet weren't right."

Sam cleaned the blood off the sword. "You still want to be doing the same thing. That's bad. But we split it with the chess game. Now you just need to work on doing that with, everything."

"Are we, are we trying the bond again?"

"Not today," Sam said. Ward saw his relief mirrored in Kane's face. "I want to work on strikes against other blades. All this waving swords around is useless. You need to know how it feels to block, to be deflected, and to cut."

Sam had both of them practice together, taking turns to make strokes in a set order, or perform the correct parry. Sam made them use the real swords he had brought, and yelled at Ward repeatedly to stop pulling his blows. Ward didn't listen. He wasn't about to cut off his best friend's fingers or worse because he couldn't swing a sword properly.

The day ended abruptly, with Sam catching Kane's sword with his hand. Ward's guard had been late, and Kane had been trying to draw back. Kane dropped the sword as a dash of blood hit the ground.

Sam seemed unconcerned. He had the faintest of smiles. "Today was good. Make sure you are here tomorrow."

"But, your hand..." Kane said. Ward was mutely staring at it. He dropped his own sword as the blood dripped on to the ground.

Sam glanced at his hand. "Nothing serious for me. I'll see you tomorrow.

Ward looked around. He was sitting in a meadow, nice soft grass underneath him, and a giant willow tree in the centre, branches overhanging everything. He wasn't wearing shoes, and his clothes were an unfamiliar style.

It was too green to be Australia, and there was something wrong with the light. Then he spotted her leaning against the tree. He didn't know how he had missed her the first time, and now he blushed, looking down at his feet.

"Lady Himoto."

"Ward. Nice to see you again. Would you like some tea?"

Ward still didn't look up. "No thankyou. Never accept gifts from the fae."

Her laughter was sweet. "It's such a well taught lesson, isn't it? How many stories are made of people failing to follow it."

Lady Himoto had advanced towards him. Ward hadn't heard her light footsteps, but now her feet were in his field of view.

"Um. Lady. You appear to be naked."

"Well of course. This is my home, where I allow myself to relax. Does it unnerve you?"

Ward blushed even more deeply. "Y-yes. It does."

The feet retreated back out of view. "Well, since I have brought you here as a guest, I suppose I can conceal myself. There, is this better?"

Ward risked a glance up, and saw Lady Himoto, with her black hair spun with gold, and her bright red lips wearing a full length green dress, slightly ragged at the bottom, which still allowed her seat to be seen. Her beneficent smile to Ward crinkled the corner of her green eyes. No, Ward reminded himself, not her eyes at all.

He studied the dress, and gasped as he realised that it was made of grass. Lady Himoto made a brief show of walking around to show it off, and Ward watched entranced as the grass grew or shrunk, the dress constantly undergoing subtle changes. The grass rippled almost like cloth.

"Is this more suitable?"

Ward nodded, fascinated. "That's magical."

"It's definitely something, isn't it?"

"But why can I see it?"

"Because you're dreaming. And you can see anything you like in your dreams."

“I’m dreaming?"

"In all important respects, yes."

Lady Himoto delicately lowered herself in to a sitting position opposite Ward, and her dress billowed out around her impressively. "Of course, I have been dressed in something similar every time you have seen me, but this is the first time you are aware of it."

Ward looked around at the meadow. "So wait, if we're dreaming, then why am I in your meadow, with you talking to me?"

Lady Himoto smiled at him. "You're always fascinated by it aren't you. Doesn't it scare you just a little?"

"Blood and violence scares me. This is fascinating."

"And sex."

"What?"

"Sex scares you. Don't like holding a male friend's hand. Don't like seeing me naked." Ward blushed again, deeper. "I- I didn't mean to offend you I was just-"

"Uncomfortable, I know. And don't worry. You're with a friend. I was only teasing."

Ward looked back at those eyes, trying to remind himself what he was talking to. "So, you brought me here in a dream, to your grove. It implies that some part of me is 'here' enough. But mostly I am asleep lying in a bed next to Iris?"

"Yes. You haven't even stirred. But you probably shouldn't think too hard about it, or you might wake yourself up."

"And this is your grove?"

"Of course."

Ward ran his fingers through the grass, and shivered, remembering the pockmarks on Mark's head. He knew Lady Himoto would be studying him, so he tried to push the thought from his mind.

"So what gives me the pleasure of your company?"

"Well, it appears you have come in to something that belongs to me."

"Your papers?"

"Yes, precisely the point. My papers. Which you plan on keeping, and Iris plans on reading, with no intention of even asking me what I would offer for them back."

"Doesn't it stand to reason that anything you offer will be worth less than whatever is in those papers."

"Oh for all the infinities no! Why do people keep this idea so rigidly in mind? I can give you something that is more valuable to you, for something that is more valuable to me. Things are not equally important to everyone."

Ward frowned. "But how would we know we were getting a good deal for it?"

Lady Himoto shrugged, and the grass peeled back from her shoulders with the motion. "You wouldn't. You would have to trust me, and trust that I want you to win this duel."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why do you want me to win?"

"Because Mark is an unstable and selfish man, who some foolishness on my part has tied me to. Because his death frees me from that."

"But loses you an opportunity to get to Iris."

Lady Himoto paused. "Do you think I should give Iris's eyes back to her?"

"What?"

"These eyes," Lady Himoto said, raising a finger to the side of one. "Do you think I should return them to Iris?"

"Of course. How can you expect her to forgive you if you have her eyes every time she sees you."

"And if I offered to return them to her tomorrow, free of any strings or other factors, would she accept them?"

Ward paused. “Well no, she would expect that there was some trick to what you were doing."

"And if I offered her some deal for her eyes back, do you think she would accept anything that I asked of her? No matter how small a favour I asked, or how clear the phrases were?"

Ward frowned. "No. She would still expect some kind of trick."

"And what if I came to her and said I would give her eyes back to her in exchange for anything she would offer me, and I would call the trade even? Would she still think it was a trick?"

"Yes. I think she would."

Lady Himoto sighed. "You are so coloured by what Iris thinks of me, that you assume that my motives are self-interested and that means contrary to hers."

Lady Himoto ran her own fingers through the grass, which grew and curled and flowed around them. "But what I want, what I really want, is to get to understand her gift, to try and develop such a talent myself. If I believed the best way to do that was through cooperating with her, then that is what I would seek. And Iris will never believe it, but I love the child deeply. I want to work with her..."

Ward was drawn in to the pause. "Why not just give back the eyes, and worry about it later? If Iris were to ever trust you, wouldn't she need to see some penance from you first."

"If all penance is a trick, why bother? And how do we know that physical eyes would not in part stifle her sight? I wouldn't want to try and do a kindness only to harm her gift at this point."

"So why help me? You never answered."

"Because maybe, if I help you, if I can show that I really mean to help you against Mark, I can help her understand it. Because she can see in to the souls of everyone except herself, and that right there is an important insight about Iris."

"That sounds like you're being pretty selfish there."

"Yes. Of course I am being self-interested. It's not at all altruism. But if that means I desperately want to help you succeed, if my interests are your interests too, why would you possibly try and fight my kindness?”

"Because Iris doesn't want me to take it.”

Lady Himoto sighed, and drew the grass up to wipe her brow. "So I am guessing that there is absolutely no way you would sell me those papers you stole in exchange for a sword that would slice through Mark's as if it were cloth?"

Ward paused and thought on that. He ran his hands over the grass, and looked in to those green eyes watching him closely. "Yes. I'm certain. If you want to prove that you want to help me, stop spying with my senses. Ask me if you want to know something."

Lady Himoto nodded. She looked sad. Disappointed not with the outcome, but with Ward. Ward fought the sense that he had failed this impressive woman. "If it's all the same with you, I'd like to wake up now."

Lady Himoto nodded, and waved her hand towards Ward. The grass grew up around him. He struggled, startled as it began to wrap around him, and then it pulled him down in to the soil, and he woke up.

Ward rolled over, and watched Iris as she slept. Lying there so peaceful, she looked like a perfectly normal girl. It was hard sometimes to remember how special she was. Iris was Iris, and for Ward, that would have been enough.

Iris opened her eyes slowly, and Ward fought down the confusion that always came to him at looking in to her eyes these days. Looking in to the eyes that weren't there was hard, though Ward couldn't imagine it would be easier if he could see what was there.

"You're awake early," Iris murmured.

"Hard habit to break after so long. How are you feeling?"

"Like I drank a bit too much wine last night. Yourself?"

"Great. Little worried Sam will take offence."

"Well, as long as he doesn't kick my door in we'll know he isn't particularly offended. You going back to sleep?"

"I was thinking I might go look at the papers."

"Suit yourself. It's way too early for me."

Ward got up, and found his way to the drawer they had locked the plans in the night before. He opened it, stifled a gasp, and pulled out a letter.

'To whom it may concern,'

It was written in Lady Himoto's hand. Ward's hand trembled. He glanced over at Iris, now sleeping quietly again, and eased the letter open, almost afraid of the rustling paper. He pulled out the letter inside and read:

'*To whomsoever opens this letter,*

*I wish to thank you most kindly for your assistance in getting these papers that are of considerable value to me away from my faebond, whose presence stopped me retrieving them. These papers are of considerable importance to me, and having them back is a great boon to me.*

*I am aware that you and your self-titled 'war council' was hoping that these papers could be used to find a distinct advantage against my faebond in the upcoming duel. I am sorry that you were unable to confirm this for yourself, but the private matters held within would have given you no edge.*

*There is however an edge I wish to offer to you in exchange for the return of this information, that is the location of a sword whose properties are most likely suited to the duelists own shortcomings in the visual arena.*

*I have taken the liberty of finding the siren, Dessa, and informed her that her assistance in your plight is required. I hope you will not think worse of me for claiming what is mine, and wish your entire war council success.*

*Your dear and ongoing supporter, Lady Himoto’*

Ward read it several times over, He walked out in to the kitchen, and whispered her name. After Lady Himoto failed to appear, Ward said it again, trying to command Lady Himoto to appear. Still no success. Ward slammed a fist in to the counter, covering his eyes.

His next memory was of Iris by his side, reading over the note, holding him, trying to reassure him that things would still be alright. Ward held on to Iris tightly as she talked. When Iris had talked herself out, Ward remembered that they would have to tell Charlotte and Kane their loss. He sent a message to both of them.

Iris retreated while he did so, and was studying Ward. "Do you think this means she was in our room?"

"Could she have taken the papers if she wasn't?"

Iris shuddered. "Okay. Now I want to talk to her. Himoto, if you are listening to me, I want to talk to you right now. None of this dealing through others anymore."

But Lady Himoto didn't appear. Ward and Iris were left to awkwardly cobble together their morning. The letter was left untouched on the kitchen bench.

Ward sat uncertainly on the rocks, looking out at the ocean. Charlotte had said to wait here, that Dessa would come and meet him. Ward had to retrieve the sword himself. It was better, he had been told repeatedly. Nobody had explained why. The sun was setting behind him, shining out over the ocean. Soon that would be gone, the glimmer completely disappearing in to night. Ward wondered what his friends were doing right now.

Veronica would be studying. Exams were drawing to a close, and as Veronica's freedom came closer, Kane had been getting less and less enthusiastic about their sword practice, and with Veronica busy would be sulking somewhere. Iris had said she needed to study as well, ready to meet him afterwards. Charlotte might be studying as well. Ward spent a moment worrying about Kane. The man had become reserved in their sword practices, and unavailable out of them.

That, at least, had been going well. Every day felt better. Ward’s muscles ached most of the time, but the sword now felt light in his hands. The weight of the blade was nothing if you could direct it properly keep the balance up. Ward had discovered that in part through the link with Kane. Kane found the proper weight and heft of their matching swords first. Ward had found it through that link.

The link itself was becoming easier too. Ward thought on it for a moment, and felt Kane at rest. It had been five days since they had last had to establish a new link. That had its own hazards. Last time the link had broken while Ward was talking to one of his lecturers. He keeled over, coughing, and stood up on shaky legs. It had helped sell the professor on his application for a discontinuation from illness though.

Ward stared at the waves, trying to pick where Dessa might come from. When he spotted her swimming up, he was surprised how close she was. Dessa, a siren or a mermaid, looked like a tall woman with silvery hair and, in this instance, silvery wetsuit. It flared unusually around her calves. Ward knew that wasn't how she looked. No reason to worry about it now. Nothing in Ward's life ever seemed to be how he saw it. A cost of living in interesting ways.

Dessa rode a wave to the edge of the rocks, then climbed up, giving Ward a smile. "Good to see you again, and under better circumstances," Dessa said.

"Somewhat better circumstances. Good to see you too." Dessa's voice had brought a smile and a touch of colour to Ward's face. It was a lyrical voice spoken in a hushed tone. If it were allowed to gain volume, it would have entranced all who heard it. Probably why Dessa kept so hushed.

Dessa looked around the rocks, then up to the cliff. "Charlotte isn't here to meet me?"

Ward shook his head. "No, your letter said I should come alone."

Dessa turned back tot the ocean. “I said you had to do the journey alone, not that you had to meet me alone. Ah well. can't be helped now."

"Are you going to stay afterwards?" Ward asked. The court case had given him no chance to talk to Dessa last time they met, and he was eager to learn more about her. Charlotte was cautious when talking about her faebond, which only enhanced Ward’s curiousity.

