

SOULS

INCORPORATED

JOSH CLOSS

Chapter 1

I've made mistakes before.

Big mistakes, in fact.

I gave more weight to the opinions of people who don't care about me than I gave to the opinions of the people I love, and who love me.

I tried to compartmentalize my religion and my sexuality.

I got upset about people putting pineapple on pizza.

Still working on that first one, but the other two are coming along nicely.

This mistake, though?

This one I just made, where I yelled at my now-former girlfriend for a few minutes on the phone in the bathroom of this craphole of a bar, already regretting my words as I was saying them, realizing that I was only adding more fuel to the fire burning down the bridge that was once our relationship?

This is probably my biggest one.

Maybe I should back up a step, though.

Hi.

I'm Jenn.

And I'm pretty drunk.

Nice to meet you.

I got laid off earlier today because my company is "modernizing" and doesn't need me anymore, so my friend coaxed me to come be sociable and such with her boyfriend and, hypothetically, my now-former girlfriend, hoping to help me forget that life sucks sometimes.

That was going OK until just now.

Now I'm just hoping tonight doesn't get any worse.

I walk out of the bathroom and head back to my spot at the bar, stuck in tunnel vision as I do. The large, crowded room surrounding me is a

disconcerting blur of noise and smells that my super-drunk self isn't handling too well at the moment.

"Jenn? You OK?" A comforting, familiar hand lands on my shoulder as I struggle back onto my stool. I look at her.

Oh, Steph.

Dear, sweet Steph.

Beautiful, straight Steph.

That last part is probably for the best, judging by my last phone call. Can't keep a job or a significant other.

Plus, she's too good for me anyway.

"Is Linda on her way?"

I wince. "...No. She..."

I can't hear you," she says. "It's hella loud in here."

Hey, how come she says "hella" now and I don't? We've lived here for the same amount of time.

Maybe it's because she chooses to hang out with other people once in a while.

She's right, though; the noise of the bar is bordering on intolerable. If there were a better place to get drunk quick without having to clean up the mess in the morning, we would've gone there instead.

From the dudebros in the corner yelling about whatever dudebros yell about, to the calamitous attempts at karaoke produced by the undergrads with dubious IDs, this whole place is a loud, obnoxious mess.

Well, at least my outsides match my insides.

"Jenn? What's up?"

I take a deep breath. "Linda dumped me," I say, speaking loud enough that I wouldn't have to say it again.

Steph looks dumbfounded.

"You're kidding."

"I wish I were, Phil," I say, leaning forward to talk to Steph's boyfriend. "Turns out the universe has a sense of humor, and I'm the butt of its jokes tonight. Jennda is officially over."

"And she knows you just got fired?" Steph asks.

"She said, and I quote, 'I know this is bad timing, but I just can't do this anymore.'"

"Oh my God," Steph says.

"Yeah."

“I mean, oh my God. She’s, like, the worst person,” she says, wrapping me up in a hug.

“No, she’s not...” I say, grateful for the embrace, but too caught up in my personal whirlwind of emotions to communicate that to her.

“Yes. Yes, she is. She just dumped you on what was already the worst day of your month, if not your year. That’s Grade-F Person Material right there.”

“This was coming for a long time,” I say. “Neither of us wanted to admit it, though.”

“The church thing?” Phil asks.

I nod. “And other issues. She called me stodgy.”

“‘Stodgy’?” Steph says. “There are many words I would use for you, Jenn Lewis. ‘Stodgy’ doesn’t make the top five hundred.”

“The vote is presently tied, then,” I say.

“I’m also voting against the stodgy motion, if I’m allowed,” Phil says. “I’m not, uh... I’m not the most informed voter, but if nothing else, I’d like to stay on Steph’s good side. I mean, you’re cool so far, but I want to make sure my motives are clear.”

I smile. “Your motives are valid. You two are so good together.”

“Now, Jenn...”

“No, I mean it. I’m too drunk to tell anything but the truth right now, Steph. I absolutely mean it with every fiber of my being: You two are super-cute together, and I’m very, very happy for both of you. Phil, I don’t know how perilous your dating journey has been, but Steph’s has been treacherous and riddled with asshats. The fact that you two have found each other gives me hope for the future.”

“Thanks,” Phil says. “I think.”

“You bet,” I say. “Especially since you’re driving.”

“They say bad news comes in threes, so we’re here to help fight it off,” Steph says. “Or to make it nothing more than a rotten hangover in the morning.”

“On the bright side, you’ll have plenty of time to sleep it off!”

“Not helping, Phil,” Steph says.

“Right, right,” he says.

The karaoke is reaching a fever pitch, by which I mean that I think whoever’s singing this song is suffering from a tremendous fever and should

go see a doctor immediately. I take a swig from my whiskey sour before letting my head fall onto the bar.

I close my eyes.

Yeah, I think as my cheek rests against the cool imitation wood laminate.

Yeah. This is nice.

I can almost drown out the karaoke and find my happy place.

Until I realize how many people have probably thrown up on this bar, at which point I spring back to an upright position with a groan.

“You wanna go back to our place?” Steph asks. “Somewhere with a bit less noise?”

“I don’t wanna impose,” I say, clutching my forehead.

“Given the circumstances, I’ll allow you to impose,” Steph says. “I mean, it’s not like there’s any reason to stay here, right? I don’t know if you’re ready to jump right back into a relationship, but this isn’t where I’d go fishing, that’s for damn sure.”

