



BOOK ONE OF CODENAME W

CODENAME W

She is a goddess like no other.
She must now fight for this world.

ODETTE C. BELL

FROM THE AUTHOR OF GHOST OF MIND AND A PLAIN JANE

CODENAME W BOOK ONE

ODETTE C. BELL



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Codename W

Book One

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CONTENTS

Codename W Book One

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

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More Fantasy Series by Odette C. Bell

CODENAME W BOOK ONE

**It doesn't matter what's after you. The only thing that counts is who's
in your corner.**

Bessie is just meant to be an ordinary journalist. Okay, she's kinda scatty, bolshie, and has never backed down from a story – or a fight. But when a fight comes to her that could consume the whole city, there's only one person she can turn to.

Xavier Kilmer is a ghost vampire. He's also Bessie's sworn enemy. The animosity isn't mutual. Three years ago, he met her and sparks flew. Ever since, every paper in town has promised she's his true mate.

But right now, all Bessie needs is a miracle. When a shadowy force called the Ghost King reaches through the dark to claim her as his bride, only Xavier can help. But all help comes at a cost.

...

Tune in for the thrilling first installment of the exciting thrill-ride, Codename W. This series is complete, and there are four books in total. So start the journey today.

“I DON’T CARE WHO YOU THINK YOU ARE — YOU’RE NOT GETTING IN,” THE burly vampire bodyguard said as he shoved his beefy hand out in front of Bessie.

Her lips twitched. The glittering magical downlights of Fire Mansion played over her hastily applied makeup. It hardly glittered over her equally hastily thrown-on dress. The various attractive magical lights might accentuate the figures of all the rich and beautiful celebrities that gathered in the open atrium beyond, but all anything ever did was make Bessie look out of place.

Sore thumb. That had been her name in high school. Anyone who saw her now, all grown up and a proud journalist, tended to add one more word. Idiot.

Bessie might think a lot of herself. Few others shared her positive outlook.

Yeah, okay, Bessie Tilley didn’t have a great deal going for her. An incredible figure? Well, it all depended on how you described incredible. Bessie was strong and stocky. And ultimately, who cared? Who cared about her wiry, wild hair? It was the same for her nondescript brown eyes. All that counted was Bessie’s legendary determination.

It burned in her just as brightly as it had in her parents. They'd been tenacious and unstoppable. And so was Bessie. They'd also been journalists.

Bessie had walked in their footsteps. She was proud, and she at least liked to believe she was known all over the city for never backing down.

Bessie shoved her hands on her hips. Her discreet mic was shoved down her top. Discreet, that was, until it clunked out of her dress and fell at her feet.

The vamp bodyguard shook his beefy arms. Then he laughed, this rumbling affair that sounded like a mountain giving birth to a troll. "Seriously? You know it's illegal to record someone without their permission, right? Even if it weren't, carrying around microphones is against the rules of the party. The same party you most certainly do not have an invitation to. So I'm gonna tell you one last time." He got up close and personal in Bessie's face, his steely gaze ring-fencing her in until she wasn't even aware of the atrium, let alone the people staring at her, drinks in their hands, smiles on their perfect lips. "You can walk away, or you can be carried. It's up to you."

"I don't like either of those options. I'm a journalist working for—"

"No one. We've already done a background check on you," the guy said as he tapped an almost invisible earpiece she hadn't even noticed before. It was little more than a small diamond earring that adorned one of his large, meaty ears.

She bit her lip as she thought. She knew how slick institutions like this worked. And Fire Mansion was the slickest of all. That would be because the guy at the helm – the vampire, sorry – was the undisputed king of Parlor City. He was also the worst vampire in the world. At least in Bessie's books. Somebody needed to uncover his secrets and splash them all over the tabloids. And soon. Because if this city kept falling for his charms, then he'd have the whole thing under his thumb soon enough.

She could chide herself for not figuring out the security vamps would have mics. Just as she could be angry at herself for failing to realize that said mics would likely be hooked up to some security room, and everything she was saying would be relayed to a crack team who could investigate her in the flick of a switch. It didn't ultimately matter, because the one thing Bessie knew was that when you started to fail, you didn't give up. That was a special lesson, one specifically tailored to her and her personality, not for the rest of the world. See, ordinary people with ordinary standards sure did give up when the going got tough. Usually it meant that the destination in mind was out of reach. Bessie never believed in that.

You set your mind on something, and you kept going. It had to work. Otherwise the last 10 years of Bessie's life would mean nothing at all. And her parents' tragic disappearance would continue to go unsolved.

She shoved her face closer. Any ordinary person would have backed away, hands held high, a polite smile crumpling their lips in the hope that the vamp would see it and not tear through their throats. But she really doubted this guy would snack on her – especially at a public function being visited by not just literati, but politicians too. That wasn't her point. He was still bigger than her. She barely had any magic, and he had the upper hand. But Bessie—

She never got to finish that particular thought. The guy glanced past her. Someone had just arrived. They'd driven right up to the front of Fire Mansion, too. Fire mansion was not just the best-lit mansion in the city, but it was the most magical by far. You see, it belonged to the most prestigious line of vampires this place had ever seen. The Kilmer ghost vamps, to be precise. And Xavier himself – the head of the family – had just rocked up, hence the fact he could park casually outside of this massive function with no one batting an eyelid.

The bodyguard locked his hand on Bessie's shoulder, turned her around as if she weighed as much as a feather, and shoved her down the steps. It

was only the fact she had good balance and that this wasn't the first time she'd been manhandled that she managed to stay on her feet and not fall to her knees right in front of Xavier himself.

Some slinky model vamp got out of the car beside him, wearing red. It not just matched her lipstick, but probably her proclivities, too. Though these days vamps weren't meant to feed on people, people can be preciously stupid creatures. If somebody wanted to let a vamp feed on them, they could sign a waiver and said vamp would gladly sink their fangs into the naïve fool.

This specific slinky model had red splattered all down her chin. Bessie very much doubted that meant she'd snacked on Xavier himself. You really, really wouldn't want to do that. Even if you were a prestigious vamp, it would come with a certain cost.

Xavier Kilmer and all of his family were ghost vamps.

There'd been a time, not so long ago, when the ordinary souls of the world hadn't known ghost vamps were out there. Now you couldn't take the bus without someone having a conversation about that new, crazy form of vampirism.

Ghost vamps were, like most other vamps, technically undead. But importantly, they were far, far closer to the dead than ordinary vampires. That didn't mean they strode around, clods of dirt falling off them wherever they walked and dust tumbling out of their eyeballs. No, it was far more magical and insidious than that. Ghost vamps didn't feed on blood. Fortunately, they weren't like ghouls and they didn't munch on carcasses, either. They solely consumed dead energy.

It was a concept Bessie still hadn't wrapped her head around, and she doubted anybody in Parlor City had, either, let alone the rest of the world. It required that you understood the edge. And what was the edge? Good question. According to ghost vamps, at least, there were multiple dimensions in this world. Most of the time, people were kept separate from

them. Until things pushed through. It was the ghost vamps, according to their fabulous PR, that stopped that from happening and saved everybody on Earth from going *crunch* under the foot of some great big dimensional demon. Or whatever. Did anyone actually believe all of the hype? Bessie certainly hoped not. Ghost vamps, whatever their proclivities, at the end of the day, were just vampires. And vampires knew two things. How to look good, and how to secure their next feed.

The slinky vampire slipped in close to Xavier. He shot her an affectionate smile. As for that smile, you wouldn't have been able to replicate it on anyone else's face. It wasn't just the slow, almost crawling way it slipped over his lips. Nope. It was the lips and the rest of the face. They were... okay, he was handsome. He had to be. Vampires had perfected that long ago as an evolutionary technique to ensure that the humans they preyed upon didn't reject them completely. If poison comes from a flower, you're less likely to remove it from your garden.

Not Bessie's point. This wasn't the first time she'd faced Xavier, considering her beef with him. But every time, the same thing happened. Her stomach clenched, her breath quickened, and her heart wanted to retreat somewhere safe.

He had something to do with the disappearance of her parents, she was sure. But to be fair, it wasn't him, just his father. Xavier Senior had died years ago. Now Xavier was the chief ghost vamp of the city, and Bessie knew he would know everything about the case.

But he'd always steadfastly kept those details to himself.

Bessie had harassed him for interviews hundreds of times. She kept getting close to him at every single function she could. But did he ever look up at her once? Did he even acknowledge her presence? Nope. He always walked on by.

Bessie was brave enough – or stupid enough – to try to muscle in close now, but the burly guard who'd shoved her down the stairs pushed one

massive hand out and actually locked it on her forehead. It was like having your momentum cut by an icebreaker. You were a tiny little dinghy motoring along, then an ocean cruiser rammed your hull, broke it, and sent you tumbling down to the bottom of the sea.

Bessie spluttered.

The model with Xavier laughed, her amusement dismissive – then the two of them walked into the atrium.

Bessie shot up behind Xavier. “When are you going to face me—”

“I do not give interviews to unattached journalists. Try to get a real job with a real paper,” Xavier muttered.

Bessie spluttered.

Xavier didn’t even bother looking at her. He opened his arm behind his slinky model girlfriend, gesturing her forward with a flick of a smile.

... Really, he couldn’t even look her in the eyes? Fine. It was pretty easy to wind Bessie up. But when she got wound up, you’d better get out of the way.

Slipping back, glad that three cars had just arrived and some seriously important celebrities were in them, Bessie used them as a distraction to slink around the side of the mansion. It shouldn’t be easy. Fire mansion wasn’t just the most important building in Parlor City, but it was also the most well-lit. There were crackling red magical lanterns everywhere.

When it wasn’t being used as Xavier’s residence during the day, it was a bona fide nightclub.

There were security enchantments everywhere. There were cameras, too. Hell, there was even a security guard a couple of meters up, though thankfully he had his back to her and he was on his phone, chatting to somebody as he leaned against a tree.

But Bessie had a little secret weapon that would help her slip on by undetected, no matter what you threw in her path.

She shoved a hand down her top. She grabbed her clock amulet. As soon as she did, the familiar race of energy charged across her lips, down her face, across her back, and around her stomach. It felt like love's embrace.

Not that she'd had that much experience, considering her red-hot personality, but whatever. That was the way she chose to describe it. And as for the way she chose to think of her amulet? Oh, it was her savior.

She'd received it the day her parents had disappeared. She used that term, though according to the courts, they were dead, thus the fact she'd been given this in their will.

That didn't matter. Nothing really did, aside from the fact that with this, she could get into the mansion easily.

She grasped her fingers around it, and she slid them over the glimmering primary clock ring. Gold, it glinted under the light of a nearby lamp. The fire playing within made the clock face all but burn, giving it this strange, otherworldly feel. As her fingers slid around it, she turned it to the first charge setting.

Bessie couldn't technically practice magic. Okay, she could – a tiny bit. But a talisman like this connected her to her family magic. And the Tillys had been some of the strongest witches this side of heaven. Honestly, her grandmother, though now long departed, had been the most powerful witch in all of the country.

And now Bessie got just a little of that power. As it zinged into her, raced around her stomach, and reached high, she twisted her hand to the side, cupped a spell in her fingers, and quickly cut through the enchantments protecting the side of the building.

She shoved her amulet back down her top. She couldn't use it too much. For two reasons. Her body wasn't used to magic, and the more she practiced, the harder it became. For days after she used it like this, she would be wiped out. The other reason was that she didn't really want people

knowing she possessed something like this. Not with this kind of force. Technically they couldn't take it from her, but let's just put it this way – it would be a lot harder for Bessie to do her job.

She slunk down the side of the well-lit castle, her back rammed up against the old, dank sandstone until she finally found a window. It was locked. But who cared?

As she pressed up against the windowsill, she slipped her fingers down until she found the slightest crack in its magical defenses. With her tongue secured between her teeth, she muttered, "Here we go." She closed her eyes, squeezed them until the skin was tight, and attuned to the talisman. Great charges of yellow-green magic zapped from it, across her throat, and into her fingers. She used it to yank the windowsill up.

She hadn't even checked to see if there was anybody in the room beyond. And there was. Because that was the kind of luck she had to deal with every day. She clambered in, her dress hardly looking attractive as it bunched up around her knees and stocky legs. Then she jumped down, heels wobbling, and at least managed a smile. She'd grabbed her microphone up before being unfairly dismissed by the bouncer at the front doors. She waved it in the air and brought her phone out. "Don't mind me. Just an investigative journalist going about her duty." She saluted the guy.

Lord knows who he was. He was on his own phone, having a cigarette, a drink in his hand. He looked like he was a vampire, but a low-class one.

Fortunately, he said nothing, and he didn't call security.

Bessie still had to be fast.

She opened the door that led to the main hall. She knew this place well. Well, kind of technically. She'd read all of the gossip mag articles about it, and her friend, Leanne, wrote the best ones. But Bessie had never been to Fire Mansion. Not since she'd started harassing Xavier, anyway. She was persona non grata around these parts.

That fact made her grin. A trace of nerves mixed with expectation slammed together, forming a heady cocktail, one she didn't much begrudge. You needed nerves of steel if you wanted to be a journalist like her. And, okay, she had hardly had many big scoops. But it wasn't for want of trying. She'd just single-mindedly focused on one case. Other journalists went for simple stories. But Bessie wanted to break the one that would matter most.

There was a secret at the heart of her parents' disappearance. It was one that was connected to ghost vamps – and considering they had this city under their thumbs, it would affect everyone. And it was a case that she just knew, if she broke it apart, could change the whole world.

Speaking of breaking apart things, two vamps, locked in a passionate embrace, suddenly burst out of the door to her side. The guy elbowed her in the ribs, and Bessie, her slight form no match for him, jostled against an expensive lamp. The lamp went tumbling, and it split her dress at the same time.

The guy said nothing. He just walked away, hand-in-hand with his lover.

Bessie stared down at the lamp, which was likely worth more than her entire crappy fortune, then over at her dress. She petulantly kicked the broken glass, groaned, wondered if her trashed outfit would make her stick out like a sore thumb, then laughed at the context.

Who cared? She was meant to stick out. Journalists wanted people to pay attention to them.

For the more attention she got, the more she could do.

Gathering her split dress and cupping it in one hand as she kept her microphone in the other, Bessie stalked forward.

It wasn't too hard to find the heart of the party. According to Leanne's gossip mag, the bottom floor of Fire Mansion was dedicated to the nightclub. Most of the rooms had been magically altered until they'd created this maze of entertainment, as the official website for the mansion

noted. You could go from one sultry club to a banging dance hall but turn around and not manage to get back. It was billed as a night of entertainment like no other. For you would have no clue what you might find.

Now it was pretty easy to follow the signs.

She saw various celebrities and politicians, drinks in their hands, voices low as they muttered about Xavier's new girlfriend. Would this be the one? Xavier, apparently, needed a wife. Once he got one, according to the rumors, he'd come into the true inheritance of Fire Mansion and his esteemed family.

It was a whole lot of crap if you asked her. There was a reason so much mysticism followed vampires around. Vampires weren't just skilled in luring prey – they were masters at PR.

Yeah, maybe Xavier had some kind of legal hurdle to get his full inheritance. But it wouldn't be mysterious. And it would just lead to more money and more privilege.

If that slinky model back there would be the one to unlock that treasure for Xavier, whatever. Bessie just cared about getting the story of her life and his.

She twisted around a couple who were discussing Xavier in low tones. She pushed through a large door into a massive reception area. It kind of looked like a ballroom, but there was a banquet table set up at one end. And by table, she very much meant tree. It wasn't to say that it was lying there, branches and leaves and surprised birds and all. It was to say that it looked as if it had been carved from a massive Redwood. It stretched... she wasn't very good at judging distance. It had to be at least 30 meters, though. It would probably take a gargoyle to move it on their own.

She was not distracted by the food, even though her stomach rumbled. How about the celebrities? Nope. She passed one gossiping about some recent case with a movie producer. Interesting. It could make a good story. One she could actually sell. Who cared? Because there was Xavier.

There was the outer periphery of the party, and there was the inner circle.

This room, while it was large and technically open plan, had different sections. There were even several bars. They were dotted around, and each seemed to have a different theme. One was sultry and had a soul singer perched on one end of the polished marble, her voice just as smooth as the whiskey the barman kept pouring.

The other was a whole lot edgier. An honest to God emo served black... liquid to anyone who wished to listen to his melancholic prose and take their chances with the strange gunk he poured them.

Then there was the inner circle. Various comfortable chairs and couches were set up. And there was Xavier, arm on the back of one, that slinky model beside him. She leaned in as a photographer from one of the major papers – Channel 89 – took snaps of them.

Even from here, though it sounded kind of mad, Bessie could see the reflected flash of the camera's bulb in Xavier's wide eyes.

Then said wide eyes suddenly darted over to her.

Crap. There was a whole crowd of people between her and him, but he still picked her out.

Ignore me, ignore me, she chanted in her head. He was so good at doing that usually, but now he clicked his fingers once, pointed to a huge gargoyle bouncer, then over at Bessie.

Oh God. Right. She only had a few seconds to do this.

She ground one hand into a fist and, still holding onto her split dress with the other, she marched over.

There were several other bodyguards about, not all of them dressed in black and as obvious as neon signs, but she managed to dodge them all. She could be light on her feet, even though her figure didn't do that fact justice.

She ducked under one just as he swiped toward her head.

She finally reached the inner circle.

She was out of breath even before she opened her mouth. “Are you going to ignore me now? Or are you finally going to tell this city exactly what happened that night 20 years ago? Because your family has been hiding something. Something massive. Something that could change—”

“Who’s this?” the model-type asked as she leaned forward, one svelte hand tapping her knee. “And why hasn’t security thrown it out already?”

Bessie didn’t react to being called an *it*. She’d been called way worse. Harsh words tended to slide off her like water off a particularly aquatic duck’s back.

But actions?

They stuck.

She marched up to Xavier.

Beside her were the photographer and lead reporter of the same paper she’d been trying to get into for two years. Both of them shot her this look. It was the exact stare you’d give the craziest person in the village when they somehow became even crazier, surpassing everybody’s already low expectations.

Whatever.

Bessie shoved the mic in front of Xavier’s face.

He just looked at her, eyes narrowed, jaw locking together.

“Are you finally going to tell people what ghost vampires really are? Are you going to reveal where you get your power and money from? Are you ever going to—”

The svelte vampire suddenly sniffed. “She has some kind of magical talisman,” she snarled.

“Indeed,” Xavier muttered, unamused but hardly surprised.

It was like Bessie had been sucker-punched. Come on, her talisman was all she had. She’d always been so careful to keep it hidden. How could Xavier already know about it?

The model vampire pointed at Bessie, her lips parting back in a vicious snarl. “She’s trying to attack Xavier.”

Those words made the security team already chasing Bessie explode.

You know that massive bouncer from earlier? The one that just had to be a troll bred with a gargoyle bred with Mount Everest? Yeah, he rammed Bessie from the side.

Bessie had been struck by a car once. It hadn’t been enough to knock her out, but it had certainly been enough to make her appreciate that there are some forces the human body cannot play with. There are some forces that will turn you and all your bones and all your joints into the equivalent of a tennis ball being struck by a hammer.

You won’t bounce. You’ll split.

Bessie had a little magic left in her.

It didn’t provide her with explosive force, but it did protect her from that blow, enough that she slipped out of the guy’s grip. So where did she go? Forward.

And where did forward deposit her? Right in the lap of the most important vampire in the city.

Bessie felt the moment, watched the moment, and heard the moment. The moment that would be trapped in her head for the rest of her damn life. Not only did every single person at the party see it, but it was being picked up by the photo journalist right behind her. Every damn detail. Every. Damn. Detail.

Bessie knew what should happen. Xavier should just shove her off like somebody discarding trash. That was not what occurred.

Xavier Kilmer paused.

No, sorry. His whole body just stopped. The heat that had surrounded him, which had once felt like getting uncomfortably close to a hot coal, suddenly switched off. His breath froze until his skin turned a little blue.

And as she fumbled in his lap, trying desperately to pull herself up but struggling as her split dress got in her way, she felt his heart.

And that paused. For half a second. Then it damn well raced.

Bessie knew that vampire hearts were important organs. The most important to a vampire, in fact. To be fair, the heart was pretty important to humans, too. But Bessie meant more about magic right now.

A vampire's heart is where their magic truly comes from, and if vampires were to be believed, it was their compass.

The heart, the saying went, could tell them when something was important to them. And the faster it raced, the more important that thing would turn out to be.

Bessie was still in his damn lap, but so far she'd been concentrating on trying to extricate herself from it. Now she made the mistake of tipping her head back, and she made the even greater mistake of staring into Xavier's eyes.

Urban legend has it that a vampire will know when they meet their true mate. Sorry, their body will. Their mind might be blessedly ignorant. Their ego might demand another person. But their body will always reveal the truth.

Aside from a vampire's heart, their eyes are the next most important organ. For they can reveal so much. And now Xavier's pupils diluted to the point of becoming two almost indistinct black pinpricks.

All at Bessie's mere touch.

The massive Everest-like bouncer finally reached Bessie, grabbed her by the arm, and wrenched her back. It was a move that meant business. And the business it had was to throw her out by her coattails, not that she was wearing any.

He was hardly gentle. As his beefy grip locked around her arm, he bruised her. But he did not get the chance to drag her out.

Xavier finally moved.

He jolted forward. He pressed right up against Bessie, and he grabbed her other wrist.

All of this was caught on camera.

As was the way that his gaze shuddered, tried to jerk to the side, but failed, then locked on her again.

That gaze revealed so much. If she'd cared to look, she would've seen it start to unravel the true mystery behind Xavier Kilmer.

Instead, she got stuck between a rock and a hard place. Or at least a surprised bouncer and his vampire master.

“Sorry, sir,” the bouncer stammered. “I’ll get rid of her immediately. We’ll press charges because there’s video evidence—”

“No,” Xavier Kilmer said, barely capable of forcing the words out. “You can’t. She’s my W—”

THREE YEARS LATER.

Bessie kicked back in her chair. It was easily the crappiest at Channel 89. She didn't care. All her dreams had come true three years ago when she'd started working here. She honestly wouldn't have cared if they'd stuffed her down in the basement with the janitor. As long as her work got out there, that was all that counted.

Leanne, her best friend and arguably one of the most important journalists in the newsroom, tipped her head up over the dividing line that separated Bessie's tiny desk from the rest of the open-plan office. "So what do you think?"

"Sorry?" Bessie leaned all the way back, stretched out her shoulders, and sighed.

Leanne frowned, the move pronounced, cutting its path across her chin like a scalpel. "About the story?"

"Why are you even asking me? Gossip about vampires is your thing." Bessie fidgeted a hand back and forth in the air as if trying to do a very rough sketch of Leanne and her thing.

If her fingers could've grabbed hold of handy paintbrushes, they would've depicted Leanne standing there with a thousand gossip rags all centered on the most important vampires in town. But Leanne wasn't just

into opinion pieces. She knew everything there was to know about vampires in every form.

So why was she asking Bessie this again?

Bessie just leaned back further. “I don’t have time to chat. I’ve got an important case – honest,” she said a little too defensively when Leanne frowned.

Leanne walked around, locked a hand on her desk, and leaned in. “Yeah, I’m sure you do. But I’m asking for your honest opinion, because it matters.”

Bessie’s nose scrunched. “What was the question again?”

Leanne sighed, crossed her arms, and leaned against Bessie’s desk, the photo Bessie kept of her parents teetering awkwardly.

Bessie clutched it up quickly, moved it to the other side of the desk, then leaned back, giving Leanne more room.

“A vampire’s true-mate response. I’m writing an article about it. Come on.” She clicked her fingers in front of Bessie’s face. “You were paying attention, right? You care about me,” she flattened her hand on her expensive white blouse, “your best friend, right? You don’t want me to lose my job, do you?”

Bessie snorted. “No, I don’t want you to lose your job. And you are never going to lose your job. But why—”

“Sometimes I don’t know if it’s innocence, blind stupidity, or something else,” Leanne muttered under her breath.

Bessie bristled. But only in that way you do when the person who’s apparently insulting you actually cares for you. “What does that mean?”

“Just answer the question. What does it honestly feel like to see a vampire’s true-mate response up close and personal?” Leanne slowed down every last word until they hung in the air around Bessie.

Bessie honestly hadn’t been paying attention. Her mind had skipped forward to her next case. Now her cheeks brightened ever so slightly.

Which meant something. With her fiery hair and pale complexion, any change of vascular activity was like a neon sign.

This one lit up her embarrassment. Her perpetual, never-ending, undying frigging shame.

Three years ago, when she'd fallen into Xavier's lap, his response had been picked up on camera.

The media at the time had gone wild. Vampire experts from across the country had all pointed to one thing. Xavier had found his true mate.

Like hell he had. While he... okay, technically he had started treating her differently since that day, and he had never ignored her once since, they were hardly hitched. And they were never going to get hitched. Bessie hated him. That would never change.

She dropped her arms. She straightened. Then she went and crossed her arms again. "How many times do I—"

Leanne opened her hands. "I get it, okay? You and Xavier," she lifted two fingers but didn't bring them together as if to suggest she and Xavier weren't close in any way, "are never gonna get together. His true-mate response probably misfired. That's not the point. You are still credited as being the only person who's ever seen his response up close and personal. You felt it. You were even in his arms." Leanne closed her arms around her waist, doing a good impression of an over-enthusiastic straight jacket.

Bessie went to stand. Heck, she wanted to run. She settled for placing her hands down beside her, clenching her teeth, and trying to figure out how to get this over and done with quickly. "I wasn't in his arms. I fell on him. That's all."

Leanne looked right at her. Hell, she looked right through her, something people had been trying to do to Bessie – including psychologists – over the years, but she quickly gave up. "Sure. But you still know what it really feels like. Just read the article. I want to get every single detail right."

Bessie sighed.

Leanne proffered the article, and Bessie reached over, grabbed it, and did not read a word. She settled it down on her desk and grabbed a red pen like she honestly cared, though.

Just when Bessie thought she'd never get rid of Leanne, someone cleared their throat behind her.

She knew who it was.

It was her friendly vampire photographer.

Bessie didn't have a problem with vamps as a whole. Most of them were fine. It was the ghost ones she had to watch out for. Charlie, on the other hand, was the greatest guy in all of the city. And now he smiled, his fat, red cheeks shoving high against his thick-rimmed glasses, and he pointed to her then toward the door. "I thought you were keen to check this out? It's not every single day a mortician winds up in a casket meant for the dead mayor."

Bessie jolted to her feet. Leanne's article fluttered out and fell around her simple black shoes, but she didn't lean down to pick it up.

"Hey," Leanne muttered.

Bessie opened her hands, turned around, and backed off. She made this awkward shuffle. To be fair, most of the things she did were awkward. Who cared? Bessie wasn't here to look good. She was just here to make a difference.

"I will look at the article later. I'm sure every detail is right, anyway. It's not like I've ever seen a vampire true-mate response, and it's not like I ever will."

Leanne muttered something under her breath that sounded like dumb ass. Charlie? He got this strange look he sometimes did.

He didn't say anything, though. He shoved his hand into his pocket, pulled out his phone, texted somebody, shoved the phone away again, then gestured to the door. "Can you even believe this story?"

Bessie put her finger in her ear and waggled it. “Honestly? Yes. This city is cursed. Anything weird that can happen, will happen. And all of it,” she growled, “has something to do with ghost vamps,” she said, voice hardening with practiced ease.

If you hung out with Bessie for too long – say, longer than two minutes – you would be inundated with her views of ghost vamps. Most people were tolerant of it.

That included Charlie. Most of the time.

Apparently not today. “This has nothing to do with ghost vamps,” he muttered, voice hardening a little.

She frowned, crossed her arms, and walked backward toward the door. She didn’t quite have the skills to pull it off, and she almost fell against a rubbish bin. She righted herself quickly, and importantly, she didn’t look embarrassed. “Sure, it does. The head of the largest funeral home,” she brought her thumb up and started counting off the relevant points of the story, “winds up dead in a casket meant for our dear late mayor,” she started to tick off the next fact on her other finger, “and no one knows where the mayor’s body has gone or how the mortician died – that’s got to be ghost vamps. It’s written all over the case in massive neon bloody lines.”

“Firstly, neon has to glow, and blood doesn’t glow,” he muttered. “And secondly—” He shot her that look again. It was so similar to the one Leanne kept using. You know, the one that suggested she was a hopeless case. Whatever.

Bessie strode out of the door, reached the elevators, tapped her foot as she waited for them, then turned. “Have you heard anything from the police?”

Charlie shrugged, scratched under the short sleeve of his blue paisley shirt, then shook his head. “It only happened yesterday. As far as I’m aware, they wrapped up their forensic report this morning. That’s why we can head to the funeral home today. But the rest—”

“You must know something more.” She pointed at him, fingers stiff, words harder. “I know you have a cousin who works on the force.”