Dessa shook her head. "No. I need to get back to the sea for a while. Maybe in a couple of months…” Dessa sat down on the rock next to where Ward had been sitting and waiting. Ward sat down as well, anxious to proceed, but unsure how to ask it. "So what are we waiting for?"

"Low tide," Dessa answered, then was silent, staring at the ocean. Ward saw she was smiling in the quiet lapping of the waves didn't dare disturb this moment of peace. The shadows were darkening when Dessa got up, and stars were beginning to show in the sky. It was a clear night, and the air was fresh with the tang of salt. "Alright then, time we go get you a weapon worth fighting with."

Dessa began to walk, and Ward fell in to step behind her. "What kind of sword are we looking for? One made of the ocean that ripples but holds steady?"

"An ocean sword? No, those things are far too heavy. And in any case, you wouldn't be able to see it properly."

"What?"

"A benefactor of yours, Lady Himoto, found me and explained your unique situation vis a vis the visibility of Other things. We both agreed that it was best to find you a sword where the challenge of getting it, along with the sword itself, didn't require sight."

"There are swords made out of the ocean?"

"No. There are swords made out of oceans. Quite cumbersome things."

"So what kind of sword are we trying to get for me?"

“A sword of darkness."

When no further explanation was forthcoming, Ward asked, "Is that why we're doing this around night time?"

"No. That's coincidental. We needed to find an entrance in to darkness, and this was the one I knew about."

"Are you being deliberately cryptic?"

Dessa stopped, and turned to watch him as he scrabbled over a few more rocks to reach her. "Retrieving a sword is a Trial. It's what makes you fit to wield it."

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes."

"Okay, so what can you tell me?"

"You will be in very real danger, and it is going to be very dark. You're looking for the hilt of the sword. And you'll be in the Other, which means that physics as you understand it won't necessarily apply."

"That's all reassuring."

"Really? I wasn't expecting it to be.”

Ward didn’t bother explaining his sarcasm as Dessa continued on, up to the edge of the rocks. "I'm here to help you in, and if you make it back here, I'll help you out. Don't head towards anything you can see until you have the sword."

"Nice and specific. How am I meant to spot the sword?" Ward said as he watched Dessa Swing herself over the rocks, and in to the water.

"You're not meant to spot it. It's a sword of darkness. You have to find it."

Ward swung himself down in to the ocean. Despite summer just days away, the ocean was still icy. Ward shivered, and felt a strong hand grab him and pull him. Dessa dragged him away from the rocks, and around the cliff. Ward tried to see what they were heading for, but didn't spot it until they were in the little alcove.

The cliff overshadowed a thin passage, an entrance to a small cave. The waves lapped at it, spilling water over, but the sheltering of the cliff kept them low. Dessa let Ward go, and he floated for a minute, shivering, and staring at the cave entrance.

"You want me to go in there?"

"It's the best entrance I was able to find. I can take you back if you want?"

Ward grabbed the lip of the cave. He hesitated as he remembered Iris advising against this, that trusting the fae was death or worse. But eventually even Iris had agreed they had no choice. They needed the sword. "Well, if it's the best entrance you found, I guess I'm going to trust you." Ward hauled himself out of the water, and then he was sliding down in to darkness.

It was a long slide followed by a very short freefall. Ward was met by the bottom by cold wet stone. And darkness. The darkness was every way he looked. Ward spun in a panic, and only when he saw the light at the top of the cave where he had come in did the panic die down. There was a way out. But it was a high tide way out. Until then he was stuck down here with the darkness.

Looking away from his only exit, Ward did what Dessa had said. Ward turned his back on the one source of light, and began to take small hesitant steps. Ward held his hands out in front of him, waving around slightly in case he missed something in his trek.

After an eternity of stumbling forward, Ward looked back. The faint patch of light that indicated the start of the tunnel was still right there. He had barely moved. Ward turned back to face the darkness, and tried to pick up the pace just a little. His feet sliding along the uneven ground now, fuller steps.

Ward thought he saw a face to his left, and looked around, but there was nothing there. That spooked him to a standstill. It had not been the most pleasant of faces. Ward stared out where it had been, but there was nothing there but darkness, a thought that completely failed to reassure him.

Remembering what Dessa said, Ward turned away from the imagined light, and as he edged forward, Ward tried to think.

Dessa and Lady Himoto had picked this trial, this challenge for him. That meant that he must have the skills to do it. Neither of them wanted him dead. Ward looked behind him, and now the light of the tunnel was faint in the distance. It would barely be illuminating where he stood at all.

At the second flash of a face, Ward stopped and waited, staring after it. His eyes showed afterechoes of it as he waited. At last, Ward cried out, "Hello?" The word disappeared in to the darkness, its minuscule size easily swallowed up. Ward shook his head and kept walking.

The next time a face appeared, Ward chased after it. He risked a burst of speed, and was rewarded with a fall. His hands caught him, but they stung. Ward held the hands up to his eyes, and tried to make out how bad it was in the thin light. His hands were stinging with the salt water at the bottom of the cave.

A sudden horror began to dawn on Ward as he stared at his hands, just before his face. Ward closed his eyes, and the image didn't change at all. There was no light anymore. Now, the darkness was the only thing left.

"Lady Himoto, are you sending these hallucinations to frighten me?" The darkness had no reply for him.

Ward kept his eyes closed as he shuffled on, and ignored the images that faced him. They weren't real. Whatever glimpses he thought he saw weren't real at all. The water was at his ankles now, but Ward tried to ignore that too. First, focus on finding the sword.

But how do you find a sword when you cannot even see your hand in front of your face? And what of guardians? As soon as the thought occurred to him, he wished it hadn't. But all the stories of mystical swords, there were guardians to be fought to win it. There was the sound of splashing water in the distance, but that had always been there. Ward told himself it was only louder because it was pouring faster.

If Ward was going to fight a guardian, he needed a plan. Ward stopped walking forward, and opened his eyes. Immediately illusory images began to appear. Hallucinations of some deep dark. Ward had read of that. If your eyes could perceive truly nothing, your brain would not believe it, and would provide details of things that weren’t there.

Was that what this was about? His mind always saw not quite what was there, so in darkness he could experience what really was? No in complete darkness, he was still seeing what wasn't there. What he saw was no more true than before.

Charlotte and Iris. How much would they be changed if he saw them truly?

What of the cave? It was a dark cave, but that was all it seemed to be. A damp hole in the ground where he had been put to try and find a sword that he would never be able to find by walking around blindly.

Ward felt the link with Kane. That was a comfort in the dark. He wasn't quite alone with it.

The darkness, that had been what the sword was to be made out of. It was to be made from this oppressive surrounding, hiding distilled somewhere in the black depths that showed you things that weren't there at all.

The water was at his calves.

The thought didn't panic Ward yet. If he sat down now, his head would still be above water. Ward sat down, neck deep in it, trying to think his way out of the problem.

The darkness was all around him. No, more than that. It was a part of the place, turning the water and the stone and the air in to the same thing.

No, that was a dumb thought. Darkness was just an absence of light. The lack. His mind was afraid because darkness had once been the great enemy of man. It played tricks on his senses, but he mustn't lose that darkness was not a thing. The darkness was not oppressing.

Only... only this was the Other. The water touched Ward's chin.

Ward thought. The Other. The Other could be anything at all. It need not have gravity or time. Darkness might not just be an absence here. What makes the Other what it is though?

What was Dessa? Dessa was something from a story. No, Dessa was something from many stories. Did the stories come first? It was impossible to tell. Perhaps there was no answer to which came first. The chicken and the egg all over again, only this time no previous egg-laying creatures to sink it.

Ward decided to ask Dessa which came first when he made it back, her or the stories of her.

'If I make it back' some treacherous part of his mind thought. Ward frowned at the darkness. That thought was puzzling. He hadn't thought about it before.

Ward had been sure, all the way through, that he would make it back. Certainly this was going to be dangerous, but danger didn't mean there was a chance he wouldn't make it back. What a childish thought that had been.

Ward breathed in, and then coughed, throat convulsing. Panic took him. He was entirely submerged.

He didn't know when it happened. He didn't care. The panic lent him strength and he flailed upwards, trying to find air to fill his lungs. He needed to cough. There was water in his lungs and he couldn't cough it out.

Ward broke the surface. He coughed and flailed at the darkness and ragged breathing was re-established. Occasionally a new outbreak of coughing would start up. No, standing, the water was up to his chest. Stupid to have almost drowned in shallow water.

His mouth tasted of salt and he couldn't spit it out. He felt slimy, standing here, caressed by the dark water. This wasn't where he wanted to be right now. Ward looked around for any light, something to break the darkness. Only illusory images met him. Ward closed his eyes again.

The darkness was inside him now.

What an odd little thought. Light went through a certain amount of skin, but it would be mostly dark inside a person. But this was different. Ward had breathed in the darkness with the water.

No, he had breathed in the darkness with the air. The water had washed some of that away. And the darkness was no thing. It was nothing. Ward was alone.

Truly alone.

And then he was. The sudden severing of his connection to Kane cut him. Ward keeled over. He held his breath as he pulled his legs to his chest, feet leaving the ground. A moan escaped his lips and came out as bubbles. Ward recalled himself and straightened, gasping in air. He wondered if there were any tears getting lost in the water that ran from his face.

The water was up to his neck.

Ward let himself begin to float in the darkness. People did this for leisure. Sensory deprivation tanks. It was meant to be meditation. You needed salt water because it made you more buoyant. This was what people did to relax, with the body paying attention to nothing, the mind could think.

Darkness. It was the fear of the unknown, represented by what we cannot see. Everyone gets spooked in darkness because anything could be in it. Ward shied away from the thought. No, he needed to examine it. That state was his everyday existence anyway.

Anything could be in the darkness. But also, people were in the darkness too. There was the inner darkness behind the eyes that nobody could see. The thoughts and hopes and fears of everyone that were obscured until brought to light by words or actions. We live in the dark, and constantly fight towards the light.

What if the sword was on the bottom?

Ward dived in to the water and scrabbled at the floor. Useless. As blind as before and far less mobile. Ward surfaced, taking deep breaths of the murky air. The darkness had always been inside him. No need to fear it.

Only, the darkness in oneself was terrifying. The little thoughts that you hoped nobody would ever guess, that you hid from the world. Ward shivered. It was cold. It must have been cold for a while.

His lips must be blue. No, his lips had no colour, there was no light to define it.

The dark had no definition until the senses swept it away.

Ward wondered how close the roof of the cave was. It couldn't be far away now. Once he hit the roof, if he didn't have the sword, he would probably drown. A dead body in the dark that might as well never have been.

Ward lifted a hand and was reassured by the stone above. The stone was proof that there was more here than darkness. The stone, the water, his senses let him know that there was something else.

How do you make a sword out of darkness? The darkness was everywhere, and where the light chased it back, it merely retreated. It was internal and external. Currently it was everything.

And it had every shape your imagination gave it.

The thought stunned Ward. He floated there barely daring to breath as he let it expand out. The darkness was given all kinds of shapes by your imagination, but your senses always showed them wrong.

But this was somewhere different. The sword wasn't anywhere, it was everywhere.

The air was running out faster. Ward worked on the idea, clenching and unclenching his fists. The challenge then was not to find it, but just to be able to grasp the hilt. He thought he heard a splash in the water next to him.

Thank god he hadn't imagined any monsters.

A bad track. Not serpents, slithering through the water. Not some giant thing, but hundreds of thousands of serpents, gripping with lithe bodies and dragging down in to the watery darkness. Ward’s ears seemed to hear a new susurration in the water.

Well.

Ward had heard the sword sink. Could he conjure another one? No time to stop and try and find out. Ward sucked in air, sure the serpents were coming, and dove in to the water. The darkness was defined by what you expected to find, and now Ward needed that sword desperately.

The water was infuriating. It yielded so slowly. He felt impacts against his body. The serpents. They were afraid of him. Tentative. His senses could tell them that they weren't real.

No. Not any more. Too confused. His eyes played tricks, his body was going numb, and too soon he would need air. A bubble escaped his lips as he struggled downwards.

The serpents wrapped around his legs, holding them together. He stared back at them, knowing it was useless. His eyes stung with the salt. A serpent bit his side. Ward's hand brushed the bottom, and he scrabbled around for the sword. It must have fallen near here.

But no. It wasn't here. All that was here was darkness.

So Ward wrapped his hands around it and swung. There was no sound, but Ward imagined a hiss. the constriction on his legs let go, and he gripped the handle carefully. The hilt that had been everywhere, just like the sword, just like the blade. Just as soon as he learned to grasp the darkness, not hide from it.

It was that simple. Don't deny the dark its power, but don't succumb to it. It was amazingly simple, and amazingly hard to do.

The serpents retreated. The sword was heavy in his hands, his feet now rested on the bottom of the cave. Another convulsion and a trail of bubble escaped. So this was what drowning feels like.

So this is what Charlotte went through. Only Dessa wasn't going to bring him back if he died. He wondered how much of this Charlotte still felt.

This place wasn't real. Not in the same way the cave he dropped in to was. Ward had the sword, and there must have been a way out. Perhaps if it weren't so dark.

Ward gripped the sword tightly and shut his eyes, then swung it. It clanged off a wall. He swung it the other way and it clanged again. Ward opened his eyes, and saw light so close.