I sigh as I look around the bar. She’s right, of course. This scene is rough. Obnoxious dudebros... Fortysomething guy still here from trivia reading a book... Lady in a cat sweater that may or may not be ironic (No hate for cat sweaters, but I’m allergic to the real thing, so that’d be a non-starter)... Hot guy in an exceptional suit staring at me as I look over at him... Sorority sisters complimenting each other on their subpar karaoke chops...

Hold up.

Hot guy is sitting alone at a table, still staring at me. Smiling.

I give him a little nod.

He waves in response.

Was he here five minutes ago?

“...Gimme a sec,” I say to Steph before sliding off my stool and crossing to him, whiskey sour in hand. As I walk over, the other sounds of the bar fade away. “This seat taken?”

“It’s yours,” he says with an elegant gesture towards the empty chair. Dayum. That suit looks hand-made. He looks surprised that I came over, but not unhappy.

“I... You look nice,” I say, doing about as well I usually do at flirting. “I’m Jenn.”

He keeps smiling, his eyes locked with mine.

Somehow, I am *nailing* this.

I'm also somehow rebounding way faster than I usually do, but that might be the booze.

"You have problems," he says, swirling the glass of whiskey in his hand. "I might be able to help with that."

I chuckle. "Yeah? You in the romance business, or the... the business business?" I ask as I sit down.

"Neither," he says, setting down his glass, "and, as the need arises, both."

Ah, great. A cryptic boy. I knew there had to be a downside.

On the other hand, his hair is fantastic.

"You're facing a... Well, a trial."

"You could call it that," I say, sipping my whiskey sour. "A couple of 'em, actually."

He smiles. "I'm only aware of the one. You know what I am referring to, then?"

I give him a quizzical look. "I... think so?"

"The Thekron case," he says. "I think it could be spun into a libel case in your favor, to be honest. The whole thing is disastrously damaging to your reputation if untrue, and judging by your demeanor thus far—"

"Whoa, hold on," I say. "We are, I now see, not on the same page whatsoever. Can we start from the beginning?"

He blinks. "Ah. Well. Yes, of course. There's a spirit by the name of Thekron accusing you of sabotaging his operations at a local church. Based on what I knew, I thought that you speaking your mind was a solid defense, but now that I know you were clueless at the time, this might be..."

"What is this?" I ask. "Like, I know I'm drunk, but things usually make more sense than this to drunk-me."

He frowns. "But... you can see me."

"Yes," I say.

"Like, you initiated this encounter, not me."

"Again, yes."

"...And you don't know what I'm talking about?"

"Not so much, no," I say. "Dude, I'm in a very bad mental space right now. And I'm also drunk, but even then I'm usually somewhat able to hold on a normal conversation. Today, not so much. Whatever you have to say, I want the 'Explain it to a Five-Year-Old' version."

“...Right,” he says. “So... The basics. I’m not alive. Not physically. I’m the manifestation of a soul — technically *souls* if you want to count the whole package, but we’ll get to that later — and I’m here to get you the help you need.

“You, for some reason, are now aware of... Us. Dead people with enough power to manifest ourselves in the mortal realm. And also us outside of it, but unless you travel there, that won’t be an issue.

“Anyway. The fact that you’re mortal and aware of us means that you now have access to a lot of different resources you didn’t have before. It also means you’ll have a lot more problems than you had before.

“And I’m also attracted to you in a way that no mortal has attracted me in a very long time.”

I stare at him, looking for any sign of a smirk or chuckle. It never appears.

I mean, I’m flattered, but this is all very, very weird.

“...Does that mean I’m dead?” I say.

“Not at all,” he says. “You are, most certainly, very much alive.”

“But you’re, like, a ghost?” I say.

“Not exactly,” he says. “Ghosts are usually restless spirits seeking out their final piece of vengeance or some such business before leaving the mortal plane, right? Think of me as a soul without a body, if that helps. If it doesn’t... Just think of me as another person. Who isn’t alive. Who happens to be invisible to most of your friends. And who, at the moment, can’t actually drink this glass of whiskey,” he adds, sliding it across the table to me.

I look him over, sizing up his cool demeanor that I once found attractive and currently find creepy. “...I know better than to take drinks from strange men in bars,” I say. “Especially ones that are hitting on me.”

“Ah, yes, of course,” he says. “An admirable opinion to have.” He leaves the glass in front of me, though.

“So you’re magical?”

“To put it in a certain parlance, yes, that’s a good way to consider it,” he says. “I have access to powers that could flip the mortal world on its head.”

“And why don’t you use them?” I ask. “Y’know, cause some mischief.”

“I wouldn’t want to get in trouble,” he says.

“Get in trouble? Who would you get in trouble with?”

“Equinox.” He says it as if I should know what the heck that means.

“What’s Equinox?” I ask.

“You really are clueless, aren’t you?” he says factually. Maybe even a little confused. “Equinox is the realm where all souls receive judgment for their crimes committed against other souls. And speaking of Equinox and Thekron...”

“Oh yeah, the weird name you mentioned earlier,” I say.

“There’s a case against you,” he says. “Thekron says you disrupted his business and wants to claim your soul as payment.”

“What?”

“Don’t worry, it’s not gonna happen,” he says. “They just start with that to try and scare mortals like you. But I think you’re gonna come out of this raking in power hand over fist, especially now that I know you were unaware of us before now. Damn, how did they screw this up so badly...?”

“Hold on,” I say. “What kind of power are you talking about? Like, money? Do souls even need money?”

“No no no,” he says. “Although money’s not a bad analogy. See, in the spiritual realms...”

Before he can continue, we’re interrupted by an unwelcome guest.