He opened his hands in a surrendering position. “Yeah. But you should also know that this is one of the most important cases the city has seen for decades. The police are keeping this under wraps.”

She opened her lips. It was an automatic thing. It felt like someone had shoved electrodes in them. Then they’d trained her over years and years to repeat the same thing when posed with a comment like that.

This was not the most important case. The disappearance of her parents was. But Bessie didn’t get a chance to reply.

The doors to the elevator opened.

She had her back to them. So rather than turn and walk in like a normal person, she just backed into it like she was willy-nilly reversing down some highway.

Except there was something in the way. And that something wore a perfect black cashmere suit. It also smelt of an attractive mix of orange and coffee cologne. But most importantly, that something always did the same thing to her body.

Bessie didn’t need to turn around to know that she’d just backed into Xavier Kilmer.

Her heart warned her of that fact with the equivalent of a 10-ton punch.

“Whoa,” Charlie said. Then he made this S sound almost as if he was gonna say something along the lines of sir. He reached over, hesitated, grabbed Bessie’s arm tenderly as if Xavier wouldn’t like it if he used force, and pulled her back.

The whole time, Bessie settled her gaze forward. She didn’t turn around. She didn’t face him. She didn’t even say anything.

Suffice to say, her relationship with Xavier had changed over the past three years.

He didn’t ignore her anymore. Ever.

Not too long after the incident, as she judiciously called it, she'd received a job offer with Channel 89. In fact, it had come in the very next day.

Since then, she'd had legitimate reasons to run into him – too many, if you asked her.

She was always assigned to his various press conferences, charity functions, and parties. She always politely declined, knowing her boss would just sack her if she took it as an excuse to do a hard-hitting interview, but that didn't change the fact that she kept running into Xavier more often than not.

Not quite as literally as this, but...

"Charlie," Xavier said, muttering Charlie's name easily, suggesting he knew it and didn't have to struggle hard to remember it.

Hardly amazing. Xavier was knee-deep in the press. As the most important vamp in town, he understood that in order to keep his fake, pristine reputation intact, he had to befriend every reporter he could, especially the photographers.

There was a long pause.

Bessie still didn't turn around, and she still didn't acknowledge him.

He, on the other hand, acknowledged her.

"Codename W," he whispered, words like a slight rustle of fingers down smooth glass as he brushed past her.

There he went again. Codename W. Ever since the incident, that's what he'd referred to her as. God knows what he'd called her previously. She doubted he'd even known her name before the incident.

Now, even if he did know it, he never used it.

She bristled. She could have turned. She could have faced him. She could've made a scene, even. But Leanne suddenly appeared in the corridor. Her eyes widened with a pulse of interest as she saw the two of them

together. Sorry – not together and never together. But technically in the same hallway.

So Bessie turned quickly. She marched into the elevator.

Xavier paused. He angled his head toward her. And just like a frigging magnet that could not move away when its other pole called it, Bessie looked up, her chin angling high, her eyes widening.

“Be careful. I would never want anything to happen to you.” With that, he walked away.

Bessie shoved her finger into the ground floor button and stabbed it with all her might. Charlie had to rush into the elevator or be left behind.

Her calm fractured as soon as the doors closed. Okay, she hadn’t been calm previously. Now she went into full Attila the Hun mode. She turned on Charlie, and it was a surprise steam didn’t issue from her ears. “Did you hear that threat?” She gestured wildly at the doors with a rigid thumb.

Charlie felt the need to open his hands in surrender again. He did that a lot around her. But now he really meant it. His lips also ticked into what could only be described as a disappointed frown. “Yeah, I did, and—”

“Xavier just threatened me. In plain daylight. I know that he hates the fact I’m looking into ghost vampires, but—”

“That wasn’t a threat, Bessie. He meant it—”

Bessie turned on him. “Why do you always defend him? He’s the shadiest vampire in the city.”

Charlie’s lips twitched. He looked like he wanted to push the point, but maybe he realized that would be just as effective as trying to shove a meteor out of the sky. He scratched his head and said, “Let’s just focus on this case. The chief wants us to get the report in by the end of the day. And, Bessie?” Charlie looked at Bessie just as he pulled his phone from his pocket, checked something, and frowned.

“Yeah?” The elevator doors opened, she turned, and she walked backward through them, because no, she had not learned her lesson. But at

least she knew Xavier couldn't be behind her this time. "What is it, Charlie?"

"I think we need to be careful, just as Xavier said."

Just as Xavier said, ha?

Screw that. Bessie wasn't careful. Bessie got things done. And this case would be no different.

Or at least that was the plan.

THEY ROCKED UP TO THE FUNERAL HOME, AND BESSIE KNEW SOMETHING was up.

No, no, it wasn't her nonexistent magic senses – though at least she still had hold of her trusty talisman. It was just... something.

Way before Charlie pulled up completely in the packed car park, Bessie undid her seatbelt. She jumped out before he put the parking brake on.

“Bessie,” he spluttered.

He hated whenever she put herself in danger. More often than not, he'd reach toward his phone. What, did he report to the chief whenever Bessie went a little too over the top?

To be honest, she couldn't begrudge him. Overboard was her specialty.

So was giving in to her intuition.

She stood next to the car, grinding her bottom lip through her teeth. “I've got a bad feeling about this. Or maybe a good one.” She clicked her fingers. “If a story is what we want, I can definitely sense there's one in there.” She cast her wary gaze momentarily behind her. The major funeral home was not far from the main cemetery. The cemetery was... Bessie didn't want to go there. Literally. She hated it. Even when close members of her family departed, she only ever saw them off at this very funeral home. She never went further.

That way trouble lay.

Now she shoved a hand into her pocket, pulled out one of her legal pads, and marched off toward the half-open steel and glass doors that led into the new side of the funeral home. There was an old section of the building, too, and it was from around 200 years ago. Made of large brown sandstone bricks, they had the kind of importance you don't get with new buildings.

But new buildings, on the other hand, looked clean. Which is exactly what the almost clinical dark steel lines and glass managed – apart from a single mark.

Before Bessie could stride through the half-open doors, she paused, teetered back on her feet, clicked her tongue, and hovered her hand over the mark.

“What do you suppose that is?” she demanded as she frowned, getting a little closer, then a little closer still. She was like someone warily approaching a chemistry experiment. Move too fast, and it might explode in her face.

Charlie was staring ahead. As she'd already said, he was a vampire, and even though he was a small-time guy compared to a lot of the other vamps in town, he still had vampiric senses. Now, as his nose twitched and the skin around his neck tightened, suggesting tension was marching down into his chest, he ignored her. He stared through the half-open doors, and tellingly for his species, she saw a flash – just a subtle one – of his primary fangs.

“Charlie?” She clicked her fingers in front of his face. Then she pointed at the mark. “What do you suppose that is?”

It took an age for him to yank his gaze off whatever he was watching. He looked at the mark once, eyes darting right over it without registering a single thing. He shrugged. “A nail mark, maybe?”

She thought about a human nail, and she went to laugh. Human nails were far too soft to scratch hardened glass like that. Then she inspected it

closer. Maybe he was right – just not about the human part. Whatever had produced this had been long and thin....

Bessie could tell herself this detail was somehow all-important, but she was self-aware – sometimes. And now she knew perfectly well she was distracting herself. This case would get grizzly. Bessie could promise you she was good at grizzly, but....

Charlie nodded her forward, and finally she unstuck her feet and walked in. He kept close to her side as they strode through the large open foyer. A gray, nondescript patterned carpet led to a small, polished reception desk. Channel 89 had already called ahead. The receptionist behind it blinked at them from over her hornrimmed glasses, her graying hair matching the look in her eyes.

What did that comment mean? Bear with Bessie, but the exact way the receptionist looked at them was like she'd seen this all before.

Well, Bessie most certainly hoped not. Yesterday, that receptionist's boss had wound up in a casket meant for someone else. One hoped that didn't happen every day of the week.

Bessie shoved her hands into her pockets. It was for two reasons. Her shoulders were a little tired – she hadn't slept particularly well last night. But more than that, she didn't want Charlie seeing the sweat starting to pick up along the back of her thumb and along her webbing.

They strode through a series of large doors until they reached the main casket viewing room. It was huge. It also had the feeling you'd get around a place dedicated to seeing off the dead.

This strange gloom hung in the air.

There was a large old sandstone wall at the back, and it was decorated with a beautiful circular stained-glass window. The window didn't necessarily depict anything, but it still gave one the impression of going through it. This part of the building belonged to the old funeral home.

It gave that sense of transitioning from new to old.

Bessie's mind wasn't usually this lyrical. She'd pulled her legal pad out previously, then she'd shoved it back into her pocket to hide her hands. That comment about the old meeting the new might be a nice detail for the article. But really, she didn't want to take her eyes off the room, even if it was just to look down to jot something onto paper.

"You've gone all quiet," Charlie said somewhat knowingly. He fingered the strap of his large, impressive camera. He frowned at her. "If you don't want to be here—"

Before he could finish whatever he wanted to say, she charged forward like a horse. "Take pictures of the stained-glass window," she commanded him, gesturing like she was a hardened battle commander, and by take photos, she secretly meant shoot everything to bits.

"We already have hundreds of pictures of it. It's a significant item—"

"I'm just going to go check something." She scratched the side of her nose.

Charlie frowned even harder. "Wait, what? What are you going to check?" His voice deepened in that way someone's does when they know you're about to go get yourself into trouble – possibly of the epic variety. Seriously, didn't he trust her at all?

Okay, more often than not, she got herself into trouble. But that was not her point. Exactly what kind of trouble could she actually get into around here?

Bessie shrugged. "I'm just going to check something—"

"The mark on the window was probably made by a claw." There, Charlie just deposited that like he had been carrying that secret over his shoulder in a sack and he was now tired of lugging it around.

Bessie spluttered, her eyes widening sharply. "What? You mean, I'm right, and some—"

"It was already in the paper this morning. Didn't you even read other people's articles before you got here?"

Bessie scrunched her lips through her teeth.

“Before you ask,” Charlie volunteered. “There are no other claw marks. No one knows what made them, either. Plenty of other magical creatures use this place. It could’ve come from a gargoyle – in fact, it’s most likely it did.”

Bessie just looked at him. Then the slightest grin parted her lips. “Yeah, but I’ve got that feeling.” She slapped her chest once.

Charlie looked like a balloon someone had deflated, not with a mere pin, but with a hammer attached to a thousand pins. “Sorry?” His shoulders hadn’t finished descending yet. By the time they reached the floor, they’d probably clunk like anchors.

“I just want to go check something out—” she began.

“Please be careful,” he said in a long-suffering tone as he plucked his camera out and nonetheless started taking the photos she wanted.

Bessie turned around and walked backward – a serious habit of hers – lifted her hands, and shrugged. “When am I not careful?”

... The answer was all the time.

Bessie bumped into an old pew stacked up against the wall. Why it was there and why it looked 10 times older than the rest of them, she didn’t know, but it almost toppled over. She grabbed it in time, winced in pain and shame, and scurried out of the door.

Don’t get her wrong, she liked Charlie’s company. And when she was scared and stressed, there was nothing more comforting than his large glasses and paisley shirts.

But Bessie got the sense that if she wanted to blast this case open, she had to be nimble, and she had to be bold.

You could put those two together and paint the picture of a woman who’d decided it was justified to break into Fire Mansion. A woman who... let’s say, didn’t necessarily mind breaking the law. Or at least pushing the law aside momentarily to get to what lay beyond.

Bessie wore her talisman. She never took it off. Now the whole frigging world knew about it, she was occasionally stopped in the street for questions. No, it wasn't that epic. Yes, it had come from her seriously powerful family. But no, Bessie didn't have the strength to really squeeze anything special out of it. It still gave her magic – only a few sparks here and there – but it was useful when she needed it most.

She kept it under her blouse now.

She went to head out front to check that seemingly innocent scratch on the glass doors once more. But she quickly changed her mind. She started to follow the growing sense in her stomach instead.

She knew the funeral home. Like she'd said – she'd been here plenty of times before.

But... had it always... seemed this blurry?

You might think this was a good moment for Bessie to snap back, check her eyes, and go see a doctor. Sudden onset blurriness was never a symptom to ignore. But Bessie had seen stuff like this before.

At the same time, strange sensations beset her. Fear and expectation coiled together in the pit of her stomach, rose like a snake, and faithfully marched up her back. Whenever she got a sense like this, big things always went down. So she reached for her legal pad and clutched it in a white-knuckled grip.

“I can sense that this is the story of the century – sorry, the second story of the century,” she quickly and automatically corrected herself. Then she rushed down the long corridor. There were other funeral rooms in this massive building. There had to be. This city was huge. Multiple people died at the same time, and many people had to be buried a day. You also needed separate rooms for certain magical creatures. You never saw a vampire off, say, in a room where you saw gargoyles off. The two were completely incompatible. There was a known rivalry between most of the gargoyle

gangs and the vamps in town. While it was usually kept under wraps on the city streets, when grief was involved, it could be a volatile mix.

Bessie passed the gargoyle room now. She zeroed in on the door frame. Fortunately no one was inside, so she didn't have to interrupt grieving folk who could pick up a car and throw it at her if they didn't like her attitude.

She saw the marks on the wall, all right, and quickly established they were real gargoyle claw marks. They were fatter, they were longer, and they were coarse. The mark on the glass doors was slim but chaotic in comparison. It was almost like someone had extended a single claw and just sliced it down the window frame unconsciously. If she closed her eyes, she could see it.

So Bessie went ahead and shut her lids. When she opened them, things were even blurrier.

Bessie pressed her lips together. The good part of her – the smart part that had kept her alive this long regardless of how stupid the rest of her was – wanted to go get Charlie.

But she rarely paused long enough to heed her common sense.

She continued through the funeral home. She angled toward the back where the bodies were dealt with. She did not have free rein as a journalist to just walk about wherever she saw fit. So Bessie finally did it. She shoved a hand down her top, and she grabbed her talisman. As her finger slid into place around the gold case, everything momentarily felt right. She aligned with her family, not just the memory of them, but the power of them that she had always been too weak to possess. As those few tingles rushed through her skin, they reached her lips, and a fat smile slid into place.

But then Bessie turned the talisman, and that smile turned into power. She hardly glowed, thankfully. Though if you'd been pressed up close, you would've seen a slim line of power trace over her entire form.

It was enough to give her the energy to rush forward and dart behind a large palm just as somebody walked out of an office abruptly by her side.

She had a small stature, so she squeezed in behind the foliage easily.

Plus, the guy in question was far too busy to notice little old her trying to blend in with the pot plants.

“I don’t care how long it takes. Get it to me. You have a day. You understand? A day—”

The guy’s voice was tense with true fear. The kind that wanted to sink into his stomach, pummel his lungs, reach his heart, and kick it for good measure.

Bessie was old-hat when it came to interviewing stressed-out subjects. And by interviewing, she meant spying on them. But she had never faced somebody quite as tense as this.

It made her own stomach kick. No, sorry, that was the fact that, when she slid her gaze over to him, he became blurrier than ever. It was now so bad, it looked as if somebody had taken a photo of this scene, isolated him, and added semitransparent smoke.

She would’ve rubbed her eyes. But the only reason she was successfully hiding from this guy was that he was distracted and she hadn’t moved noticeably yet.

The guy suddenly got a phone call. It managed to ring through, even though he was already on the line to somebody, and even though this conversation was so important, it felt like it could pop his heart. But as he yanked his screen down to check who was calling, he froze, his shoulders turning into this line of pure tension, the side of his face she could see becoming as white as snow.

His breath got stuck in the top of his chest. His torso rocked forward, but then it couldn’t rock back again. Sweat picked up along his already clammy skin, making him look as if he was an amphibian. He took an aching long time to finally slide his thumb across the answer button. Then he swallowed – like he’d been punched in the throat. “Yes?” he stammered breathlessly.

Bessie shouldn't be able to hear what was on the other end of the line. She couldn't. Technically. But she could see it. The blurriness that had already encompassed him got even worse. It centered on the phone. It spilled out as if it was somehow having a permanent effect on reality.

“Soon now. Keep going. Bring me the next one. Don't delay.”

Bessie... that voice took her to a place. She couldn't tell you exactly what place. It just felt like the edge – no, the end. The very verge of oblivion.

She couldn't take it anymore, and she went to gasp, but that would be when her usually elusive good luck held.

The receptionist from earlier came barreling down the corridor. “Sir, we've had an issue with one of the recently arrived bodies. It's got another one of those marks,” she muttered. Her voice dropped a full octave on the word marks. It made it sound like the devil himself was speaking through her.

Bessie at least managed to slip a hand up and cover her mouth.

The guy had already shoved his phone into his pocket. Bessie doubted that meant he'd ended his conversation with the guy with the... world-ending voice. But whoever that monster was, he was smart enough not to speak over the receptionist.

Bessie doubted he was that polite. He clearly did not want to be overheard.

“Ah... I'll come and check it out soon,” the guy muttered.

“Sir, we have a corpse with a mark actively burning into his face. If we don't do something now, no amount of makeup is going to fix it. We'll have to answer to the family—”

“I'm coming, Stella,” he said through clenched teeth. “I was just on an important call.”

Stella got a knowing look. She turned away quickly, though. “Finish your call and see me in the mortician room as soon as you can.”

Were these two together? Stella had come across as a simple receptionist. But maybe she had a stake in this company or something? She certainly seemed to be running the joint.

Then again, maybe this company was reeling, considering the fact their real boss had just died and wound up in a casket yesterday.

Finally the other guy trotted off. It was not before he carefully pulled the phone from his pocket and said, "I'll get you one."

Bessie knew when the call ended, because that touch of unreality went with it. The guy was no longer blurry like someone was fastidiously erasing him. That said, it took a while for him to look real again.

When everyone was gone, Bessie set about carefully extracting herself from the palm.

It took a long time to extract her talisman from her own palm, however.

You wouldn't have thought that somebody with her build could hide behind a mere pot plant – even though it was a very large and very leafy one. While she wasn't tall, she certainly did stick out.

But with the talisman, it was criminally easy to hide – with over-emphasis on the word criminally.

That said, it wouldn't help her hide from somebody like, say, Xavier. But it made it simple to hide from people who were already busy and lacked a ghost vampire's incredible senses.

She slowly pulled her pen from her pocket, and she faithfully wrote down everything she'd just heard. Her hand got a little shaky when she started to write down the bit about burning marks in some corpse's forehead.

"Bessie. Bessie?"

She looked up to see Charlie running toward her.

He had that look again.

He came to a skidding stop beside her. "Why are you all pale like you've seen a ghost?" He couldn't quite stomach the word ghost. It got

stuck on his lips and shook there in his throat.

“Ghost?” She reached up and touched the back of her neck. “I haven’t seen one of those. But, Charlie, you won’t believe what I just overheard.”

She shoved the pad at him. She could have quickly told him everything, but she didn’t want her voice to shake.

As Charlie read it, she turned around, and she went to head to the office that guy had burst from. That would be when Charlie grabbed her arm. He shot her this look. One that said maybe she should at least try not to be so obviously illegal.

She grinned. It couldn’t make it far over her crumpled lips. “Did you get the photos I was after?”

“Did you honestly overhear this?” he asked as he gestured with the legal pad. This corridor was relatively dark, but there were windows up near the junction between the walls and the ceiling. They let in in a few shafts of light, and they cut across Charlie’s frown and the side of the legal pad, illuminating what Bessie had written. Now she was calming down more, thanks in part to Charlie’s anchoring grip, she saw just how frightened her scrawl was. It was surprising he could read it at all. You’d likely need a team of scientists and several very smart AIs to make sense of a single letter.

She scratched behind her ear. “Yeah. Should we go and—”

“Yes, we should go and do something. Let’s head back to the room where it all happened. You can take some more notes. Then we’ll go back to work.”

“**But** what about what I overheard—”

Charlie frowned, the move pronounced as it cut down his chin. He drew more attention to it as his lips sliced open. “You got this by eavesdropping.”

Charlie could sometimes swing between being what she thought was a competent photojournalist to... well, doing what he was doing right now. Laying down the law. A law which he did not have any right to be wielding.

She spluttered. “Should I repeat the journalist’s code to you? We’re here to uncover the truth.”

“No. You should not repeat the code, because you don’t know it. You were about to break into that guy’s office. And you overheard all of this stuff while eavesdropping. My point, Bessie, is this is an active and extremely important case. You don’t have any right to be messing around and interfering with the police’s investigation. You really don’t want to mess up like you did a year ago, remember? It was only because X—” He stopped abruptly.

She had to actually think this one through. What had she done a year ago? Oh yeah, she’d almost gotten fired because she’d snuck into the trunk of the car of two dirty politicians to get evidence on their dodgy deal. They’d then proceeded to race down the highway at 100 miles an hour, being chased by the cops who were... it turns out, already investigating them.

Bessie had almost died.

If the car she’d been traveling in hadn’t magically switched itself off, she probably would have.

The police had asked for her head. Channel 89, for whatever reason, hadn’t given it.

Bessie shrugged. “Come on. I promise not to clamber into any trunks to be almost killed in high-speed car crashes,” she said with a cute laugh. Or at least what she hoped was one.

Charlie didn’t buy it. He crossed his arms. “I’ll be the judge of that. Now come on.”

She turned with him and walked away, and he stared past her shoulder at the very office he was preventing her from walking into.

Maybe Bessie was making this up, but he appeared to make a mental note of it.

Then he pretty much dragged her away.

The story, according to him, was in that direction. It wasn't. It was behind. And it would wait for Bessie until she was ready.

BY THE TIME THEY MADE IT BACK TO THE CAR, BESSIE WAS A LITTLE EDGY. Strange, considering she was usually bouncing up and down at the possibility of a big story. But something had sunk into her stomach, and it steadfastly refused to be removed. Even as she clamped a hand on it and pushed her fingers down, she couldn't dislodge it.

Charlie kept shooting her worried looks. He started to drive back to the newsroom, but his phone pinged. He checked it quickly. He always had this knack of being able to hide the screen from Bessie. Bessie was pretty good at spying on people, but it was somehow impossible when Charlie was involved. He had limited vampire skills, but it was like all the skills he did have he directed at preventing Bessie from eavesdropping on him.

Smart. It wasn't like she could control her urge to find out everyone's secrets. It was inbuilt.

Charlie sucked in a breath like he'd just been hit. "I just have to park here." He pulled up to the curb. Then he jumped out of the car.

Bessie undid her seatbelt quickly. "What do you mean? What's going on?"

"I just have to deal with this call. There is a coffee shop across the road." He shrugged at it. "It'll be 20 minutes or so."

“Charlie, are you getting serious on me again? What’s the call? If it’s a problem, I can help—”

She meant it. But Charlie just smiled noncommittally.

Bessie crossed her arms and strode over to the coffee shop.

She knew she was in a crappy mood. And she knew exactly why. It wasn’t every day she banged physically into Xavier. She might run into him, share a few snarled words, or see him from across the street and duck into a laneway to hide... but touching him was different.

She grabbed her neck. She sank her fingers in. She scratched her nails down. And it was in that distracted mood that she strode into the coffee shop.

And, as always, distraction was a particularly dangerous thing for Bessie. She almost walked face-first into a stunning blonde, thin vampire. She was in some kind of beautiful blue silk dress that looked as if the ocean had come to life and wrapped itself around her svelte limbs.

It was only when she turned, clearly perturbed by the fact someone had rammed her, even if that thing was like being rammed by a small mule, that Bessie’s stomach truly kicked.

Xavier’s girlfriend.

Bessie didn’t honestly expect the woman to recognize her, but the way her cheeks suddenly stiffened, tension wrapped around her long, sinewy throat, and her hands curled into fists meant that yeah, she recognized Bessie. And no, she didn’t like what she saw.

“You,” she hissed. “Is there a reason you just assaulted me in public?”

“Assaulted you?” Bessie muttered. She felt the need to put her hands up – something people mostly did around her. “I didn’t assault you. I just wasn’t looking where I was going. Sorry,” she stammered.

The vamp was not about to let go. She crossed her arms, the beautiful silk of her dress slipping around like dripping water. “What are you sorry

for exactly? Making a fool out of me today, or for three years ago?” she hissed.

“Three years ago?” Bessie struggled. “What did I do three years ago?”

There were a lot of people in this café. It was packed. Some of them were even vamps. Everybody looked at Bessie with those damn knowing stares. What, did all of the city know how crappy and innocent she could be sometimes?

To be fair, that wasn’t exactly the way they were all staring at her. Nope. It was kind of like Bessie was the most important person here. Not just some small-time journalist like she felt she was – but the queen of the damn city.

Xavier’s ex tilted her long neck back. “Do I really need to remind you of the fact that you stole him from me?”

Oh crap. Here we go. Bessie could play innocent for a while. But the time for games was up. Her stomach kicked back and forth like someone was desperately trying to change gears but they didn’t know how.

She dropped her hands. She quickly scratched her cheek, then her neck, then beside her eye. “Look, I didn’t steal anyone from you. If you’re talking about Xavier—” she wanted to keep her voice even. Even, it was not. It shook worse than a Richter scale registering a category 11 earthquake. Did they even exist? Well, they did now.

The look in this woman’s eyes was getting darker and darker.

She laughed coldly. “I cannot even fathom what he begins to see in you.” She looked Bessie up and down, up and down.

Bessie’s lips twitched. “Look, I’m sorry for what happened three years ago. I didn’t mean to disrupt your date. I was just looking into a case. But I am not,” her voice dropped down low, “together with Xavier. You got that?” She didn’t know if she was speaking to the woman, the room, or, you know, all of Parlor City. She might have acted all innocently with Leanne this morning, but Bessie was painfully aware of how the city treated her.

But things change. And one day, everyone would realize there was nothing going on between her and Xavier.

Bessie was an eternal optimist. She told herself that at some point, Xavier would get married. Not to her. And when it finally occurred, all this would disappear for good.

She held her head up higher.

So the vamp crossed her arms. She leaned in. “Xavier doesn’t need some weak, pathetic half witch like you. He does important work. Necessary work. He keeps people safe. You just irritate them. If he’s ever dumb enough to actually let you into his life, it will likely be the last thing he ever does. You, Bessie Tilly, get people killed.”

Bessie stood there, cheeks cold, tension descending down her shoulders. It reached her stomach, then it... it got worse. Much, much worse. It made her feel like someone had stabbed her stomach then replaced all of the contents with icicles.

God knows what she looked like. God also knows she didn’t care.

“Excuse me?” she stammered through stiff lips.

“You heard,” the vamp snarled darkly. Then she slipped her hand down her blond locks, shook her shoulders, turned, and accepted her coffee.

All eyes were on Bessie, including the barista’s.

She turned abruptly.

She went to walk away. She took a single step. She stopped. All she could do was think of her parents.

This vamp... how dare she. How dare she bring up Bessie’s dead parents. She hadn’t done that directly, but come on, that’s what she’d meant.

Bessie twisted. People were now taking out their phones. They would be recording this.

Bessie had a very careful game to play. She couldn’t tell you how many times she’d screwed up at work. Yet her boss kept asking her back. There would be a limit to his kindness, however. If she did something crazy, like

finally taking on an important vamp in public, there'd be no crawling back, even for her.

But Bessie couldn't stop herself. "If you think—"

The vamp now had her coffee.

She walked over to Bessie.

She was a great deal taller than Bessie. So Bessie had to tilt her head back. Her face was in the direct line of the coffee cup. She could see the steam coiling out from underneath the lid from here.

She should've paid attention to that and put it in the dangerous context of the vamp's rapidly darkening features. It was like a storm was overcoming her. "Bessie Tilly, I don't even know why you bothered to get up in the morning. If it weren't for that," she pointed at Bessie's talisman, "you'd be nothing. The only reason you got to Xavier was that you bewitched him with that."

Bessie couldn't take it anymore. All of the footage being taken of her face would presumably show it about to explode. "I do not get people killed. I don't honestly care what happened between you and Xavier. Maybe he just woke up and realized you're a monster."

Not exactly the worst insult. Bessie could've said something much worse. But the vamp reacted. She didn't need much to push her over the edge. Nor did she need a reason to attack.

She couldn't go for Bessie's throat. Not in public. She just went to throw the coffee cup in Bessie's face instead.

But Bessie wasn't about to get a face full of burning hot liquid.

A hand shot in over Bessie's shoulder and grabbed the coffee cup before it could leak a single drop onto her.

The door had opened into the coffee shop a microsecond earlier, and whoever had just saved Bessie had rushed in in the blink of an eye – so quickly that not even Xavier's ex had noticed.

If Bessie had bothered to look at anyone else, she would've seen that from the very second she'd walked in here, the vamps had been texting each other about her.

In other words, word had spread.

It didn't take long in this town for word to spread to one very specific man.

Bessie didn't need to turn around to know who'd grabbed that coffee cup. She didn't need to question why her attacker's face suddenly looked like it had been kicked in by an army. All Bessie had to do was slightly slide her gaze to the side to see the monogrammed watch, the broad palm, and the crackle of a ghost vampire's magic.