He put his last energy kicking up towards it, one hand flailing while the other dragged the sword. His head burst out of a narrow passage underneath a cliff, where a worried face greeted him. Strong arms in a silver wetsuit which wasn't there at all grabbed him and dragged him out. They tried to pry the darkness from his hand, but he held it fiercely. He was dragged to the rocks, and hauled up on to them.

Ward's vision spun. He stared at the stars above him and laughed. It came out as mostly cough, but Ward didn't care. Ward had a sword, a mystical magical sword.

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Charlotte opened a second bottle of champagne, and this time allowed Ward a small glass of it. Ward was wrapped in every blanket Charlotte and Iris had been able to find in Ward's house, but he still looked blue.

Kane had made a comment that Ward nearly matched Charlotte, and had been sent to buy them all dinner, with surprisingly little complaint. It had been a good meal, and the champagne was a nice touch Iris had brought.

Charlotte had seen Dessa long enough to give her a hug, but little more, as Dessa brought Ward to the beach, and had used a pay phone to call Charlotte. Even now, completely covered in blankets, Ward hadn't let go of the sword.

The sword was something else entirely. Charlotte had seen magical blades before. Most were bright to the point of shining, part of the spectacle of the fae. Ward's new sword was black. It didn't cast a shadow either. Instead, Charlotte saw the shadows in the room warp towards it.

With everyone now holding a glass of champagne, Charlotte raised her glass. "I propose a toast to Ward, who risked a watery grave, and cut it pretty damn fine, to get this fine weapon. After this, Mark should be afraid, wherever he is now loitering."

The rest raised their glasses, and Charlotte looked around. For the first time since the endeavour had started, nobody was looking worried. "So what happened anyway? Feeling well enough to answer yet?" Iris glared at Kane for the question, but Kane seemed unabashed.

"Um. I'd rather not. Maybe later. The memory is a bit raw right now."

Kane shrugged. "Sure, whatever. I guess this means we're not on for training tomorrow too."

"Why not?" Ward asked.

"Well, you almost drowned. And we deserve a day to celebrate getting a sword."

Ward shook his head. "No, I want to start learning the weight and feel of the sword, of fighting with it. And there's only a month left. We need to prepare."

Kane looked glum, but shrugged. "Sure thing boss. After all, it's only a month until freedom for all of us. Then we can leave all this swords and stuff business behind."

Kane took a swig of champagne. "Though I do have to say, Veronica has been pleasantly surprised by my physique. I'm not as lucky as you, Ward, my scrawny frame has stayed pretty scrawny. But she can still tell."

"Why? You thinking you might want to take up actually exercising after you finish?" Charlotte said.

"I wasn't going to go that far. I mean, you don't exercise, do you?"

"I did,” Charlotte answered, voice now hushed, “Hasn't mattered much since the whole death thing."

"There, you see?" Kane said, hand with the champagne glass pointing at Charlotte. "Exercise leads to an early grave, as told by personal experience.” The sheer audacity made Iris smile, and Ward’s mouth twitch. It was only the happily simple smile on Kane's face that stopped Charlotte tearing in to him. Instead, she smiled too. "Should we list where your decisions have got you?"

"Best not. Nobody wants to be that depressed right now.” Ward spoke the words lightly, but met Charlotte’s gaze. They had understood each other, and Kane made no more comments about Charlotte.

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Charlotte and Kane stumbled out together after Ward had insisted on calling it a night. Kane had objected, but Charlotte had agreed, and with Iris, Charlotte and Ward against him, Kane had sulkily been forced out. Summer was in the air now. Neither of them had even brought a jacket out with them, and the air was pleasantly cool. "I am so not ready for sleep yet," Kane commented, kicking at a loose piece of asphalt, and watching it skid off.

"You need to be up in under six hours."

"Yeah, but I only woke up five hours ago. Totally nowhere near ready to sleep."

"So what, gonna head home and stay up playing games?"

"Nah. Having some arguments with my roomie at the moment. I'm between jobs, and trying to save. Want to wait till he goes to sleep."

"Since when are you between jobs?"

"Since a month ago, when I blew off work to help out Ward. Couldn’t do morning shifts anymore. And may have slept through a couple of afternoon ones. Boss told me I was too irresponsible. And with the whole duel thing, looking for another one hasn't been a priority, so I haven't picked anything else up yet."

"Just like that?"

"Just like what?"

"Just like that you brush aside your unemployment."

Kane shrugged. "It should be fine."

"And if it isn't?"

"It should be." Charlotte had no answer to that. Kane had lost most of the spring from his step. "So anyway," Kane said, "How do you think Ward's going to be tomorrow?"

"Do I look like I'd know?"

"Well, you're the one who has the most experience with drowning."

"No. I died. Ward had a close encounter. I have no idea what he should be expecting." Kane nodded. "I hope he's okay."

They walked a little while longer in silence. "Hey, what does it feel like for you?" Kane asked.

"What?"

Kane looked uncomfortable. "You know, the being dead thing. What does it feel like?"

“Why would you ask that?"

"It's just that. No, forget I said anything. You don't want to talk about it."

Charlotte thought for a while, then tried to quiet her own discomfort and asked “What were you thinking?"

"It was just, you're this person, vibrant and full of life, and you seem to have more energy than anyone. Sometimes I forget that there's anything strange about you, and then something will remind me and I was, you know, wondering what it's like from your side. Can you forget?"

Charlotte ruffled Kane's hair. "That's almost sweet, being concerned like a real human being."

"So much of the time you're running around helping other people. I think that we, and hey, me in particular, often forget that we should think about you too.”

"Now you really are being an emotional sap on me..." To her own surprise, Charlotte found a tear in her eye. She wiped at it. "Sorry. Can't deal with you being suddenly caring.”

"Aw it's not all that sudden. Veronica has made a better man of me."

"It shows."

Charlotte went and claimed a park bench, Kane following her. Charlotte stared up at the skies, her eyes clearing as she thought.

"You don't have to answer. I didn't mean to pry."

"Sometimes I forget." Charlotte said, not looking at Kane. "Sometimes I feel that I'm normal until my hair floats weirdly, or I see my reflection, or I touch someone and they draw away."

"Normally it's fine. I mean, I don't worry that my hair's odd, or that my skin's a different colour, but watching someone draw away when they don't realise that they're even doing it is hard."

"Have you ever considered using your song to draw people closer?"

Charlotte glanced at Kane. "No, but why would I want to? People who liked me because of Dessa's song would still flinch, even if just a little. Nobody likes touching someone who's as cold as a corpse."

Charlotte started as Kane reached towards her, and ruffled her hair. "For what it's worth, your hair is absolutely amazing." His hand travelled down, leaving Charlotte's hair to float, and cupped her cheek. "And people flinch because they're not used to it. You're not as cold as a corpse. You're cold like someone who's come plunging out of the ocean when it's been a cold day, full of life. It's unfair to call yourself dead. It really undermines all you are."

Charlotte leaned forward towards Kane then, bringing her own hand to his face. He didn't pull away, and lent forward, and then he was kissing her. Charlotte grabbed him, and held him close, and kissed back fiercely, desperately. She kept waiting for the moment when Kane would pull away, flinch back, but he didn't.

Charlotte pulled back from the kiss. It was hard, but she pushed herself away from Kane, whose smile melted in to confusion as he looked at her. "What's wrong?"

"What's wrong? What are you going to tell Veronica about this!?"

Kane slumped back, away from Charlotte. "You know, that really wasn't something I was thinking about."

"How dare you!"

"How dare I? We made out. Who cares? We're drunk."

"Oh god, what do we do?"

"What do you mean? We didn't do anything wrong. We were drunk and we did something that maybe we shouldn't have. Why don't we just, just not mention it again."

Charlotte sat silent. "But this last time before we never mention it, that was a pretty good kiss."

"How can you say that in the circumstances?"

"Why are you so strung up about it?"

"You bloody know why. And I'm not going to lie to Veronica about it."

"Then don't lie. Just don't tell her about it."

"How is that different?"

"Because you haven't lied. And look, maybe we did something we shouldn't have, but it wasn't anything all that bad."

"Why do you keep saying we? You kissed me."

"And you leaned in to it. Don't try and make me out to be some kind of villain."

They were both standing now, their voices raised. Charlotte glared at Kane. "Fine, it was a mistake, and fine, I'll let you blame me as well, but you have to tell Veronica."

"Why do I have to do anything? There's no way telling Veronica we made out does anything but hurt her."

"Because sometimes doing the right thing means doing something you don't want to do."

"Oh, so this is just another one of those little 'Kane's life is too easy, let's force him to do hard things and call them necessary' is it? I'm so sick of people trying to make me do things all the time. You can't make me tell her."

"I can't make you tell her, but I can make sure she finds out.”

"Is that a threat?"

"No. That's just a fact. If you don't tell Veronica, then I will. And I will be apologetic, and she will probably hate me anyway, but at least I won't have to worry that some day she turns up somewhere hating me because I kissed her boyfriend and never told her."

"Well that's just great." Kane ran his hands through his hair. "This is fantastic. Drunken pity on the poor girl who never gets any, and that makes me a villain somehow?"

Charlotte could see he knew he had gone too far as soon as he said it, but it didn't matter. She turned and stomped off, not letting herself look back. Charlotte half-expected Kane to call after her, or chase her down to apologise. Charlotte allowed herself to look back when she went around the corner. Kane was still standing there, not doing anything. Charlotte left him.

Back at her home Charlotte couldn't sleep. She had a glass of white wine in her hand, and kept changing the channel on the TV, hoping that there would be something new on one of them. Charlotte wanted to break something, but there would be no point. The wine glass had done nothing to her.

And her anger, as much as it was at Kane, was too much for herself as well. Guilt at what she had done, at wanting that kiss, unflinching and completely open enough that she forgot the cost of it.

Charlotte remembered Tracey sniggering. Tracey had said that Charlotte should be delighted if Veronica and Kane broke up. No, Charlotte wasn't going to let herself become that person. She was going to be better than Tracey, and better than Kane.

After even Charlotte was considering giving sleep a try, her phone buzzed. It was a short message from Kane.

'I'll tell her after the duel.'

Charlotte snorted. Of course, delay it. Charlotte wondered if Kane would have another reason after the duel, or just assume that Charlotte wouldn't have the nerve once she had calmed down. Charlotte put the wine glass down, hands shaking. Now was not the time for any drastic action. First, she was going to make sure Ward won the duel, and then after that, there would be time to sort herself out. A nice and simple answer.

Charlotte went to bed, and lay, unsleeping, staring at her ceiling, trying her hardest not to relive every one of the forbidden sensations.

"No. That was awful. Try again."

Ward picked himself up of the ground, and picked up his sword. Kane sat leaning against the wall, watching, while Sam stood, his own sword outstretched in front of him pointed towards Ward.

"Your style was wrong for the kind of blow you were going for. Sword out of position."

Ward righted himself, then began to shuffle one foot at a time towards Sam. Ward darted his sword forward as soon as he was within range, knowing that Sam's sword held a longer range on his. Sam didn't parry, instead stepping back.

O-kay. To follow that up, move in and 3 quick strikes, working lower. Ward went for the first strike. Sam parried this time, forcing Ward's sword up. The second swing was weak, still too high, a bad angle. Sam deflected it, bringing his own sword around, slapping Ward in the face.

Ward fell again. Kane laughed.

"No, what were you doing?"

"He was trying to do three swings working downwards," Kane supplied.

"I could see what he was trying to do. But that was clearly not going to work after the first deflect, so why, why did you try for the second stroke."

"Because I'd already decided what to do. My feet were set wrong to switch out."

"Your arms were set wrong to continue. You can't fight it."

Ward frowned. "How important is this, really? Mark won't be as good a swordsman as you."

"No, but he'll feel your muscles moving as you do. If you can't switch plans quickly, he will have the ability to play with you. We're not training for whoever has the best technique anymore. You're training to kill Mark."

"Is that why I get to spend so much time on the sidelines?" Kane inquired.

Sam glared at him. "Come, take up my sword. Both of you attack me at once. We will be scoring this one.”

Kane’s eagerness dropped away, hesitantly taking hold of Sam’s blade. Ward wouldn't let anyone other than himself hold his sword, and Sam had said Ward needed practice with the feel of his own blade, so Kane kept having to take Sam’s sword off him. The sword was an off-white colour, carefully polished, and made Kane’s palm itch. Sam picked up a mundane sword. Technically it meant he was at a disadvantage, though it was unlikely to matter.

The two of them attacked almost at the same time. Both had conquered their fear of practice duelling with real swords. Sam had seen to that.

Ward and Kane worked to try and stay on opposite sides of Sam as much as possible. It should have been easy. Sam never moved particularly quickly. His ability to trip either of them, or knock them aside with the flat of his own sword, ensured that the two young men were doing much more running around.

Ward and Kane had learned that entirely synchronous attacks didn't work all that well. Sam had been fighting too long, and always had one motion to stop them both. Instead, Ward would launch a strike, and Kane would follow it with what seemed best.

Ward saw it before Kane did, and tried to pull back. Sam grabbed Kane's hand as it came too close, while Sam's other hand hit Kane's throat. Sam just continued the motion of Kane's sword, Ward trying to bring his sword around fast enough to block.

The sword stabbed in to Ward's arm, and Ward dropped his sword, crying out. Ward staggered back, gripping his arm, and staring at the blood. He stared at Sam as the sword came sailing around again.

It stopped at Ward's neck. There was the slightest of stings. "You let the pain distract you."