His body spray hits me before I see or hear him.

“Sup, babe?” he says, walking up behind me and placing a hand on my shoulder.

Ugh. One of the dudebros.

“What,” I say, glaring at him. Now that I’m looking at him, I can confirm that, as I suspected, everything about him is the worst. From his pseudo-hipster wardrobe to his cocky smile, I want to set every part of him on fire.

“I just saw you sitting over here, and I thought you were so beautiful. I knew I’d regret it for the rest of my life if I didn’t talk to you, so...”

“OK, stop right there,” I say, lifting his hand off of my shoulder. “This isn’t how you talk to human beings. You don’t put people in a position where saying ‘no’ feels like you’re irrevocably obliterating their deepest hopes and dreams. If you want to have a real conversation and get to know each other, we can have a real conversation and get to know each other, but judging by all of... *this*,” I say, gesturing to his whole person, “I don’t think we’re going to get anywhere. So go back to hanging out with your bros until you have something better for me than a lame pick-up line.”

I get loquacious when I'm drunk. And snarky.

"OK, OK, whatever," he says, backing away. "You don't deserve me anyway. Bitch."

I'm so very tempted to get up and drag his butt to the ground, and not in a sexy way.

"With enough power," my new friend says, "you could make sure that never happens again."

I look back at him. "...Really?"

"Really. You could obliterate him into next week, if you wanted."

I wince. "I wouldn't want to hurt him," I say. "Well, not... permanently."

"There are less aggressive ways to impose your will as well," he says. "But that might be a better discussion for when you're less intoxicated."

"For sure," I say. "So what did you want from me?"

"I merely wish to offer you the services of my firm in your upcoming trial," he says, reaching into his jacket and pulling out a business card and handing it to me. "I promise you, there's no better group in the known realms."

"So there are unknown realms?" I ask as I take the card.

He smiles. "Again. Better saved for when you're ready for a more in-depth conversation."

I look down at the card. "*'Ratchet and Elmtree: The Soul-ution For All Your Legal Supernatural Problems,'*" I read. "I see puns are a transcendent art form."

"That one wasn't my idea," he says.

"So, are you Ratchet or Elmtree?"

"Oh, neither. I'm just a representative."

"...A representative?"

"'Ambulance chaser' might be a better term if you wanted to be negative about it. And if supernatural ambulances were a thing," he says. "I spot people in trouble and try to get them the help they need."

"And that's what you're doing with your afterlife?"

He smiles. "Beats my old job."

My eyebrows shoot up. "There's a story there, I'll bet."

"Oh, there surely is. But, again..."

"When I'm not super-drunk would be the better time for the thing," I say.

“Exactly. I think.”

“Cool cool,” I say, looking over the card again. “...There’s no address here.”

“It’s not exactly at an address,” he says. “Not one you could find on any map around here, at least.”

“So what’s the point of the card?”

He frowns. “...I’m not sure.”

I shake my head. “I... OK. Great. So. Is that it?”

“I think so,” he says, rising to his feet. “For the moment, at least. I’ll be in touch.”

I nod. “So... What do I do now?”

“Go get some sleep,” he says. “Or drink some more. It’s your life, bright eyes.”

With that, he disappears with a small “POP” sound, leaving me staring at empty air.

...The hell just happened?

I look at the untouched glass of whiskey he left on the table and compare it with the empty glass in my hand.

Well, either this is all a dream, or he’s probably at least trustworthy enough that I can drink this, I think to myself as I pick it up and take a sip.

Ahh. High-quality stuff, that.

“So, uh...” I say, walking back over to Steph and Phil.

“What were you doing over there?” Steph asks. “Talking to yourself?”

“We couldn’t hear you over the music,” Phil says.

“I was just... yeah,” I say. “Working some things out.”

Steph smiles. “You feel better?”

“...Getting there, hopefully,” I say. “Hey, what do you think of this?” I hand her the card.

She turns it over. “Weird names,” she says. “And a weird pun. Where’s the address? Like, what is this?”

“I... Never mind,” I say, taking it back and putting it in my pocket.

“Wanna go home?”

“Please and thank you,” I say, finishing the whiskey in two gulps. “I just need to close out my tab.”

“Already done,” Steph says.

“Seriously? You’re the best, Steph,” I say.

“Happy to do it any time you’re fired and dumped on the same day,” she says. “C’mon, let’s bounce.”

“Cool,” I say.

As we walk out, I take one more look at the empty table and wonder.

Chapter 2

Half-reclining in the backseat of Phil's sedan, I am not, thank God, feeling nauseous.

Very drunk, yes, but it's not like I'm about to spill my guts all over the floorboards.

Given everything else that's happened today, I'm counting that as a win.

The streetlights overhead pass in and out of my field of view in a hypnotic rhythm, almost lulling me to sleep. Most of the city's asleep; after all, most people have to get up and go to work tomorrow.

"I know a guy that works at one of the big banks downtown," Phil says. "Might be able to get you a job there. That's kinda like what you did, right?"

"Uh-huh," I say, feigning attention. Based on whatever that conversation I had at the bar was, finding work in the mortal realms might not be on the top of my priority list.

What was that conversation, anyway?

That guy — why didn't I ask for his name? — was making things appear and disappear, including himself, so it wasn't completely fake. Either that, or I'm way drunker than I think I am. But no, I'm pretty sure there was some real stuff happening there.

I don't know if it was scarier if it was all in my head or if it was all real.

"Hey, Steph?" I say as Phil makes the turn onto my street.

"Yeah, Jenn?"