She'd run into Xavier again, ha?

Was this where she should feel thankful? Was this where her heart should glow at the fact he'd saved her?

It couldn't, and it never would.

She fixed this tremendous angry glower on her face, turned, and huffed. "What are you doing here?"

The coffee had dripped down the side of his hand, and a few chaotic, hot wisps of steam coiled around it. It reached his exceptionally expensive watch, then moved onto his seriously expensive suit. He did not hand the cup back to his ex-girlfriend. He shook his hand out to dislodge the hot liquid's relentless march. He finally moved alongside Bessie. "I believe the words you were looking for were thank you."

She crossed her arms and huffed. "I had that situation in hand."

"No, you almost had it in your face." He might technically be talking to her, but he was looking at his ex.

And she... wow, Bessie had never seen someone melt on fast forward, but that was exactly what she was looking at now. The vamp had looked so in control and all-powerful previously. Now her shoulders crumpled. She bit her lip. It was not a coquettish move. It looked like somebody who'd

just strolled in front of a lion and stolen the beast's favorite toy. She put her hands up. "It's a minor dispute—"

"Indeed. You will find assault is not minor." He shook his hand out again. "Nor is property destruction."

Her eyes could've exploded out of her head. "Assault? I didn't lay a finger on her."

"No, but you did ruin the cuff of my suit," he muttered.

The vamp looked like she was going to crumple. She'd seemed real, alive, and actually made of flesh and blood previously. But maybe she was really nothing more than a statue. One whose base had been ripped right out from underneath it. She took another step backward, opened her hands out wide, and smoothed something that could almost be called a smile over her face. It was too twitchy. And God knows the rest of her was far too jittery.

Bessie turned on Xavier. "Just let her go. Stop being such a bully," she added.

He had technically saved her from a face-full of coffee. And to be fair, if anyone had been a bully, it was that woman. But whenever Xavier was concerned, or rather, whenever he was concerned with Bessie, rules of propriety changed. He was the only one responsible for all that went wrong in this town.

The vampires in the room muttered amongst themselves in low, guarded, but clearly affronted tones. Bessie didn't pick up everything they said, but let's just say, people were more than surprised at her reaction. What, did they honestly expect she should fall into his arms for saving her from a few drops of hot coffee? Fat chance.

Xavier didn't look surprised. His lips twitched, then moved smoothly into a smile. "As you wish." He said that, but he still stared daggers into his ex-girlfriend's eyes.

She clearly knew what was good for her. She scurried off, proverbial tail tucked between her legs, and she didn't even ask for her coffee back.

That just left Bessie with Xavier. She could have used the word alone, but they very much were not alone. At least the vamps in the room were no longer obviously taking footage. They weren't bolshie enough to do that with Xavier around. A lot of the other magical races, however, were.

You would think that, knowing she was on camera, it would make Bessie a heck of a lot politer. She just crossed her arms. This was a good chance to grab a public interview. "Are you finally going to tell me and the people of Parlor City who you really are?"

Xavier reached over to the bench, placed the coffee down, and faced her as he stood tall. "I'm Xavier Kilmer, senior ghost vamp of this city."

She mostly hated the look in his eyes. She should have detested it, but she could admit one thing. He could look at you so directly, the rest of the world became boring and irrelevant. The universe with its countless stars, planets, and intelligent life? Extraneous. It was just him and you. Or should she say him and her?

She wouldn't let her stomach kick, even though it was trying its hardest to do a good impression of a bucking horse refusing any control. She crossed her arms tighter. "I want to know who you really are. There's a festering secret at the heart of this city—"

The main shop door opened from behind Bessie, the little brass bell above it giving a light tinkle. Someone gave a strangled gasp. She knew that voice well enough. It was Charlie.

She turned. It was only her concern for her friend that made her do it. With Xavier in the room, yanking her attention off him was like throwing the lid off a pit of snakes and turning your back to them. But Charlie couldn't spare a second to glance at her – he watched Xavier with wide, white-rimmed eyes.

Charlie had seen a lot in this town. He had an unrivaled ability to put facts together quickly. And now as he looked over from the coffee to Xavier's stained cuff, then back to Bessie, his shoulders sank like a

burning-hot meteor through ice. “You didn’t throw coffee on him, did you?” he muttered quietly, the skin around his lips as tense as she’d ever seen it.

“It wasn’t me. But now you’re here, put the camera on. Xavier Kilmer is finally feeling in a talkative mood. Great place for an interview.” She pointed to the side at all of the rather flabbergasted witnesses.

Xavier just looked at her. No, she couldn’t say it was aggressive or angry. It was just the exact same look he’d been shooting her for three years. The one that was determined but somehow tender, like it was a hard chocolate with a soft center. The one that, if she paid too much attention to it, might send exactly the wrong kinds of tingles rushing through her stomach.

So what did she do? Why, she went for her go-to move, of course. She crossed her arms and walked backward.

Someone had just got up, but rather than tumble into them, she tumbled into their chair, thankfully.

She said thankfully. Because the chair soon toppled over. Way to go for looking like the tough, in-control investigative journalist she imagined she was. She was about to face-plant a half-finished bowl of eggs and bacon in front of a packed, attentive room and at least 20 camera phones.

About to.

Why was it that vampires – and ghost vamps especially – could move faster than the wind? Why, in the blink of an eye, could they be on one side of the room, then in the next blink, on the other? Oh yes, because they very much weren’t human.

Bessie never got to knock her head on the table. Somehow the chair was whipped around, and the next thing she knew, she was seated in it. Xavier didn’t touch her for long. He didn’t even linger. His hand locked on her back for a microsecond as he placed her in the chair, then it retracted faster than light.

His smell, however, and the specific sense of him remained, even as he took a proper step back, expensive shoes clunking on the floor.

Bessie didn't like to be reminded of that moment three years ago, but today she'd been reminded of it twice.

He'd only touched the side of her shoulder, and even then, it had been a preciously light move. Yet it left these aching tingles racing down her arm and into her hip.

Most of the various people in the room, including the vampires, actually cheered.

That just set Bessie's teeth on edge. "I didn't ask you to save me, Xavier."

"You don't need to ask."

Crap. What a comment. The kind of perfect comment you would put on a tagline on the front page of tomorrow's paper, preferably under a photo of Bessie tilting back, limbs all akimbo, expression still with fright.

She had tried desperately to shrug off her connection to him three years ago, but now it would come racing back to bite her in the bum.

She thought for a second Xavier would sit. You know, for a second she actually thought that he would act like an adult and have a public interview. That, of course, did not occur. When he confirmed that she was fine, he walked over to the barista, ordered two coffees, stood there, texted somebody, then waited.

Sorry, Bessie was doing all the waiting. Seriously. She sat there staring at him, her hair a mess, her heart aflutter, for 30 whole seconds. It took way too long for her to realize she had a job to do and a reputation – or whatever was left of it – to upkeep.

She jerked to her feet. The barista worked quickly and soon finished the coffees. He handed them to Xavier. Then Xavier paused, turned to her, and in full view of everyone, handed her one.

Without a word, he walked out. But he didn't need words, did he? Because his gaze was sufficient. He stared at her once, and once more, the world didn't matter. Only she did.

“I DON’T WANT TO LOOK,” BESSIE SAID AS SHE CLENCHED HER TEETH AND rubbed her face.

Leanne leaned over. She shoved the phone in front of Bessie’s nose. “Why would you need to look? You were there – the very center of attention,” she chuckled. “What did it feel like exactly? I mean, seriously? What did it—”

Bessie couldn’t take it anymore. She snapped. “Xavier Kilmer is directly related to the disappearance of my parents,” she hissed.

Leanne was not somebody who was callous, but she was also not somebody who gave you any quarter if you were being foolish. “He’s your age, a couple of years older at the most. Xavier couldn’t have had anything to do with the disappearance of your parents – you know that.”

“Fine, his father did. But Xavier definitely knows what happened.”

Leanne opened her mouth to say something. From the look in her eyes, maybe it would be a comment to tell Bessie to snap out of it already. But she didn’t. She sighed. Then she crossed her arms and finally put her phone away. “What are you going to do about this? Your groupies are going wild.”

“I don’t have any groupies,” Bessie stammered.

“Sure, but Xavier does. And considering you’re—”

Bessie looked at her challengingly. “I’m his what?” she growled.

Leanne put her hands up. “I didn’t say the word *his*. You did.”

“What were you gonna say, then?”

“Famous,” Leanne said, shoving her teeth into her bottom lip and really enunciating that with a purr.

Bessie’s eyes narrowed. “I’m hardly famous.”

“You are in the vampire community. So let’s go back to my question. What are you gonna do?”

“What do you mean?”

“Even if you’re not together with Xavier,” Leanne spread her hands again, “this sure looks bad. Especially the line—”

“Don’t say it,” Bessie spat.

“Fine. What do you say we just get some Chinese and head home?”

“No. Let’s go see a movie afterward. I don’t particularly want to have an early night.”

“Afraid of what you might dream of?” Leanne muttered.

Bessie scowled at her. But arm in arm, they walked to their favorite Chinese restaurant.

They sat at one of the back tables, ordered their dishes, and waited.

It was a beautiful restaurant. It was a little dark and small, but the food was great.

Leanne drummed her fingers on the table and leaned in. “Anyway, have you heard?”

You often used the word anyway as a segue. But Bessie had no clue what Leanne was talking about. “Ha?”

“Come on, you must’ve heard.”

“About what?”

“The multiple disappearances.”

Bessie had no context. “What are you talking about?”

“Reports have been coming in ever since the mayor’s body disappeared.”

All Bessie could think of was what she'd learned at the funeral home. She straightened. "You mean corpses with marks burned into—"

"No. Living people. Mostly construction workers."

"Ha?"

"Not just from one construction site, but from all around town. Five people are missing already. There doesn't seem to be any connections between the cases. Barney, my cousin, mentioned it."

Her cousin worked on the force.

Bessie leaned in, intrigued. "You sure it's only been happening since yesterday? Maybe some of the guys went missing earlier and nobody noticed?"

"No. Every single one of them went missing from the construction sites they were working on. It happened in the last 48 hours. What the hell do you think is going on in this town?"

Bessie opened her mouth to give a snapped, automatic response. Did she honestly have to tell you what it was? Whatever was going on, it had to have something to do with Xavier.

But something held her back from making that knee-jerk conclusion.

She went back to what she'd heard at the funeral home. That guy... with the endless, void-like voice had said he wanted another. Soon. Bessie still didn't know what he'd meant, and Charlie had pointed out that the conversation itself hadn't been illegal – nor had it necessarily suggested untoward conduct. There was no reason to believe they'd been referring to people. But what if they had? And somehow that's why all the construction workers were going missing?

Bessie wasn't about to let Xavier off the hook, but if there was one other person in this town who could be responsible for something so devious, it was the voice she'd heard on the phone.

She wasn't careful with her expression or her body language, and as she straightened and her cheeks became slack, Leanne leaned in. "What do you

know? You've always got your ear to the ground."

"What does Barney know?"

Leanne shrugged. "He's not really giving too many details. The case is way too fresh. It's going to take time for the police to figure things out – and even more time before they're comfortable telling the rest of the city what's going on."

Bessie looked to the side.

She went to say something along the lines of they should just check with Xavier, but she looked over Leanne's shoulder. And that would be when she saw a blur spreading down the street. This area of town was well lit. There were lots of little shops clustered together, and every single one had a brightly lit sign showing their wares.

It meant it was bright enough that Bessie could see the blur marching down the street. Sorry. To march, you need to have feet. Maybe you also needed to have somewhere to go. The blur, on the other hand, slithered around like a snake looking for prey.

Bessie knew that the blood drained away from her cheeks, knew it looked as if she'd just had her throat slit.

"Bessie?" Leanne jerked close, eyes wide, lips wobbling.

She knew full well that Leanne couldn't see the blur, even though Leanne was a level II witch.

But Leanne saw as, four seconds later, a guy came racing into the restaurant. He was in high-vis gear, a hard hat askew on his sweaty head.

He looked like he'd just seen the dead.

The owner of the restaurant came racing out. "Chan?"

"This... I..." the guy couldn't spit out whatever he needed to say.

Bessie jerked to her feet, Leanne too.

"What's going on?" Leanne demanded.

"There's—" The guy backed off. He still couldn't form a proper sentence. His lips wouldn't work. It wasn't just the fear talking. Maybe

Bessie was making this up, but it almost looked as if his mouth was turning to ice. This cold pressure was building around his body. It started in his chest then moved over his neon orange vest, actual little icicles marching in its wake.

The guy abruptly turned.

He went to throw himself back out of the restaurant, but he stopped. He skidded, his large brown boots churning up chunks of mud from one of the construction sites he'd been at all day.

His eyes widened at the sight of something. But there was only one thing out there that Bessie could see – the blur. She'd never met another soul who could see it. Not before today.

Hell, she'd never trusted that the blurs were real. Not before today.

She'd always suspected they were just some peculiar symptom of the fact she'd come from a powerful magical family. While all the rest of her parents and grandparents had received incredible powers, she'd gotten nothing but the ability to see crazy blurs instead.

But if this guy could see it too, then—

“Chan,” the owner of the restaurant demanded one last time, but Chan couldn't answer.

It was like he'd entered a little world of his own.

He took a breath, then jogged through the open door, large shoulders jostling the glass hard enough that it cracked.

He shot away, moving so fast, he was out of sight in a heartbeat.

“What the hell is going on here?” Leanne demanded.

Bessie lurched toward the door.

She could have thrown herself out into the street, but she slowed with a terrified twitch that started in her stomach then shot into her shoulders. Yes, there was a story out there, but boy, was the blur getting thicker. She'd never seen it move like this before. It seemed to seep down the street like poison gas looking for a crack. When it found one, who knew what it would

do? But as Bessie's skin chilled, she got the sense it was building up to something big.

She—

“That’s my son. He’s got a baby on the way,” the restaurant owner screamed desperately.

That kicked Bessie into action. It wasn’t that she didn’t care about saving people who didn’t have families of their own. She wasn’t that callous as to think people were only important when they lived for others. But she just needed one spark to ignite her curiosity – to force it to burn brighter than her raging fear.

She ran for the door, hair flying around her face.

“Are you crazy?” Leanne screamed, her voice hoarse.

No, Bessie wasn’t. But if anyone had a chance of chasing Chan down, then they needed to be able to see exactly what he could. And from the fact that nobody else was staring at the blur, it was clear this was now down to Bessie.

“Call the police,” Leanne spluttered. She turned, but Bessie had already reached the door.

She thrust out into the rapidly chilling night.

And what a night it was. It was... strange.

She heard mutters – these distant moans that broke through, not just the street, but the matter that created it. She whipped her head from left to right, her neck muscles straining like overstretched rubber bands. But still, she couldn’t detect whose throats those shadowy sounds came from.

Bessie kept searching for their origin until finally, she reached the edge of the blur.

Until now, everything had been cold like Bessie had been shoved face-first into a snow drift. A few little icicles had even picked up over her lips and the back of her neck. But as she reached the edge of that great marching shadow, everything became as hot as coals pulled from a crackling fire.

But paradoxically, part of the experience was also cold. Her teeth kept chattering in her head.

In the real world, something was hot, or something was cold. But at the edge of this blur, reality morphed, smashing together, all of the once distinct states of matter forgetting the rules of physics that defined them and making them up instead.

“Chan?” she screamed. Her voice made it out of her lips, but that was it. It couldn’t penetrate the edge of that blur. If the sound waves had momentarily become visible, she would’ve seen them smash up against that strange shuddering threshold only to fall back like marbles thrown at a mountain.

She thought she heard Chan scream. Guttural, low, and truly frightened, but the sound only just made it to her ears as if somebody had smothered them with layers of blankets.

“Chan? Chan?” She ground her nails into her palms, scratching them hard enough that she cut the skin.

Though she could hardly hear Chan anymore, at least his echoing distant voice told her where to run. She stopped at the mouth of the laneway. The blur wasn’t particularly distinct from here, but as she thrust inward, it quickly became thick. Bessie had never walked through a pea-soup fog, but even if she had, the experience couldn’t be that similar to this. Not unless fog could be given the means to infiltrate, not just the air, but one’s mind. The further she pushed into it, the more this cloudlike force spread through her psyche.

At least it didn’t stop her from running down the laneway, her simple shoes slapping against the uneven bitumen with distant thwacks that made it sound as if the noise didn’t come from her but was only overlaid over the scene to make it seem more real.

The laneway was hardly empty. This was the primary shopping district of Parlor City. There were little cafés, small supermarkets, and tiny clothes

stores everywhere.

A lot of the stores down this laneway, however, didn't operate at night. The lights might still be on, and Bessie might be able to see their wares, but that was it.

As she ran past the store to her left, she saw it was a strange toy shop. Bears and old wooden soldiers were aligned up under powerful downlights. Though it could've been her imagination, as she spun past, heart a flutter, hair sticking to her sweaty brow, she swore she saw shadows gathering in the eyes of every toy like tar dripping onto white beads.

There wasn't another soul around, which meant there was no one to help her should she scream.

But scream she did not. She focused every single one of her senses on the threshold of the blur.

It was insane to watch it as it marched down the street. She could only just see Chan's hardhat bobbing above and beyond it.

Bessie's phone rang. She was aware of it in that way you are when something comes in contact with your body. But not like she actually had to do anything about it. Because the only thing she needed to do right now was get to Chan before it was too late.

Maybe it was already too late. That blur suddenly thickened.

Bessie needed to stop calling it a blur. Why not call it some pocket instead? It occupied space, but it didn't seem to do so with the ordinary physical constraints that dictated the properties of normal matter. It was like anything that got too close to it or strayed inside was somehow carried away to another world. One that looked almost exactly like this, but not the same.

That sense of unreality Bessie had felt earlier morphed, becoming bigger, sliding around her shoulders and holding on until it felt like it wanted to drag her down into the sewers.

She ran past a clothes store. If she'd been paying any attention, she would've noticed that the mannequins' eyes looked glossier, almost like they were watching her.

She heard Chan. His breathing was labored. He sounded like he was struggling under a 10-ton stone pinning his chest.

She would've called his name, but she'd run out of breath 10 meters ago. She was fit, but... but indeed. The more she chased, the less things seemed real.

She had no clue what would happen when she actually reached Chan, but it would involve going into the pocket. There was no way around it, even though her trembling heart warned her with every shuddering beat not to dare get a step closer.

She clutched her talisman. Her fingers did it automatically, moving long before she was actually conscious of it. As they slid around that smooth, easy-to-hold-onto clock face, it gave her the blast of courage she required.

"Hold on," she responded just as Chan screamed one last time, his voice somehow sounding further and further away as if it was an echo at the edge of the world. Then she flung herself forward.

Bessie encountered the true edge of the blur, and it felt like straying behind a spacecraft as it took off through the atmosphere. So many forces struck her, she should've been torn apart, turned to ash, then atomized for good measure. But somehow, her body held on, a few charges of green-yellow magic blasting up from the talisman, slicing around her fingers, and holding them in place with a desperate grip.

The exact way the edge of reality pulled and tugged her was memorable but impossible to describe. Magic had to be involved. While Bessie didn't technically practice that much magic herself, she did have a good grounding to understand it.

While approaching that threshold felt like throwing herself into a black hole, this had to be more appearance than fact.

So she just clutched her talisman harder. Running her teeth back and forth, she pushed further on. It felt as if she was crossing some great divider – like she'd walked up to a wall in her mind and found a door that separated her conscious side from her unconscious side. With just a little more effort, she could cross through and find what lay beyond.

Bessie closed her eyes. She shoved forward.

She did it.

She didn't know how long she'd been avoiding these blurs for – it had to be the best part of her life. Not once had she ever actively moved toward one. Now, she moved within.

It didn't take long until Bessie reached the other side. Before she did, she had to put up with, Bessie didn't know – the pulsing heart of creation? The chaotic lifeblood of pure magic? Why describe it? Why not just feel the terror that engulfed her and the force that flung itself through her limbs, reached her heart, and exploded?

Her trip through unreality didn't last. Bessie soon punched out the other side.

And she... screamed.

All her life, Bessie had seen shadows. These ghastly, almost ghostlike creatures. It was why she hated cemeteries, because they hung out there more than any other place.

For the large part, Bessie knew how to avoid them. Not now. Because the world that met her was filled with them. Not just one or two – frigging hundreds.

Bessie appeared in a version of the city – the same laneway, almost the same shops. And as she faced the wide streets beyond, she saw them filled with those shadow creatures.

They appeared not to notice her at first, almost as if they were busy living their own lives. But as Bessie skidded to a stop, fell to her knees, and screamed, the closest one twisted its head around. It had no face, and it had

precious little that could be referred to as a form. Until it grew a head. A mouth and teeth came next. Then a hand stretched out from its shadow body with the sound of plastic wrap melting and moved toward her.

Bessie shrieked and backed off, her jeans ripping on uneven sections of the asphalt beneath her. Then the shadow creature freaking screamed. Wait, no. It was Chan, and it came from far further ahead. Maybe space wasn't the same in this weird pocket world. But he hadn't been that far ahead before she entered this place. Now it looked as if she'd lose him.

He ran around the side of a major street. He kept muttering to himself, voice low, words strangled.

She couldn't pick up a single thing – other than one horrifying comment. “King. The Ghost King is waiting.”

Bessie couldn't describe the way those words affected her. But boy oh boy, did they reach in. They shook through her stomach, pounded into her back, and made her want to spit her teeth out.

But she still shoved forward.

She had to push through the shadows. They didn't attack her. They seemed to be more intrigued than aggressive. They didn't appear to have the ability to speak, either. Until one of them figured it out. To do that, it had to grow a mouth, then teeth, then disgustingly, a tongue. Bessie heard and saw as it slid out into the air. Then the creature said three little words. “Ghost King's bride.” It looked right at Bessie as it said that.

Bessie lurched back from it. She wanted to shriek and run, but she couldn't. She heard Chan. He sounded like he was half-a-city away now. “Chan? Chan? Come back,” she screamed.

He didn't respond.

Bessie lurched around the fiend that'd called her the Ghost King's bride, then continued to run.

This place was strange. It felt like the city she knew and kind of looked like it, though there were glaring differences. For one, all of the people were

these ghostly apparitions. And for another, whole sections of the city were replaced by shadowy divides.

“Not far now. Not far,” she heard a faint cry that had to come from Chan’s lips.

Bessie threw herself around the side of a laneway and encountered a large street. Ghost cars were driving on it. Actual frigging ghost cars. They had the proportions of actual vehicles and even had exhaust. They didn’t look like the cars she knew and loved, however. They didn’t have colors. They were all painted out of the blackest substance you could imagine until they absorbed the light completely.

She moved toward one, reaching out, telling herself it couldn’t be real. But it almost took her fingers off as it raced past without a care. She jerked back. She looked down at her hand. Her fingers were bleeding. But the blood couldn’t possibly be real. It shimmered, glowing brighter than ordinary blood at first, then it rapidly turned into this strange tar-like black substance. Bessie shrieked at the top of her lungs and desperately tried to wipe it off her.

She was starting to gather more and more attention, and the same refrain was repeated. Ghost King’s bride. Ghost King’s bride. Bessie had never heard those particular words before, and yet somewhere in her, she swore she already knew them. It was like this refrain had been repeated all her life, right on the edge of sleep or whenever she’d closed her eyes long enough to slip into a slight reverie.

She pulled herself up. She clutched her injured hand against her chest, forming a tight fist so she didn’t lose any more blood only to see it turned into the equivalent of crude oil. And she spun.

Something thumped against her chest. Her talisman. It was still with her, even on the edge of reality. She stared down at it. It was glowing strangely. The colors were inverted. She’d never seen it look like this. It

was like someone had flipped it, and in doing so, had somehow changed its power, too.

Instinctively, she grabbed it.

Her hand shook. It was the injured one, but as soon as it slipped around her talisman, at least it stopped actively bleeding.

Nothing could calm her crazy breath. Bessie focused her senses once more. Chan was across the street, disappearing beside what, in the real world, was a beautiful old Art Deco hotel.

Bessie shoved forward to follow him. If she'd been paying attention, she would've realized that she was dripping blood wherever she went. The talisman might have stopped her from actively bleeding, but she'd still lost a lot. It covered her front, and it dripped down her wrist and the side of her arm, splashing over the road wherever she went.

Bessie didn't care. She just had to get to Chan.

More of those shadows kept appearing. Now they thronged the streets. It was almost like some important person had appeared and they desperately wanted to see them with their own eyes – or the shadow equivalent thereof. And that person had to be her.

All Bessie kept hearing was the same word.

Bride.

Bride.

Bride.

If Bessie had thought that the past three years of living down the outrageous claim she was Xavier's true mate was bad, then this was something else entirely.

The word bride made Bessie want to strike the closest thing. But the shadows always moved far out of her grip, and she didn't have the ability to do anything but run.

She made it across the street in front of the ghostly equivalent of a truck. If it had struck her, God knows what would've happened. If touching

a racing car had split her finger like someone taking an ax to a leaf, she had to take this shadow world seriously. If she could leak blood, she could most certainly die, and who knew what would happen if she carked it here?

As the wind buffeted around her face, she saw Chan. He was the only thing that could distract her and focus her off every hissed claim she was someone's bride.

He stopped beside what looked like an alternate entrance into the Art Deco hotel. He rocked back, and from here, Bessie could see this glassy force overtaking his eyes like somebody pouring milk into water. He shot forward, his body desperate to open the door and rush inside.

Bessie did not know what was going on here. She doubted she'd ever learn the truth. Maybe she'd been struck on the street and this was nothing more than a crazy nightmare. But she knew if Chan went in there, he would never come out.

"No. You can't. You can't," Bessie screamed.

Chan either couldn't hear her or didn't want to listen.

He stared up at the entrance, dumbfounded, mouth opening wide, hands groping the door until finally Bessie heard a click as something unlocked from within.

Bessie couldn't reach Chan in time, but her magic could.

In the real world, her magic barely functioned. In the real world, even if she turned her talisman up to its top setting, it didn't matter. But this wasn't the real world. And without even having to twist the talisman, Bessie just opened her hand. Magic shot out of it. It curled wildly around her fingertips in charges of red-black force. It struck the street and kept going as it raced through the bitumen. She hadn't intended to, but she ripped up a massive chunk of it, right underneath Chan's feet. It threw him to the side just before he could lurch through that open door.

He struck his hip with a bone-shaking thwack.

He spluttered. And for the first time, his senses returned to him. Bessie was sure of that, because the milky magic that had overtaken his pupils retreated like a slapped hand.

Bessie reached him. She fell down on her knees. “Chan. Chan, you’ve got to get out of here. Think about your kid. Think of your mother. *Think,*” she spluttered.

He shook his head, clutched at his eyes, and rammed them shut. Bessie couldn’t see his pupils, but she could swear that that milky force was returning. Should it grasp hold of his eyes once more, she was certain it would never retreat.

That was until Bessie grabbed his face. Her fingers were still charged with magic. Honestly. She wasn’t making this up. This couldn’t be a dream. Because she felt the magic moving through her, racing like water flowing down a pipe it’d always been kept from, and it was unstoppable.

Something broke in Chan. Not his sanity, fortunately – just whatever was trying to overcome him. He spluttered, jerked back, and shook his head.

“What?” Chan looked straight at her, and for the first time, he actually looked like he was present, like there was a real life behind his widening eyes.

“You have to think of your family. I don’t know where we are, but you have to trust me. We have to get out of here.”

Chan let her help him to his feet.

Bessie turned.

She might have just spoken bravely. But how the hell was she going to get out of here again?

Maybe her talisman could answer that for her. All she had to do was frown down at it, and she saw light tracing around it. But only in one direction. It was... it was almost like it was telling her where to go.

“This way,” she muttered. She darted down the side of the hotel.

“Who are you? What’s happening here? And what the hell are those shadows?” Chan spluttered.

Bessie stared down at her hands. Her magic hadn’t gone anywhere. It still surrounded her with a gentle, crackling embrace. It felt like it was coming from some other place. But it wasn’t. It originated from deep inside her.

She needed to assure Chan she was in control, that he actually could trust her. But she kept staring down at her hands, watching the magic charge along her fingers as if it was the first time she’d ever seen it.

But Chan had plenty to distract himself with. He stared, flabbergasted at the street and all the shadows until something distracted him. There was some fine dust on his fingers. He glanced down at it, dumbfounded.

It probably came from whatever construction site he’d been working on, right?

“Honestly, where the hell are we?” he demanded in a throaty gasp. “What is this place? And why... does it seem so familiar?”

“What do you mean?”

“I... at the construction site, we encountered something similar this morning.”

“Ha? What are you talking about?”

He shook his head distractedly, grabbed his chin, and let his fingers sink in hard. “I work down at the construction site for one of the new car parks. We found something this morning... something deep in the basement as we were digging further in to support a pylon.” He started off strong, but with each new muttered word, they became ever more distant as if his mouth was busy moving away from the rest of his body.