"You stabbed me."

"In a week, you will be in a duel. It's not a fight to first blood. Are you going to drop your sword just because you've been scratched?"

Sam dropped the other sword, and Kane scrabbled to retrieve it. Sam picked up the practice blade. "I wasn't expecting such a reaction. Kane, give me my sword back. Sit and watch, maintain your bond, and let that help Ward."

"Do we still have training tomorrow?" Kane asked, looking embarrassed.

"Yes, of course we have training tomorrow. Why? Is that going to be a problem for you?"

"Only, it's Christmas Day. I'm meant to be going to a lunch with Veronica."

Sam stared, unbelieving at Kane. "You can leave early if you must, but if you are not here, I will personally come and find out why you weren't."

Kane nodded glumly, and the two of them walked out, Ward still grimacing at the cut. Kane looked at it. "At least the blade cut along your arm, rather than stabbing in."

"Yeah, a great deal of comfort that is."

"Hey, don't be so down about it. It's christmas. Time to relax and stuff."

"You know Kane, this really isn't going to be a very relaxing christmas for me."

Kane nodded. "Yeah, I thought not. Though at least you don't have to go to anything with Iris's family. That treat gets to wait till New Year's Eve."

"Ha ha nice joke."

"Why are you so uptight?"

"Because I have to fight and kill a man very soon."

"Well I'm sure you will. I mean, the guy likes to rely on tricks and making people angry and just that little bit of magic. I can't imagine he's really that good a swordfighter."

"Neither am I."

"You're fine."

"You're better." That made Kane pause. "You think I'm better?"

"Of course you're better. Your technique is awful, but you adjust what you're doing so easily. I'm better at it with the bond, but do you remember last week when he made us try without it? All he did was figure out what set I was working from, and then floor me. Every time."

"Well, sure."

They reached the train station, and Ward said goodbye, continuing on past. Kane called after him, "So do we have any plans for New Year's?"

Ward gave him such a look, so Kane clarified, "For afterwards."

Ward frowned, and shook his head. "Only, it'd be nice if the celebrations would be something that Veronica could come to. Think she'd really like to hang out with everyone else again, now that the secret men's business is drawing to an end."

"What does she know about it?"

"That it's dangerous, and that it'll all be over soon. We all get to go back to normal." "Only with a magical sword."

"Oh, go throw that thing in to a lake. It won't do any good just sitting around here."

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Kane adjusted his tie again, lowering it just a little bit further. It wasn't actually choking, but it still felt wrong to have something around his neck. He saw Veronica frowning at him, and adjusted it up a bit. No need to antagonise her.

So far the lunch had been going well. Veronica had wanted to come to dinner with Kane, but Kane had managed to convince her that it wasn't the best idea. Kane had worked hard to sit up straight and talk intelligently.

When asked about himself, Kane had mostly referenced what he had been doing at university, and made up plans for returning to university. The parents didn't seem to pick up that Kane didn't mention what he was doing now, and hopefully nobody else in the family would care enough to ask.

By the end of the lunch, Kane had even won a few smiles from Veronica's dad, who had seemed all too serious at the beginning. When Kane was safely driving away, Veronica in the passenger seat, he took the tie off.

"Well I think that was a roaring success,” Kane said, taking a corner carefully.”

"It went pretty well, yeah."

"Hey, I conducted myself as a perfect gentleman for your family. I didn't do anything terrible by accident did I?"

"You did mispronounce my mum's name."

"I apologised for that, and besides, I think we all moved on from that quite nicely. I'm a master at good impressions, don't you know. Everyone always likes me when they meet me."

"And what about afterwards?"

"Well, most people can't stand me, except for some people who I am amazingly fortunate to have around."

"Yeah, you're pretty lucky to have such a great bunch of friends."

"And you."

"Yeah."

"No, I really mean that. You're fantastic, and you're way too good for me, and that's gotta suck for you."

Veronica smiled as Kane continued. "I know it's been hard recently, my odd hours and stuff, and the whole Ward's secret project thing, which I've been helping with. But come the New Year, things are going to change."

"Yeah of course." Veronica didn’t sound very enthusiastic.

Kane pulled the car to a stop in front of Veronica's house. "I'm not just saying it. Things are going to change. Here."

Kane pulled an envelope out of the car's side pocket, handing it to her. "The earrings were a gift for your parents to see, but this is what I wanted to get you."

Veronica opened it, read over the card, then looked at Kane. "I can't, my boss at work-“

“Already agreed to give you the time off. Let me tell you I didn't like to ask him, but I got it."

"And this is going to be expensive."

"Well, a little, but not that much if we do it right."

Veronica stared back at the card. "We're really going to do it?"

"Come New Year's Day, you and I will be heading all the way up the coast, just you and me for two weeks, or until you can't stand me."

"Oh wow. Thanks. This is so great. This is." Veronica looked in to Kane's face, beaming. "Thanks Kane. You really are the best boyfriend."

Kane got out of the car to hug Veronica goodbye, and she ran around it and kissed him, still smiling wildly. "Are you going to tell me what Ward's little secret is too?"

"Of course. Come New Year's, everything's going to be fantastic."

**Part 6: The Duel**

Charlotte enjoyed the warmth of the summer evening. Seven in the evening and still the sunlight was creeping in and the bricks were warm. The others were drinking, even Veronica clutched a glass of wine as they lounged in the courtyard of a local pub, enjoying the warmth. There was no ‘talking shop’ tonight. It was time to unwind and enjoy living. Charlotte did not begrudge them that. Even Ward was smiling, even if he looked just a little peaky. Iris had not let go of his hand all evening. Kane had joked about it and everyone had laughed. Kane had called the ‘New Year’s Eve Eve’ party a necessity, since celebrating the next day was likely to be hard no matter what. Tomorrow there might even be reasons to grieve.

Charlotte was struggling to relax, remaining distant. It was not just avoiding Veronica and Kane, so happy together, but the worry of the next day. Charlotte had asked Iris in quiet, despite Kane’s rule, and Iris had said it would be fine with such confidence Charlotte almost believed her. Yet though Iris could see many things, but the future was not one of them. Charlotte looked at her untouched glass and took the slightest sip. Charlotte had hunted down every contact she could find for information, for trinkets for aid. Spending hours talking to Callum, costing her personal information again and again to the information dealer. Charlotte had done everything that she could to make sure Ward won. That terrified her. Not because she had not done enough, but because it was now completely out of her control. The duel would be entirely up to Ward and Kane, working together.

Iris slid over next to Charlotte, finally releasing Ward’s hand. “You’re looking rather somber over here. Anything I should be worried about?” Iris kept her voice down, letting Kane’s tomfoolery keep the other two occupied. Charlotte shook her head. “Everything’s fine. Just enjoying having a break in my own quiet way.”

Iris rested a hand on Charlotte’s shoulder, and Charlotte felt the slight flinch, subtle but there. “You’re making sure Ward and Kane don’t overdo it tonight?” Charlotte asked. Iris started to answer, but stopped suddenly, staring. Charlotte followed the gaze to the gate just as it opened, revealing Mark, trailing a terrified Rhani. Mark held a longsword in one hand.

“You wouldn’t imagine the time I had finding where all of you are. I can’t believe I wasn’t invited.” Mark sat at one of the benches while everyone else was still stunned, and casually put his sword on the table, between them. Charlotte thought about what she could do, but there was little for it. She remained quiet, anxious. Mark was bound to show up sooner or later, particularly after Kane stole from him.

Veronica was the first one to speak, surprising everyone, including herself. “What did you do to Rhani?” The question held a menace to it. Mark, who had been enjoying the faces around the table flicked his eyes back to Veronica. “What’s it to you? You don’t belong at this table anyway.”

“If you hurt her…” Veronica stood, and began to navigate her way around the table, to get to Rhani, who stood, staring blankly ahead. Kane grabbed her hand to stop her. “Don’t. I’ll help Rhani in a second.” Veronica hesitated for a second then shook Kane off. Mark let Veronica retrieve Rhani.

“I wanted to come say ‘hi’ to all my friends here and I finally got sick of all Rhani’s refusals. She cooperated quickly once she understood I was serious about how much pain I could cause her.” Charlotte’s stomach churned at the thought. “Honestly, I’m a little worried about your girlfriend, Kane. Completely ignores the sword to focus on her friend’s wellbeing. It’s the kind of detail you don’t expect people to overlook.”

Kane’s face was red, and he glared at Mark. “What are you doing here? Get out.”

“Or what, you’ll keep my sword from me? How do you plan that?”

Charlotte saw the guilt before Kane could mask it, and there was a sinking feeling in her stomach. Veronica’s voice broke in, “Kane, what’s he talking about?” Veronica was standing close to Mark, trying to get Rhani to speak, or pull her further away.

Kane glanced from Veronica to Mark. His hand ran through his hair as he considered his response. “What I have been working on these last few months, this man challenged Ward to a duel to the death, one which I have been helping Ward prepare. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you because, well, it’s ludicrous. You wouldn’t have believed me.”

“Why is there a duel?”

“It’s complicated, I don’t know if I can explain now.”

Veronica was having none of it. “Kane, why was there a duel?” Mark was sitting back, watching it unfold. He had picked up Ward’s drink. Kane took a deep breath. “Mark is Iris’s brother. Mark wants Iris dead, or Iris to suffer. Killing Ward seemed a good way to do it.”

“And you didn’t go to the police?”

“There’s more, which I can’t tell you about, but I promise I’ll explain it soon, just not right now.”

“Oh? Why not now?”

“Because there’s a maniac with a sword sitting far too close for this conversation now.” Kane’s voice rose there, unable to keep a calm facade. There were tears in Veronica’s eyes now. “You mean when you saw Mark you knew he was crazy, and you didn’t tell me, didn’t try and help?”

Kane was standing now too. “Of course I tried to help. I couldn’t tell you, but I made damn sure he left you and me alone.”

“And left Rhani to him?”

Mark interjected there, voice full of mirth. “Maybe he worried I wouldn’t accept that deal, or maybe he just forgot her in the heat of the moment. Nonetheless, I treated her very kindly before today. Ask her once she’s less hysterical. More than I can say for how Kane has treated you, am I right?”

Veronica stiffened, and gave no answer. There was a brief hot silence, eventually broken by Iris. “What do you mean a deal with Mark?”

Mark only glanced at Iris, still discomforted by her study of him. “Do you want to answer this one too, Kane, or should I?”

Kane, shoulders drooping, looked at Ward and Iris. “I made a deal, but it was important. I made sure he couldn’t get to use before the duel. We needed him to leave us alone.”

“Indeed! That I should not come near Charlotte, Veronica, Iris, Ward or yourself before the day of the duel. If I broke that, well, then Callum would keep hold of my blade here, making it almost impossible to win. Thankfully I have been spared that humiliation. I was truly worried when Kane made off with my blade here.”

There was a hush. Kane slumped back in to his chair, and would not look at anyone. At last, Iris asked, disbelieving, “You had his sword? You actually had his sword?”

“I had to give it up. He was in Veronica’s home. You would understand, I kept us safe from him.” Kane pulled himself up again, and yelled at Mark. “And you have broken the agreement. Here you are talking to all of us. You don’t get that sword.”

Mark cocked his head. “Well then, it’s within a day, so I rightfully reclaimed it before coming here. Possibly this is still a transgression. When you can get enough signatories to hold a court, and the time to do so, feel free to hold a full inquiry. I think you might struggle to do that before tomorrow afternoon though.”

“Fine. Spit out whatever you came here to say and leave. You’ve already ruined the evening.”

Mark took a swig of his purloined drink. “Can’t I simply come and join in the celebrations? I’m hoping you’ll all join me celebrating tomorrow. Ward excepted of course.” Iris spoke back. “Leave, or I will finish the last fight we had.” Charlotte could already see that things were starting to spiral out of control. This needed to be ended. They were in a public place, and soon there would be far too much attention on them. Already some other tables were looking their direction, curious. That could go worse.

“Let him sit,” Charlotte said, “He’s not harming anyone. If we stay here he can’t harm us.”

Mark stood up, his chair clattering as it fell. “A nice sentiment from you. I was wondering when you were going to speak up. Surprised you didn’t defend your secret boyfriend there.”

“What are you blathering about?” Charlotte said, trying to keep her voice calm, keep her body calm so Mark wouldn’t feel the sudden nerves. The explosion of pins and needs in her palms was not helping. “I am referring,” Mark said, “to your little indiscretion with Kane. Or am I the only one here who knows about that too?”

Veronica’s mouth fell open, and she looked at Charlotte. Veronica’s face grew tight, and Charlotte realised her face, her hesitation must have given it away. “We kissed once. It was a mistake that I won’t repeat.”

“Such a mistake you thought it better nobody should know, I’m sure.”

“No, I wanted to tell Veronica, she deserved to know, but we needed to finish the duel first.” Charlotte was looking at Veronica, willing her to believe Charlotte. It had been a mistake, and she had wanted Veronica to know, just not yet. Not quite yet.

The tears glistened in Veronica’s eyes, but she would not let them fall yet. She turned her gaze to Kane. “How could you?” Veronica asked. Kane shrugged. “I was a bit drunk. It didn’t mean anything.”

“And that’s enough! It didn’t mean anything so you decide not to tell me. It means something to me, and you knew that. You can’t say you didn’t. Tracey was right about you.”