"...How come we're still friends?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" she asks, turning around to face me.

“I mean, you’re the only person outside of my family from high school that still talks to me. Pretty much the only person from college, too. I mean, except for on Facebook when it’s my birthday or whatever, but that doesn’t count. How come we stuck together?”

“You pulled my butt through stats in undergrad,” she says. “I’ll never be able to repay that debt.”

“That’s all? I mean, that was nine years ago.”

“You’re also useful for when I want to beat somebody at Mario Kart...”

“C’mon, Steph, give me something. With everyone else in the world kicking me in the metaphorical gut today, I need you to feed my suffering, bruised ego.”

Steph sighs, then smiles as we pull up to my apartment, awkwardly reaching into the backseat to place a steady hand on my shoulder.

“Jenn Lewis. You are a fiercely loyal human being, sometimes to a fault, who refuses to accept mediocrity in anyone or anything. Your genius and kindness inspire me to be a better person every day. I guess most people just can’t handle how awesome you are.”

I laugh as I fumble for the handle. “I don’t deserve you,” I say. “Thanks for the ride, Phil.”

“Anytime,” he says. “Especially after you’ve had the suckiest day ever, but... Yeah. Anytime.”

“I guess we’re skipping the gym tomorrow?” Steph says.

“Yes, please,” I say. “We’ll pick it up when I’m not horrifically hungover. Which I’m definitely gonna be.”

“For sure,” Steph says. “I’ll text you.”

I exit the car and, after checking that I have all of my belongings, start my journey across the sidewalk to my building’s lobby. Normally this wouldn’t be an issue but, well, whiskey.

“You want some help?” Steph asks from her rolled-down window.

“Nah, I’m good,” I say. I appreciate her offer, but I need time by myself to think.

“You sure? You look a bit... Wobbly.”

I wave her off. “Worst-case scenario, I spend the night here!”

She laughs. “That’s another thing! Your sense of humor!”

With that, I stumble to the front door. They wait until I’m inside before driving off, because they’re wonderful human beings who care about my safety and well-being. I step inside and walk the familiar path to the

elevators, pressing the call button I can find by memory as much as by vision.

With the button illuminated, I savor this moment of peace. I tap my feet against the dirty linoleum floors, keeping a certain amount of movement going as I sway back and forth to keep from falling over. My ears are filled by the buzzing fluorescents in the Pepsi machine, complete with fifteen-year-old artwork on the front. What do they do with my rent check, anyway?

I sniff the air. Something's...

“Hey, babe.”

A familiar voice.

Oh, God. Now I'm feeling nauseous.

“What the hell?” I say, turning to confront the dudebro. “Did you follow me to my apartment?”

“Whoa, I'm just waiting for the elevator,” he says. “I live in this building too. Small world, huh?”

Yeah, what are the odds two people that went to the same bar five minutes from here live in the same apartment? Oh, right, they're actually pretty good. Idiot.

“Can't we just have a conversation?” he says.

“...Fine,” I say, stepping away from his overcrowding position to reestablish my bubble. I consider taking the stairs, but in my present condition, there's a strong chance I would reach my floor and then tumble down the whole staircase again, landing on my funny bone every single time I hit the ground.

In other words, that option lost out by the slimmest of margins.

He doesn't say anything.

He's just looking at me. No, not at me. At my body.

I feel a million shudders run all through my person.

Am I really about to get on an elevator with this guy? Alone?

Why didn't I take Steph's offer?

“So, conversation,” he says. “What do you do? For work?”

“I just got laid off, actually,” I say. “A few hours ago. Without warning. But thanks for bringing it up.”

“Oh,” he says. “I'm kinda... in between positions, too. Starting a new thing.”

Of course you are. I bet you want me to invest in your startup or whatever.

The awkward silence returns.

Good.

Thud.

Thud?

I feel something hit me in the chest and enter me. I take in a sharp breath and wince, expecting to look down and see a gruesome wound based on the impact. There's no blood, though; not even a hole in my shirt. Still, whatever it was, I feel it inside me.

"Whoa, you OK?" he says, for once acting almost like a human being.

Before I can respond, every muscle in my body tenses, now racking my body with pain. If I could, I would scream, but my whole being is inaccessible to me. A second later, I go completely numb; it's a relief from the pain, but still disconcerting. I enter a fetal position, thankfully falling in such a way that my head doesn't smack against the floor.

I hear a million voices in my head, all speaking at once, all saying different things. It also feels like something inside me is trying to control them, and they're slowly being silenced.

As this happens, I regain sensation in my body and I feel my muscles change. The change is painful, but not as bad as the mind-blasting shock I felt a few seconds ago. My muscles become both stronger and lighter; I feel like I'm being pumped full of adamantium, and just slightly less painful than the searing pain that goes with hot metal flowing into my veins. It feels terrible, but it's the kind of pain that comes from a hard workout times a billion. I'm filled with a new, surging energy that feels like a runner's high after a marathon of marathons.

And if this doesn't have something to do with that little encounter I had a few minutes ago at the bar, then I officially have the weirdest luck in the history of the universe.

The voices fade, and so does the pain.

The elevator door dings and slides open.

"Do you need me to call 911, or..."

I look up at the dudebro. As he looks at me in this state, his face shows something like compassion. It's not quite that, but for just a moment, I could believe that he's human.

Maybe I was too quick to judgment.

“...No,” I say, composing myself as I stand up and dust off my clothes, taking a few breaths to steady myself. “Thanks, though. Don’t worry. I’m feeling just fine.”

“OK,” he says. “Good. So, should we get on the elevator, or...”