A sickly chill raced down Bessie’s back. “What are you talking about?”

His eyes almost became glassy again.

No way. Bessie would not let whatever force was trying to overcome him return. She grabbed his shoulder hard. “Chan?” she demanded in a tone

that could not be ignored. For it was one that came along with the ever-present crackle of magic. A few little shaking sparks zipped from her fingers and pounded into his cheek. They were the equivalent of a well-placed slap.

Either he responded to her touch or something else, but once more, he shook his head and pulled himself out of his own reverie. He clenched his teeth. “We encountered some... jet-black stone. It looked like obsidian, but it was... pure, pure black.”

Bessie’s stomach lurched. “How come nobody has heard about this?”

“We—”

Bessie could continue to question him. But the fact of the matter was they just didn’t have the time. Every time she pushed, that glassy look would return, and it would just make him slow down.

Nothing was chasing them yet, but Bessie kept passing those shadows. They all brushed past her like leaves being pushed by a violent gale, and they all whispered the same thing – the Ghost King was waiting.

She had to get Chan out of here now. She could question him later – if there was a later.

They ran down another side street.

Bessie needed a plan. You know, something other than just running around crazily.

Maybe that plan was her talisman.

She started to follow it, tuning in to the light that kept chasing around it, walking to the left when the light shimmered to the left, then to the right when it glimmered in that direction.

Finally, they came to the edge of a street. A blur seemed to separate them from something beyond.

Bessie pulled Chan toward it, but he yanked back. “What the hell is that thing? It feels like a black hole. We can’t possibly go through it. It will tear us to pieces.”

“Trust me – it’s the only way out of here.”

“You—”

Bessie didn’t give him the chance to say anything else. She knew this was their only option. So she yanked him forward.

Again, she crossed through that transition space. Now she knew what to look out for, she felt it distinctly as if she was somehow traveling through the various stages of matter. It couldn’t last. It didn’t need to. In a crack, they finally came back to the real world.

Bessie fell down onto her knees, and her body was suddenly seized with a muscular tension worse than any she’d ever felt. It was like someone had fastidiously injected every one of her muscles with tetanus.

It was just in time to hear sirens. She stared across at a squad car as it blared into view, its tires screeching.

God, she’d done it. They were back, and they were safe.

But to be safe, you have to be sure the threat will not return. And the threat, why, it had just got started.

SHE SMILED AT THE FACT SHE'D GOTTEN CHAN BACK TO SAFETY. THEN Bessie almost immediately went to faint. Her body couldn't take it. She'd used too much energy. Too much... magic.

What she learned in that strange realm raced around her head, every thought getting progressively more violent, each one slicing in until they could've turned her brain to mush.

She fell to her side, and so too did Chan.

Then he started muttering something under his breath. "King stone. King stone." He crumpled in on himself. Though his hardhat had remained steadfastly on his head, no matter what, now it tumbled to the side with a light clunk as he clutched his brow. "King stone. King... stone."

The police reached them. They grabbed Chan up. Maybe Bessie didn't look as bad, but though she tried to get to her feet, she soon staggered to the side and face-planted the bitumen, cutting her cheek and nose.

She would've stayed there, bleeding, picking up God knows whatever muck from the street, had someone not taken the opportunity to rush over.

There are few times in life when a single touch can anchor us. To be fair, there are few times in life when we need to be anchored so desperately. But now Bessie encountered both situations. They threw themselves together to form an experience she would never forget.

Just when she felt she was slipping sideways and somehow she would fall back into that strange world again, someone grabbed her. They pulled her to her feet. As she twisted, her hair brushing out in an arc, her face fell against that person's chest. And that someone gathered together her confusion and wiped it away with a broad, firm hand.

Suddenly Bessie wasn't teetering there on the edge of that strange space. Suddenly she came back to the here and now.

She was already standing, and she was already firmly held in someone's arms. But as she returned to this reality, it was like somebody yanked the carpet out from underneath her feet. She jolted forward, and a magical shockwave spread out, scattering her fringe over her face and rumpling the shirt of the man who held her.

It was as if, until a few moments ago, she hadn't technically left that ghost realm yet. Now she had, it was like landing back on Earth after being thrown from a plane. Fortunately, she was held safely in Xavier's arms. Yes. Xavier. Her senses realigned, and she stared up at him just as his horrified face stared down at her. "Bessie—"

She clutched the side of her cheek. She pushed away from his chest. "What—"

He let her go. Then he immediately shook his head, opened his arms, and gestured at her. "Bessie," he said in this deep voice she'd never forget. "You're here, with me."

Here... with him.

She touched her head again. She sighed, and she let his voice take her that last little distance between the ghost world and this real one.

She dropped her hand, and she stared at him. Then Bessie screamed. It pitched up from the bottom of her frigging soul. Nothing could have gotten in its way.

"What the hell is wrong with her?" somebody muttered as they rushed past to deal with Chan.

As for Chan, he was now convulsing on the ground. He kept muttering the same thing. “King stone. King stone.”

In a rush, everything came back. Bessie started to shake.

Xavier slowly approached her, his hand opening wide, his face alight with true fear. “Bessie, it’s okay.”

“What the hell was that place? What just happened? Xavier—”

He reached her. He grabbed her arm. His touch did this thing. As soon as it locked onto her, the horrifying nature of that strange pocket space could no longer crush her.

And what a welcome release. But she couldn’t forget one thing. He was still Xavier Kilmer.

She went to pull away, but he tightened his fingers. “You need to anchor yourself. You don’t know how to do that yet. So you have to let me.”

“Anchor myself? What... what the hell was that place?”

“I shouldn’t answer your questions out on the street,” he warned, voice dark but eyes still alight with the same real fear they’d shown the moment he’d grabbed her up.

“Answer...? How do you... even know what happened to me? Did you cause this?” she demanded, voice shaking with anger.

He just looked at her. He’d faced her with disappointment before. But it was usually tinged with understanding. Now it sure as heck wasn’t. If anything, it was colored with a peculiar kind of fear she’d never seen someone like him show. “No, Bessie, I did not do this. You just had your first brush with the ghost realm.”

She went to say something, anything, but her mouth stopped. She couldn’t form the word ghost. God knows she couldn’t say the word realm. It felt like she was choking on her own frigging tongue. And that brought into sharp contrast everything she had seen and heard. Those strange shadow creatures felt like they were about to crawl up through the cracks in

reality to claim her. She screamed when a stray cat suddenly jumped down from a dumpster nearby.

So Xavier just clutched her tighter.

One of the police officers came up. “Is she going to be okay?”

“I’ve got this,” Xavier muttered, words quiet but still somehow louder than anything she’d ever heard. It could cram out the hisses of those shadows, no matter how much they muttered she was the ghost bride in her mind.

“Sir, this is a serious incident, and we need your immediate help. We have no idea how it happened,” the officer muttered.

Bessie got stuck staring at Xavier as he turned his attention to them. It wasn’t just that nobody seemed to care about her anymore – though for that to be true, Xavier wouldn’t be holding onto her as determinedly but tenderly.

That wasn’t the point. She couldn’t hope to speak. Yet slowly but surely, she started to appreciate the fact that she had just been to another... realm. She could claim that it had all been in her head. Maybe it had just been some kind of crazy group hallucination between her and Chan? But he kept muttering the same refrain that echoed in her mind like the shadow of a bomb blast. “King Stone. King Stone.”

Worse than that, she started to overhear the conversations of the excited police officers. They repeated the same damn thing. Ghost realm – and the Ghost King.

... The... Ghost King.

Bessie would’ve fallen back on her ass had Xavier not pulled her toward the side of the road. He sat her down in the passenger side of his open car.

She stared ahead. He fortunately did not get into the driver’s seat. He stood beside her, one hand on the door, his gaze never deviating off her for

more than half a second as he dealt with the various questions from the officers.

They all seemed to know what was going on. It was like they'd all seen something like this before.

Bessie clutched the seatbelt. She had no intention of pulling it around herself, but that wasn't the point. She had to anchor her fingers right now, or they would fly off and do something unexpected.

Now she was sitting, there was no way to get away from what she'd experienced. Everything summed to create this violent weight that suddenly rammed down on her shoulders. It was a surprise the expensive car's suspension didn't break. As she jolted, she almost struck her head on the dashboard.

She honestly didn't think Xavier was paying any attention to her. He kept being pulled away by the various emergency workers. Yet before she could knock herself out with her silly move, he was there, pulling her back, eyes anchoring her once more, taking her away from all the horror and bringing her back here in front of him, always in front of him.

"What... was that place, Xavier?"

People kept trying to pull him away, but now he stopped by her side. He let his gaze rove over hers. It seemed to be asking a question, but she had no clue what that might be.

She shook her head, and once she started, she couldn't stop. "What's going on here? What was that space? Why are the police reacting like they've seen all this before – like this kind of thing happens all the time? What—"

"Why did you go inside, Bessie?" he asked, and be damned if she couldn't hear disappointment filtering through his tone as if she had somehow hurt his feelings.

"Excuse me?"

“Why did you go inside? I’m talking about the shadow you encountered. Why would someone as smart as you throw all caution to the wind and go inside? You should’ve called the police.”

“How... how the hell do you know what happened? What is that place?”

He kept looking at her until suddenly, he couldn’t take it anymore. He stared to the side. He watched the police coming and going.

It didn’t look as if he’d face her again. But abruptly, he turned back. “That was the ghost realm. You should already know that, because you’ve been there before.”

“I’m sorry, what? Been there before? What the hell are you talking about?”

He faced her, jaw stiff, gaze harder. “You need to calm down, regulate your breathing, and resist the urge to be pulled into any more shadows. Do you understand?”

Sorry, did she understand? The answer was absolutely not. She still had no clue how the hell anything like that could happen.

Though all Bessie ever wanted to do was dismiss anything he said to her, she couldn’t dismiss the look in his eyes. The one that promised that, if only she listened, he would finally answer.

“What was that place?” she asked one last time, only just capable of shoving her words from her stiff lips.

“I will tell you, but first, you need medical assistance.”

“I’m just a little wobbly, but apart from that, I’m fine.”

He looked pointedly down at her hand. The same hand that was now leaking blood all over the expensive upholstery of his equally expensive car.

Bessie stared in utter befuddlement. It took her too long to remember that she’d received this injury by touching one of those ghost cars.

Xavier made a motion to pick her hand up, but she winced, not at his proximity, but the violent memory.

He steadily looked into her eyes. “I intend you no harm, Bessie, and I never would.

Stressed-out and not thinking, she used the very same injured hand to cup her face, apparently not caring that it transferred blood all over her cheeks in front of a frigging vampire. But this guy wasn’t after the red stuff, was he? “What even is that place? Just tell me,” she growled. “And who is the Ghost King?”

Xavier Kilmer froze. Froze until she swore the blood turned to ice in his veins. Froze until a breath rocked his chest forward but couldn’t pull it back in. Froze until the look in his eyes relayed one message.

Whoever the Ghost King was, that way death lay.

BESSIE STARED IN DISMAY AS XAVIER REACTED NOT JUST TO THE WORD Ghost King, but the way she'd said it. She knew that, because he'd twitched along with every syllable and hissed breath.

Though she'd already figured out whatever had happened had been real enough, at the corners of her mind, she'd still been playing with the possibility it was all in her head. But there are some things you can't fake. There are some things, when you see them, that change your entire outlook on life and never let you return to the person you once were. Xavier's gut-punching, skin-chilling reaction was one such thing.

This... God, this was all so very painfully real.

"Xavier—"

"Your questions will be answered... eventually. But first, you need urgent medical attention."

"It's just a cut—"

"One that was received on the other side," Xavier said that a little too loudly. An important-looking police car had rocked up a few minutes ago, and though Bessie's mind seriously wasn't functioning right now, it still worked sufficiently to recognize the guy that jumped out of it, moving at a million miles an hour as if he'd been ejected from a cannon. From the look

in his eyes, it was clear that something like this wasn't meant to happen in his city.

Because he was the Police Commissioner.

As soon as he saw Xavier, he jolted over. "Tell me the breach wasn't too bad? And what do you mean an injury from the other side?"

Bessie stared over at the commissioner. Then she warily looked down at her hand. "It's nothing—"

"Whoever you are, I don't require your opinion on this. Xavier?"

"She will be capable of pushing through the injury if she gets the correct medical attention."

Sorry, what? Pushing through? It was a graze. Okay, it was probably a little worse than the mere scrape she was making it out to be, but the point was, it was nowhere near as bad as what these gentlemen were suggesting.

"I will take her to the clinic immediately," Xavier said. He moved to get into the driver's seat.

Bessie balked. "There's no way I'm getting in a car with this man. Do you have any idea who he is? He's a criminal," she spluttered. She might've been having an almost polite conversation with him previously, but it couldn't expunge his past. Nor could it change hers. She had to hold onto the fact that Xavier was a criminal, because if she didn't, and she started to pay too much attention to the tender look in his eyes, she had no clue what she'd do next.

The commissioner, suffice to say, did not react kindly to Xavier being called a criminal. "And who the hell are you to call one of the most respected vampires in the city and the savior of this town a criminal?" he growled darkly, lips like whips that were learning how to work on his words until they swiftly moved on to her behind.

Bessie had heard about the commissioner in gritty detail before. He was not the kind of man you toyed with. He was not the kind of man who tolerated people doing anything but getting out of his way.

And here was Bessie, apparently insulting one of the most important resources he had.

She turned a little red. “I’m not—”

“You have two options. Considering the possible severity of that,” he hissed down at her injury, “you will get taken to the hospital by him, or you will be taken by a squad car – handcuffed.”

She now turned beetroot red. She went to argue again, but Xavier cleared his throat. He motioned with his head toward a group of gathering journalists. While some of them worked for her own paper, others came from her competition. It would be noted if she was taken away in handcuffs. And as she’d already been at pains to explain, while there were certain things that she could bounce back from, other things would see her sacked as fast as a gun shooting through paper.

Bessie mulled it all over. Did she honestly think that Xavier would do anything to her in the car? No. And that was a resounding no. It wasn’t just the way he kept looking at her. It was....

Screw it. She was already in the car, so she leaned over, and she grabbed the seatbelt.

She did not look at the commissioner again. Quite wise, because he looked like a volcano ready to lose its top.

Wordlessly, Xavier walked around, got in the driver’s side, closed his door, and waited for Bessie to do the same. Eventually, she did. And without a word, he started driving.

As he conscientiously paid attention to all of the emergency vehicles and avoided them, he didn’t say a thing. It left Bessie in this strange position where she wanted to scream at him, wanted to know everything he did, but wanted him to stay perfectly silent like he already was in case his revelations undermined her further.

Without distractions, all Bessie could do right now was go back to what had just happened. And that just made her crumple.

She didn't have anywhere to fall, so the crumpling only happened inside her frigging mind.

What the hell was that place, and more to the point, more to the eternal point, who was the Ghost King?

If Bessie had bothered to look over, she would've seen that Xavier was paying her some of the clearest attention he ever had in his life – and that was saying something considering the way he usually looked at her.

“Bessie, it will be fine. We'll get you to the clinic. They'll treat your injury.”

She couldn't take it anymore. She turned around in her seat, body practically lurching like a zombie towards their next feed. “What the hell is that place, Xavier? And who—”

“Please don't say his name,” he muttered.

It was only quiet, but it had a disproportionate effect on Bessie. Her stomach lurched. She felt like it tried to climb her throat.

It was about as pleasant as you could imagine. She choked on the Ghost King's name as it rose through her mind once more. She palmed her head. “Xavier—”

He reached over. He grabbed her hand, and ever so tenderly, he pushed it down. It was the kind of move that Bessie should've shaken back from immediately, but the kind of move that came with its own gravity. She got stuck in it like a tiny speck of space dust that had dared strayed too close to Jupiter.

It took him a few seconds to drop his grip. He looked at her earnestly. “Your blood has to be treated. Though this might only look like a simple injury, it isn't. Please be very careful.”

This was where she should snarl some comment about him being a vampire, but she knew it was pointless for multiple reasons.

“Will Chan be okay? Will he be taken by that blur again?” Her eyes darted away from Xavier and searched the growing crowd of blaring

emergency vehicles for any hint of Chan in his high-vis orange.

“You’re finally admitting that you can see it, then?”

She paled once more. “What do you mean finally?”

“The... blur.” His lips wouldn’t quite move right around that word. They tried to carve it out of the air but then got stuck halfway through, almost as if the mere recitation of it were enough to blur his own mouth. “Are you finally admitting that you’ve always been able to see it?”

“I’ve never kept it a secret.”

“Sure, apart from failing to mention it to every doctor you’ve ever seen. And except from the medical questionnaire that you were given by Channel 89 News when you joined – the same questionnaire that explicitly asked if you ever saw anything otherworldly. And except from every single person in your life, Bessie. Sure, apart from all that – you haven’t kept it a secret at all.”

She didn’t know how to react. So she hunched in on herself, her shoulders rounding. “Have you been spying on me?” she whispered, breath quiet, throat closing off with every stuttered syllable.

“No. I haven’t been spying on you.” He kept his eyes only for the road.

She had no clue how to interpret that comment and the fact that he didn’t make eye contact with her again. But it didn’t take much longer until they reached the front of the clinic.

Bessie’s stomach knotted with nerves. She had no clue how to deal with this. Worse, she had even less of a clue how to deal with Xavier as he leaned over once more. “No matter what happens in there, understand this – you will be fine.” With that mysterious comment, he gestured her out of the car.

She could hardly be on death’s door or anything, because no one was waiting for her as they strode into the foyer. The passing medical staff largely ignored her, even though Xavier became the instant center of attention. Everyone seemed to know him, and disappointingly, everybody

treated him like he was a king. Sorry, that implied privilege. They treated him like he'd actually earned their trust.

He walked up to the attending physician, muttered two little words, and proceeded to get her and everyone else's attention.

All he'd said was ghost realm.

The doctor's eyes could've blasted out of her head. "This way," she muttered.

Bessie was taken away.

The whole while, she stared, not at Xavier, but at the way people treated him. Or didn't, rather. Not a single person came up to him and slapped him for being the monster he truly was. Nobody bothered to point out that all of this had to be an act. For someone like him, a vampire steeped in privilege and money, kindness had to be nothing more than a ploy.

But not a single person tried to throw their drink in his face or call security.

Bessie was aware of something. She was distracting herself, big time. Because if she managed to do that, then she wouldn't have to think about what happened. She wouldn't have to remember the way those shadows had whispered in her face, the way they'd all grown mouths, all to mutter one thing. Bride of the Ghost King. Bride of the frigging Ghost King.

By the time she sat down on the edge of the bed, her pulse was racing at a million miles an hour. The attending physician was a vamp, and even without expensive medical equipment, she would know full well that Bessie was losing it.

"It's a significant ghost injury, but considering who you are, you will live," the doctor muttered.

"What do you mean considering who I am? What's going on? What the hell was that place?" Bessie began to speak, and after a splutter like an old car remembering how to speed, she soon got so fast, she'd likely swallow her tongue. "How can something like that possibly exist in this city? Can

someone please tell me what the hell is going on here?” she ended up screaming.

Way to go to act professionally. Bessie was like a kid finding out for the first time that, not only was magic real, but monsters were, too.

The attending physician looked at Bessie passively, then over at Xavier, then back to Bessie. If she was going to make some comment about the fact that Bessie and Xavier were together, Bessie would lose it.

“If you want to know about the ghost realm, then ask our resident expert. Now you have physically been there, you will be dealt with by him.”

Bessie’s shoulders shook. “Dealt with? What do you mean?”

Alarm didn’t have a chance to plaster her features for long. Xavier swiftly lifted a hand. “I’ll get to the complexities soon. Please, first heal her cut.”

He said that with a great deal of ceremony. What exactly was gonna happen here? How were they going to heal her injury? Was the vamp doctor going to crack out a holy potion, throw it on Bessie, and go grab every priest she could find before Bessie fell to the damned? Not exactly. But let’s just say it didn’t involve Band-Aids and a lollipop, either.

The doctor walked out of the room, then walked back in wearing what looked like hazmat gear. Bessie was so surprised, she actually took a double-take. “What the—”

The doctor had some kind of radio piece in her ear, and she muttered, “Is the potion field ready?”

“Yes,” Bessie heard somebody respond faintly from the doctor’s earpiece.

“Bessie, you will have to stay exactly where you are. A shadow-fighting medical field will soon appear around you. Expect it to tingle.”

“A shadow fighting—”

There was no time to finish off that question. Because something started to flicker down from the ceiling. It reached Bessie, then encapsulated her with this great whoomph. This wasn't the first time she'd experienced a magical medical field. You often felt like you were inside a bubble. Sounds wouldn't travel correctly, and everything would feel strange. But this was the thickest she had ever encountered. It was like she was underwater.

The physician proceeded to deal with Bessie's cut with what looked like a freaking blowtorch.

The whole time, Xavier remained in the room, though he wasn't surrounded by a medical field, and nor, apparently, did he need to wear a hazmat suit. Tellingly, even though there was a chair right beside Bessie's bed, he chose to stand and face her, his attentive features never missing a thing.

When it was finally over, the physician let out a massive sigh of relief. She brought up some device, checked Bessie's cut, then nodded at Xavier. "That was a close call. If it were anyone else, I'd hate to think of what might have happened."

"What do you mean?" Bessie squeaked.

The doctor ignored her. "We need to discuss this."

Xavier lifted a hand. "Of course we do. But give me several minutes alone with Bessie to discuss things first."

Bessie hated the way he said discuss things. Possibly because she didn't hate it enough. Confused? So was she, and that was the point. She knew how she should react around Xavier. She knew what her body ought to do. But all the rules she had lived her life by were starting to be rewritten.

As her heart charged along too fast, she turned her hand into a fist and watched the doctor walk from the room, her hazmat gear swishing and rustling.

Bessie sat on the edge of her bed.

Xavier was already on his feet, so it wasn't as if she had to watch him get to his feet slowly. Nor was it as if her eyes had to move far as he warily approached her. He carefully reached out a hand.

When she receded back, he muttered, "I just have to check the integrity of your scar to ensure there is no shadow magic leaking from it."

She knew she had to be compliant, so she let him draw close, his fingers hovering just over the scar. When no charges of magic leaked from it, he appeared satisfied.

Bessie, however, was not. Something inside her either reacted to the scar or his presence, and her heart lurched.

He opened his hand to placate her. "I'm just checking on the integrity of the seal. It's fine. No shadow energy has leaked out. But to check it, I have to interact with your magic system slightly. You might jolt a little but try to stay seated."

"Shadow energy? Come on, Xavier, put me out of my damn misery. What the hell happened back there?"

He finally sat. He did so heavily. It was like a massive burden had just descended on his shoulders, and it was one he couldn't carry.

Or perhaps it was one he was uniquely placed to carry. One word struck Bessie. One she'd always ignored.

"Hold on, aren't you a ghost vampire?"

He looked at her impassively and nodded.

"Your kind claim to protect us all from some other dimension. But it's just vampire PR—" she said automatically.

He looked at her pointedly, and that one glance was all it took for Bessie to stop speaking abruptly. Vampire PR puff? If it was all just empty PR, then what the hell had she just experienced?

"There are realms beyond this one. Shadow realms. That is where the true ghosts lie."

“I know the standard explanation you vampires give,” she spluttered quickly.

He looked at her evenly. He leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms. “Fine. But now do you actually believe it considering you have experienced it personally?”

Say no, she told herself. Hell, she begged herself. But the more she tried to actually say no, the more it got stuck on her lips.

She’d been there, for the love of God, and she’d felt how different that realm was.

She shoved her head into her hands. She groaned. “A place like that... it can’t possibly be real. How can—”

He offered nothing. He just watched her with a silent, sharp gaze that roved over her face, no doubt noting every single detail with his extended vampire senses.

She lifted her hand. She palpated her cut. Then she remembered how she’d received it. “If that had just been a ghost realm, then how come that car hurt me?”

“You walked into a car?” he spluttered.

She shook her head. “I touched a speeding car as it shot past.”

He closed his eyes. That long-suffering look crumpled his mouth and broadened his brow once more. He shook his head as if there was no one quite like Bessie. Not in a good way. In a very stupid way. He sighed and leaned back. “There are things I can tell you, but things... that are best left unsaid for now.”

She frowned. Bessie was overcome. She was confused. And her brain just wouldn’t work. But she could always sense when someone was keeping a story from her, and that was about the only thing that could help her function now.

She shoved forward, her legs dangling off the edge of the bed. She frowned until the move overcame her face. “Up to your old tricks, then?”

she growled. “Hiding the truth from people, are you? Just what’s your stake in this, anyway?” She fired off her questions, every new one faster than the last.

He actually smiled. Here she was, doing some hard-hitting journalism, apparently striking where it should hurt most, but he looked like he’d wanted this from the beginning.

If Bessie had taken a step back, she would’ve realized that in the blink of an eye, her sorrowful mood had changed. She was now so focused on getting a story, she didn’t care about her trauma.

“The ghost realm is quite real and must be treated as so,” he warned.

“Excuse me?”

“It may not seem like a real place. You may encounter creatures that... shall we say, can choose to change their faces at will. But you cannot touch cars zooming past you, Bessie. In fact, you can never go there again.” His voice dropped like someone had thrown it off a cliff.

She blinked quickly. “Sorry?”

“You must never go there again. This is the most important piece of advice I’ll ever give you. You have to stay out of his grip.”

Oh God, why had he used one little word? One frigging curse of a word that could take Bessie’s mood, crush it, and strangle her for good measure?

His.

His grip.

She had to stay out of his grip....

She shunted forward. She stared at him. It wouldn’t be beyond Xavier to be playing with her, right? This could all just be some elaborate trap. Right? She didn’t just think that desperately, but she acted desperately as she sat forward on the edge of her bed, crumpled her fingers in, and squeezed them so tightly, she nearly cut her palms. “What are you talking about, Xavier? What does... he want with me?”

“I’m afraid I have to be quite clear on this. You must never,” he said, slowing down every single word, “ever go back there. If you see a blur, you are to contact me.”

He reached into his pocket, and he pulled out his card. It wasn’t the standard card you might see someone give an ordinary person on the street or even a politician. No. This was his direct card. You didn’t need a phone number to call it. All you had to do was rub his name with a little magic, and it would give you a direct connection to him. Cards like this were very, very expensive, and you only gave them out to people who meant something to you. Should Bessie take something from that? You know, should she expand on that fact to conclude she had to mean something more to Xavier than just the mild irritant she’d always assumed herself to be?

Nope. She couldn’t think like that. She just didn’t have the brainpower. All of her mind was too busy going over two little words that started with G and K.

When she didn’t accept the card, he stood, and he offered it to her with a stiff grip. “I’m afraid this is nonnegotiable. You’re also going to have to sign a contract.”

That got to her. Her stomach lurched. Then her teeth wired themselves shut. “I’m sorry, what? You think now that you have me in a vulnerable position—”

“I would watch your tongue if I were you,” the physician said as she walked back into the room.

Why was it that everyone always got the same look whenever she treated Xavier like this – you know, like she was kicking a puppy? He wasn’t a frigging puppy. He was one of the most powerful, competent, and dangerous vampires in the land.

“I will not accept your card. And I am sure as hell not signing any contracts,” Bessie spluttered as she defensively crossed her arms tighter. She didn’t care if her attending physician was one of the best doctors in the

city. When it came to Xavier, everything came down to principles that could not be broken.

“I would accept the card if I were you. As I would sign the contract,” the physician growled.

“Why?”

“I can deal with this, Bella,” Xavier muttered quietly.

Bella, apparently, didn't think so. “Mr. Kilmer deals with everything regarding the ghost realm. And anyone who has anything to do with the ghost realm, whether they went there by accident or an act of stupidity,” she added somewhat meanly, “must sign a contract with him.”

“I'm not going to sign a contract,” Bessie spat. She should have at least taken something of the increasingly dangerous look in the doctor's eyes, but she was too tired to. This wasn't fair, anyway. Why did everyone always come to Xavier's side? Couldn't they see how much of a criminal he was?

Bella, apparently, was the least of Bessie's troubles. Because who chose to walk in at that moment? Why, the commissioner himself. Bessie liked to believe that she wasn't the kind to back down, even in the face of possibly epic defeat, but she still shrank back a little. The way he'd snarled at her was all too fresh.

Worse than that, apparently, he'd heard some of the recent conversation. “Xavier Kilmer deals with anyone who has gone to the ghost realm. And anyone who has traveled there is a clear and present danger to this city. Ghost forces could be attracted to you again. If you see them, any hint of them, you will call him at any time. To ensure you do not take matters into your own hands and you do not willfully ignore this advice,” he growled, “you will sign a contract. Or you can go to prison. It's up to you.”

Bessie jolted as if she'd been struck by a car again. This was all happening so fast, and not a scrap of it made any sense. “Prison?” she asked in a high-pitched voice.