Kane stood. “That’s unfair. Veronica, I love you. I don’t want anyone else, I want you. And I am willing to do whatever it takes to make it up to you.” Charlotte could already see the plea was wrong. There was guilt, but no contrition in Kane.

“Saving her life might be a good start,” Mark said. Then sanity gave way to madness. Mark picked up his sword, causing everyone to jump back. The sword swung to point at Veronica. Ward began to lunge forward as Kane took one further step back. Charlotte watched as both of them began to curl up as if hit by some invisible blow. Charlotte had not time to spare for them. She was already in motion. Iris was rising too, but she was too far away. Veronica stumbled pack, not running, eyes fixated on the blade. The blade was coming towards her. Charlotte was there.

Charlotte caught the sword with her hand, gritting her teeth, containing her scream of pain. Her hair whipped around her, blocking her vision somewhat, but she did not need it. The sword was against her bone, and Charlotte stepped forward, dragging her hand down to the hilt, forcing the sword down as she punched out at Mark. There was a solid connection. The pain of the impact on her left hand was too dull to really feel. She punched again, and again, until Mark stumbled back.

Charlotte brushed her floating hair back, seeing Mark retreating, face red where he had been hit. The sword was hissing and steaming. Mark looked furious, and Charlotte braced for another attack. It had been barely ten seconds.

Iris stepped up beside Charlotte, ready to fight too. Charlotte glanced at Ward who was barely collecting himself, disoriented, still on the ground where he had fallen. Mark lowered his sword. Everyone else in the courtyard was watching. Mark shrugged, “Fine, I won’t kill her if you two are so adamant. Hope everyone saw how Kane was the only one not willing to jump forward to save her.” Mark walked out. Iris touched Charlotte’s shoulder, attracting her attention. “Are you alright?”

“I’ll be fine.”

“It was a magical blade, sometimes they can be different.” Charlotte turned away from Iris’s concern. “We have other worries. We need to leave here. Now.”

Charlotte waited till she could move her fingers again then started breathing. It was an odd thing to forget to do. It had taken her months to learn to breathe naturally again, just for her own comfort. Extreme pain made her forget. Charlotte turned back, and Iris was bundling everyone else out of the courtyard, on to the street. Veronica was helping Rhani, Iris was supporting a still-disoriented Ward. Charlotte saw Kane still struggling, looked at everyone else, then reluctantly offered him support so they could get out.

They walked as fast as they could to Ward’s house, only a few blocks away. Kane could stand on his own when they got there, but was still pale. All six of them squeezed in to the kitchen, with its three chairs. Rhani, Kane and Ward were allowed to take them.

“We need Sam here now,” Iris said. Lines on Veronica’s cheeks betrayed she had cried on the walk, but now her eyes were clear, slightly too wide from fear. “He tried to kill me.”

“With a sword, I know,” Iris said, barely paying attention. “I’m going to get Sam here. We have problems.”

Iris walked out, leaving Charlotte and Veronica to talk while everyone else recovered. Charlotte decided to speak first. “I really am sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

“Someone tried to murder me with a sword. My relationship can wait. Was that man really Iris’s brother?”

Charlotte nodded. “So there really is some kind of duel tomorrow?” Charlotte nodded again, watching Veronica’s face get angrier. “Well, in those circumstances, I guess I should stay out of the way. Can you at least tell me what this is all about?”

Charlotte thought of saying yes, of explaining it, but Sam would be on the way. It would cause trouble. Reluctantly she shook her head. “I promise to tell you as much as I can, but there are things I can’t tell you.”

“Why not? You’re in some kind of mad sword-fighting cult, you caught a sword with your hand, which is now fine. There is something going on, and seeing as my friend has been traumatised, and I was nearly killed, I deserve answers.”

“It’s all magic,” Kane said, making both girls start. “Crazy insane magic. Charlotte’s dead, so wounds don’t hurt her as much. If we tell anyone else there’s a crazy old man who comes to kill you. If I tried to show you any magic, explain the madness that consumed my life, I would have been put to death for it.”

Veronica stared at Kane for a moment, then walked out of the room. Charlotte worried about her leaving, of Mark sneaking up on her, but could not face calling her back, forcing her to stay. Instead, Charlotte looked at Rhani. Rhani was quiet, but alert. There was an anger in her eyes and Charlotte felt relieved that she was no worse. Upon inspection, one arm was broken, and Charlotte busied herself trying to set that. Charlotte had learned to set her own bones since she was dead. This was easy enough.

Sam stormed in to the room unannounced. It could not have been more than five minutes since Iris went to find him. Sam ignored Charlotte, and instead levered both Kane and Ward from their chairs, forcing them to stand. “The link. We need to reforge it.”

Kane and Ward mutely gripped each other’s hands. Charlotte left to find Iris, leaving them to do it. Iris was sitting on the floor in the loungeroom, head hanging. Charlotte sat next to her. “Sam’s here. He’s working with Ward and Kane. That should fix it.”

Iris shook her head. “No. I saw it. They changed, and they saw each other for how truly different they are, in will, and in action. They won’t be able to make that link again.”

Charlotte and Iris waited. Nothing to do, and everything wrong. Veronica came out and asked if her and Rhani could head home, but Charlotte said no. Mark might try for them again. Veronica paced the small dark loungeroom, then eventually found a bottle of wine and opened it. Veronica offered it around, and while Iris, Charlotte and Rhani drank little, Veronica drank with a passion that scared Charlotte.

It was dark by the time Sam, Ward and Kane reemerged. Sam’s fury told Charlotte everything she needed to know. Sam barely glanced at Rhani and Veronica. “I’m going out. Mark won’t harm any of you tonight, I will make sure.” With that said, Veronica and Rhani went to leave. Kane called for Veronica to stay, but she ignored him. Kane picked up the win bottle and swallowed the last few mouthfuls without finding a glass. “Well I’m out then. I’m useless and worthless, according to Sam. I’ll see you later.”

Charlotte called after him. “Tomorrow at the warehouse?” Kane hesitated, but did not answer. Charlotte thought it was time for her to leave. Just Ward and Iris were left with her. They deserved some time. Ward sat on his couch, exhausted from whatever mental effort he had tried. “Well that’s it then,” Iris said. Her hands were clenched in to fists. “Tomorrow my idiot boyfriend goes in to an impossible fight.”

“It’s not impossible. It’ll be hard, but…” Ward had nothing to finish with. Iris sat next to him and held him as tightly as possible. “I’m going to miss you so much. This,” her own sob cut her off. Charlotte stood awkwardly in the door. At last Iris pulled herself away from Ward, who was reluctant to let go.

“I’m not coming to watch you die tomorrow.”

Somehow Ward managed a weak smile, “Then I’ll have to come and tell you about my victory in person.”

Iris left Charlotte and Ward the only ones left, and in the dim globe above, Ward appeared as more of a shadow.

Ward levered himself out of bed, feeling awful. There were many different parts to that, the least of it physical. He needed to be strong today, but there was nowhere left to draw the strength from. Kane was useless, Iris would not attend. Only Charlotte had stayed with him for the fight. Ward made himself a bowl of cereal, tasted none of it, and gave up on the food half way through the bowl. He meticulously cleaned it, and then went and cleaned the rest of the kitchen, wiping down the surfaces. Even after a thorough clean it was only one in the afternoon. Five hours until the duel would start.

Ward checked on his sword. Still under his bed, the sword, appearing to Ward as black metal. In his imagination it was nothing, no pigment or definition beyond where it ended. The sword looked worse in daylight, so Ward had kept it hidden as best he could, terrified that he would reach down one day before practice and find it had vanished.

This was the last time Ward would need to draw that sword from its hiding spot, one way or another. The thought kept him as he walked out in to the far-too-bright summer day. The sword was wrapped in a cloth to keep it hidden. There were a fair number of people in sandals and singlets walking the streets. Ward caught a slight amount of bickering over where might still have ice. Everyone else looked happy and relaxed, readying for the fireworks over the harbour.

Ward headed in to the more industrial area of Erskineville. Someday this would all be apartments, but for now, The Warehouse still stood. Charlotte had asked around, and it was the best place to hold the duel, even got permission from whoever owned it. Ward could already see it down the lane. Then Ward spotted the people.

It looked like a dozen people, milling around outside the warehouse. Ward’s phone bleeped as he stood there. It was from Charlotte, saying there was a slight problem with the venue. Ward stared at the small crowd and eventually picked Charlotte out, talking to the blue-suited figure of Callum. Ward walked up slowly, trying to figure out the conversation.

Callum spotted Ward first, and greeted him with a wave and a large smile. “Ah, the man of the hour. Ready?”

Charlotte was not letting go of her conversation though. “It’s despicable. Not telling me that you owned this space when you’d said you’d get it, fine. But selling tickets?”

Callum shrugged. “Duels are exciting, and ever since my bar was exploded, business has been slow. You’re really going to begrudge me trying to make money?”

“Out of my friend? yes.”

Callum’s face became serious. “Look, I’ve been polite for twenty minutes as you argued. Do you have any authority or ability to make me change this beyond appeals to ethics I don’t agree with or a moral duty I don’t feel?” Charlotte had no answer. Callum gave a respectful nod to Ward, then led his gold-suited companion off to talk to some of the others gathered.

“He’s sold fifty tickets to this thing. With more people coming. This shouldn’t be a spectacle.” Ward was shocked at just how angry Charlotte seemed. “Hey now. It won’t matter, will it?”

“Won’t it?” Charlotte was watching the crowd now, frowning as she pulled the hair back from her face and held it till it was almost still. “Mark’s ability, with this many people? I don’t know who that benefits. It’s just impossible,” Charlotte looked at Ward as if noticing him for the first time. “Hey why are you here? You don’t need to be for another couple of hours.”

Ward drew his eyes away from the oddly-dressed crowd. “Couldn’t just stay at home. There was nothing there. It was a shorter walk than I thought.”

Charlotte touched Ward’s arm, causing him to shiver. “Hey Ward, I know it’s hard to think about but you’ve trained really hard. You can do this without Kane. You were always better than him anyway.”

Ward hugged Charlotte. In part to relieve her guilt. Ward had watched Charlotte take the duel on herself, and now her actions had put all of that in jeopardy. Ward had no words to say she was innocent of whatever unfolded. In part it was a thanks for all the effort and worry. In part, Ward needed to be held as much as Charlotte did. To feel someone close before he fought.

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Ward sat, watching Mark smoke. There was nothing else to do. There was an hour before the duel, but the protocol meant they had to remain in the 'field of combat' beforehand. Neither Charlotte or Iris had found a reason why. Mark shuffled his chair over next to Ward in the bright spotlights of the arena. Ward considered scooting away, but was sure that little exchange would look ridiculous. "This is all a bit silly, isn't it?" Mark said.

Ward looked around at the bleachers Callum had set up around the circular arena which the duel was to take place in. Iris had argued that a more complex duelling space would be better, but Mark had apparently got the say. An empty circle of hard asphalt now too bright in the spotlights. The gathering crowd were indistinct. Eventually Ward nodded agreement.

Mark opened his pack of cigarettes and held it out to Ward. "You know I don't smoke,” Ward said, nose wrinkling at just the sight.

"Just being polite in your last hour. The cancer isn’t a concern now.” Mark said. Mark pulled out a cigarette for himself, and lit it. "I was delighted to hear your helpful friend wouldn't be joining us today, though I'm worried. You look tired."

"I'll be fine once the fight starts." Ward just wished Mark would remain silent. The man continued though.

"People think that. They think the adrenaline will kick in and keep them on their feet. But that's only compensation. You'll be duller than I am."

Now Ward shuffled sideways, away from the growing cloud of smoke. "I'm going to win." The voice sounded weak in the large enclosed space. Mark laughed. "I really am glad you've found a fighting spirit. I tried to tell your friend to take the sensible way out, but you're all fired up, ready to end it.”

"People keep trying to tell me that the Other is this amazingly dangerous thing. So far, you, a regular person, has been the most awful thing I’ve seen.”

“I am far from regular.”

“You just use the Other, but you'd use whatever It’s you who’s twisted. Iris saw that.”

Mark smiled. "You know, I'm going to be slightly sad to have to do this. Not all that sad, but sad enough to make sure what's left of you gets a proper burial."

"Why are you so certain you're going to win?"

Mark laughed, and slapped Ward on the back. The crowd hushed at the motion, and Sam began to walk over, but Ward waved him away. The crowd settled back down, some trying to get close enough to overhear what was being said.

"I've watched your training for weeks. You're better than I was expecting. You learned quickly. But I know your sets. I know your moves. You're not good at changing when something's not working. Kane brought that to a fight, and without him I could kill you before you finish your first little sequence.” Mark threw his cigarette to the ground, and pulled out another. “I felt you train, I got deep and familiar with how the sword grip felt in your hands before an overhand swing, before a stab. Do you have any idea how to fight that?”

“| might surprise you.” Ward said, then picked up his chair and walked to the other side of the arena, to sit and stare at his sword. It looked black, and not quite metallic. In the stadium light it looked fake. Ward had to keep telling himself how sharp it was, how it could turn in his hands to help catch Mark's sword.

“It's a shame you can't use the sword with your shrouding powers. Who knows how it might help you. You have got quite good at them.” Ward looked up in to the smiling face of Lady Himoto. Today she was wearing a gown of blue, with streaks of orange running through it.

"You're not allowed in the arena."