“Yeah,” I say, smiling as we step into the small, enclosed space.

This will be the test, I guess. If he acts first, he has it coming, right?

On my way in, I press the button for the sixth floor and take a position in the middle of the elevator, giving him room to do whatever he wants. I notice that the button almost felt non-existent under my finger; my strength is going to take some reining in, it seems.

I watch him press the button for the seventh floor and grin. “Hey, looks like I’m on top,” he says, laughing at his own joke.

So he’s a twelve-year-old boy on the internet. Got it.

I mean, fine, he makes stupid jokes that aren’t even jokes. That’s annoying, but it doesn’t warrant a death sentence.

“Oh, yeah, guess you’re right,” I say, feigning amusement. “Is that your modus operandi, then?”

“Um, actually, I think you mean modus operandum,” he says circling behind me. “As in, modus operan-damn, look at your fine...”

OK, nope. He’s terrible.

I sense his intent, somehow knowing what he’s doing without looking. It’s like I’m in concert with the air around me, listening to its movements to know what’s coming.

And what’s coming is totally unacceptable.

As soon as I feel his hand contact my butt and start squeezing, I hit him with a no-look backhand slap.

I turn to grab him by the scruff of the neck, but the scruff’s not there.

Why is the scruff not there?

My answer comes soon enough.

I feel the wind blow through my hair as his body rushes to the back of the elevator car, making several loud, unpleasant sounds all at once as it hits the rear wall.

Crunch.

Crack.

Squish.

Dear Lord.

Worst Rice Krispies sound effects ever.

For a few seconds, I can't bring myself to look.

When I do look at him, I can't believe what I'm seeing.

"Please, no," I say, kneeling beside him. Blood. So much blood. Blood pouring out of several holes. And his face. Is it still even a face? How is the elevator still running with that huge dent in its side?

"No, no, no," I say. "This... How did I do this? Please don't be dead. Please, I didn't want this to happen. I..."

The elevator dings open.

I run through a billion possibilities in my mind of what to do next, most of which involve sinking into a hole in the ground and hiding forever. This is irredeemable, right?

Like, I'm going to jail forever, right?

God, please, help me.

As the elevator doors start to slide shut again, I jump up and stick my foot in the opening just as it's about to take me to his floor. In a rush, I scoop him up and carry him to my apartment, praying that nobody on my floor has a hankering for a late-night fast food run tonight.

I'm at my door. Nobody else in sight. Phew. I finagle my purse so that my fob gets close enough to the deadbolt to give the pleasant chirp, signifying I can unlock it and slide in before anyone notices. Thank God for technological advances.

I tumble into my apartment and all but drop the body on my living room/kitchen floor, more out of panic than exhaustion. God, so much blood. All over me. Did I leave a trail? Please tell me I didn't leave a trail. Please make it so I didn't leave a trail. I don't know how I would not have left a trail, but I...

I watch the blood flow back into his body.

A steady stream, most of it fighting the flow of gravity, seemingly determined to re-enter this corpse.

Um.

That's not how blood usually goes, is it?

Blood is the one that usually goes with the leaving stains everywhere, right?

Blood is the one that doesn't defy entropy at every turn, I thought.

But still, I watch his blood re-enter him, wicking itself off my clothes and carpet and coming under my front door in ebbing and flowing puddles. I also hear the sound of metal and plastic being wrenched and scraping against

itself from the direction of the elevator. Was something repairing my mistakes?

As the last drop of blood returns, I see some sort of green, viscous ooze-gas seep out from between his lips and float around. I try to feel it, but my hand passes right through.

“Huh,” I say, bending down to sniff it. As I do, a sizeable amount of it flows into my nostrils.

It’s an energizing experience, like a milder version of what I felt after the mystery projectile hit me. I don’t know what it is, but it feels good; I instinctively slurp up the rest of it.

Maybe not a wise idea, all things considered; my life is already weird enough without layering on this added bit of oddity.

At this point, though, I’m too far gone to make that kind of judgment. I’m physically, mentally, and spiritually exhausted.

To the best of my ability in my current state, I take stock of my situation; I have a dead body in my living room, with all the blood returned to its body; my victim slain by my enormous new otherworldly power, and I have now consumed some nebulous blob that was inside him.

Also, I’m still very, very drunk, having consumed very many amounts of alcohol over the past some hours.

Right.

Only one option at this point.

I go to the bathroom.

(Still no puking, which is a plus!)

After that, I stumble into my bedroom, kicking off my shoes as I do. Unsurprisingly, by the time my face hits the pillow, I’m out.

Chapter 3

My entire universe as I wake up is a wad of fabric pressed up against the face.

Why is there a wad of fabric pressing up against my face?

I realize that my hands are keeping it there, so I lift it up.

Ow. Sunlight. Bright. Painful. No no no.

I put the wad of fabric back. Yes, wad of fabric. Much better. Good wad of fabric. Wad of fabric is my friend. “Wad of Fabric” would be a pretty good band name. “Wad of Fabric” used to be good, but then they went commercial, and...

What the fabric am I talking about?

What happened last night?

I realizing I’m still wearing my clothes, which is already a bad sign. Memories of yesterday start coming in. I got fired. Cool. I got drunk. Actually cool, given the circumstances. I broke up with my girlfriend. Can’t even sarcastically say cool to that one. I...

I fumble in my pockets with one hand, still holding the wad of fabric against my face. The first thing I find is my phone which, as I squint out from behind the shelter of my woven friend, I can see is now dead and needs to be recharged. I fumble it onto my nightstand on the auto-charging dock, which is now proving to be a value buy at twice the price as I set my phone on it without needing to fumble with any cords.