“Yes. As you are starting to recognize the severity of this situation, I will not bother to repeat myself again, Miss Tilly.”

Bessie didn't want to, but she looked back at Xavier. Why? Because he was the only person in the room who wasn't snapping at her. And when the only person in the room you could turn to was your worst enemy, then your life had officially gone to hell.

Xavier rose to his feet again. He nodded at both Bella and the commissioner. “I've got this.”

“We need to discuss—” the commissioner began.

Xavier opened his hand. “We can do so in a moment. Just give me a minute.”

Both of them retreated. Bessie watched them go, red-cheeked like they'd slapped her with more than their words.

She wouldn't look at Xavier. Even as he cleared his throat and stopped in front of her. He reached into his pocket. His fingers fidgeted for a while, almost as if he didn't want to do this. Then, with a somewhat regretful glance her way, he pulled out a contract.

Her lips hardened. “If you honestly think I'm going to sign that, you have another thing coming. I don't know how you twisted them around your finger, but I know who you really are, Xavier Kilmer.”

He looked right at her. Bessie suddenly felt as if everything could get in her way, from the city, to the commissioner, to the frigging Ghost King. But he would stare right through them. He always would when she was involved.

“You have to sign the contract, Bessie. And you have to agree to be bound by it. The next time you see one of those blurs, you must call me.” He handed her the card.

She tried to reject it, but he just moved around, and he placed it in her hand with a tender grip.

She went to growl. It went nowhere.

She had two options, see – take this, or be thrown in jail. If she was thrown in the clinker, she'd never be able to find out Xavier's secrets. And honestly, that's all she lived for.

When she had the card, he plucked up the contract. He didn't have to hand it to her. You see, it already knew she was its target. It hovered in front of her insistently.

“You must accept it.”

“I know.” She snatched it up. She let her fingers hover over it and finally called the pen to her grip. It clunked against her fingers as if it was a ship's anchor. It was going to drag her down to the bottom of the sea, she was sure of it. And if it didn't, why, Xavier would just latch onto her and drag her the last distance.

She signed. It very much felt like signing her life away.

When it was done, peculiarly, he sighed. It was deep and somehow sorrowful, as if this was the last thing he wanted.

“That's done.”

“If you think—” Bessie began.

He placed the contract in his pocket. He took a step back. “Don't worry, Bessie, I'm sure you'll have nothing more to do with the blur. And if you so choose, you can have nothing more to do with me, too.” With that, without another explanation, Xavier walked away.

For somebody who had been such an unwanted fixture of her life, it almost felt like a bittersweet goodbye.

Then Bessie reminded herself of everything that had happened, and she flopped back on the bed. This was insane.

And none of it was fair. Nor, apparently, was it over yet.

BESSIE STARED OVER AT CHARLIE. HE KEPT WINCING WHENEVER SHE SPOKE.

“You’re not exactly helping, Charlie.”

“I just feel a little guilty, that’s all.”

“How could you be guilty? What did you do?”

“I failed to watch you like a hawk.”

“How does this have anything to do with you? It’s to do with Xavier. It’s all his fault.” Bessie went to launch into one of her usual tirades, but she got stuck.

And Charlie? Oh, he kept wincing.

Bessie had got to work early that morning. She’d figured there had to be a story around here somewhere. One that wasn’t related to the ghost realm, and one that could take her mind off it. Because even though you would think, considering her journalistic proclivities, that she wouldn’t take no for an answer, and she’d investigate that place, you would be dead wrong.

The last thing she ever wanted to do was have anything to do with that strange place.

Charlie crossed his arms, took another step back, and shook his head. “I’m surprised I still have a job,” he muttered.

“What are you even talking about, Charlie? This has nothing to do with you. Now, let’s start to investigate—”

Charlie threw his hand out as if he was stopping a madman from grabbing a gun. “You can’t go anywhere near one of those blurs again. Do you understand?”

“I wasn’t suggesting that. I’m not mad. Do that, and I’ll be honor-bound to call Xavier frigging Kilmer.”

“No, Bessie, not honor-bound. Vampire-contract bound. If you don’t do it, there will be very serious consequences.”

“People always say that when discussing vampire contract breaches, but what exactly does it mean?”

“In your case?” he squeaked. “You’ll likely be thrown in prison. But that would be the least of your troubles, frankly. When you break a vampire contract, the vampire in question can—”

“Yes, I know – do what he sees fit with me. It will provide him the perfect opportunity to get rid of me.”

Charlie did that thing. You know that thing where the entire world looked at her as if she was just an idiot that didn’t get what was happening here? Usually she could ignore it. Not today.

“I know what that look means, Charlie. But you have to understand, everything Xavier does is fake. He has no feelings for me,” she said proudly. “He doesn’t care about anyone but himself.”

Charlie sighed.

She pushed to her feet. “Now, why don’t we go out and investigate—”

“I’ve got a case for you,” the chief said as he strode out from his small office at the back of the room. He didn’t exactly look like one of those cigar-chomping media moguls from the height of TV, but he was close. It was all in his attitude, too. He never technically raised his voice and shouted at anyone, but that was because he didn’t have to. All he needed to do was shoot you one look over the end of the plastic pen he was always chewing on, and you would crumple. Hell, Bessie imagined even Xavier would crumple.

Bessie stood to attention. “So you heard—”

“Yeah, I heard. I heard you had a narrow run-in with the law yesterday. So guess what you get to do today? You get to go do a piece on the local pet fair,” the chief said. His grin was all hard and very much all teeth.

“The local pet fair? You can’t be serious,” she spat. “You promised—”

“Yeah, I’ve promised a lot of people a lot of things about you over the years, but I’m still your boss.” He reached forward, clamped his knuckles on her desk, and leaned in. It wasn’t that far. But honest to God, he didn’t need to get any closer. He was like a dragon bearing down on her.

Bessie crumpled her nose up.

She looked over at Charlie, hopefully to, you know, get a little bit of moral support. But Charlie looked as if this was the best idea he’d ever heard.

“Charlie,” she growled.

“I think it’s probably smart for us to just do something simple for a few days.”

“Simple? The only thing we’re going to find at the pet show is fluff.”

“I get to decide who goes and finds stories,” her boss growled. “Now you,” he stabbed a finger at her, “can go and write up the best piece of your life about Fluffikins and Spot. Go.”

Bessie grumbled some more. But she was smart enough not to do it too loudly.

By the time she made it into the car with Charlie, he had that look again.

It was surprising. Here they were, going to the frigging pet show, but he still looked like she could get into trouble.

“This is for the best, Bessie.”

“Yeah, yeah, the best.” She clamped her arms over her chest and tried not to swallow her teeth. “It’s not fair, though. I don’t even want to go investigate that place again. The Ghost King,” she hissed, “terrifies me.”

She didn't honestly know how much Charlie was privy to. But clearly word had gotten around the vampire community.

He had to know something about the Ghost King. Because the way he paled was so similar to the way Xavier had.

She frowned and looked over at him. "Who is that guy, anyway? Xavier wouldn't tell me a thing. Wait, do all vampires know about the ghost realm? Why am I only learning about this now?"

"Bessie," he said, voice serious, possibly even more serious than she'd ever heard it, "I want you to promise me something."

She frowned at him. "Ha?"

"Just... be careful, okay? Put your curiosities to bed and don't go scrounging information on him."

Bessie wanted to pretend there was no reason for him to say such a thing, but he knew her too well. Whenever she was explicitly told not to go find information on something, she dropped what she was doing and tracked it down on pain of death.

But now she just frowned. "What do you know, Charlie?"

"Let's head to the pet show."

So they headed to the pet show. The whole car ride over, Bessie stewed. Her mind whipped back and forth like a wild sail in a gale.

And yeah, one or two times, it was stupid enough to stray toward Xavier.

Why had he not gloated when he forced her to sign the contract? Where was the man she was certain he was? And what about... the bit about him leaving her alone if she never wanted to have anything to do with him again? Okay, that was obvious. That was what you said when a journalist was getting way too close to the truth. Because it would be nice for him if she never had anything to do with him again. It would mean he wouldn't have to answer some seriously uncomfortable questions.

But....

Bessie remained in that mood, and the word “but” filled her head like water filling a dam until finally they reached the show.

It was already getting started, and it was only 8 in the morning.

Bessie didn’t have anything against pet shows, but at the same time, she sure did hate time-wasting. Her skills could be better utilized elsewhere. So many stories had popped up in front of her over the past 24 hours, she was like a cat who didn’t know which toy to play with first. She couldn’t forget what she’d learned at the funeral home. What about those marks appearing on corpses’ heads? And what about the guy who’d spoken to the man with the world-ending voice? There was so much for Bessie to do. Rather than do it, she’d get to take photos of fluffy cats and adorable puppies.

Bessie groaned as she walked through the large doors of the function hall. You would think you wouldn’t need a function hall for this, but clearly the citizens of this city took their pets seriously.

Bessie walked past a well-to-do couple holding a cage. Inside was... okay, let’s just say it resembled a cat, but even from here, Bessie could tell that it had several illegal magical spells cast on it. She’d read the rules of this show on her phone on the way over here. She knew that the pets had to be natural and unchanged by magic. And yet, walking in the front door, she saw her first violation.

“Keep your head down for a while, okay? Go back to life as usual,” Charlie said.

Bessie stopped paying attention.

“Bessie? Bessie? Are you listening to me?”

“There’s a story over there,” she muttered.

She followed the criminal couple into the main hall. There were cages upon cages of pets, most of them being groomed and fed before the big show. There were also officials walking around, reminding people of the rules. If Bessie had spotted that the criminal couple’s cat was magically altered, then the officials should be able to do it, too. As one such staff

member walked past, Bessie saw a magic checking device clutched in his hand. As he strode past the couple's kitty, he turned it off with his thumb. He only bothered to toggle it back on when he was passed. Three cats down, the device beeped, and he found his first unsuspecting cheat. Sorry, his second. He didn't care about the first one, though.

Charlie looked over. "Who the heck would bother to cheat at a pet show?"

"And who the heck would bother to engage in corruption?" she muttered. You'd think her mind should be elsewhere. Come on. Her world was crumbling.

But there was a story to be had.

There was always a story to be had.

Bessie spent the next half hour carefully documenting the corruption she saw. It wasn't just the first couple. The show staff clearly had deals with multiple entrants. But all of them were well-to-do. One would suppose you would have to be to afford a bribe in the first place. Though that said, Bessie had no idea how much money it took to grease the palm of a pet show official. Not her point.

Charlie stopped haranguing her over the ghost realm. But whenever he got a little too close, Bessie saw he was still watching her carefully.

What, had the boss dragged him aside and told Charlie on pain of death that if he let Bessie get up to any more shenanigans, he'd lose his job?

Bessie certainly hoped not. Protecting her own job was bad enough. Protecting Charlie's would be like a noose around her throat.

Speaking of her throat, ever since she'd started investigating this place, this strange pressure had started to build up around her neck. She was making it up, right? It was nothing more than a little left-over adrenaline from her hell ride yesterday. But whenever Bessie strayed too close to the thick shadows at the edge of the room, they were like... hands reaching out to her.

Charlie got distracted taking photos of the real event instead of investigating Bessie's side project. It meant Bessie was on her own to walk around the tables.

The main hall was starting to fill up.

Why they were having a pet show in the exhibition hall, Bessie didn't exactly know. Wasn't this where they had famous operas and whatnot?

It certainly had a grand feel to it.

More than that, it was massive. And though Bessie had never appreciated this before, massive things cast large shadows.

As Charlie got distracted talking to a photographer from a rival but friendly company, Bessie marched toward the edge of the hall.

She saw someone disappearing through a back door, and her instincts told her to follow. He marched ahead, but she could recognize him easily from behind as her stomach kicked.

"Is that the guy from the funeral home?" she muttered to herself, her words so quick, she almost drowned on them.

Yeah, it was, and before Bessie could think it through, she started to follow him.

Fortunately he was so distracted that he didn't even bother to look around. He had something clutched in his hands. Bessie had to narrow her eyes to see that it was a phone. He wasn't waiting for another call, was he?

Yes, yes, he was.

He answered.

Bessie froze.

She saw dark energy encase the guy's fingers. Her stomach lurched, warning her about what she'd see next.

The blur. It was coming.

And there was only one thing Bessie could do, right? Contact Xavier. She was contractually obliged to. Her fingers almost darted toward her pocket. She'd made certain the card was there this morning. No, she wasn't

a dirty little rotten sellout, and under ordinary circumstances she would never jump to calling Xavier. But there would be serious consequences if she breached that contract. And perhaps one of the most serious would be that she would be forced to have more to do with Xavier – and in the space of the last 24 hours, she'd had quite enough of him, frankly.

But Bessie didn't get the chance, because something happened to the corridor.

The door behind Bessie had been partially ajar. Now it slammed closed. It did so with such force, a shot of air raced past Bessie, whipped her fringe over her face, and almost made her fall over. Yet it somehow didn't come with a single sound.

Hell, the gasp that rocked out of Bessie's lips was silent, too.

Alarm shot through her.

The blur pushed out of the man's phone.

Then... then there was the voice.

“Do you have another for me, Jeremy?”

Bessie was frozen to the spot, fear coiling around her stomach, reaching high, making it feel like someone was wrapping vines around her throat. Though vines was a tame image. Why not call them chains made out of fire and ice? They felt like the pure, chaotic forces of magic. And they were all coming for her.

“No, my lord. I don't have another yet. But—”

“Then you can bring me something else instead. Turn around. She's standing behind you.”

Bessie lurched back. She spun. She went to grab the door open. A big mistake. She should've gone for the card in her pocket instead. Because it would not remain in her pocket for long.

A jolt of magic shot from the phone, coiled around her, grabbed her pocket, and yanked the card backward. She clutched toward it desperately

as if the loss of it was somehow akin to the loss of a limb. But she didn't grasp hold of it in time.

It spun out of her grip.

Jeremy grabbed it. Sorry, the force rippling out of his phone did. Bessie watched it as it marched down his arm, coiled around his fingers, and seemed to control him.

He sneered. "Were you eavesdropping on me? A big mistake. The Ghost King does not abide by spies."

Oh God no. Oh. God. No.

Two little words. And one horrifying conclusion. Ghost King.

Maybe somewhere at the back of her mind, she'd already concluded that that world-ending voice had come from only one man's throat. But to have it confirmed was like being slapped by the heart of a blazing star.

Bessie lurched back, but her knees suddenly wouldn't work. She fell to her ass with a skull-shaking thump.

Then she got to her feet. She turned and tried to yank the door open. It was unresponsive. Too much magic kept chasing around it.

Oh God no. Bessie was trapped.

So there was only one thing to do.

She reached down her top and grabbed her talisman.

She could hear everything coming over the phone perfectly, so she was aware as the Ghost King gave this guttural hiss. It made it sound as if he was right behind her.

She clutched the talisman with both hands. "I'm warning you. If you try anything, I will fight back."

"Not with that, you won't," the Ghost King muttered, his voice light with laughter. It was categorically the most sickening thing she'd ever heard.

But she wasn't about to let it stop her.

Bessie sank her attention into the talisman as she turned it up to full. She'd already told you she had to be careful with this thing. Bessie was not an inherently magical soul. Sure, she could practice a little power through this, but it was like asking a waterpipe to carry molten lava. Maybe you'd get a few drips or drops through, but at the end of the day, the pipe was incompatible with that which you pumped through it.

As Bessie twisted the amulet on to full, the magic that shuddered through her instantly gave her a splitting headache, but she couldn't stop. She opened her hand wide. As her fingers shuddered, charges of green-yellow magic wrapped around them and jolted up high.

The Ghost King laughed once. The phone moved with that shaking rumble of a sound. And more black energy pulsed through it. It was starting to blur the corridor. And Bessie... Bessie could almost hear those shadows gathering.

No. No way. She was not going to be pulled back into that place only a day after having escaped.

She had to get out of here. Which meant using her magic to full effect.

God knows what the Ghost King was truly capable of, but he wasn't here in full. Not yet.

All Bessie had to do was get away from this specific section of the corridor. She could be making it up, but it felt as if his power couldn't stretch beyond that blurred effect.

To get away, Bessie had to throw herself past Jeremy. Which meant voluntarily bringing herself closer to the phone.

Bessie didn't and couldn't think. She acted. She threw herself to her feet. Her whole body shook, and her shoes skidded on the polished concrete floor.

The Ghost King laughed once. "Home at last. And you're just as excited to see me as I am to see you."

Those cold words just told her to run faster.

She twisted past Jeremy's side just as he lurched to try to grab her. He moved... like he wasn't human, let's just put it that way. It didn't take Bessie's frightened mind long to figure out the way he moved instead.

It was the lurch of a zombie. No, of a shadow. He reminded her of those creatures that filled that other realm.

She'd timed this move perfectly, but she hadn't accounted for the fact that he had beyond-human skills. He wrapped his cold hand around her elbow, and instantly Bessie's mind started to fail.

One second, it was pumping with adrenaline and fear, narrowing in on the task she had to complete to save herself. The next, she was like a pulley that had been snapped.

He locked an arm around her throat, but the phone vibrated. "You will be gentle," the Ghost King cried.

Bessie... holy crap. She was slipping back. Her mind... nothing... nothing made sense. Everything was getting blurrier. And the more her vision ceased to work, the more power she felt pumping into this room. It was almost as if the Ghost King needed her eyesight to fail before he could manifest properly.

The phone shuddered out of Jeremy's grip. It floated in the air for a few seconds until Bessie realized something was holding it. This growing force that looked like a hand beginning to manifest.

Crap. She had to... get away. Just get away.

Bessie had called on her talisman's full power, but it didn't seem to make a difference. Magic was certainly pumping around her, but if anything, it was just making her weak at the wrong moment.

You wouldn't think Bessie would have the wherewithal nor the power to reach her hand up and grasp the talisman, but somehow she did. A kick of adrenaline shot through her from some deep, unknowable place, and she grabbed the clock face. She turned it off. That rush of holy power that had

filled her up before and promised her it could save her abated. And just in time. It seemed to disrupt the Ghost King's growing form.

It shuddered. And so too did Jeremy. His strength, which had been as great as 10 men previously, reduced until it was that of a single person once more. A single surprised person.

Bessie wasn't much for action, but it was time to learn. She reached back, and she elbowed Jeremy hard in the sternum. He spluttered, and a few drops of spittle splashed over her cheek.

So she elbowed him harder, and she finally broke his grip.

Then Bessie ran. Not back in the direction of Charlie and the rest of the function hall. She couldn't dare go past the Ghost King again. She just shot forward.

She'd been to the exhibition hall many times, but she'd never bothered to explore the little warren of rooms and corridors at the back of it. Now she had to. On fast forward, while this splitting headache continued to grow between her temples.

She staggered occasionally, but every single time she dragged herself up. It wasn't hard. She had all the encouragement in the world. For the Ghost King cried from behind her once more.

She must've disrupted him when she turned her talisman off somehow, but his distraction wouldn't last.

Bessie went to clutch at her phone. She grabbed it out, but when she tapped on the screen, she realized it was dead.

Had she not charged it last night, or had her run-in with Jeremy somehow done something to it? Had his shadow force slipped into its processors and snapped them like dry twigs?

Crap. Bessie was on her own.

Though it was crazy, though it was virtually world-ending, she only wanted to do one thing. Call Xavier to her side. It didn't matter that he was

the real criminal in this city. She just knew out of anyone out there, he could deal with the Ghost King.

But with no means to contact him, she was on her own.

“Just run. Get to safety soon. Just....”

Bessie staggered to the side as that splitting headache became 10 times worse. It felt like somebody had just shoved a samurai sword up her nostrils and they were waggling it around in order to slice through as much of her cerebellum as they could.

As the pain got worse and worse, Bessie had to pull herself up anyway. She staggered forward, no longer running, barely capable of putting one foot in front of the other. She managed it, then she managed it again. She kept going. But now she'd slowed down considerably, she could hear the Ghost King behind her. His dark, muttered words slipped through the wall easily. Hell, matter chose to get out of its way. For wherever his words moved, that sense of unreality joined them.

He was going to turn the entire corridor into blurred shadow space, and then there would be nowhere for Bessie to go.

She pushed herself into an unsteady jog. She kept falling into the walls, her sweaty fingers sliding down them. But she just shoved off again. She had to get out into the car park. Then she could find someone, borrow their phone, call Xavier... and... save herself. She just had to... save herself.

But that was easier said than done.

As the Ghost King's whispered words continued to interact with the back of the exhibition center, the shadows started to come alive.

One appeared right by Bessie's feet. She wasn't paying attention, but then she saw it out of her peripheral vision, and the shock almost killed her. She jerked and tumbled onto her side.

As she struck her ribs, she kicked wildly at the shadow, but it snatched hold of her ankle with a cast-iron grasp.

“Ghost King bride. Ghost King bride, it’s time for you to come home. Time for you to put on your crown. Time for you to sit beside him and rule, rule forever. Hand in hand, hand in hand.” As it whispered that, it used its hands to climb her.

Bessie shrieked and tried to jerk out of the way, but there was nowhere she could go. Another shadow appeared right beside her, pulling up out of the intersection of the lights above with the tall wall behind. This one was even darker. Worse than that, it already came with a face. It didn’t have to grow one, so Bessie saw its intelligent eyes manifest right in front of hers, and there was nowhere to go.

“Time to come home, Queen.”

Bessie lurched. Her fear got the better of her, and this was one of the few examples of when that was a good thing. It reached past her mind, accessed her adrenaline, and used it. As she kicked the shadow behind her in the face, she managed to call on her own magic. Just a few sparks – because that’s all she had. It was also all she needed. The shadows, apparently, couldn’t exist in the light, and as the sparks of her force lit them up, the one behind her screamed and jerked back.

The one in front of her hissed. It launched forward, clearly not wanting to lose Bessie, but it did not get the opportunity.

With a wretched cry, she spun around on her hip, and she kicked that one too. More faint sparks shot out of her foot.

They were sufficient to thrust the ghost back.

Then Bessie... Bessie pulled herself up.

No more headache. She wouldn’t allow it – couldn’t afford any distractions.

She ran.

But behind her, the Ghost King chased.

BESSIE ONLY HAD ONE PLAN – TO GET OUTSIDE AND TO GET TO SOMEONE with a phone. But that rapidly became impossible. More of the shadows began to infect the corridors of the exhibition hall. Bessie wanted to say she'd never seen anything like it, but with yesterday all too clear in her mind, the memories came snapping back, not just into her head, but into her limbs. They moved with such ferocious speed, it felt as if Bessie was going to fall face-first on the floor.

She couldn't let herself. She continued to stagger. Because behind, the Ghost King continued to chase.

Occasionally, those low muttered words from him would become louder, piercingly so. She'd have to jerk to the side, bury her ear against her head, and wince until it all went away. That just slowed her down. And you know what else slowed her down? The marching shadows. Now they didn't just attack her. Nope. They clung against the walls, and the deeper they got, the harder it was for Bessie to navigate past them. It was like she was walking into a trap.

“Find a phone. Just find a phone and call him.”

Bessie had never thought like this before. Her mind was now focused, 150 percent, on getting to Xavier. It was the only thing that could drag her tired limbs forward.

When she came around a corner and faced a door that was completely encased in shadow, she lurched back. The Ghost King wasn't too far behind.

Bessie clenched her teeth. Her talisman was all but useless. She had no clue why. For something that had kept her relatively safe her entire life, now every time she clutched toward it, she had to force her hand down. She had to rely on the magic in her own form instead. If that weren't bad enough, the little she'd already used on those shadows was already catching up to her.

With every second step, she thought she'd black out. Do that, and she knew she'd wind up in the Ghost King's arms. She had to... get through the door.

Xavier had told her on pain of death never to go anywhere near the shadows again.

She hadn't exactly had an option. But she sure hoped that if Xavier intended to kill her, at least he'd find her and save her first.

Bessie winced. Then she did the only thing left open to her. She threw herself forward at the door. As soon as her fingers touched the shadows, they reacted to her grip. They groped toward her, almost as if the unintelligent had become intelligent, simply under her touch.

She didn't wait around for the shadows to clutch her. She twisted the door handle, and she burst through.

Somehow, she'd made it all the way back around to the function hall. But this was not the function hall as she knew it. She couldn't see it filled with various cats and small dogs. Nor was there the rampant corruption that she'd cottoned on to earlier. No. It was a sea of shadows. It was just like the strange city Bessie had come across yesterday. And all of the shadows turned. They faced her. As one, they chanted, "Ghost King bride. Ghost King bride."

Bessie clutched her ears and shrieked. But no amount of trying to distract herself stopped her from hearing words repeated from the growing lips of every shadow. They might not have had faces previously, but they created them, all to hiss that at her.

Bessie couldn't go backward. She could tell the Ghost King was perilously close. So she thrust forward. The various shadows tried to grab her. As their hands slid over her skin, Bessie was chilled to the bone.

If she had somehow slipped back into the ghost realm, her talisman would act differently now, wouldn't it? Wait. Better than that, her magic would be back....

Bessie couldn't finish that thought. She had to test it out. She jerked her hand up just as two of the largest shadows in the room lurched toward her. And there, sure enough, Bessie saw a few charges of magic racing along her knuckles. But unlike in the real world, those few charges didn't soon disappear in a disappointing sputter. Oh no, they grew.

Right in front of her eyes, it was like Bessie had just shoved her hand into a furnace.

As the power erupted over her, she shunted her shoulder forward, opened a hand wide, and attacked. Those two ghosts didn't get a chance to latch their unformed hands on her shoulders. Her attack struck them both on the chest. They pushed into the air for at least five meters before smashing back down into the floor. But their bodies didn't create fissure lines or crack the concrete. They thumped, but only in this way something does when it's trying to pretend to be real.

Bessie ignored them. She wanted to ignore everything she saw. All she had to do – all she frigging had to do – was get out of here. Get to Xavier. Get to safety.

She clutched hold of that mantra. She held onto it like a rope. She pushed through the shadows. They were a lot less likely to group around

her now it was clear she could fight back. But while she could fight them, there was a growing force she could not.

“Bessie,” someone screamed as they reached the room. It was the Ghost King.

He knew her name. Oh God.

Bessie turned over her shoulder. Somehow he still hadn’t formed in full, despite the fact that this was his very own realm. He was manifesting from around the mobile phone. Bessie watched as a hand shot out of the dark, gathering power. That seemed real enough. It also stretched far beyond an ordinary arm’s range. It almost reached Bessie, but then she ducked down, skidded, rolled, and shot up.

She kept swiping wildly to the side, and magic kept blasting out.

The shadows smartly got out of her way. And there, in front of her, she saw the door.

She just had to get to it—

But the Ghost King had other plans. Out of nowhere, Jeremy appeared.

His body was almost entirely overcome by the shadows now. They wrapped around his form, raced toward his jaw, then opened it with a sickening click as if it wasn’t made out of bones and cartilage but it was a lock someone had just hit with a hammer.

Worse than that, dark magic spilled forth from it.

Bessie tried to bat it off, and she used several charges of well-placed force, but it still grasped her wrist. It felt exactly like the Ghost King. And it chilled her, oh it chilled her to the bones.

Bessie had once fallen in an icy river as a child. And there she’d assumed she’d die. She hadn’t, though. She couldn’t honestly tell you who’d saved her, but... she’d lived. Before she’d been saved, however, she’d had to put up with the prospect of drowning in the cold. And that was exactly what this felt like now. Her whole body stopped. It simply didn’t have the energy to keep moving.

As her eyes went to roll into the back of her head, Bessie swore she heard something from somewhere. A distant call, maybe. Her name? Something else? It couldn't be... her parents, right? Wait, that's what it sounded like. Her mother was calling her back for dinner.

Before Bessie could stagger down to one knee, she blinked her eyes warily open. She heard the Ghost King running through the hall toward her.

Just... seconds now. Seconds to get out.

As Bessie focused on her mother's distant chant, she thrust her palm forward. She didn't call on her magic consciously. She let it do what it needed to. And boy did it need to do something big.

Bessie had very rarely seen people practice true magic – and by people, she meant non-vampires. But right now, the force that erupted out of her could only be referred to by that term. As it smashed into Jeremy, it tore back his shadows momentarily. She saw the real man underneath. Somehow he seemed to be incompatible with this realm. Because as soon as his actual flesh was exposed, the world around him started to spark and buckle like someone was stamping on paper.

“Stop her,” the Ghost King roared. All of the eagerness and victory that had filled his tone previously was now gone. It was replaced with real fear. Fear, and greed. A greed that could set Bessie's nerves alight, that could turn them into the equivalent of jet fuel, and that could see her run from anything, no matter what.

She spun from Jeremy. For good measure, she kicked him in the chest. And this time, she heard the crunch of real bones and flesh. She didn't let it distract her. She ran through the doors. But of course safety did not meet her. She was still stuck in the ghost realm. And the Ghost King, why, he was still behind. She could run. She could practice magic. But in his realm, she would never escape.