Lady Himoto stood up straight, still smiling at Ward. "No, I'm not am I?”

Ward squinted at the crowd, and spotted Lady Himoto in a silvery dress sitting towards the back of the stands. She flashed a smile at him. "So you're not. This is a glamour. I'm talking to myself."

Lady Himoto shrugged. "I thought you might need the company."

"I must look like crazy.”

Lady Himoto sat down on an ornate wooden chair that hadn't been there before. Ward tried to pinpoint the moment it appeared, but couldn't. "You don't look crazy, because I'm glamouring you. You just look like you're sitting in your own chair, perfectly normal."

"You can do that?"

"Of course. Glamours lie to the senses. From there it's just a matter of scale and ability. I thought you were smart enough to understand that.”

Ward stood up and began pacing in front of Lady Himoto. He watched the crowd. The few who were looking his direction watched the chair, not him. "So what, still trying to take my side?"

"Charlotte asked me to come and offer you help."

Ward scanned the crowd and found Charlotte, sitting near Callum at the front of the crowd. "Why?"

"I don't think she wants you to die."

"I already told you I didn't want your help."

"You've got spirit, certainly. But that might help you lose it far too swiftly. So come, tell an old trickster how you plan to win? I’ve been dying to know.”

"If I tell you, you could just tell Mark."

Lady Himoto sighed. "I promise you, on my name and reputation, that I will not tell Mark that we have spoken, or what we discuss in any of our conversations unless you are dead. Happy?"

Ward left off pacing, and stood in front of her. "You really think that you can help me win from here?

"Yes. Of course. Now tell me what you're planning. Let me help. For everyone's sakes." Ward threw himself down on the seat. "I don't have a plan. Just fight. Do my best. Hope."

Lady Himoto stood up, astounded. "After three months of planning, and you get to the day and that's it?"

“I had a plan. It was dismantled. That's all I have left."

"And yet you still turn away my help? I really thought you were smart. Just take my help and don't tell Iris. Take it and lie about it afterwards, say it was all your ideas and abilities.”

"Iris would know."

"Of course she would know with that vision of hers. But the upside is that she gets to live long and peacefully after she leaves you. Just maybe even she will be able to appreciate that you alive with my help was better than her pure anguish over causing your death. It seems all your friends will get to take a little credit there.”

"I said I didn't want your help, and I don't. I'll do this on my own terms."

Lady Himoto looked sour. "I see. Well, I hope you don't come to regret that decision, but if you do, you really won't have much time for it. Goodbye, you stupid, arrogant man."

"Wait," Ward cried, as Lady Himoto began to vanish. "You still owe me a favour, don't you?"

Lady Himoto turned back, smile on her face. "Yes. I owe you a favour. You can get my help without even needing to make a bargain."

"I want you to make it appear like I am sitting on the chair until I need to do anything else. I want my privacy until the duel starts."

Lady Himoto's expression soured again, disappointment with a dash of anger. "Of course. That's all too easy." She vanished, leaving Ward alone.

Ward walked around the arena staring at all the faces that would be watching the fight. The place was filling up, everyone talking excitedly. Ward looked at Callum, remembered Callum assuring people that harm would come to Mark, yet he had brought this crowd here. Ward looked at Charlotte, who was staring intently at the chair where Ward sat. Charlotte looked as frightened as Ward felt. Ward glanced at Lady Himoto, who was talking to an ancient looking man sitting next to her.

Ward’s phone buzzed, and Ward worried for a second that someone would have heard it, but everyone else continued. The message was from Iris. It was awkwardly worded, too long. There were signs of half-written sentences intended to be edited out. The sentiment was confused, unstructured, the guilt and the sorrow and that anger at the Other for everything it had done. The last line though struck a chord with Ward: ‘I won’t say goodbye so don’t you dare’.

Ward quietly tapped in a reply. Three words, ‘see you soon’. As soon as it was sent, the knees went out from under Ward. He had no plan, and no hope. He had spent his favour with Lady Himoto, and there was no time for anything else. With nobody in the crowded stadium to watch, Ward burst in to tears, letting them stream down his face, muddying his vision and damping his palms.

At last Ward calmed himself and returned to his seat. There were barely ten agonising minutes left. "Lady Himoto?" Ward whispered. Ward heard Lady Himoto's voice whispering in his year, felt her breath, but didn't see her. "Did you want something else of me?"

"I think you can let the glamour go now. It's almost time."

"Are you sure? You're still a little red around the eyes."

"Yes. I'm sure. It's time we finally ended this. I have a plan.”

Ward got up. His tread was steady now. Ward walked over to where Mark was sitting, ground around him strewn with cigarette butts. "Ward. You're feeling mighty plucky there."

"Are you ready for this fight then?"

Mark glanced at his watch. "It's another five minutes. Time for one last smoke."

Mark pulled out another cigarette, and began to slowly draw it in. "I saw that my sister left. Lucky there. Her eyes on me always gave me the creeps. Guess that means the only friend here to watch you die is Charlotte."

"No chance. You're going to lose this fight."

Mark closed his eyes. "Your stance, the feel of your voice. What's got you so suddenly confident?"

"Everyone says you're lazy. You're not going to be good."

Mark shrugged. "I don't need to be good. I've got the natural advantage all the way. I could run rings around all those carefully learned little moves of yours blindfolded."

"I'd be willing to bet you can't."

Mark opened his eyes, looking at Ward, then laughed. "That is possibly the dumbest trick I've seen.”

Ward shuffled, letting his uncertainty show, his doubts. Mark smiled at him, then called out for Callum, gesturing him to come over. Callum glanced at Sam, but advanced on the two combatants. Baror kept close, golden eyes watching the two combatants.

"Callum, how does it affect the odds if I'm blindfolded?"

Callum's pen was spinning between his fingers as he thought. "A little, but not too much. It barely affects your ability to fight, and the betters know it. Why?”

Mark nodded. “Well, Ward was getting all cocksure, and wanted me to fight blindfolded, so I thought, since you are doing wagers anyway, you could mediate one between the two of us. I have an offer.”

Ward shook his head. "No. I want to offer you a wager. If you cannot beat me while wearing a blindfold, then you must leave all my friends alone. Forever. You don't come near them."

Mark took another drag, then laughed, smoke pouring out. "So this is your master plan? Try to protect your friends, even in death."

Mark stood up. "Well, it's a noble sentiment, of course. I'll agree to that, on the condition that if I win blindfolded, I want amnesty from the Other."

Ward looked shocked. "But I can't give you that. I can't make that bet."

"Well then I suppose you'll just have to-"

"I'll pay out that wager if you can't do it," Callum interrupted. Both Ward and Mark looked incredulously at him. “I agree to act as guarantor, Ward, if Mark cannot beat you blindfolded, your friends will be safe, under pain of Mark’s death. Swiftly, before they can be harmed. If Mark defeats you blindfolded, then I will ensure his safety, and offer amnesty from even my own vengeance.”

Mark snorted. “You can’t offer that. Nobody has that kind of pull.”

Callum looked at Mark, the disdain clear on his face. “Call me anything but a liar. Are you going to take the incredibly generous deal or not?”

Reluctantly, Mark held out a hand, and Ward took it, and shook it. As Callum retreated back to the seats, the fight about to start, Mark muttered to Ward, "I don't know what you're planning, but it really doesn't matter. You’re going to die.”

Ward smiled. "Oh, I don't know. As soon as you take off that blindfold, you'll never be allowed to hurt Iris or any of my friends again. Claim be damned."

Mark raised his sword, then at the gasp from the crowd reluctantly lowered it. "That was a cheap trick, and a stupid one. You have no idea the horrors I'm going to visit on your friends once you're dead now."

"You would have hurt them anyway. It's what you do."

"It doesn't matter, you still can't win."

Mark cut a strip off his shirt, and tied it around his eyes as a crude blindfold. He turned to directly, facing Ward, then raised his sword on guard. "So let's get this show over with already. I want to wipe that little smirk off your face." Ward raised his own sword, taking deep breaths trying to remain calm, and trying to keep his head clear. Ward looked over at Sam, who walked to stand between them. The crowd hushed as tension hung in the air, waiting for Sam to start the duel.

"Alright. You should both know the rules by now. Break a rule, I step in and kill the rulebreaker. Nice and simple. Begin."

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Charlotte gripped her armrests as tight as she could. If she had had circulation, it would have been cut off. The blindfold had made the crowd around her buzz, all kinds of new bets being exchanged. Beside her, Callum sat with his pen held stationary as he watched what was happening down below. Callum had refused to change the odds from one to one, despite everything. He hadn't even adjusted them with the blindfold.

It was clear that from the first swing the blindfold wasn't hindering Mark. Ward had opened up with several swipes, and Charlotte had felt a surge of hope as she had seen him move. It wasn't the same Ward she had met almost a year ago swinging that sword. This one was fiercer, more determined.

Mark had blocked each of those strokes without any apparent effort. His movements were slower than Ward's, but Mark didn't need to be quick. Charlotte thought of looking away, of denying Mark that set of eyes to watch this from. "We need to distract the crowd," Charlotte said to Callum, but Callum shook his head. "No. You can't interfere in the duel."

"To hell with that. The crowd being here is interfering. That's your fault."

Callum looked around as if surprised by just how many people there were. "Well they're here now. No reason to interfere further."

"If Ward dies here I'll-"

"Be very sad. But if I were you, I'd stop talking, and pay attention to what is happening.”

Down below, it looked like Ward was playing keepaway. The crowd were already grumbling at that. Ward kept retreating further and further away from Mark. After the initial salvo, Ward was focusing entirely on defending himself. It looked like he needed to. Many of Ward’s deflects looked awkward, the back-pedalling keeping him safe.

Ward's shuffling retreat was stopped by the edge of the circle. Ward ducked and ran, and managed to get back under Mark's guard, but took a slice across his arm to do so. The crowd roared at first blood.

"Come on, Ward," Mark yelled pacing to the centre of the arena. "Is your plan to just run around for hours and hope I can't catch you?" The crowd around Charlotte laughed. Charlotte felt sick. Every move that Ward made, Mark was already moving to intercept at the same time. There was no delay between their two motions.

As Ward made a second dodge at the other end of the field, Charlotte glanced at the clock. It had been five minutes, and both of the men were sweating now. Mark didn't bother to pursue Ward so quickly this time, instead allowing himself time to catch his breath. "Now I see. Wear me out a little. Think you're fitter than me. But that doesn't really matter. I can stalk you slowly. Eventually you won't escape."

"I only need to get lucky once."

"You haven't tried a strike since the start. You need to attack to get lucky."

"Is it hard orienting through all those eyes instead of your own?"

Mark laughed. “Was that your hope? I’ve been doing things like this since I was fourteen. This is what I see every single day..”

Ward glanced at the crowd, and even Charlotte could see the mistake. Mark took the opportunity to dart forward. Ward's attention snapped back, and he managed an awkward block, but he tripped over his feet trying to skip away. Charlotte heard the impact as the air was driven from Ward’s lungs. One hand held Ward’s sword out towards Mark.

"Watch this closely," Callum said to Baror, who nodded. Charlotte wanted to scream, but fear held her completely still, watching. Charlotte studied the fear and pain in Ward's face, the triumph in Mark's. Mark batted Ward's sword aside in the same move as he plunged his sword down in to Ward.

The crowd roared.

Charlotte saw the look of confusion on Mark's face. Mark began to recoil back, then he screamed, and the world changed.

Ward was on one knee, sword outstretched. Mark was recoiling back, clutching his eye. Charlotte tried to make sense of what she was seeing. The crowd was near silent, but it didn't last long. They all began cheering or booing, and the noise was deafening.

Callum turned to Baror, and said, "Change the odds, two to one in Ward's favour," then to Charlotte to say, “I knew he was too clever to die easily.”

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It had been a monumentally difficult trick. Ward was still stunned it had worked. The rules had been very clear, no glamours on the opponents senses. The secret had been in the wording. More than a hundred eyes had watched Ward, their own senses being leeched by Mark, Ward’s own eyes and muscles feeding more and more information. Ward had cast a glamour on the crowd, lied to them about what was happening. Then, most difficult, he had cast it on himself. There had been five seconds of blindness, as he experience events the same as everyone else, hoping Mark would not move too far. The blow he delivered afterwards had been no killing blow. But it had been as precise as Ward wanted.

Ward got to his feet, and advanced towards Mark. Mark screamed out, "Foul play. We banned glamours!"

The entire crowd looked at Sam, who glared back at them. "The glamour was on the spectators and on himself. That is perfectly acceptable." There was the slightest nod of respect from Sam to Ward. Ward took another step towards Mark. "So what's the plan from here? The only senses in this hall you can trust are your own. Want to risk it again?"

"You bastard." Mark yelled. Ward took another step forward, and Mark ripped the blindfold off, throwing it to the ground. Only then did Charlotte see that Mark had been stabbed in the eye. "If you think the pain will stop me, then you don't know anything about me."

Ward smiled. "You took the blindfold off. That means you're not allowed to touch Iris. You lost your amnesty from Lady Himoto or Callum. You're a dead man walking."

The audience roared, then became quieter and quieter. Ward’s sword was wavering in the air as Mark warily advanced on him again. Ward took a step forward then stumbled, falling to his hands and knees, sword dropped, and the crowd was once again silent. The only noise was Mark laughing.