The next thing I find in my pockets is a business card.

So that part wasn’t all a dream.

“...What the hell even happened to me?” I say as I start to sit up.

“A lot, it seems,” a familiar voice says.

I yelp, wincing as I do. Sitting on my dresser is the hot guy from last night, now looking roughly 40% more demonic.

“How’d you get in!?” I say, once again wincing.

“C’mom, Jenn,” he says, pointing at his generally-demonic-looking self. “I’ve got powers. If I could disappear last night, I can appear here this morning.”

“...Fair enough,” I say, settling into a softer tone. (My hangover thanks me for it.)

“I love what you’ve done with this space,” he says, looking around. “The floral theme could be gaudy or old-fashioned, but you’ve done it so tastefully that it’s fresh and modern.” I can’t tell if he’s being a sarcastic jerk or if he actually likes it. I think it’s the latter, but I don’t know him well enough to distinguish between the two.

“You’ve worked on your look too, I see,” I say, taking in his new form, horns and all.

“Yeah, this look takes a bit less energy to maintain than the one you saw last night,” he says, sliding off my dresser and taking a seat in the chair at my computer desk. “I’ll disguise myself a bit better if we go out in public, though. Maybe even go corporeal.”

“Out in public?” I ask. “We might be going somewhere... together?”

“Oh, yes,” he says. “I’m going to be sticking close by you from now on, Jenn. A little bit of research has determined that you might be a highly valuable asset.”

“Cool,” I say, wiping some drool off my cheek. “Anything you can do about this hangover?”

“Afraid not,” he says. “Alcohol is immune to our powers. Works as a bit of a dampening field, actually; sometimes very useful. We’re still trying to figure out how Jesus managed that water-into-wine business.”

“So now I get to talk to you hungover and disheveled instead of drunk and in shock.”

“You’re probably still in shock,” he says. “Just for different reasons. I mean, if I’d just learned that there’s these mysterious spiritual realms all around you, I’d be thrown off my game.”

“...Honestly, that’s not the thing that’s getting me,” I say. “I mean, I have read a book before. I’m a bit surprised to find out it’s real, but airplanes fly and I can talk to someone halfway around the world with a device that fits in my pocket, so I figured it was a matter of time before we found out that some honest-to-goodness magic was going on.”

“Fair enough,” he says. “So what is the thing that’s getting you?”

“Why I could see you,” I say. “Like, not why people can see y’all in general. Why I, Jenn Lewis of middle-of-nowhere, Nebraska, can see the supernatural realm. I know you said something about a trial I’m in or whatever, but that doesn’t explain why I can see you. Like, even you said that was weird.”

“I did,” he says. “And... I don’t know. There’s surely an explanation, but I don’t know what it is.”

“Well, that’s no use,” I say.

“I do know two things, though,” he says, now leaning towards me.

He looks at me expectantly.

“...Am I supposed to guess what they are?”

“It would be nice.”

“OK,” I say. “What two things do you know... Hey, what is your name?”

He blinks. “I didn’t say last night? I could’ve sworn I said last night. I guess I... Anyway. Lethanos. But you can call me Lee.”

“...Lee?” I say, staring at him.

“Yes,” he says, returning my stare. There’s something hopeful in his eyes.

I don’t think he realizes why I’m staring at him.

“...Our ship name’s gonna be ‘LeeJenn,’” I say. “Like the bible demon. Crap, and it slides right off the tongue, too!”

“I... Ah,” he says, flustered for the first time since we met. “That is... Well, is that a bad thing?”

“I don’t know,” I say. “I mean, I’m not fundamentally opposed to you, and you haven’t tried to grope me yet, so... Wait, why did I say that?”

Did somebody try to grope me last night?

“You were going to ask me something,” Lee says.

“Right!” I say. “Lethanos. Lee. Old pal. What two things do you know?”

“Well, now the second one’s gonna be kinda awkward, but... The first one is that I know you have a certain quality that you’ll need in spades to get through what’s coming.”

“Hope?”

“Desperation.”

I think about correcting him, but he’s right. Even before the job loss and the break-up, I was in a tailspin. Maybe whatever this trial is all about will help me pull out of it.

And maybe my mom will stop trying to make the turducken a thing again at Thanksgiving. But the probability of either of those coming true is...

“So what’s the second thing?” I ask.

“The second thing is... I know your eyes are beautiful.”

This time, I’m the one that’s flustered.

“Uh... Excuse me?” I say.

“There’s something about you, Jenn. I know it sounds like a crappy pick-up line, but there’s something enchanting about you. I haven’t met anyone in all the realms I’ve been so captivated by since...”

Something shifts in his complexion. He starts to look a little sad, I think. He’s not letting it show too much, though.

“In all the what now?” I say, shifting topics as best I can.

“Oh, the realms?” he says. “The nontrivially distinct versions of this universe that we have ascertained are safe enough for us to visit? ...Oh, right, you’re still on mortal terminology. Hey, I can just show you this to get you caught up!”

With that, he summons a screen out of nowhere and hangs it mid-air. The screen comes to life, and a cheery fanfare from unseen speakers underscores a title card reading “THE SUPERNATURAL REALM AND YOU,” filling the screen.

When was this made, the ‘60s?

Like, maybe the 1860s?

(Don’t at me, I know there weren’t movies in the 1860s.)