BESSIE STOPPED. SHE KNEW SHE DIDN'T HAVE THE TIME, BUT SHE COULDN'T unstick her feet yet. She faced the car park. It was full of ghost cars. She stared up at the horizon. The sun... it was inky black. It wasn't to say that she couldn't see around her. She could. It was just like the ordinary world was somehow inverted.

Gasping wildly, she planted a hand against the back of her mouth. She threw herself forward.

A few seconds later, the door was kicked down. The Ghost King hadn't reached her yet. It was just the other shadows. They spilled out. Some of them even got into the cars.

Bessie had never been chased. Not like this. Considering her... shall we say less than legal proclivities? She certainly had been harangued by various security officers over the years. Yet she'd never had an entire exhibition hall full of frigging shadows get in their cars to run her down.

She couldn't breathe properly. She didn't want to describe her heart. She didn't want to feel it. She just had to escape. Had to escape....

She saw an embankment to her side. There were shadowy trees covering it. It seemed to lead to some kind of highway. You'd think that would be the worst place to go, but Bessie could see that the traffic was going in the opposite direction to the cars roaring into life behind her. If she

could just cross it, then all of the shadows in their cars wouldn't be able to follow her.

Bessie wasn't thinking right. She just had to escape. That dictated every single one of her movements as she scrabbled wildly up the bank. Real dirt – what felt like real dirt, at least – spilled out from underneath her fingers. A few clods even got trapped there. But then she felt how dark and insidious it was. Worse. In her mad rush to escape, she somehow reopened her cut. A few little drops of her blood mixed with the dirt. Then sparks erupted out of it. They were pure white. She went to describe them like snow, but that wasn't even white enough. It was the absence of darkness.

And the dirt receded from it.

Bessie stared down at it just as she reached the top of the embankment and stood beside the rushing highway. “What?”

She heard the Ghost King screaming from behind.

She turned over her shoulder. She went to say that he still hadn't manifested in full, but now he had a body. He marched toward her. The only thing missing was his face.

She stared over her shoulder in utter desperation. A part of her needed to see that face. She had to know his features in case she ever ran into him again, but standing here and wasting her time was criminal.

So Bessie turned, and she faced the highway. It was even madder than some of the massive highways you got in Parlor City. It was eight lanes. All the traffic was going in the same direction, and there were massive trucks. All of them were shadowy. And all of them, Bessie knew from experience, would pack a punch if she was stupid enough to touch them.

But there's stupid, then there's desperate. And desperate always wins.

Wincing her eyes closed, which was quite possibly the dumbest thing she could do, Bessie thrust forward. The shadow cars instantly started beeping their horns, but in a mixture of luck and pure stupidity, Bessie

made it across the first two lanes. Then, somehow, she even got across the third.

She faced a dark, massive truck barreling down toward her. It beeped its horn, the sound so loud, Bessie was surprised it didn't tear up massive chunks of the shadowy asphalt below.

She stood there, eyes open like a deer in the headlights. But just before the truck could reach her, her magic kicked into gear. It raced up over her body. It gave her that extra kick she needed. She shot forward, faster than she had ever moved before.

Not every race could practice magic on themselves to increase their speed, perceptual limits, agility, or strength. Very few people could do it unconsciously. But right now Bessie's magic knew what her mind did not. It was the last thing that could save her.

She ran across the last lanes of traffic. A few of the other shadows tried to spill out onto the highway to capture her, but they didn't get anywhere near as far.

Bessie had been lucky. Not that she'd seen it at the time. But there'd been a break in traffic. Now the highway was swarming with cars with no intention of slowing down.

She couldn't just stand here and stare at it. She had to take her advantage to... what? Disappear into the ghost city?

No, she had to get out of this realm before the Ghost King captured her.

Bessie went to clutch her talisman again. She felt betrayed by it. Its mere touch had somehow given the Ghost King permission to form.

But yesterday, when she'd come here, her talisman had led her home. She plucked it out now. Her breathing was so ragged, it was like she was going to tear holes in her throat. As soon as she touched the clock face, more light spilled around it. Then, just when she thought it wouldn't work, it started to dart to the left.

"You better show me the way home," she muttered.

It sure showed her the way towards something.

Bessie soon disappeared down a side street. There were other shadows, but she ran past them quickly. She threatened anyone who got in her way – she opened her palm full of magic and stuck it in their trembling faces.

As she disappeared further into the city, she moved up the main hill. Just as with Parlor, this ghost city was built on an incline. As Bessie ran to the mouth of a laneway, she paused. She gasped as she stared down at the entirety of the ghost city. It was almost beautiful. And while it looked a lot like Parlor City, it also had this massive tower right in the middle.

Had this entire place been built in the Art Deco era? Because it reminded her of such architecture. The details of the tower especially were similar, and there were numerous gargoyles sitting atop.

As Bessie narrowed her eyes, she soon realized that there was an outside staircase running up around the side of the tower. There were open arched windows leading in at every level. And gargoyles protected every single one.

Bessie just stood there for way too long, staring, knowing that somehow that place was important. Critically, critically important.

Then she heard a scream behind her.

Just run. Just run.

So she spun. She ran.

Desperately staring over her shoulder, she realized that different ghost cars were now on her tail. She started to hear sirens.

Did the ghost city have its own police? Were they now chasing her down?

God.

Just when Bessie didn't think she could take anymore, she watched her talisman grow brighter. It seemed to heavily suggest there was something to the left.

So Bessie ran down the street. And there, she finally saw a blur.

Just before she could throw herself at it, someone appeared.

It was Jeremy, and God knows where he'd come from. No, he'd been on the rooftops above.

Now as he sailed down, landed behind her, and shot forward, Bessie wasn't ready for him. He kicked her in the stomach, though it wasn't a blow designed to kill anyone. It enabled him to move in close. Then he grabbed her magic-encased hands and pinned them behind her head.

Bessie went to attack anyway, knowing full well that magic could be practiced anywhere in the body, but then he opened his mouth. He hissed, and some strange, black gaseous substance spilled from his lips.

It chased around Bessie. It....

Bessie began to tip backward. She had no clue what would happen if she fell asleep in this realm, but she could conclusively conclude that it would not be good.

She became so weak, she couldn't move.

Jeremy hissed once more. She could no longer see his real face. He was artfully covered in shadow.

He reached into his pocket to pull out a phone.

Bessie stared at it languidly as her body started to shut down.

She....

He didn't even have to dial someone. He just pressed the phone to his ear. How he had one considering his other phone had turned into the Ghost King, Bessie didn't know. Maybe the rules of matter were different here. Because the rules of everything were different.

As Bessie started to black out, she stared to the side. That blurry doorway was just there. If only she reached toward it... she could....

As darkness settled over her mind, she swore she was back under that frozen lake.

Sinking, her hand outstretched, her breath departing her. Sinking until a hand pushed down. A hand encased in shadow....

That memory did something to Bessie, and she managed to open her eyes.

Jeremy's grip slackened around her ever so slightly as he erroneously thought that he now had her where he needed her. "Come, my liege. She's ready," he whispered.

"Keep her that way," the Ghost King hissed.

His voice was the only thing that could save Bessie now. Not because she needed it. Because she needed to avoid it at all costs. Again, she got a flash of almost drowning under the lake only for that shadowy hand to save her.

But as she saw it, she recognized one thing. The hand did not belong to the Ghost King. The palm was too broad, the fingers too large.

Something about it was memorable, but it wasn't a memory she could dare waste the resources to pierce into now.

Just get away. Just get away, she begged herself.

Jeremy slackened his grip ever so slightly.

So Bessie used the very last of her magic to kick him in the guts.

He spluttered.

She didn't bother to turn and fight. She didn't have the energy.

Just get to the doorway. Get to the doorway.

Bessie reached toward it. She flung her whole heart into the move. Every organ, every cell. All of her aligned to throw her into the darkness and beyond to the threshold that could save her.

Jeremy shot in close, but before he could grab her, she reached the threshold. And it opened.

Bessie had now experienced this twice, but not like this. Maybe her mind was on the edge of shutting down, so she was picking up different details. Or maybe... maybe the more she did this, the more she understood.

Back there, the real Parlor City, wasn't where she belonged. Right here in this strange realm of shadows – this was her true home.

You might think that Bessie would fight that conclusion with everything she had. It would undermine everything she'd ever thought about herself. But instead of fighting it, she used it, just as she felt Jeremy throw himself into the threshold behind her.

As she pushed through that strange bridge between what was real and what should not be real, her mind threatened to shut down. Instead, she pushed it on more. She sharpened her senses, and though it was crazy, and she shouldn't still have it, she grasped hold of her magic for all it was worth.

Jeremy locked an arm around her. He tried to pull her backward toward the shadow realm.

But Bessie fought.

She used her strength – every last dwindling drop – and with a scream that could have split the heavens in two, she finally thrust through.

She reached Parlor City. She knew that, because she rolled face-first into a bin. She fell against it, and all of its contents – including half-drunk coffee cups and half-eaten sandwiches – spilled around her.

But so did Jeremy.

As he reached the real world, he lost his shadow form in a snap. Though was it more accurate to say that he lost it in a slither? It was as if all of the little dark snakes that made it up had to retreat to their bolt holes.

There was a moment when Jeremy's eyes widened and shock rippled over his features. A moment when he realized he no longer had the advantage. Yeah, that's right.

Bessie went to punch him across the face. But here's the thing – she no longer had the advantage, either. Just as she sent magic into the move, it spluttered and fell. It sparked up her fingers, struck the junk that was surrounding her, sizzled faintly, then disappeared without so much as a goodbye.

“What?” Bessie stammered.

Damn. Of course. She didn't have magic in this realm.

She didn't catch herself starting to think of the real world as a realm. Nope. She shoved to her feet.

She knew she had one chance. Get away from him. Do it now.

Bessie didn't know where she was. From the thrum of traffic close by, she had to be near a highway.

She wasn't thinking straight. Just get to a phone. Get to a phone and call Xavier.

In a recreation of what she'd just done, Bessie rose up an embankment to her left.

And there she saw a somewhat modest six-lane highway compared to the one in the ghost realm. It was still packed with traffic. And every car was going more than 100 kilometers an hour. So what did Bessie do? At the sound of Jeremy racing up behind her, she threw herself forward.

The first car slammed on its brakes. Bessie missed it by a whisker. By that time, she was in the second lane.

All of the traffic was going nuts at the sudden appearance of the idiot running through it.

Jeremy was faster than Bessie. As he reached toward her, he clutched his phone. She heard the Ghost King. "Come back to me, Bessie. Come back to me now while you still can."

Bessie heard the words while you still can, and she shot forward faster. She pushed into the next lane of traffic. She could see the end of the highway. She didn't know what she would do when she reached it, because Jeremy would still be on her tail. But she—

Jeremy reached her. He latched a hand around her throat.

Whatever spell he'd cast on her previously was still in her body, ready to be reactivated. And all it took was the touch of Jeremy's short nails over her trachea.

Bessie's eyes rolled into the back of her head. A real problem considering where she was. Not all of the traffic had caught up to the fact that two stupid humans were running amongst it.

Out of the corner of Bessie's eye, she saw a black car shoot toward her. The driver opened their mouth in surprise, but even now, Bessie was capable of telling they didn't have sufficient braking distance. So this was how she would die?

It would be better than falling to the Ghost King.

But just as Bessie tumbled forward, Jeremy locking an arm around her middle and her hair fanning in front of her face, a low-slung sporty car skidded to a stop in front of her.

The other car smashed into it. But neither car was thrown into the air. Magic blasted around both vehicles, coming from the first and protecting them.

Then there was the sound of a door opening.

Footfall. Then someone screaming her name. Someone with a memorable voice. Someone with a memorable everything.

Before Bessie could pass out, she opened her eyes just in time to see Xavier.

It might still be the middle of the day, but as Bessie's gaze darkened, everything darkened with it. It was like it was a pitch-black night and it was just the two of them. She stared over at his legs, then his torso, then his face.

And Xavier stared back.

"Don't interfere—" the Ghost King hissed from Jeremy's phone.

"I was born to," Xavier snapped back.

Jeremy went to drag Bessie backward, but Xavier wouldn't let him. Bessie had never seen Xavier actually fight anything. Of course she'd imagined it. Presumably, in her head at least, that's what he did every day, right? He abused his position. He used his vampire shadow skills. He got

rid of anyone who didn't agree with him. But right now, he was fighting for her, not against her.

Jeremy tried to create some kind of magical field, but there was no chance it would work against the strongest ghost vampire in the city.

Xavier grunted, spun, and kicked him in the stomach. It thrust him back from Bessie.

Before Bessie could fall onto her knees, Xavier was there. He moved around her seamlessly. He grabbed her by the middle. She fell against him.

Jeremy screamed.

His mouth opened wide. Shadows went to spill from it, but Xavier clearly had no intention of letting that happen in his city.

He muttered something under his breath, and this great rush of dark power erupted out from somewhere near his chest. Bessie thought she caught a glimpse of something burning under his pristine white shirt. It looked like some kind of mandala or at the very least a magical rune. As it erupted, blazing with magic, force shot forward. Jeremy's eyes widened. Bessie thought she heard the Ghost King screaming. Then the attack struck Jeremy on the chest. It thrust him up in the air, and it kept him floating there, several meters above Xavier's car.

Xavier made a complicated set of gestures with his fingers. He shouted even louder. He slammed his hand down onto the ground. Jeremy struck the bitumen, too. But the man's very human body didn't break. Instead, the shadows encasing him did. They shattered around him as he convulsed. Then the last few strands snapped. As for his phone, that shattered into a thousand pieces, but not before the Ghost King could mutter one last warning.

"No matter what you do, I will still come for her. She is mine."

He disappeared.

Jeremy soon lay still, though thankfully as his chest pushed up and down rhythmically, it proved he wasn't dead.

Sorry... thankfully? There was only one thing Bessie should be thankful for right now.

Xavier still held her. Though he'd used a lot of energy, he was barely out of breath. Until he let his gaze stray toward her. His chest tightened as if someone had kicked it. "Bessie—"

She managed to lift a hand, though she was preciously weak. "I tried to call you. I honestly did. I didn't break the contract. I... tried to... get to you."

With that, Bessie shut down. She was like a computer. A computer who'd had its powerpack pulled out, thrown in water, then blown up for good measure. She very much doubted she would ever rise again. But as Xavier cradled her, guiding her down until she rested in his lap, she realized he would not see her fall.

BESSIE WOKE UP. THAT SHE COULD BE SURE OF. WHERE SHE WAS, HOWEVER, was a complete mystery. She frowned. She was in a room. And what a room it was. She was sleeping on a very soft, very comfortable king-size bed. It was fourposter, too. And in front of her was a beautiful set of white-rimmed windows. They offered a view of racing clouds. It was breathtaking.

The place was decorated just right. Not too gaudy, but it made it clear that everything was expensive.

She....

As soon as her eyes opened wider, someone lurched to their feet. She heard the sound of chair legs grating. She turned. And right there, was Xavier.

For a while, Bessie's mind didn't catch up. She growled. "What the hell are you doing here in my room?"

"Your room, Bessie?"

Her lips opened. They wobbled. No. This wasn't her room. Her apartment was one of the crappiest in all of the city. But....

"This is one of the rooms in Fire Mansion. You...."

"I—" she went to fill in that statement. Her lips froze. Because reality caught up with her. And my oh my, was it powerful. And my oh my, was it painful.

She clutched her chest. She crumpled her fingers in. She wheezed. She could remember the Ghost King, her trip to the ghost realm, everything.

She went to sit up violently, but he wouldn't let her. He stood beside her and weighed a hand down against her shoulder. "It's all right. He's gone."

She swiveled her gaze up to him. It took so long to say anything. Her lips didn't want to work. Because if they did, and she asked the question she wanted to, he might answer.

And Bessie... sometimes it was just better not to know the truth, wasn't it?

So she just sat there for far too long, mouth open like a stunned mullet. Xavier didn't push. He kept his hand there for a little longer, fingers lingering like a welcome warm flame. Then he let them drop. He stood back. He looked her up and down with a calculating gaze, then sat. He locked his elbow on the armrest, paused, then pressed his knuckles against his forehead. He looked like he was beating himself up for something.

Crap... if he was gonna beat himself up over this, then what about Bessie? She'd breached the contract. The very same contract that everyone had been telling her all morning would come with heavy consequences.

She sniffed, grabbed the covers, and tried stupidly to hide underneath them as she drew them up to her chin. "What happens now? It wasn't my fault. I honestly did try to call you. But Jeremy did something," she waved her fingers around noncommittally under the covers, "and he stole the card off me."

It took too long for Xavier to actually look at her. What, was he calculating exactly what he would do with her net wealth? She hadn't actually figured out what the consequences of breaching the contract were, but usually vampires jumped in and grabbed everything you had first. Whatever. He could have her crappy assets.

But he was very much not interested in that.

He rested back. "Yes. He took the card. So next time, you get a tattoo."

“Next time?” She should’ve questioned about the tattoo part. She couldn’t. She really, really couldn’t put up with the possibility that there would be a next time. The last time had been frightening enough. Plus, now that her mind worked, she couldn’t get over the last thing the Ghost King had said to her.

She was his.

She shook her head. At first, she couldn’t do it properly. The move got stuck halfway through as if her neck muscles just didn’t understand what it was to move. But then, she got the swing of it, and she kept doing it until Xavier reached out. She stopped when she saw his hand. She frowned. “Did you... find me? On that highway, did you know I was there?”

“I was driving along when I felt a disturbance in the shadow realms. I didn’t know it was you.”

“Disturbance... in the shadow realms. Exactly... how are you connected to all of this? And what did you do to Jeremy?”

Her voice hadn’t even twisted high with suspicion. But his lips still twitched. “Jeremy is fine. I simply stripped the shadow infection from him. For now. He accepted it into himself voluntarily. There is little that can be done for him in the long run. He will likely fall to the Ghost King again. But that, unfortunately, is his choice.”

Xavier had downloaded a lot in that statement. Too much to take in.

Bessie clutched her covers harder. This was where she had to keep asking questions, right? She had to alleviate the pressure that was now compacting her shoulders and back, dragging her down to frigging hell.

Heck, she imagined hell would be way better than the realm she’d just been to. She drew her knees up, pinned them against her chest, and rubbed her forehead. Then she looked at him. “What happens next, Xavier? I... why does the Ghost King want me?”

Xavier wouldn’t look at her. He so obviously wouldn’t look at her that it was like he was trying to build a wall between him and her. But short of

getting up and leaving the room, he'd have to face her eventually. Especially now she scooted out onto the edge of the bed. She let her fingers drop the covers. She swung her legs over as if she was going to get up.

He straightened. "You need to rest. You may not appreciate this, but what you just went through would be enough to destroy an ordinary person's mind."

"... Well then, I guess that means I'm not ordinary." How exactly could she say that with a straight face? She would assume that her voice would break, that everything would tremble out of her, that her heart would just fall at her feet. And yet, she delivered that neatly.

But that's when neat ended.

Her mind was dragged back to the ghost realm. It got stuck on the tower.

She trembled.

Bessie was right. He couldn't keep ignoring her forever. His already strained eyes opened wide. "Bessie. If you—"

"What was that tower – the tower in the middle of town? The one that is guarded by gargoyles on every level... it's something to do with the Ghost King, right? Is it his palace?"

Xavier let out a huff. "Palace is a rich term." He finally leaned back in his seat, no longer propping himself on the edge as if he'd have to jump up and come to her aid in a jiffy. He closed his eyes. He banged his pronounced knuckles against his forehead. He was beating himself up again, wasn't he?

A part of Bessie thought that was a good thing. He was a monster. Monsters should have consciences. But the rest of Bessie wanted to reach forward, grab his knuckles, and stop him.

She settled for teetering there on the edge. "What is it if it's not a palace?"

"A prison."

“For whom?”

“Anyone who has ever gotten in his way.” There was a great deal of dead energy behind the way he said that. It felt as if Xavier would never come to life again. He’d remained there, half broken in his chair, a shadow of a man.

But Bessie had a new definition for the word shadow.

She didn’t want to sit down anymore. Yeah, she was a little weak, but what her body needed was for it to prove to itself it could move. So she pushed up to her feet.

Xavier soon snapped up too. There wasn’t that much distance between them. Bessie had been closer before – hello, she’d fumbled in his lap for a good minute on camera. But....

His heat was the first thing that struck her. Had she ever really paid attention to that before? Yes – when she’d been in his lap, it had been the most striking detail. But at the time, she’d thought she’d imagined it. Now she knew she hadn’t.

Very powerful magical creatures ran hot. Their metabolisms were greater than that of other races. Just how hot did Xavier run, though?

And why was she thinking of this right now? And why, oh why, was she not moving back?

His gaze flickered across her face. “You need to lie back down. It might feel like you’re fine, but—”

She flopped a hand in front of his face, trying desperately to, you know, prove to herself and him that she wasn’t just staring agape at him like a lovestruck child. “I’ve felt worse. But I do feel a little sick. I still need to move.”

... Way to go for acting professionally or, you know, sounding anything other than mad.

Who cared? She couldn’t think properly. She turned from him. She started to pace through the room. Xavier reached over to grab her and pull

her back, but his fingers froze as she turned and faced him again.

It took her a while to realize the reason he'd frozen. She was right up in his face.

She cleared her throat and jerked back, but not before letting her gaze dart back and forth.

It was just stupid to think that Xavier, of all people, had had a true-mate response for her.

He was a ghost vampire. Didn't they only get with their own kind?

And why was she thinking of this right now?

She sighed, grabbed her face, curled her nails in, then let her fingers drop. She turned, and she stopped in front of the window.

Xavier unstuck his feet eventually and took a step up behind her. But he didn't come too close, almost as if he was scared of her. "I know you will have a lot of questions, but—"

"You can't answer everything. But maybe you can tell me this. Have I met the Ghost King before? I... no. It wasn't him." She shook her head. She knew that. Whoever had saved her from that icy lake had possessed a different hand.

Xavier froze. It was far worse than what he'd done previously. This felt like he'd never move again.

Bessie's eyes widened. She could see his reflection in the window in front of her. "... Xavier?"

His cheeks twitched. His skin didn't look like it was getting blood anymore.

"Xavier?"

"Yes, you've met the Ghost King before. I... you shouldn't have those memories yet—"

"What do you mean yet? What memories?" She spun.

He backed off. He wouldn't look at her.

She reached toward him. "Xavier?"

“You would have heard it by now. You are the Ghost King’s bride. He’s wanted to pull you into the ghost realm for so long. I tried to keep you separate from it, but—”

“What? None of this makes sense. What do you mean I’m his bride? I’m just normal—”

If there was one thing that could apparently see him look up – it was that. And his gaze was so very piercing. “Normal, Bessie?” How come his voice became so rich when he said that.

She blushed slightly. She dropped her hand. She tried to stand tall. She just felt like a child. “Yeah,” she tried to convince herself. “I am normal. I mean, I barely have any magic. I come from one of the most powerful magical families in the land, but apparently that didn’t matter. Power skipped me.”

He said nothing.

Shouldn’t this be where he laughed? Shouldn’t this be where he pointed out that, yeah, she was a 10-pound weakling compared to her grandmother?

So why did he look at her like she was an idiot?

She frowned at him. She backed off. “Xavier?”

“What kind of memories do you have of him?” he questioned, voice quick.

“I don’t have any memories of him. I just remember falling in a lake once. Someone—” She went to pinch the bridge of her nose and hide behind her hand, but she stared down at Xavier’s fingers instead.

That’s when she realized she remembered them. The very hand that had saved her – had been his.

His hand had been much smaller at the time, but it was still the same general build.

She dropped her fingers.

His cheeks slackened. “Bessie—”

She crossed her arms. “When I was 10, I fell in a frozen lake. Someone saved me. I only remembered it when I was back in the ghost realm. They used some kind of shadow magic. That was you, wasn’t it?”

He looked to the side.

“Why did you save me? Did it have something to do with my parents?” she spluttered.

His cheeks... she wasn’t certain if they stiffened, or if they decided there was no point in moving anymore. He turned from her.

“Xavier, I know you have something to do with my parents’ disappearance.”

“I was 11 at the time, Bessie. I had nothing to do with your parents.”

“But you saved me from that lake. Why?”

“I was passing by, okay?”

She spluttered. “Not okay. You have precisely no confidence in that statement yourself. I know when you’re lying to me.”

He laughed. “You want the truth, then?” His voice dipped.

Bessie had been waiting for the truth her entire life, so why now, when it was offered to her, did she freeze?

He turned. “Do you want the truth, Bessie?”

“Yes. Of course I do. What happened to my parents—”

“I saved you, because you were someone I was always told to keep an eye on.”

Her nose scrunched. “Ha? This isn’t because of that stupid thing that happened three years ago...?” She couldn’t face him. She started off with her eyes at his level, but then they jerked around and then fluttered to the floor as if they were a bird that had been de-winged.

His lips twitched ever so slightly, but he shook his head. “No. Let us say... you’ve always had something to do with the ghost realm. And as a ghost vampire, I was always told to keep my eye on you.”

So much was not being said. And it was doing Bessie's head in. So she went to fall back onto a familiar track. The very same track she had been driving along her entire life. She opened her lips to say that Xavier had killed her parents. Then she just froze.

When she went to clutch her talisman, her fingers stiffened over it. She stared down at it slowly.

Xavier watched, and tension marched across his cheeks. "You must be careful with that, Bessie."

"I touched it earlier – I tried to use its power to help me against the Ghost King—"

"But it did the exact opposite. Yes."

"What do you mean yes? What happened? Did it malfunction? Has he cursed it somehow?"

"... It is not of this realm. It is... a gift from him."

"What do you mean it's a gift from him?" She laughed. It was far too unstable to suggest she was having any fun here. "It was from my parents. I got it in their will—"

"But it was ultimately a gift from him, nonetheless. It helps you practice magic in this realm."

Again, so much was being left unsaid. It began to get to Bessie. It started in her feet, strangely, and it made her impossibly weak.

Xavier could tell. Rather than pull her back to the bed, he walked to the side and pushed a chair toward her.

He didn't guide her into it. Good. She didn't want him touching her. Because every time he did, he distracted her. Right now she had to focus, channeling her mind forward to figure out the one and only path through this mess.

As she collapsed into her chair, it didn't feel like she'd stand again.

"Bessie – you are weak—"

"You better tell me everything—"

He turned.

“Xavier?” She pushed onto the edge of the seat, but she was smart enough not to try to stand. Her legs felt as if somebody had pulled all of the bones out of them and replaced them with rubber bands.

“I’ve already told you what I can.”

“What are you talking about? What happened to my parents?”

For the very first time in her life, she didn’t utter that like an accusation. All the energy left her. It drained from her body like the last drop of blood from her trembling heart.

He remained with his back to her. He tightened one hand into a fist. She longed to see his lips. Were they trying to form the truth? Or would he never offer her that dignity, regardless of what transpired between them?

“Xavier?”

“Rest, Bessie. The shadow magic has been removed from you.”

She stared down at her hand. Sure enough, the cut had been healed once more. She frowned at the memory of the clods of dirt that had been under her nails previously. “What happens to me in that realm, anyway? I... I’m actually from it, aren’t I?” She came back to the conclusion that had struck her on the threshold.

She wanted to keep it to herself – and God knows she shouldn’t share it with her number one enemy.

But the truth came tumbling out anyway.

Xavier turned. Desperation made his eyes pulse wider than she’d ever seen before. In every single magazine shot, Xavier always looked like he was perfectly in control. He was like a model of a man. That was to say that he couldn’t lead an ordinary man’s life – he was too strong, too rich, too perfect. But models don’t exist.

They are figments of the imagination, tricks created by filters and light.

Xavier, on the other hand, very much existed. And now she watched as his chest pushed out then got stuck, thoroughly ruining her imagined picture

of him as the perfect vampire.

She sat even further forward on the edge of the chair. “I’m actually from the ghost realm, aren’t I?”

“Bessie—”

“Tell me this—”

“I—”

“Am I the reason my parents disappeared?” She didn’t know why that question suddenly slammed into her head. Okay, it didn’t slam into her. All Bessie’s life, she’d always had the impression that she was different in some way. And she’d never been able to shake the conclusion that somehow, for some reason, her parents disappeared because of her.

Now that conclusion was confirmed in Xavier’s eyes even though he couldn’t say the words.

Bessie closed her own eyes. She settled back in the chair. “I caused it. And I’m not human. Great.”

A weak sentiment. It came from an equally weak and broken heart.

But Bessie wouldn’t have the time to break for long. For the Ghost King had found her, and he would not wait.

XAVIER LEFT THE ROOM, BUT ONLY WHEN BESSIE CLAMBERED BACK INTO bed. She did not close her eyes. She would not let herself. Do that, and she wondered if she'd slip back into a dream of the Ghost King. Had she dreamt of him her whole life?