Ward tried to make himself stand, but it wasn't working. It was taking all his energy to keep himself this far off the ground. Ward couldn't hear the crowd through the ringing in his ears. So that was magic on a grand scale. The effort of it made him feel light and dizzy, the triumph a distant buzzing. It was a triumph though. His friends were safe.

The kick to his stomach knocked him over. It didn't hurt enough. The second one hurt more, straight to the chest. Ward looked up at Mark, standing over him. Ward struggled to make out the words.

"I always thought you'd whimper more now," Mark said, kicking Ward again. "This hurts enough you should be screaming. I'm impressed." Mark kicked Ward's sword away, then looked up at the crowd.

"It appears this bastard at my feet has sacrificed himself to keep those precious to him safe, and assure my death once the duel is over." Mark knelt down, and Ward weakly raised his arms. Mark stroked his face, hushing him, then addressed the audience again. "That means, for your viewing pleasure this evening, you get to watch five hours while I kill my competitor slowly. Let it never be said I failed to make a martyr out of him."

Mark grabbed Ward by the hair, and dragged him across the concrete to the centre of the arena. Ward tried to turn, but there was no energy left in him. Mark dropped him face down, then rolled him over with his boot. "You're not going to feel it right now, so we're going to take a little break. Round one of the bout solidly to you. Now, just so you don't try and go anywhere," Mark stabbed him through the calf. Ward heard his own scream from far away. "You should be happy I know where to slice to not kill you. Or maybe you shouldn't be." Mark walked out of his vision.

Ward turned his head to stare at the crowd. His eyes were too blurry to see any faces, but he looked towards where he remembered Charlotte, and smiled. Pain was starting to flow through his chest.

Five hours was a long time.

Longer with Mark. Ward shuddered, and the pain in his chest caused him to cough. Mark had aimed to cripple him now, so that he could draw it out. Mark would make it a slow death, and would know exactly how to do it. Mark would know exactly when to press down to increase the pain. Ward felt tears in his eyes, blurring his vision further. He had done so well. Better than he could have hoped for. He was still going to die though. The effort of the magic had weakened him too much for a quick death.

Mark had been right, Ward was going to die a martyr.

The crowd began to come back in to focus far too quickly. Mark was back almost instantly, a spring in his step, and cloth rapped around his head, creating a crude patch. "Can you speak?"

Ward tried, but was overcome by a fit of coughing. Mark tsked, and applied pressure to Ward's chest. Ward screamed. It felt like fire burning him from the inside. The scream hurt too, and Ward drew himself in to a ball, whimpering, trying not to breath for the pain it caused.

Mark was laughing. "Oh look, the last of your little friends just decided she didn't want to watch. How nice."

Mark let his sword fall to the ground near Ward's feet, then sat down next to Ward. Mark grabbed Ward's right arm. When Ward struggled, he pressed against Ward's chest until Ward went limp again. Mark grabbed Ward's pinky, grinned at him and SNAP

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SNAP. Charlotte heard a second one, and a second scream as she looked desperately around the wall. It would be somewhere here. No, not this wall. Charlotte cursed under her breath, and glanced at the door. Charlotte was working off a hunch. All her books and here she was working on the slightest of clues.

Charlotte tried to keep her actions natural, calm, unrushed as she moved back through the crowd towards the other wall, carefully holding her cup of water. What she had seen was Callum glance at the spotlights, only so briefly, just after Ward’s sword was kicked away. Callum knew more about the sword than Charlotte. But Charlotte remembered what it was made of.

There was a third snap, and Charlotte sped up as the scream rang out through the silent hall. Most of the onlookers seemed horrified. Charlotte heard a satyr whispering to his neighbour that this was in such bad taste.

Mark's voice rang out again. "So what is the scuttlebug doing back there? Charlotte?" Charlotte sped up. "Why not interfere?" Mark called out, "Then Sam can kill you too."

"Let's see how this works out for you," Charlotte said, as she poured water all over the power boards.

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The warehouse was plunged in to darkness, and Mark scrabbled away from Ward. Ward didn't wait to find why, but rolled away as fast as he could. Ward barely rolled three times over before he had to stop.

Ward heard a voice from not too far away. "What was the point of that, Charlotte? Now you're going to die, and it won't even help this clown."

Ward raised himself to his forearms. He could support himself on his palms and one knee, though the other leg was useless. He wouldn't be able to stand.

"So, Ward. I know what you're doing right now. Hell, it's admirable that you're trying to stand, when breathing hurts. I'd say give up, but the worst is happening already, so there's no reason to."

Ward heard Mark take a couple of steps. He was still so close. "I picked up my sword again. I should have stuck you better, but the bleeding always saps some of the pain. I didn't want that for you."

Ward managed to turn over, and get himself in to a sitting position. He felt calm now. He closed his eyes and pushed the pain away, pushing out the purple spots in his vision. Ward opened his eyes and said, "If I were you, I'd kill me quickly. Safer."

"That's because you're dull, and predictable." Ward saw the flare of a match on Mark's face for just a second, smelt smoke. Mark was barely two meters away. "But you're sword is across the arena, and you can't stand. I think I'll just cut a muscle in your arms and then we can get back to it."

Ward forced a laugh through the hurt. "If you want any chance to take me to hell with you, it's fading."

Mark laughed too. "I'm glad to see you kept some of Kane's bravado. Makes you less of a drip. But you've got no tricks left to play. This delay will mean nothing.”

Mark stepped forward, eyes adjusted to the gloom of the warehouse interior. Everything was just outlines, but it was enough. Ward closed his eyes again. Ward waited, relaxed. Mark stepped cautiously forward, footsteps inching closer. Ward waited until the footsteps were unbearably close, then raised his left hand, and gripped the darkness, willing it to take form.

Ward felt his fingers close on something, he lent forward, hearing Mark shuffle back. Ward thought for a moment he had felt the sword press in to something, then Ward's pain was too much. Ward felt his head hit the ground and then nothing more.

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Charlotte stood still, waiting for the confusion to abate. After several minutes of near darkness, a torch shone out in to the arena. The light found both Mark and Ward, lying next to each other.

Charlotte ran towards the arena, but Callum was there in her path. "I wouldn't go in there if I were you."

"I'm already dead from what I've done." Charlotte went to brush past him, but Baror was there, holding her easily. The dim light kept Callum's features entirely obscured. "Just wait. All you need to do now is watch."

Charlotte watched Sam approach the two bodies, and kneel down beside them. There was an unbearable moment as Charlotte tried to hear the wheezing over the growing sound of the crowd. There were maybe two sets of breathing, but maybe one. The crowd was all on its feet, a dozen hushed conversations travelling through them. At last, Sam stood up and faced the crowd. There was a slim smile on his face.

"Mark is dead. Ward is the victor." Sam nodded in Callum's direction, then went to the door and walked out.

Baror let Charlotte go, and she rushed forward. Ward looked nightmarish. Cut and bruised, and leg still oozing. Others began to file in behind Charlotte.

Charlotte grabbed the nearest person, and yelled at them, "Call an ambulance. He's dying."

The torch came closer, held by Baror. Sam travelled in his wake, and Charlotte saw the professor. Charlotte ran to him, and shook him. "You have to save him. He can't die because of this."

There were tears on Charlotte's cheeks, as the professor tugged her off him. "Miss, I assure you I will do everything that I can." Charlotte was left standing there as the professor approached Ward, put down his medicine bag, and examined Ward. Callum came over, and then after a brief discussion, called for his trolls to clear everyone out.

The crowd complained, but none seemed willing to put up a fight. One troll came and took Charlotte in an arm. She tried to pull away, but it bundled her off and held her just outside, unspeaking.

Eventually, Callum came out and walked over to her, pen spinning. Callum glanced at the sky, and Charlotte noticed the clouds in the evening sky. That would be bad for the New Year's fireworks.

"Well, under the professor's care, and assuming that no idiot actually called an ambulance, Ward should be fine."

Charlotte almost hugged him. "He'll be fine?"

"Almost as good as before. You and I need to talk though."

Charlotte gulped. "What about?"

"Your little stunt. Sam doesn't seem to have cared, but there is going to be a lot of outrage. Some are going to call it match fixing. There was lots of money on this duel."

"I didn't tell you to set up gambling on it." Charlotte couldn’t keep the accusation from her tone.

"Well what did you expect when you sold information to an information dealer?"

"Well I'm not planning on drinking in your bar anytime soon."

"My bar, another casualty of this farce. If I don't get money to rebuild it, then you'll have no place to scorn."

"What do I care?"

Callum's pen stopped moving in his fingers. "Either I am going to seek retribution against you for your intervention, or you can agree to help repair the damages, owing information or favours of equivalent value to the harm caused to me."

Charlotte wiped the tears from her cheeks now. "I'll accept the debt. Tell me how much and I'll pay it in money, thankyou."

Callum shrugged. "I'll tell you once I know. But you can't afford it. A pleasure working with you. And congratulations on your victory. I'm going to soothe my customers, but I'll be seeing you soon."

Callum walked off towards the crowd that still stood crowded around one of the other warehouses. Already he was saying, "Ladies, gentlemen and all assembled..."

Charlotte turned away from him and went back inside. Baror was standing with the torch, looking bored. The professor's body obscured his work. Upon seeing Charlotte, Baror beckoned her over.

"Good to see you missy. It was getting dull in here, and I know I'm missing some excitement."

Charlotte looked down, and then looked away again. The professor was examining the leg. "I don't know how you can be so blasé."

Baror shifted his weight, then scratched the hand holding the torch. "Seen ten crippling leg wounds, seen 'em all. And I bet Callum is going to get himself in to some kind of trouble out there."

"Will the two of you shut up. What I'm doing here is more than a little difficult," the professor snapped.

Baror sighed. Charlotte leaned in closer to him and whispered, "So where did you get the torch from?"

"Oh, this?" Baror said, shaking it slightly. "I was carrying it with me. Just in case."

"Then why didn't you use it immediately?"

Baror grinned. "Well, in the confusion, you know, it didn't seem a priority."

"Since you obviously don't get it, can one of you please leave."

Baror tossed the torch at Charlotte, and was skipping off across the warehouse before Charlotte managed to recover it. Charlotte peered after him, until the professor said, "I'm still doing a surgery here, can you point the damn light. And try and hold it straighter than he was."

Charlotte pointed the light at Ward, then looked away. She looked back when the professor asked her to adjust it, then looked away again, biting her lip until it bled, listening to the disquieting sounds of the professor’s work.

The world was soft, and Ward wanted to just sit and enjoy it. There was light filtering in through his closed eyelids, making the world yellow. Ward breathed in and out slowly, exploring the sensation. There was a tightness, but no pain. That was so surprising that Ward raised a hand and put it on his chest, then slowly applied more pressure.

"The Professor said that you wouldn't have much pain?" Iris's voice was quiet.

Ward opened his eyes. He was in Iris's bed. Iris was watching him, hands clasped together on her lap. "I'm sorry. I just saw you were awake. You can keep resting if you want?.”

Ward shook his head, and raised himself up to a sitting position. "What happened?"

"Charlotte told me what she knew, but it wasn't much. You struck Mark twice, somehow. The second time in darkness. Both of you were injured. He bled out first. Everyone has been hoping you would tell them more. Kane and Callum both came to see you, and, and Lady Himoto wanted to come and see you too."

Ward looked at the window, and saw the darkness outside. "What time is it?"

"It's just after 1 in the morning. Happy New Year." Iris shifted so she was sitting near Ward, and he pulled her down beside him. "There's no pain."

"The professor is good at what he does." Iris said, settling in next to him. "It isn't fully healed yet, but you'll be fine."

Ward put an arm around Iris. "So, it all worked out in the end. Nothing but the thanking everyone who helped."

"Sam apparently already left town, so I wouldn't worry about thanking him. The others, yeah probably a good idea."

Ward felt Iris tremble. "What is it?"

"I really thought you were going to die, and it was going to be my fault. Now that you haven't, I don't know what to do.”

Ward held her tighter. "Don't worry. We got through it. Now we can just relax, and be normal for a bit. The only crazy silly thing to do is thank some people."

"How did you pull it off anyway? Charlotte tried to explain, but I don't think she was clear herself."

"I tricked your brother in to blinding himself, and then glamoured everyone in the audience. I got the idea from Lady Himoto's little trick. She reminded me that glamouring wasn't just about hiding things from people, but also altering what people perceived."

"There should have been no way you could do that."

"Everyone's been impressed by my glamours, and they get better under stress. I just had to prepare for it. And I was desperate, so I prepared the gambit I thought best."

Ward held on tighter. "To tell you the truth, when I went to do it, I just wanted to make sure everyone else was safe. I still thought I was going to die."

Iris rolled over, and looked at Ward. "Don't say that."

"Why not? It makes me happier to be here now."

They lay there as long as they could bear to. Ward got up first, mentioning how hungry he was, and realising how cramped he was. There wasn't pain, but his movements were constricted. Ward hobbled in to the kitchen, with Iris fussing over him the entire way.

Iris set about making some food. Once eggs were frying, Iris looked at Ward. "I heard Charlotte really came through for you too."

Ward was hunched over the bench top, watching Iris cook. "Yeah. The light trick at the end was nice."

"I wish I'd been able to help you."

"Hey, you saved my life earlier in the year."

"So? Twice you've been in danger because of me, and this time I failed to get you out of it."

Ward glanced at the eggs, and Iris realised they were burning just too late. Iris served them up on some toast, and Ward took a grateful bite.