“Hello,” a suited man I don’t know says as his image crossfades with the title card. “If you’re watching this video, you’ve recently become aware of the supernatural realm. If it because you have recently died, my condolences! However, you are one of only a few individuals who have reached this level of awareness, so congratulations for making it to this point. If you are still alive, then even greater congratulations are in order! In either case, you will benefit greatly from this video.”

“How long is this?” I ask.

“Fifty-five minutes,” he says.

“Are you kidding me?”

“You want the condensed version?”

“Dude, I’m hungover and in a very bad mental space right now,” I say, standing up. “Can I get a shower before we do this? And maybe we can get some breakfast? I’m feeling gross and ravenous, in that order.”

“Sure thing,” he says dismissing the screen. “I’ll wait out here.”

I eye him suspiciously. “You promise no peeking?”

He smiles. “Demon-looking soul’s honor,” he says, holding up his right hand.

I shrug. “Good enough,” I say, pulling some clothes from my dresser. The drawers feel weirdly light under my hands; did I, like, pump weights after drinking last night? “You wanna get on my computer? Catch up on the latest games?”

“I wouldn’t even know where to begin,” he says. “No need to entertain me; I’ve been around for centuries. A few minutes is no inconvenience.”

“OK, OK,” I say, heading for my bathroom. “Give me a shout if you need anything.”

I close the door behind me and consider locking the door, but I know he could get in if he wanted to either way.

But... I mean, he seems fine, right? Not great, but better than...

Dammit, who do I keep comparing him to?

Chapter 4

My shower is warm and invigorating, as usual (one of the few positive aspects of my apartment), but my head is going in too many directions for it to do much in terms of calming me down. Even now, I feel this new strength pulsing through me, presumably a result of this new awareness; I treat every shampoo bottle and faucet with the utmost delicacy to avoid shattering them into a million pieces. After a few minutes of testing it, though, I think I'm starting to get the hang of it.

I didn't hurt anyone coming in last night, did I? I can't remember anything after I got out of the car.

As I'm drying off, I hear a knock at my bathroom door.

"Are you decent?"

"Not yet," I say. "And if you come in, I'll smack you three realms over."

"Naturally," he says. "Wouldn't dream of it. Just had a question for you."

"Ask it, then."

"No, no," he says. "Go ahead and finish getting dressed; I'm in no rush. I'm not the mortal around here, after all."

"...I keep almost mistaking you for a gentleman, you know."

"A common error. We'll work on avoiding that in the future."

Ugh, why am I flirting with him?

Oh, right, because he's super-hot.

...And no, that wasn't a demon pun.

I finish my post-shower ritual and open the door. When I do, Lee is once again seated on my dresser.

"You like it up there, don't you?" I say.

"It gives me a feeling of power," he says, looking me in the eyes.

"And it gives you a place to say cryptic crap like that."

“Precisely,” he says.

“So, hey, question,” I say. “You said you had one. For me.”

“Yes,” he says. “If you had to pick one thing that drives you, what would it be?”

“...That’s your question?”

“It’s an important one,” he says. “From now on, you need to think with a long-term vision for everything. Your life expectancy has shifted from roughly another twenty thousand days to... Well, a lot more. Probably infinite. We’re not a hundred percent sure, to be honest.”

“Oh yeah, hey, have y’all figured out religion and stuff?” I ask. “Because that’d be nice to have settled.”

“Not really,” he says. “I mean, obviously, the ‘everyone goes straight to heaven or hell or whatever eternal destination when they die’ business is out, and so is the notion that physical reality is all there is. But anything else in between is still fair game. The notion of reincarnation in the traditional sense is a bit iffy, but it has some merit. We don’t know if there’s a higher power; we just know that we kept on going after we died because we figured out some stuff before we died. Or because somebody decided we were necessary.”

“So... What happens to everyone else?”

“They slip,” he says.

“Slip?”

“It’s what we call it when your soul enters a realm we haven’t explored,” he says. “We’ve never had anyone return from one of those realms. It’s... It could be anything. It could be eternal paradise or it could be eternal punishment. Or it could be eternal pie. Or eternal some other word that does or doesn’t start with a P.”

“So you just don’t know,” I say.

“Exactly.”

“Do you have any theories?”

“Well, it’s only speculation, but I think that when we enter a realm and can’t get back, it’s because there are already souls like us in them. None of the realms we’ve found have any form of life in them; they’re basically empty voids. So maybe if we try to intersect with other souls, the reaction is so intense that ours instantly dissolve.”

“Again, only speculation,” he adds.

“And people have tried to go into them frequently? Or... souls have tried to go?”

“We use the terms interchangeably,” he says. “And yes, several have tried. They’ve tried tethering themselves in a familiar realm, or only sending a piece of themselves, or sending some sort of device that would automatically return after a certain period of time. Very, very rarely — I know of two instances, and both of those were the result of sheer luck — we’ll stumble upon a new realm that’s safe for our souls to travel to and from. Generally, though, they’re lost forever.”

“A piece of themselves?”

“OK, you’ve asked plenty of questions, and still haven’t answered mine,” he says. “One thing that drives you. You can change your answer in fifteen minutes if you want. Just give me a starting point.”

“Right now?” I say. “My stomach. I’m starving.”

“Fair enough,” he says. “We can solve that one. You know any good places to eat around here?”

“Oh, heck yes,” I say, perking up. “Mickey’s! I can go to Mickey’s any time I want, now that I’m jobless! And also a part of the immortal realm or something!”

“You’ll still have to pay,” he says.

“What.”

“We’ll get into that later. For now, lead on to Mickey’s.”

“Right,” I say, grabbing my purse. “You said you’re corporeal now, right? So, like, other people could see you?”