You know, Bessie wasn't somebody who was very attuned to her dreams. She might have one or two per year, but that was it. Or at least, that was all she remembered. Now as this pall of horror set about her shoulders like a dark, stifling blanket, she wondered if the truth had been kept from her memories.

She stared down at her talisman. She longed to take it off and throw it across the room. It was a gift from the Ghost King....

Every time her fingers went to settle around it, she stopped. Yes, by using it, the Ghost King had become real. But it had also helped her out of the ghost realm twice.

What if its powers were far more mysterious and getting rid of it was the last thing she should do?

Bessie kept breathing far too fast. Every inhalation kicked around in her chest like a pinball.

Every time she told herself to calm down, her brain quite rightly told her there wasn't a single reason to calm.

The Ghost King was after her. She'd seen it in the way he'd reached for her desperately. He would not give up.

He would not frigging give up.

Bessie rocked back and forth on the mattress. It squeaked rhythmically. Then she finally jumped to her feet. She was a little dizzy. So she settled for awkwardly stalking back and forth across the room. Her feet could've worn a hole in the carpet. Heck, considering how violently she threw herself back and forth, she could've worn a hole in the floorboards, too. At the very least, she would start a fire under her toes.

She stopped in front of the window. Judging by the angle of the sun, it would be dusk soon.

Dusk meant shadows. And shadows....

Bessie couldn't take it anymore. She just had to get out and do something. She thrust toward the door. She grabbed it and opened it, hauling herself out as fast as she could. And in usual Bessie fashion, she didn't look where she was going.

And who was standing out there, a tray of food in his hands? Xavier, of course. She banged into it.

She upended it, but rather than a single drop of hot soup falling on her, somehow she was twisted to the side so quickly, everything became a blur. The soup landed against Xavier's expensive suit. It dripped down the same cuffs Bessie had seen stained with coffee yesterday.

Bessie went to say sorry, but then she reminded herself of who she was speaking to.

Then she reminded herself of something else.

She'd caused the disappearance of her parents. Not him.

No. Her body revolted at that possibility. There had to be more to the story. He'd conveniently let her believe that. Everything was a cover-up. It had to be, or the very basis of Bessie's life had been a lie.

She extricated herself from his grip.

He glanced up at her dark expression once. Then the slightest sad smile crumpled his lips.

He moved away from her. “You still need to rest. Your strength is important. It will... help you avoid the shadows.”

“I want to go home.”

“You’re free to leave.”

That’s not what she expected he’d say. At the very least, he should pretend that she had to go back to bed, right? He should proudly proclaim that he was here to save her – and that the only way she would ever be free of the shadows was if she stuck close.

Instead, he locked his gaze on the floor and didn’t look at her.

... Free to go, ha?

Bessie decided to test that. She turned. She started marching down the corridor. She didn’t actually know where she was.

It was hard to get her bearings, too.

Was she on the third floor or the fourth floor?

“The staircase is behind me, Bessie,” he muttered.

She turned. She expected him to be lying, but no, the staircase was literally right behind him, and she had just failed to see it.

She huffed.

She went to take the stairs as fast as she could but soon realized she didn’t have the coordination. She reached out, and she clutched the railing in a disappointingly trembling grip.

He cast a wary gaze over her.

His lips twitched as if he wanted to tell her to be careful, but he swallowed his caution.

She managed to get herself down the first flight of stairs, and my oh my, was she proud.

By the time she got to the second flight of stairs, however, her knees wouldn’t work. She locked them together, and she clenched her teeth. “Why

am I this weak?”

Xavier was following her – but at least 10 steps behind. “Because you were forced to use your true magic back in the ghost realm. It’s been a long time since you’ve had to call on it. Your body isn’t used to it, that’s all.”

She whipped her head over her shoulder. She wanted to ignore him, but she could not ignore this. “True magic? You mean those white sparks that appeared when I got dirt under my nails, don’t you?”

He hadn’t seen the incident, but the way his gaze narrowed told her he knew exactly what she was talking about nonetheless.

She yanked a hand off the railing to stare at it, just to ensure there was no dirt stuck anywhere under her cuticles. But that robbed her of her balance when she needed it most.

“Careful,” he blurted now, incapable of keeping that guttural warning to himself.

Careful she was not, but at least she didn’t teeter toward the railing side of the stairs. She landed hard against the wall instead. Her sweaty fingers slid across it until finally she found her purchase. Then she sniffed once. “I’m fine.”

“Yes, Bessie.”

That was it. He didn’t make any muttered comment about the fact that was patently not the case, and nor did he follow it up with a well-timed insult. He remained standing 10 steps behind her until finally she made it down to the foyer. She was so happy she did, she wanted to collapse. For two reasons. Not only was she relieved, but this heady pressure was building in her skull.

It got worse when she saw a shadow to her side. It wasn’t moving, but that wasn’t the point. She shrieked and turned.

Xavier was behind her now. Right behind her. She stared at his chest. “It’s just a shadow. Not all shadows are bad. Trust me on that.”

She got stuck staring at his pecs. Seriously, they might look great against his tight shirt, but—

She reminded herself of what he'd just said – and more importantly, the tone he'd used. The certainty....

“What do you mean not all shadows are bad? That place—”

“That place is a legitimate realm, Bessie. But it has fallen to a bad practitioner. The shadows themselves, however, are not bad. It is not a good idea to fear them. Shadows are a necessary part of life.”

There we go. That was the thing she'd been looking for. Another reason to hate him. Now doubt was infiltrating her mind about her parents' disappearance, she had to clutch onto anything to sustain her negative feelings toward him.

This was it. She jerked backward, though thankfully she didn't fall into anything, tumble over, and end her argument fabulously before it began. “The shadows are good? Of course you'd say something like that. You haven't been there. I have. You haven't seen the way they leered at me. And yet you are telling me they're good? What exactly are you hiding—”

“I've been there,” he said quietly. He didn't compete with her volume. He just slipped that statement in and waited for her to pick it up.

When she did, she flinched. “You... you've been there?”

“As a ghost vampire, I, among all my kind, have the peculiar ability to move into the ghost realm and out of it freely.”

“You....”

He what? Exactly what did she want to say right now? She had to follow it up with something, because she'd started her last statement with so much fire and passion that if she spluttered into silence now, she'd sound like an idiot.

But what was there to say?

Nothing. There was something to feel, however.

If he was right, and he could move into and out of the ghost realm unencumbered, did that mean that he could come for her the next time she was trapped there?

All these thoughts happened quickly. So quickly, not even the world's most powerful computer would be able to track them.

But maybe Xavier was more powerful than that. "You'll be tattooed next time. And you will be able to call on that tattoo, wherever you are, including in the ghost realm. I will come to you. You have my word on that." He nodded low.

Suddenly all of Bessie's anger from before just melted away. It was like someone had created a statue of her heart – one made entirely of ice. And then they'd carelessly thrown it in a fire.

She opened her mouth. She closed her lips. She opened them again.

Xavier remained there, staring at her steadily. And if that stare was just as good as the promise he'd just given, then he was right. The next time she called him, he would come.

... The next time.

Bessie turned.

She remembered the foyer of Fire Mansion. Technically, she'd only ever spied it from afar, over that bouncer's shoulder three years ago.

Now she bothered to look, it confirmed everything she'd suspected. It was actually beautiful. Sorry – opulent. And stupidly expensive.

It was also a nightclub, right? There were no staff walking around yet, though. She frowned. "Isn't this meant to be some grand entertainment area or something?"

"The nightclub has been canceled for tonight."

"Why do you even run one out of your mansion? It's not like you need money, right?"

"No. It provides a service for the city, however."

She snorted. "It's a nightclub."

“It provides a service for the city,” he repeated without elaborating.

“What, alcohol and loud music? Yeah, hardly healthcare.”

“I take it you’ve never been here.”

“No,” she said defensively. “I was never invited. I was *persona non grata*—”

He just looked at her. The kind of look that could defuse a bomb. Hell, why not 1000 bombs? That stare could stop a stampeding rhinoceros. If you were in an out-of-control train, it would brake out of nowhere – all at Xavier’s steady stare.

As for Bessie... it melted her.

She sucked her lips in.

He didn’t need to say it. He just needed to stare at her and wait for her to come to the only obvious conclusion. Bessie was not *persona non grata*, and had she chosen to come here at any time, he would’ve allowed her.

At that uncomfortable thought, she quickly turned. She walked over to some piece of art on the wall. She poked at it. “It’s a moneymaking operation,” she muttered to herself conclusively.

“Fire mansion offers people the ability to get closer to their shadow sides in a safe environment.”

She froze. It took an age to turn. “Shadow side—”

He opened his hand and spread his fingers wide. “I know you are currently not comfortable with the concept, but you must become comfortable at some point. Shadows,” he said conclusively, his tone suggesting that he would not argue about this, “are not bad. They have every right to exist – just like us. The shadow realm is different. The shadow realm fell to him,” he said, teeth clenching hard. “But the people of the shadow realm are not monsters. True monsters do not exist outside of fairytales.”

That was the very first time he’d told her off. Okay, since the incident. But even before the incident, he wouldn’t have ever corrected her – just

ignored her.

This was like a slap.

She opened her mouth to scream that the shadows had to be bad. She'd been there. She'd felt their force. But then something clicked in her head.

Her lips drooped. "You were told to keep an eye on me, right?"

"Yes—"

"Then why did you dismiss me for most of your life?"

"I was aware of who you were. I did my duty from afar—"

"Are you telling me that every time you fobbed me off at a press conference, you were still keeping an eye on me? Are you telling me that every single time you dodged an interview, you somehow... knew that I was the Ghost King's bride?"

Everything came to a head. She watched the moment it arrived in Xavier's wide, panicked eyes. He'd clearly been trying to avoid this topic, but now Bessie had raised it, there was nowhere to run.

Literally. Bessie used the little strength she had to jerk up to him. She didn't get too close, but nor was she that far away. She teetered, 30 centimeters from his chest. It was well within range of his arms should she choose to collapse, but she would argue until her last breath before that happened.

"How long have you known that I was the Ghost King's bride for?"

"I only...."

"You only what?"

"I was always told to keep an eye on you because of your family. It was clear from childhood that you came from that realm and not this one," he said, stuttering through every syllable.

He just confirmed so much. But he'd still dodged around the major fact. So she got closer, then closer still. 30 centimeters became 10 centimeters. And 10 centimeters is not very far to stand from someone – especially if

they are meant to be your mortal enemy. “Xavier, when did you find out that I was the Ghost King’s bride?”

With nowhere to go, he had to look down into her eyes. With nowhere to go, it meant that she had to see his expression. The way his pupils dilated – the way tension spread down his cheeks. And finally, the way he looked as he answered, “I found out three years ago.”

There was only one thing of importance that had happened three years ago.

His reaction to her....

She shook her head. She jerked back. She grabbed her mouth. She rocked forward and back. “I don’t get it. Why—”

“You... it doesn’t matter. It was confirmed three years ago. And now, Bessie, you need to do as I say. In order to stay out of the Ghost King’s clutches, you have to do as I say.”

Xavier usually wasn’t one for repetition. That was more her angle. She’d repeat the same fact over and over again to convince herself it was real. But Xavier didn’t need to convince anyone right now.

He was right. If Bessie had any hope at all of staying out of the Ghost King’s clutches, then she had to stick by the one man she’d spent most of her life hating.

She turned. She thrust her wrist out.

Xavier frowned at it. “What—”

“You said you had to tattoo me. Go ahead and do it. I... will comply. Okay? I still don’t trust you,” she spluttered as quickly as she could. “But...”

Yeah. But. But she needed someone to call on the next time the Ghost King trapped her. But she had to understand what was going on. And the only way to do that would be to stay close to Xavier’s side.

She’d always promised herself that in him, she would find the truth. But she’d never thought that in him, she’d also find salvation.

ONE WORD ECHOED AROUND BESSIE'S HEAD AS XAVIER DROVE HER through town to the tattoo parlor. Salvation. She hadn't actually thought that, had she? She hadn't actually used that word in a sentence along with Xavier's name, right? She could kick herself. Instead she just clamped her arms around her middle as she sat next to him.

He hadn't said a thing for a long time. He was concentrating on driving. Sorry, of course he wasn't. He was a ghost vampire. He would need a fragment of his attention to drive safely through this town, regardless of how crazy the traffic sometimes got. God knows what the rest of him was thinking of. But judging by the way his cheeks were limp like someone had severed the muscles and rediverted all the blood, he was thinking of the Ghost King again. Funny, because that's exactly what Bessie was thinking of, too.

How... how could she be the Ghost King's bride? What did it mean, exactly? She hadn't met him before – she knew that. But had she been promised to him or something? And more to the point... more to the frigging point, what was that realm? And what did it mean that she had come from there originally?

“We're about to reach the parlor. I warn you... the tattoo mistress is... eccentric. She is also a ghost vampire. She may be aware of you.”

“What do you mean?”

He flinched. “She will very much be aware of you. I was attempting to be polite.”

“What do you mean by aware, though?”

“Your... reputation precedes you in this town.”

She winced. It sure did. That damn reputation was like a dark cloak around her shoulders. But that’s not what Xavier meant.

Nope.

He pulled up across the road from the tattoo parlor. Bessie had seen it before. It was always packed. You’d think that meant everyone in the city would have to get a new tattoo every other week, but Bessie knew a thing or two about this tattoo parlor. It was so famous that it pulled people from out of town – out of the country – too.

Now Bessie was about to get her own tattoo.

Had she actually thought about that? Exactly what would it look like? Would Xavier just write his number over her forehead?

“Ah... exactly what is this going to look like, anyway? The tattoo will be discreet, right? It’ll look pretty weird if I walk around with your number tattooed on my—”

“It won’t be my number. And don’t worry, it won’t stick out.” He got out of the car.

Grumbling to herself, Bessie slipped out, too.

She stared over at the tattoo parlor. Dusk was settling. There were beautiful little lamps on just outside of it. Cast iron, they hung from steel poles, giving the place a slightly older look as if it came from the turn of the twentieth century or something.

“As I said... Madame Arlington can be... eccentric.” Xavier stopped in front of the doors, paused, solidified that warning with one quick look, then opened the door.

As Bessie had already pointed out, Xavier was not one for repetition. Just how eccentric would Arlington be exactly for him to indulge in verbal overemphasis yet again?

Bessie got her answer as soon as she walked into the tattoo parlor. The major section out front was open, and there were at least five different burly wizards getting tattoos. One of them shrieked as it was applied to his ribs, and Bessie winced.

Music thumped through the air, even making some of the jars rattle on the shelves.

These weren't just ordinary tattoos. Most of them were magical, and as she walked past a guy getting a dragon, the tattoo had to be reapplied with ink, then with magical paint. The paint crackled over the guy's skin, made him roar like an actual dragon, then half knocked him out.

"Do I really have to get a tattoo?" Bessie muttered.

"Considering what you can put up with, Bessie, I really don't think the pain is going to affect you too much," he muttered.

What exactly did that mean?

She frowned as she walked a little closer to him. That's right. A little closer. Now Bessie had voluntarily neared him on more than one occasion, it was like she'd ripped a Band-Aid off. She'd realized it wasn't that scary after all. Maybe it was... the opposite.

And maybe she didn't have the time to think of that right now, because soon Arlington would appear.

There was a door that led out to the back section of the tattoo parlor. Bessie wondered if it was for the important clients, or perhaps those that were more likely to scream like a banshee.

Rather than open the door, Xavier knocked on it professionally twice. He straightened up. He shot Bessie one last warning look.

The door opened. Madame Arlington appeared. She was maybe in her early forties or fifties, but it was hard to tell. She was a vampire. And she,

unlike a lot of other vampires, didn't bother to hide her teeth. They sat proudly against her fat bottom lip. She wore a bandanna in her hair and a fifties-style dress. As for her eyes, they were pretty. And the second they locked on Bessie, they widened with uncomfortable interest.

“Ah, the bride.”

Bessie jerked back.

Before she could knock into a shelf behind her and spill God knows what all over the floor, Xavier grabbed her shoulder lightly. “That’s not what she means,” he muttered under his breath.

How did he know what Bessie was thinking? There were two possibilities here, weren't there? Either Arlington thought Bessie was the Ghost King's bride, or....

Bessie was forced to stare over at Xavier. He straightened and walked in front of Arlington, a warning look flashing in his gaze. “I called ahead. You know exactly what she needs. Perhaps... attempt to keep the conversation light?”

Madame Arlington bit her lip. She looked like she was the cheekiest soul Bessie had ever seen. And as a vampire to boot – that was a toxic mix indeed.

She leaned forward, grabbed Xavier's tie in a smooth move, pulled it out, then yanked him closer. “Your realm is out there, my vampire lord.” She pointed to the street. “And my realm is in here. Now, I don't need you around bothering my patient while I'm working. Go have fun. Check the wizards. Jeffrey over there could give you a lovely momma's tattoo on your arm or your ass,” she laughed as she twisted, slapped him on the butt, then pushed him out of the door.

Remarkably, Xavier did nothing. You'd think he'd explode, right? Instead, he shot Bessie one last wary look. Then he walked away.

As for Bessie, she stood there, quite rightly flabbergasted.

Madame Arlington crossed her arms, leaned against the doorway, looked Bessie up and down, nodded once as if she liked what she saw, then pointed to the back room.

Bessie spluttered. “I just need a simple tattoo—” She stupidly walked in after Arlington.

The door closed itself with a bang.

Bessie let out a surprised squeak.

“Don’t worry about that. It’s just a magical seal. Considering what we have to do to you, we have to ensure that the magic doesn’t leak out. The wizards out there would have just another reason to cry. Now, come here.” She gestured over to a tattoo bed.

Bessie frowned at it. Then she made the mistake of looking at the room. Yep. There was a serious magical seal in place. The kind you might use on a magical reactor. Lose the integrity of this seal, and you could take out half of the city.

But this was just a tattoo parlor, right? She shook her head. “I—”

“All right, Bessie. Come take a seat.” She patted the bed.

Bessie did not want to take a seat. She wanted to run. She hardly had an option, so she walked over.

With her bottom lip between her teeth, she sat.

Then Arlington proceeded to pull a needle out from somewhere. There wasn’t a table around, so she must’ve yanked it out from her back pocket or a holster. She certainly waved it around like it was a gun.

She muttered something, and it started to fill with ink.

Bessie scampered backward. “Xavier said this could be discreet. It has to be—”

“Don’t worry, I’m not gonna tattoo the word bride across your head.”

Bessie couldn’t take it anymore. She twitched back. “The Ghost King —”

All Bessie had to do was mention those two words, and Madame Arlington's mood changed. It was like she'd been punched. Bessie actually saw her cheeks freezing. It was a surprise icicles didn't spread down her throat. "The Ghost King is a goddamn murderer. A true monster. And a man who must be stopped, no matter the costs."

Bessie blinked back her surprise. "But—"

"This tattoo will help you call on Xavier, no matter where you are. To activate it, all you will have to do is clamp your other hand over it and send magic into it. If you're in an intensely magically protected area... like say a dungeon," she muttered, apparently offhand, "you will need more magic to activate it. But I have every confidence that you will be able to scrounge it." With that, Madame Arlington pointed to her wrists. "Which one?"

Bessie grabbed her left wrist. "You're going to put it on my wrist? Isn't that gonna hurt?"

Arlington snorted. "Xavier is right. I'm sure you have the strength to take on anything." With that veiled comment, she just reached forward and grabbed Bessie's wrist.

Before Bessie could splutter, she started to ink her up. Bessie thought the pain would be unimaginable. It was... bad. She could agree on that. But it wasn't screaming-at-the-top-of-her-lungs, clutching-onto-a-chair-and-begging-for-mercy horrible. It was manageable. Bessie winced a bit, but then she focused on what Arlington was doing.

Bessie wasn't that used to the process of tattooing someone, but she could tell this was different. "What exactly are you up to?"

"I have to etch this not just into this realm, but into the ghost realm, too. This thing," she proffered her needle, "is capable of cross-dimensional tattoos. Cool, ha? I can't tell you how many idiots keep trying to steal this. They don't need a cool 'I love mom' tattoo capable of appearing in this realm and the next. You, however, do."

Bessie's lips twitched. Part of her still didn't want to know the truth. A part of her kept running from it. But that part was rapidly becoming weaker.

All Bessie had to do was close her eyes, and she could imagine the Ghost King in perfect detail. Apart from his face, that was.

But his hand was enough. The way it had stretched toward her, the way it had tried to claim her, it promised to Bessie that the next time, he wouldn't fail. He'd pull out all stops and murder if he needed to.

Bessie stared down at the mark then up at Arlington. "You're a ghost vampire too, aren't you?"

Arlington proffered her fangs and hissed through them. "Sure am."

"Why did ghost vampires keep themselves hidden from the rest of the magical community for so long?"

Madame Arlington's pretty eyes flashed up. "Because you weren't ready for us, sugar."

"Do you mean the magical community at large... or do you mean me?"

Arlington arched an eyebrow. You'd think it would be because Bessie's question was ridiculously stupid. It didn't feel that way, though. It was prescient somehow.

"Something like that is probably better answered by loverboy."

"Loverboy? The Ghost King—"

"The Ghost King is a damn monster. I've already told you that. I clearly don't mean him."

Why was Bessie being so freaking slow today? Of course Arlington meant Xavier. And of course that was embarrassing. But Bessie refused to blush. "Are there other ghost realms?"

"Technically yes. But the one that you visited is the closest and most powerful."

"Why does it look exactly like this city? Are there other cities?"

"Yes. It's a perfect match for this world, but Parlor City is the capital."

Bessie shook – but not enough. This should be a revelation, right? So why did it feel as if she'd already known that?

She frowned down at the mark that was starting to take shape. It seemed to have a familiar form.

They drifted into silence. It wasn't that Bessie didn't have any more questions. She had so many, she was choking on them. But she didn't know where to start. Xavier, or the ghost realm? Both were equally as important.

If you had told Bessie this morning that by the afternoon, her views of Xavier would have softened, if not entirely changed, she would have kicked you in the stomach.

Her hatred of Xavier was like her only rock. Now that rock was morphing.

“Shouldn't you be asking every single question you've ever had about him? I'm here to answer. That's why he was acting so awkwardly.” Arlington laughed.

“Ha?”

“I've known Xavier my whole life.” She grinned. “I even knew him as a kid. I babysat him, too. Let's just say, he didn't always walk around in Cashmere suits.” She snarled through her laughter.

Bessie actually giggled. “What was he like?” As soon as the words slipped out of her lips, she chided herself. What was he like? A frigging monster, but—

Arlington cackled again at the top of her lungs. “A real awkward but cute kid. He's always had this sense of justice.” She thumped her chest with her free hand. “Whenever he sees something wrong, he has to correct it. And whenever he sees somebody in trouble,” her eyes flashed as they looked at her, “he has to protect them.

Bessie looked away from her. She started to chew her lip. “Is he—”

“He's the only one who can protect this city.” Arlington's mood changed suddenly. Seriousness flooded in. It disrupted her good humor. It

suddenly felt as if a cloud filled the room.

“Ha?”

“I might pretend I’m special with this thing,” she proffered her syringe, and Bessie saw a few strange crackles of magic arcing around it, “but I can’t protect this city. Only he can. I know you think he has his secrets. We all do, sugar. That’s part of life. But this city would not exist without him.”

There were a trillion things Bessie needed to say. People who had secrets tended to want to keep them because if others found out about them, it would be bad. Few secrets were good things.

Especially when a vampire was concerned. But Bessie could think this. She just couldn’t say it.

They descended into silence yet again. Arlington broke it. “Are you seriously not going to ask me about all of his embarrassing childhood stories?”

“I can’t imagine them being that embarrassing,” Bessie muttered, distracted.

Arlington tipped her head back and laughed, her bandanna sliding over her loose locks. “Are you serious? Have you already fallen for him that much?”

Bessie stiffened. “I have not and never will fall for him.”

“Sure. I will volunteer some important but apparently irrelevant information, then. He might seem prickly on the outside. It might seem like nothing can affect him. But it can. He’s got his emotional buttons, just like the rest of us. All he ever thinks about are the people he didn’t save.” Her voice changed. All the lightness disappeared from her tone.

It became heavy like a coffin lid.

Bessie didn’t want to react. Her eyebrows still clunked down. “All the people... he didn’t save?”

“I’m not entirely sure how much I can share with you, but I heard about that incident yesterday. If you hadn’t saved that guy, he would’ve been lost

to the ghost realm. His mind would've been eaten up by the Ghost King. Then he would've been used as an asset over in that realm. You saved him. But you can't save everyone. And neither can little Xavier. The more people he loses, the harder it becomes. So whatever you think of him, Bessie, cut him some slack."

Bessie opened her mouth. She closed her lips. She'd already done this several times today. But this was different. It felt like something was breaking inside her.

"He's still a criminal," she muttered defensively, though it was so far under her breath, Arlington had to lean in.

She snorted. "You sure about that?"

Bessie had a preprepared response. It was the same one she'd been using for years. Whenever someone had faced her with that exact expression and those exact words, she'd reached for it. Now she couldn't. Now she stared from Arlington down to her tattoo then back again. Was Bessie sure? The answer was no. Heading to the ghost realm had changed everything.

Arlington chuckled, leaned in, and patted Bessie's hand. "It's done, you know?"

Bessie looked down. "Ha?"

"I know, right? I thought it would take longer, but the interdimensional tattoo took to you easily." She made a face. "Disappointing, because I thought we'd have more time to talk about Xavier's embarrassing past. But apparently, you don't need all the juicy details."

Bessie stared at the tattoo. Then carefully, she touched it.

It didn't suddenly send a magical transportation halo slicing around her, and nor, thankfully, did it bring Xavier to her side.

Yet.

"How exactly—"

“It only needs a little magic. It doesn’t matter where it comes from – you, or your talisman,” Arlington’s voice dropped slightly.

“My talisman? But—”

“Like I said, it doesn’t matter. You or the talisman – as long as you feed it a single charge of magic, it’ll work. Then no matter where you are, this realm or the next, Xavier will come to your side. And before you question whether that’s a good thing,” Arlington said as she leaned forward, locking a hand on the bed so she could get as close to Bessie as possible, “you’re the luckiest person in this city, Bessie Tilly.”

“The Ghost King—”

“It doesn’t matter what’s after you.” Her eyes flashed. “The only thing that counts is who’s in your corner.”

BESSIE

She lay at home in bed, staring up at the ceiling. About once every 10 seconds – or five if she was being honest with herself – she would lift her hand up, and she would stare at her tattoo. It was thankfully discreet.

She wondered if many people would notice, even if she didn't wear any sleeves.

But the way it felt...

She went to tap it again but judiciously chose to drop her fingers. Spend too much time obsessing over this, and maybe she'd accidentally activate it and draw Xavier to her side.

She had to go back to what he'd said in his mansion. If she didn't want to have anything to do with him, then she didn't have to have anything to do with him. It was down to her.

Except it wouldn't be. Xavier wouldn't have gone to all the trouble of getting her outfitted with this tattoo if it weren't necessary.

She could tell why.

She suddenly let her hand flop down, and it covered her face with a thump.

A little to the left, and she would've struck her nose. She could be bleeding all over her pillow by now. Instead, she had to put up with the pain

in her mind.

The Ghost King was gonna come for her. It could be today, tomorrow, the next day – but soon. She'd seen the look in his eyes. She'd felt the determination in his grip. She was his bride, and he was not going to give her up.

“But how the hell am I the Ghost King's bride?” She shoved her thumbnail into her mouth and chomped down on it as she coiled up into a tightly wrapped-up ball. There was so much tension in her body that if someone poked her from the wrong angle, she'd explode.

Or hell, maybe that's what she wanted. Because when you explode, the pressure leaves, right? It doesn't continue to build and build and build in the center of your stomach like you're always seconds from dying.

She scrunched into an even tighter ball.

It was morning already. She should get up. She should face the day. Especially considering her phone had just pinged.

She didn't want to. She continued to stare at the wall in the exact same position she'd taken for most of the night.

The wall hadn't changed. Only she had.

Her phone couldn't take it anymore. Or rather whoever was trying to communicate was sick of the fact she was ignoring them. The pinging turned into a ringing.

Worse than that, it had the call tone she only associated with her boss.

“Now?” she grumbled.

She rolled over. She scabbled over her bedside table until she plucked up her phone. Keeping the groan from her voice, she answered, “Yeah?”

“What do you mean yeah? I've been trying to contact you for the past hour. You have to come into work.”

“It's not even 7 o'clock yet—”

“Yes, but you need to do an interview. The interview of your life.”

Bessie sat up straight. All she could do was think of Xavier. She wasn't even sure if that would be the interview of her life anymore, and nor was she sure if he was knee-deep in her parent's case like she'd always assumed. Not the point. Anything that could get her addled mind fixating on Xavier now instead of her problems was a good thing.

"Xavier—"

"What? No. Prince Kane."