"I've been in danger partly because I sought it out. I wouldn't worry about it. You'll drive yourself mad doing that."

Iris sat opposite Ward, watching him eat. "Are you going to talk to Lady Himoto?"

"I didn't think you'd want me to."

"You're kind of the hero of the hour. I think you're allowed to make your own decisions for a bit. It's not like I seem to have judged Lady Himoto very well. I was sure she would try and work against you."

Ward paused, fork half raised. "Actually, I think she's probably the first person I should talk to."

"Of course. I'll get in contact as soon as you want me to."

Ward shook his head, and finished his eggs and toast. “I’ll do it first thin in the morning.” Ward shivered. “I’m sure she’ll find me when I want to talk.”

Iris shook her head. Ward walked around the bench and hugged her. "I might have been wrong about her. In the end. You almost died because you refused her help..."

Ward didn’t reply, heading back to bed. After a few minutes, Iris joined him. They fell asleep lying on the blanket, sleeping in the new year.

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Ward stepped outside, and almost tripped over Charlotte out the front of the building. In the morning light she looked even more sick than normal, scrabbling to her feet. "Sorry, I didn't mean to be weird or anything, I just wanted to see..."

Ward reached over and hugged her. "Yeah, I'm fine. Really stiff, but I'll be good as new. Possibly better."

Charlotte hugged him back fiercely. "Can we agree that this exciting life completely sucks?"

Ward stepped back and laughed. "Yeah, of course we can. Looks like Kane was right all along. You really stepped it up, helping out. You're an amazingly great friend."

Charlotte blushed. "I just did what anyone would do."

"Nah, Kane did about what anyone would do, which is do what was asked with reluctance. You worked so hard on it."

Ward began to walk, then turned back to Charlotte. "You gone above and beyond again and checked whether Kane is doing fine?"

Charlotte started. "Yeah, I was going to see him soon."

"After what he did to you and Veronica, I'm slightly surprised.”

"It was my mistake as much as his." Ward did not quite believe it. "I'd blame the guy cheating on his girlfriend, rather girl with her own insecurities. But it's clearly a day for forgiveness and new beginnings. Say hi to him for me."

Charlotte watched Ward walk off, confused. She sat back down outside Iris’s apartment block, and waited until Kane came back.

"A coffee for the madam, three sugars as requested." Kane sat back down next to Charlotte. "So any news from our little vigil yet?" Charlotte took her coffee then shoved Kane. "You totally saw Ward walk out didn't you?"

Kane put on a guilty grin. "Well, I didn't want to ruin you two celebrating your victory."

Charlotte frowned. "Everyone gives me too much credit."

"And that's why you're so cute. You never seem to get that you deserve it."

That got a smile from Charlotte. Kane looked where Ward had wandered. "Did he say anything about me?"

"He said to say 'hi'. Happy?"

"Yeah, I suppose it'll do. I kind of fell through on the guy, didn't I."

"Hey, heartbreak will do that to you."

Kane looked at Charlotte who stared pointedly ahead. "It was a bad way for me to end a relationship, sure."

"The way you were acting, I thought you'd still be sadder about it."

"What, when I can spend the day being happy with such a lovely woman as you?"

Charlotte took a sip of her coffee, still looking ahead. When she didn't respond, Kane spoke again. "So now that we know Ward's ambulatory, do you want to do something else, go see a movie or something?"

Charlotte watched an elderly couple move out of sight before answering. She still wasn't looking at Kane. "Are you trying to hit on me?"

Kane grinned at her. "Well sparks totally flew when we kissed, and you can't deny that."

"I told you when we met, I had no interest in dating you."

"Well, yeah. But now you've got to know me, and know how charming I am, and then with Ward and Iris dating, it just makes sense. It'd all just work out."

Iris put her coffee down carefully, then stood up, looking down at Kane. "I don't want to date you Kane, nor have I ever wanted to date you. Do you think who I date is just a matter of convenience?"

Kane stood up too, and reached for Charlotte's hand, taking it in his own, and staring in to her eyes. "How many other people hold your hand without shuddering. And I'm not naive. You like me."

Charlotte pulled her hand back. "How dare Charlotte stopped and took several deep breaths. "No, you won't get it. If you ever bring this up again, I will knock that smile off your face. Happy victory to us day, Kane. Bye."

Charlotte walked away, not looking back once. Her hands were clenched at her side, and her coffee sat abandoned. Kane watched her leave, incredulous. He stood there watching where Charlotte had disappeared long after she had gone. Finally, he kicked over her coffee cup and stalked off to find a bar, to see if he had any other friends left.

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Ward sat on a park bench, letting the wind brush over him. The play equipment was empty, and Ward wanted to play on it for the first time he remembered. He had always been too serious a child, but now the frivolity appealed to him. This was the last task before Ward was sure he could finally relax.

It took Lady Himoto almost half an hour to appear. Her dress was a marvellous tan and grey construction matching the gum trees that shaded the seat Ward was sitting at. The smile on her face was amazingly warm.

Ward stood to greet her, and Lady Himoto rushed over him and hugged him. The dress almost engulfed him, and covered his surprised blush. Lady Himoto held him so long that Ward almost pressed himself away.

"You know, there's no way I can possibly thank you enough for what you've done. You've brought me a freedom I haven't had for so long.” The smile on her face was so bright Ward almost took a step back from it.

"I did what I had to do."

"And so impressively too. I thought you weren't going to manage it, but you were exactly clever as you needed to be."

Ward let himself smile a little at her praise. "Do you mind if we sit? I'm still a bit stiff."

Lady Himoto nodded, graciously, and took a seat next to Ward, who marvelled how gracefully she sat with her long dress. Ward sat down, and looked in to her eyes, taking a deep breath.

"I wanted to thank you for the help you offered, and the privacy you gave me before the duel. I needed that privacy deeply."

"You don't need to thank me for that. That was an old debt being repaid. Of course now I owe you more, so it seems I just ended up buying myself more debt." The laugh that followed it was joyful.

Ward sighed. "I really don't think you owe me anything else, but it's not that simple is it."

Lady Himoto shook her head. "I do have an offer for you though, one that I thought you would really like. Firstly, no matter what, I was planning on giving you the sight to repay what you have done. It’s unfair for someone who is so of the Other to never see it.”

Ward gaped. "You can do that? Make someone see?”

Lady Himoto winked languidly at Ward, who saw a dampness on her eyelashes. "A fae doesn't lie. Certainly not one with my reputation."

"But there's more?"

Lady Himoto nodded, leaning in with a conspiratorial grin. "I was going to offer you the position of my faebond. It's a way I can give you what you've always wanted. I can train you not only to perfect your glamours, but even other kinds of magic. Doesn't that sound wonderful? And of course you would get to learn all about the Other.”

"It sounds too good to be true."

Lady Himoto leaned back in to the seat, smoothing her dress down so the cloth revealed her shoulders to the fading sunlight. "It does rather. And I'm sure you've got questions, and misgivings, and want to go talk to Iris about it. The two of you really are so sweet together that I wouldn't want to be what comes between you."

Ward placed a hand over his mouth, watching Lady Himoto's every move and thinking. Lady Himoto watched him from the corner of her eye. Ward lowered his hand. "Something that's mutually beneficial is what you want though, isn't it?"

Lady Himoto nodded, then readjusted the gold threads that entangled her black hair.

"Well I have a few questions before I make a decision, but I don't need to talk to anyone else."

"Of course."

"Firstly, by showing me those glamours, what you could do to a whole crowd, were you trying to make me figure it out? Were you trying to help me despite my request?”

Lady Himoto closed her eyes, but kept smiling. The sun caught her and made her look some impossibly perfect picture. "I knew you were clever, and would be thinking through options. I didn't help you though. To do that would have been to disobey your request. You helped yourself."

"Why didn't you have to help your faebond in the fight though? What does the bond even mean if not that?"

"The bond is complicated. I'll give you all the contracts on it, but I think your friend Charlotte has examined them. I was not allowed to prevent him duelling, but otherwise, my connection required me to do little. Dying in a duel meant I didn't even need to seek vengeance for his death."

Ward nodded at that, absorbing the information slowly, giving himself time to think it over. He was staring at the ground, and when he looked up, he saw Lady Himoto sitting up straight watching him intensely. "The other thing that has confused me is that you told us you would hold Mark, but he escaped."

"Even the fae make mistakes sometime. You saw what he had to do to get himself out."

"Did you know he could break out?"

"Of course I was aware of it. You would have to be completely mad to do it though, and be willing to put yourself through agony. It was an elegantly designed prison, which was it's fault.”

Ward nodded. "Then what of the papers of yours you reclaimed from us, what was on them?"

"They were just copies of some of the contracts that Mark stole from my desk when he left my grove."

"Were they the contracts related to duelling?"

“Now why would you ever think that?"

Ward frowned. "All you have to do is say that they weren't there."

Lady Himoto laughed. "You really are a very clever boy. Did you glance at them and pick it up before I took them?"

"It was just a guess."

“A clever guess then. When Mark escaped, he found all the information on duels he could ever want on my desk, as well as enough random little secrets that he never picked up what I had done to him."

"Then you knew he was going to escape."

"Good gracious no. I could hardly be said to be holding him if I knew he would escape. I knew he had the capacity to, and made sure if he did escape, it would go well for me. But I was hardly relying on it. Perhaps I hoped.”

"Why do all that?”

"Because I was not allowed to kill or arrange the death of my own faebond, and because this was a likely way to get rid of him. I was glad that he figured out to challenge you, not his sister, otherwise it would have been necessary to take more drastic steps."

"So you deliberately set him up to fight me, so that I would kill him? That sounds like arranging his death."

"No, you failed to see the distinction, I left pieces for him to follow. He worked himself in to the situation. It was what he wanted to do that got him killed."

"And what would you have done if he had won?"

Lady Himoto's expression soured. "If that unfortunate eventuality came around, I would have gone through the unpalatable business of using his influence over his sister to get to play around with her abilities, if possible, without her coming to any harm. But thankfully, I won't be forced to do that. Now I can support you, and show her that I can be trusted."

"You think you can be trusted after what you just told me?"

"What I told you openly and honestly? The more you try and make me out to be some wicked creature out to trick you, the harder your life is going to be."

"Is that a threat?"

Lady Himoto sighed. "No, not a threat. Just a little truth that I wasn't sure you realised."

"Okay," Ward said, "I just have one more question. If I became your faebond, does that give you an influence over me?"

Lady Himoto looked at Ward and shook her head sadly. "You've really outsmarted yourself on this one. Yes, it would give me an influence over you. I could use you callously to get to Iris. But I don't want to do all this through manipulation. I really don't."

Lady Himoto stood up, head held low, face sad. "So?"

"I won't accept the faebond. You're exactly as people always described you. You're only after your own goals, and you manipulate people in to doing exactly want of them. You barely seem to see them as people at all."

Lady Himoto stood there watching him, then prompted. "There's more you want to say, isn't there?"

"This year has been horrible anyway. I don't want to be drawn more in to this. It almost got me killed, and it's brought Iris no joy at all."

"Iris has no idea what it's brought her, because she has never even seen the half a world that you see.” Lady Himoto seemed deeply saddened, disappointed by not surprised. “Now to prove my good intentions, despite whatever you may think, I told you I was going to give you the sight no matter what you decided, but if you want to rebuff it, I can't object."

Ward sat on the chair looking up at the impossibly beautiful Lady Himoto, and the trees behind her, and the empty play equipment. Ward wondered how Iris would see all of this, whether there was any overlap in how they saw the world. That was exactly what Lady Himoto had wanted him to think, he was sure. He had earned this though. Lady Himoto owed him.

"Yes, I'll accept the sight, then we're even, and you won't need to try and help me again, right?"

Lady Himoto nodded. "I won't promise to stay away, but I won't force myself in to your life."

Lady Himoto lunged forward and Ward found himself grabbed by the neck. He flailed at the arm, but the grip was vicelike, and his flailing didn't even phase Lady Himoto, who knocked his hands deftly aside with her remaining hand. Her face showed no rage, just studious concentration.

When Ward's vision began to go black, and his arms had fallen weak to his sides, Lady Himoto held his head with one hand, while the other reached towards his eye. In one deft move, Lady Himoto pulled out Ward's left eye. The pain shot through Ward, but it came to him dull, from far away.

Ward was barely aware of Lady Himoto raising her hand to her own left eye, and carefully taking out her own eye. No, not her own eye, the eye she had stolen from Iris, some part of Ward reminded him. That part admired the cleverness of the idea, barely aware of the horror.

It was over swiftly. Ward fell from the seat as soon as Lady Himoto released him and lay on the edge of her dress half strangled. "I hope one day you appreciate this for what it was, and let go of whatever bitterness it will cause you."

Ward watched Lady Himoto through two blurred eyes, and two images stood in the one place. The one that had always been there, and alongside the image of a woman whose features that were not marred with shadow, but instead a coloration of herself, wearing a dress made from a tree, that flowed around her as if it were still growing. He watched that vision and saw that all of her appeared to gain new sheens of colour as she moved. She looked a perfect portrait of a person. The only imperfection that could be seen on her form were her eyes. There was a green eye out of place with her complexion, then the new brown eye, hideously bloodshot for the moment. Both studied Ward with sadness.

Lady Himoto vanished, leaving Ward to try and collect himself, as the world reeled around him.