Bessie's face screwed up. "Prince who? Never heard of him."

"You might've never heard of him, but he's a big deal across the pond. He's come to Parlor City. He intends to set up a charitable business hub here. In the space of the last month, he's bought more property here than anyone else."

Bessie shook her head. This sounded like a massive story. So why was she only hearing about it now?

"He's the biggest deal this city has ever seen. And out of all of the news agencies in town, he's come to us for an exclusive interview."

Bessie got up. Her blood pumped as she finally recognized the importance of this. Then it was like someone put her in reverse. "So... why are we going to use me to do the interview, exactly?" Bessie wasn't someone who usually engaged in self-deprecating thoughts. But come on. Both she and the chief knew something patently obvious. Yeah, she did like to do hard-hitting interviews, but not where she sat down with the rich and privileged and chortled over their wealth. She was more of the kind of girl who would take you down, shove a recorder in your face, and demand for the truth until her cheeks went purple.

"He asked for you," the chief muttered. "Likes your style, apparently."

Bessie got several steps. "What do you mean?"

"He's a fan. He mentioned several of the pieces you did over the past year. He likes your blog, too. He's intrigued by your writing style. Need I

say more? Yes, apparently I must. Get your ass here right now. We need to prepare. Try to wear something decent.” With that, he hung up.

It left Bessie standing there, blinking, confused, and quite rightly, having no clue what to do.

She’d spent all night staring at the wall, wondering how she should avoid the Ghost King. Now the real world was intruding.

Before she’d left Xavier last night, he’d told her to just get back to living. He’d done so with this strange, morose expression as if that’s all he’d ever wanted for her.

She could splutter and say yeah, right. Xavier was still a criminal... wasn’t he? But that wasn’t the point. She actually appreciated that he was right. The only way to put all of this out of her head was to just get on with work.

While work wasn’t usually this weird, at least it would be distracting.

So Bessie rummaged around, found her most decent clothes, shoved them on, and ran a brush through her hair.

She didn’t know what the temperature would be. Should she wear a blazer?

She brought her hands up, then instantly, her tattoo caught her attention. Yep, wear a blazer. The cuffs of her shirt were a little short and didn’t quite cover her mark.

Bessie shoved a blazer on and ran out the door. She was at work a full half hour later, which, considering the traffic and where she lived, was a record. Not for her boss, apparently. As soon as she came scooting in, he looked like he’d explode. “What time do you call this? I told you to get here as soon as you possibly could—”

She put a hand up and spread it wide. Then she almost collapsed onto the office dividing wall next to her. “I took the subway and ran two blocks to get here. This is the fastest I could’ve come. Now... who the hell is this Prince Kane again?”

Her boss crossed his arms. “The biggest deal this city is ever going to see. Wealthy,” he lifted his fingers and started ticking them off one by one, “wealthy, and stinking rich.”

Bessie frowned. “Those are all the same thing.”

“Yeah, I was just emphasizing them before I moved on to the other points. Known philanthropist, champions good causes around the globe, and, for whatever darn reason, now wants to call this city his home.”

Bessie frowned. Why this place? The more she learned about her hometown, the more she realized that Parlor City wasn’t just the same old dingy magical town she’d always assumed it to be. It had secrets, right there in every single shadow.

She bit her lip. “Is that all we know about this guy? Is he a vampire?” she demanded, her nerves suddenly getting the better of her.

He rolled his eyes. “No. Just a wizard. Why? Do you have vampires on the brain?”

Bessie relaxed measurably. Okay, though it kind of sounded weird... go with her paranoid mind here, but what if the Prince could be the Ghost King? Bessie didn’t understand how he functioned, but what if he could leave the ghost realm? She wanted to tell herself that couldn’t happen. Because if that were to occur, Xavier would go after him directly. But she couldn’t really tame her crazy thoughts.

The fact that the ghost Prince was not a vampire, however, let her relax.

She bit her lip. “When is this interview gonna be?”

“Noon.”

“Where?”

“We’re still scouting out locations. We want somewhere with perfect lighting. Somewhere a little regal too.”

She snorted. “Regal in this dingy city?”

He opened a hand wide. “I know. A hard call. But I’ve got everyone working on it. You just need to brush up on your interview skills, and for

God's sake—”

She winced. “Try not to make an embarrassment of myself and all of Channel 89?”

“Add the whole city to that. Seriously, this will be the most important interview of your life,” he said.

Bessie wanted to pooh-pooh that, but honestly, the way he emphasized every single one of those words made it sound like yeah, this would be the most important moment of her life.

For the next several hours, she was swept up in the mess of preparing for the interview. A knot kept raveling and unraveling in her gut. It formed unbeknownst to her, wrapping tighter every time she rushed around, gathering up papers and learning every fact on Prince Kane she could. But whenever she tuned in to it, she forcibly unwrapped it. There was no reason to be nervous. This was the best thing she could hope for today. A proper distraction.

But could she really be distracted from the rest of her life? She'd already concluded the Ghost King would come for her sooner rather than later.

By the time the interview came around, Bessie was a nervous wreck, though she was doing a good job of hiding it. To her, at least.

She was driving to the interview location, though technically Charlie was doing all the driving. Her thumb was in her mouth, and she was chewing industriously. She was chomping on it so wildly, she was surprised that little bits of nail didn't spit out in every direction like she was shredding wood.

“It'll be fine,” Charlie muttered.

“Yeah. Fine. But now I have to live with this for the rest of my—”

“Ha?”

“Never mind. Where are we going, anyway?”

“The old Hammersmith.”

“Hotel, right?” She had to wince her eyes closed to remember that.

When she opened them again, Charlie was doing some wincing of his own. “Yeah – owing to the fact it’s the most important hotel in town, it shouldn’t be surprising that you remember that. Are you really sure you’re up for this?”

“How could I not be? First day of the rest of my life, right? The chief said if I could nail this and knock it out of the park, he’d give me more exposés in the future.”

“The chief rarely uses two metaphors in one sentence. Seriously, are you okay?” Charlie pulled up outside of the old Hammersmith.

Bessie didn’t even bother to turn and stare. It was a beautiful old hotel, though. Built in the 1920s, it was one of the last ones that hadn’t been torn down for new ugly mega structures. The façade was original, painted this gray and blue that matched the sandstone peeking through. You might not think such a color scheme would work, but it was done perfectly. It was offset by the arched windows and various carved details.

The doors were these two massive red-painted affairs with these huge intricate brass knockers. Right now they were open, and a hotel worker dressed as a bellhop, red from head to foot, ushered them in.

There were already other journalists around. Wait, this prince was a real big deal, wasn’t he? How exactly had Bessie failed to even hear about him, let alone pick up the fact he was buying up most of the property in town?

Oh yeah, because her life had always been a tunnel. If Xavier had bought up most of the property in town, she’d be screaming it from the rooftops.

Now....

She scratched her left wrist. “Where are we heading?”

“Up to the attic.”

“The attic?”

“Not what you think. It’s an old tearoom. A beautiful place. Rounded windows, a carved ceiling, and magical fire lanterns.”

Yeah, she had heard of the place. She’d even been there for tea. But now Bessie’s mind wasn’t working.

Her stomach kept pitching. Once or twice, she reached down her top to check that her talisman was still there, even though she didn’t know what she thought about it now. A gift from the frigging Ghost King, she should throw it off the first roof she could find. But if it was her only way to get out of the ghost realm....

The bellhop led her to one of the old elevators. As they rode it up, Bessie felt like she was ascending to hell. Wrong direction, right? Correct feeling, however. Her stomach bottomed out, her face tingled as if she’d been slapped with ice-cold hands, and her heart kept skipping several beats, warning her this was it.

How exactly could this be it again?

It was just a damn interview.

She repeated that as she winced her eyes closed. Then they reached the attic floor. They walked out into a very small hallway that led to a beautiful white door. The bellhop opened it for her, and she strode through.

God. This prince had to be a massive deal, because all of the tables and chairs in the tearoom had been moved. Now, in this humongous space, there were only two chairs, two small coffee tables, two glasses of water, and a beautiful window beside them.

“Look at all that natural light,” Charlie said as he walked over.

Bessie just looked at the two chairs. They were sitting awfully close together. She got it. They needed to be close. It would make it easier for Charlie to get them both in one shot. But....

“How long until it starts?” Bessie muttered.

“We are meant to start in half an hour. The chief will be here soon—” His phone pinged. He grabbed it out.

Bessie walked up to the chair that would likely be hers. It was slightly smaller than the other chair. It was less intricately carved, too. Wait, why were both chairs carved? They almost looked like mini thrones. Hammersmith had some very interesting antique collections, right? It was probably that. The chief had angled for a regal look.

Maybe he'd even carved these chairs himself, considering what this interview could mean.

She walked over to her seat. She bit her lip. She sat.

"Right now? Are you serious?" Charlie spluttered.

Bessie whipped her head around. "What?" she mouthed.

"The interview is gonna start right now," he muttered.

"Now?" She couldn't keep her voice down.

The doors behind were closed. Now they opened.

Charlie shoved his phone back in his pocket and raced to set up the magical camera equipment.

Bessie... turned. Slowly. Like she was a pig on a spit. Like she was a horse on a carousel. Like she was something that was moved by some other force and no matter how hard she tried, she would never be able to move herself without external help again.

Prince Kane walked toward her. Tall, commanding, he was exactly what you would expect. Not from real life, mind you, but from a movie. The presence he wore around him like a cloak suggested a sense of greatness. His face... she almost couldn't see it to begin with. This was a well-lit white room. There was enough reflected sunlight that you'd be able to see somebody even if they attempted to hide in the corner. But he... it took until he stopped right in front of her, until he stood right above her, for his face to resolve into full detail.

He had a wide jaw, sharp cheekbones, and eyes... eyes that looked like shimmering emeralds.

Eyes that wouldn't look anywhere but at her.

“I’m so sorry we’re not ready yet,” Charlie muttered. He was focusing on his camera equipment. “I—”

“My schedule has changed. You have five minutes starting now.” Still looking at her, Kane turned, never blinking once, never letting his stare deviate, and he sat in his seat. He pulled it a touch closer as he did. When he crossed his knees, they almost touched hers.

Bessie hadn’t said a single thing. She needed to unstick her lips. She couldn’t.

“The interview starts now,” Prince Kane said.

Charlie spluttered, but he started recording.

Crap. They were on live television right now. And Bessie—

No. She....

His eyes... there was something about them.

He sat forward. He reached a hand out. “Prince Kane.”

Maybe it was the look in his eyes or the fact that this was on TV right now, but Bessie finally unstuck her body. She slowly reached a hand out. “Bessie Tilly.”

He grabbed her hand.

And Bessie’s world ended.

EVER SINCE SITTING DOWN, BESSIE'S NERVES HAD GOT THE BETTER OF HER. She'd tried every trick in the book to control them. But they'd kept raging, nonetheless. Because sometimes the body cannot be told to calm down, no matter how hard you try.

And now was one of those times.

It was his eyes, the presence, the fact he'd come out of nowhere. But worse, so much worse than that, it was the simple fact that as Prince Kane grabbed her hand, her talisman lit up.

Bessie didn't make it do that. A charge of magic raced from his fingers, sank into hers, jolted through her chest, then reached the talisman.

Bessie spluttered in surprise and stared down at it.

Prince Kane smiled and tightened his grip on her hand.

"Bessie—" Charlie began.

"Nice to finally meet you," Prince Kane muttered.

No way.

There was... no way.

Bessie tried to jerk back.

He tightened his grip.

"Ah—" Charlie spluttered.

Prince Kane lifted one finger. "Continue to record this."

Charlie froze. Bessie watched as shadow magic shot out from nowhere, grabbed his face, locked his fingers over his camera, and forced him to keep recording.

His eyes were the only thing not stolen away by the spell, and they widened with true shock.

But shock would not save him. It sure as hell would not save her.

Bessie tried to jerk back, but Kane wouldn't let her. He gazed at her, from her head, to her feet, then back to her talisman. That jaw, that wide, angled jaw spread, and he smiled.

It was the most sickening thing Bessie had ever seen. It was a gut punch – one that swiftly moved through her body, reached her soul, and tried to wrench it apart.

“Who—” she began.

“A moment, my dear,” he muttered.

Gathering shadows in the palm of his hand, he flicked his fingers to the side again. Then the strangest damn thing occurred. Dark light raced over Bessie. It didn't stay there. It was as if it took an image of her.

And it was one that stuck in her chair, even as she lurched to her feet.

Kane pulled her to the side.

Bessie twisted around, alarm plastering her features, shaking her until she almost fell over.

She saw herself and a perfect recreation of Kane. The image of her started to interview him. Charmingly, professionally, and, importantly, without screaming once.

Bessie shook her head. “No way. You can't possibly be him—”

“You can say it. You must say it. I'm the Ghost King.” His lips slowed down, carving those words out of the air. They also carved the rest of reality away until it was just her and his mouth. Even though he remained exactly where he was and she did, too, she felt like she was getting closer, like destiny shoved her in the back until she'd fall into his face.

He pulled her closer. She staggered. Then she went to grab her talisman – an old habit.

His gaze darted down to it and back to her face. “I’m honored that you always kept my gift beside you.”

“Who the hell are you?”

“You know who I am. You have felt me in your dreams your entire life. And for that whole time, I’ve longed for you to say it. So say it now, Bessie. Who am I?” He stopped and angled his face just a few centimeters closer.

It might not sound like much, but it was enough that Bessie’s heart exploded. She shook.

“Who am I, Bessie?” He got just that little bit closer again.

“The Ghost King,” she hissed.

“Yes. And you are the Ghost King’s bride. Now, come. I find this realm tiresome.” He pulled her away.

She managed to shove her feet down. As wild fright erupted through her eyes, she turned and stared at Charlie. He still watched her with a truly frightened gaze, but it was clear he couldn’t do anything.

“What have you done to him? Stop it,” she screamed.

“Once the interview is over, in time, perhaps his mind will return to him.”

Bessie shrieked. She tried to yank back on his hand again, but it was clear she was doing nothing more than trying his patience.

“This realm is not where you belong. It has fed you poisonous lies. Now return with me.”

“I’m not your bride. I don’t even know who the hell you are.”

“We have already gone over this.”

“Why aren’t you a vampire? I thought you were a vampire,” she spluttered desperately. She felt like an idiot. She’d already had the premonition that this could go south. It was too convenient. Some rich prince appears just as the Ghost King tries to hunt her down? Yeah, right.

But why had she convinced herself that it couldn't possibly be Kane just because he wasn't a vampire? Had anyone ever actually told her that the Ghost King was a vampire? Or was it just a preconceived notion she'd come to on her own, one probably based on her bias towards Xavier? Now it was one that could cost her everything.

"I'm a sorcerer, Bessie. Quite similar to you, in fact. We are two of a kind. Now—"

Now, indeed.

Bessie had to act now.

He had her right hand. That left her left open. But as Arlington had already said, in order to activate her tattoo, she had to grab it and push magic into it. But with one of her hands taken—

It didn't matter. Kane wasn't going to give her that opportunity. He strode toward the window behind the interview, of all places.

Bessie tried to stop him. "What are you doing?"

"The quickest way to get to the shadow realm is down. Don't worry. I won't drop you." He burst through the window.

God knows what they saw in the interview. He broke through the glass with charges of magic. As the frame shattered out everywhere, it covered the floor. But Charlie didn't move – he couldn't – and the two shadows continuing the inane interview didn't bat an eyelid, either.

Bessie screamed at the top of her lungs. She doubted anyone would have heard. The tearoom was too high above the rest of the hotel, and as for the interview, presumably Kane had already spelled Charlie's camera to only pick up what he wanted.

In other words, Kane was in complete control.

As he pulled her out onto the balcony, the wind got her. It slammed into her hair, pulling it out of her bun. As it snapped and sliced around her face, he moved in close.

Before she could stop him, he grabbed her, pulled her up, then jumped right off the side of the building.

Bessie screeched and grabbed at his shoulders.

She didn't want to hug him. But she really, really didn't want to die.

A sick smile spread his lips. He enjoyed this, even as the wind buffeted against them, howling like a pack of wolves.

Bessie couldn't pay attention to the details of the hotel as it flashed past her. But one thing stuck out. The shadows loomed.

Just as they reached the ground, dark energy spilled out from underneath Kane, struck the pavement, and changed it.

Bessie didn't feel herself crossing the threshold this time. It happened in a bang.

As her hair flopped back against her face and she drew slack in Kane's grip, she limply turned.

And there she saw the ghost realm. It spread out before her. She watched the shadows encompass Parlor City, erasing what she knew and replacing it with the realm she originally belonged to. And the realm she would never escape from again.

KANE LAUGHED ONCE. A DEEP CHUCKLE. ONE THAT STARTED IN HIS stomach, rose to his throat, then rushed back down again. He repositioned his grip on her, and he marched forward.

At first they were alone – then shadows started to pick themselves up out of the cracks in the pavement. They all cried the same thing. “The king’s back. And so is his bride.”

Bessie had to fight.

She couldn’t grab her tattoo. Kane still had her by the hand.

That meant he knew about the tattoo, right? That meant the only way she could get out of here was now blocked off from her.

Bessie felt like she was in a parade. The various shadow creatures lined the streets. Xavier might have told her that, fundamentally, they weren’t bad. But she couldn’t help detest them as they screamed at her. The Ghost King’s bride. The Ghost King’s frigging bride.

Tears started to rush down Bessie’s cheeks, and she squeezed her eyes closed.

It didn’t matter.

Nothing stopped. As the Ghost King angled through the streets, she could tell where he was taking her. The tension changed in his body, his

muscles contracting, his gaze locking forward like a laser. And there, she saw the tower.

She had to admit it took her breath away. A lot more now that she was closer.

As they walked down a large wide street toward it, she saw it sat atop this massive carved stone plinth, almost as if it was the base of a grand pyramid. And around it were various statues. The gargoyles guarded the various levels of the tower, but below stood stone lions and tigers.

It should have been over the top. But considering the shadows that clung to everything and the fact the dark sun hung in the air, it was perfect, as if every single detail had been carved out by her deepest nightmares.

The sense she got as she approached it... it was like returning home, but in that way one returns home when they die. It was a contraction, not an expansion. It was a sense of being stifled, not being protected. A sense that once you went inside, you would not get out again.

With nothing else to clutch hold of, Bessie still grabbed Kane's collar. Her fingers sank in against the expensive fabric of his suit.

He chuckled once when they reached the base of the stairs that led up to the first floor. There were no doors. Instead, these carved intricate pillars led into an open atrium area. It was covered in shadows. She could only just glimpse a little of what lay within. She thought she heard the trickle of water, almost as if there was some large water feature or a pool.

She was almost certain she heard the clink of claws. But that was it. For now.

He looked at her once. "Our marriage will be soon. Then the sky will be yours, and the land will be mine." His lips curled around that promise. And his eyes alighted with true greed.

"The sky—"

"You have finally returned home, Bessie. It's time."

He started to walk up the stairs.

Bessie's eyes opened wide. Something started in her stomach and scissored up to her back. It was like lightning was discharging in her heart. She could tell you she'd never felt anything like it, but she was certain no one in existence had ever experienced anything akin to this. If they had, they would've died seconds afterward. The human body wasn't built to withstand this. And the human mind should crumble at the mere suggestion. But Bessie had to hold on.

She found herself unconsciously clutching his collar tighter until her short nails perforated his shirt.

He didn't grumble at her that she'd have to pay for the repair bill. He only stared ahead in electric anticipation.

He reached the top of the stairs. There were two prostrate lions, their claws held up, their mouths open. They reacted at the approach of their king. Yellow black magic charged up them, racing over their fangs and settling into their eyes with sizzles.

They came to life, right there in front of Bessie.

Oh God.

"Don't worry," he said, smiling down at her, reading her mind. "They'll just be your guards for now."

Bessie had honestly thought he'd carry her forever. But now he set her down at his feet. He spread his hands and finished the spell. His two lions came to life entirely. Fire magic raced over their faces, sank into their fur, then alighted along their crackling tails.

As Bessie lay at Kane's feet, she stared over at them.

He smiled. The black sun was angled just over his shoulder. It sent dark illumination playing around his face, lighting him up, even though it was the exact opposite of what the sun should be and should do.

"Don't worry, Bessie. Your future is finally here."

YEAH, HER FUTURE WAS HERE. THE THING SHE HAD SUBCONSCIOUSLY feared her entire life would finally come to pass. But Bessie couldn't give in.

Now her hands were free, there was only one thing she could do – only one possibility she could pin her every last hope on. She grabbed her left wrist. She sank her fingers in, and she called on her magic. It started to rise.

She asked for a few crackles. She got a rush. Fire suddenly spurted out of her hand and encased her wrist.

Kane stared down at her, frowning. “There is no need to fight. There is no way to, either.”

He finished the spell. Both of his lions unstuck themselves from their stone plinths. They moved toward her, sniffing and growling.

“Understand, this is nothing more than a precaution. Until your memories have returned in full, I can't have you running around and getting into trouble.”

“Go to hell, Kane. Go to hell.” She squeezed her eyes shut. “Please. Please, come save me.”

He chuckled. “You don't need to be saved. I'm already here.”

She had never prayed before. She'd never thrown her heart so thoroughly into something as much as she did now. But as she pumped

more and more magic into her tattoo, she called on Xavier with everything she had.

If he would just come to her, she would never judge him again.

If he would just come to her now, she would let the past go.

But he had to come. *Right now.*

“Please,” she hissed, tears leaking out of her eyes. “Please come and save me.”

“There’s no need. I’m already here.” Kane reached down. He grabbed her hand. He pulled it back. And there, he saw her tattoo. His mood changed. The apparent good humor and affection – they cracked. “You—

Bessie felt a rush from somewhere. Maybe it started in her heart. Maybe it started in something deeper. But thankfully, it rose.

In what had to be her darkest moment, as the black sun behind Kane lifted higher, she felt something racing along her wrist.

She screamed.

And so did Xavier.

A transport spell opened up around her.

Kane was forced to jerk back.

Xavier Kilmer appeared just beside Bessie, down on one knee, his side pressed up against hers, his magic crackling around her back.

“You,” Kane snarled.

“You will never win,” Xavier finished his sentence. Then he shot forward. He grabbed both of the cuffs from his suit. He yanked them off, and in slices of powerful magic, they turned into daggers.

Each one of them let out these little white sparks. And as he slashed them down into Kane’s attacks, Kane was forced backward.

But Kane wasn’t alone. The lions had already come to life.

“Kill him,” Kane snarled.

The lions lurched toward Xavier’s back.

Bessie could remain here, down on her knees. She could wait for Xavier to save her.

Or she could move.

Her whole life, Bessie had always believed she never had the power to protect herself. Compared to her family, she'd been nothing but a speck of dust. But she'd been wrong about everything.

Bessie Tilly wasn't weak.

Not here, at least.

Here, where she truly belonged, she was a witch like no other. Here, where she truly belonged, she had only just started to scratch the surface of her power. And here, where she truly belonged, it was time to stretch her wings.

Just as one of the lions leaped towards Xavier, Bessie bolted to her feet. She opened her arms wide. She let magic blast out.

It struck the lion and forced it back long before it could wrap its teeth around Xavier's throat.

"I've got this, Bessie," Xavier spat back.

"No. I have." Bessie had always been jealous of her family. From her grandmother to her parents, she'd seen only their power and compared it to her lack thereof.

But nothing in this world is truly weak. Every so-called strength we have can be a weakness in another circumstance. And every weakness, ah, if you change the situation, can become your greatest power.

Her whole life, Bessie's true magic had hidden in the darkness. It had flitted through her body like distant shadows. But now, here, in the realm of real ghosts, she could finally rise.

One of the lions leaped toward Xavier again. Bessie opened her hand. She let loose. She commanded the light at the center of her soul, and it bled out.

Just as the lion almost reached Xavier's back, her attack struck it in the stomach. It went flying.

"No, you can't," Kane snarled.

Yes, yes, she could.

Bessie spun. She took the other lion on.

She didn't honestly know if Xavier had the power to defeat Kane, but she imagined he didn't. If Xavier had the force to just stride into the ghost realm and defeat the king, he would've done it before. Which meant one thing. They had to get out of here.

She reached Xavier. She let her body do what it knew needed to be done. She questioned nothing. She scooped one arm around his back. Then he spun just after he parried an attack from the Ghost King. He locked one arm around her stomach and the other around her head. A charge of magic raced down to the symbol on her wrist.

It activated the tattoo, and the next thing she knew, transport magic encased her.

The Ghost King reached toward her, his face flattening with pure fear then crumpling with anger. "Bessie—"

"Transport," Xavier screamed.

The transport spell circled around them just before Kane could break it.

Bessie and Xavier were whisked away.

Bessie arrived down on a street, in a very crowded, populated part of Parlor City – on a road filled with cars that suddenly had to skid around the abruptly appearing couple.

Bessie fell against Xavier as he staggered to his knees. He'd clearly used a lot of force during that fight, and she watched his strange ghost power splutter over his shoulders.

People had their phones out already. They knew exactly who she was and who Xavier was.

And even though Bessie knew the same, she still jolted forward. She still reached up. She still locked her arms around Xavier's shoulders in public. After the incident three years ago, she'd spent her entire life trying to avoid him. But she would never be able to avoid him again.

"It's over—" He reached up. He grabbed her shoulder tenderly. "I'm fine. He pulled her down. He looked into her eyes. It... almost felt as if he was going to kiss her. But he didn't. His lips split open. "But, Bessie," he muttered quietly, "the Ghost King will come again."

The end of Codename W Book One. This series is complete, and there are four books in total. You can pick them up today.

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Anna's Hope – she's the unluckiest witch in the city; he's the vamp who has everything. Together, they must save Marchtown and fall in love in the process.

Better off Dead – she's cursed never to die; he's the demon waiting for the chance to rip that curse from her soul and save her in the process.

Broken Witch – she's a witch with two personalities; he's her partner, and he needs her power to fix this city once and for all.

Forget Me – she can make anyone forget; he's the one person who needs to remember her before it's too late.

Forgotten Destiny – she’s a new witch with no clue; he’s the most powerful vamp in the city, and he knows exactly what she can do – for the city, and for him.

Elements of Fire – she’s the most powerful witch in the city, and he’s the most powerful man. When he inherits her, she’ll fight for him – but only to find out the truth.

Gladys the Guard – she’s an ancient fighter; he’s a soldier with the cutest smile around. Together, they must save a simple coastal village from Hell.

God Given – she’s a goddess with the power of all; he needs her before it’s too late.

Gods no More – she was thrown out of heaven by him, and now she’s here for revenge.

Grail’s Dawn – she’s a grail, a witch capable of pulling strength from another; he’s the man she’s been dreaming of all her life. When she’s thrown into his school, she must fight through the lies and intrigue or die trying.

His Light – she’s an angel; he’s a vampire. Together, they must solve every crime that comes their way without falling for each other.

His Only Hope – she’s a goddess on the run; he’s the god she’s running from. When they’re both reborn, they fall for one another again, until he remembers and the end returns for all.

Legal Rites – she’s a wise-cracking sassy witch detective; he’s an ancestral vamp with a secret. Together, they have to save the city from an ancient curse.

Magic Born – she’s on the run from the most powerful wizard family in the country; he’s one of them, but he has no clue who she is. For now. She’ll use him, and he’ll use her in turn.

My Immortal Soul – she uses her soul to fight; he’s a demon who could never forget her. Together, they have to stop the city from spiraling into

Hell.

Modern Goddess – these goddesses must find their consorts to save the day.

One More Bite – she's a rare creature who must feed on vamps to survive; he's willing to give her his blood for a price.

On the Cards – she's the most powerful magical card player in the city; he's a cop with a secret and a use for her. She's no pushover. She'll finish his job, reveal his secret, and do it all in a day.

Prince of Roses – she's a fay fighter; he's the only vamp in the city brave enough to offer her protection.

Shadow Witch – in the dark realm of death, her truth lies.

The Demon's Witch – she's a powerful witch out for revenge on a school that tormented her. Her demon master will help her. Until she falls in love with him.

The Enchanted Writes – when a diner waitress finds out she's a witch hunter, all hell breaks loose. When she finds out she's destined to marry her mortal enemy, things only get worse.

The Frozen Witch – in her veins lies the cold power of the darkest realm. He will lie to her to use it. But he will need her help soon enough.

The Last Queen – she's the most powerful piece in a real-life game of chess. Every king wants her, but does she want them?

The Witch and the Commander – when a prim witch and a handsome navy commander are thrown back in time, they'll only have each other.

Today's Exorcist – today's exorcist is tomorrow's dead meat. A sassy exorcist and a straightlaced detective who is out of his depth must fight to defeat a serial killer before it's too late.

Trial by Light – a mysterious woman with the gift to see the future and one man who can save her.

Witch's Bell – a sassy witch with a rambunctious bookstore, a mysterious detective, and a city to save.