“Ah, thanks for the reminder,” he says, shifting his appearance to match what he looked like last night. “This form makes it easier for me to deal with any dangers you might encounter.”

“What kind of dangers?” I ask as I open my bedroom door.

And I look at the floor.

Ha ha, hey, guess what I forgot all about?

As I step into my living room/kitchen, I rediscover the dudebro’s corpse lying on the carpet.

“...Oh my God,” I say as the memories from last night start popping back into place.

“You killed a guy?” Lee says.

“I mean... I didn’t mean to, but...” I say, my heart beating so hard.

“This... might cause problems with your trial,” he says. “Wait, hold on.”

He places two fingers on my forehead.

“...Um?”

“Oh, yep,” he says. “He’s in here. He’s confused, but he’s in here. Along with some pretty weird stuff, but...”

“What?” I say.

“All the alcohol was clouding him over, but his soul is in you. What do you think you breathed in last night?”

...Wait, the creepy dudebro is...

“Hey, come on now,” a regrettably-familiar voice says. “Stop it with the biased slander of my good reputation!”

“You’re reading my thoughts!?” I say.

“With the right training, I could change that,” Lee says.

“Really?” I say.

“But not before you eat. You’re probably about to topple over if you’re just now dealing with this amount of power.”

“...Fine,” I say. “Guess I’ll deal with this unwanted narrator.”

“Aren’t you going to even ask me what my name is?” Dudebro says.

“Fine. Sure. What’s your name, Dudebro.”

“...It’s Brody.”

I wince.

“Are you kidding me?”

“What? I can’t help it if it’s my name.”

“Look, I didn’t mean to kill you. ...Kinda. Lee, is there any way we could just give this guy back his body and forget this ever happened?” I say. “Somehow, I feel a little guilty about killing him.”

“Same story; you gotta eat first,” Lee says, crossing to the door. “C’mon, you said you wanted Mickey’s, so we’re going to Mickey’s. His body will keep until we get back.”

“What if someone finds it, though?” I ask.

“They won’t,” Lee says.

“But—”

“They won’t. I swear it.”

I see the meaningful look in his eyes and nod. “Right. OK. Sure, let’s go.”

“Why do you have all the lyrics to ‘American Pie’ memorized?” Brody asks.

Oh, dear Lord. What even is my life.

Chapter 5

Do you have that one restaurant that you've claimed as your personal treasure?

Where they don't even hand you a menu when you walk in, and just start cooking your order?

Where the concept of having a bad meal is so improbable in your mind that you cannot even begin to process it?

For me, that's Mickey's Diner, just a few blocks away from my apartment. It is my special treasure, open twenty-four hours a day.

When I need service with a smile and my arteries clogged with love, it's my one stop shop. It gets a bit crowded due to its small size and the decor is kitschy, but hey, I like kitsch and usually don't hate people.

It's my go-to stop when I'm entertaining visitors from the supernatural realms.

Apparently.

"So you just killed him? No hesitation?" Lee says as we walk in the front door.

"Uhh... Yeah, I totally fragged him! That's how I won that round of the first-person shooter game. I totally owned him. With a... plasma rifle and stuff."

I pull him into one of the booths and, pulling him close, whisper in his ear, "Maybe talking about me killing people isn't such a great idea?"

He smiles, looking bemused. "What do you think they're gonna do to you?"

"Like... Arrest me?"

He shakes his head. "Not a problem. You're not on their level anymore, Jenn. You have the power to shape the world around you how you want."

"What do you mean?"

"So, let's say someone did know you killed our man Brody," he says.

“Which, by the way, was super lame,” Brody adds from inside me.

“You’d have a number of options. You could erase their memory; you could send them off to another dimension; you could... Well, you probably wouldn’t want to annihilate people in most situations, but it’d certainly be an option.”

“Sorry for the wait, y’all!”

Oh, thank God. Betty, my knight in greasy apron, walks up to our table, pen and pad ready to take our order. I don’t think she’s much older than me chronologically, but she feels like she’s been at this diner for as long as humanity has required sustenance.

“Why, Jenn! You’ve brought a friend in this fine mornin’!” she says.

“Call him a... colleague,” I say.

“Potential business associate,” Lee says.

“That’s the word.”

“Well, whatever the word is, what can I get y’all?” Betty says.

“You know my usual,” I say. “Plus an extra biscuit or two, please. I need a little something.”

“Why, what’s wrong?” Betty says. “Oh, were you involved with all that business? I heard about it on the radio.”

I tense up and shoot a glance at Lee. He still doesn’t look too concerned.

“You were workin’ at that big tech company that had all those layoffs, right, Jenn?”

...Well, that was a freebie.

“Y-yeah, I was part of that,” I say.

“Damn shame. I’m sure you’ll find something new soon, though! Maybe with this fine gentleman! Speakin’ of you, sir, what can I get started for you?”

“A stack of pancakes and some coffee, please,” he says.

“You want some coffee too, right, Jenn?”

“Please,” I say.

“Alright. Nothin’ on the side with those pancakes, sir?”

“Based on the stories Jenn’s told me, the pancakes and some syrup will be more than enough,” he says with a sly smile.

“Well, alright,” she says. “I’ll go get that started for y’all and get you your coffee. Sit tight, OK?”

“Of course,” I say.

As Betty walks away, I turn back to Lee. “You’re pretty slick,” I say.

“After a few centuries, you learn a few tricks,” he says.

“The pancakes *are* pretty friggin’ great, though.”

“Glad to hear it,” he says.

“So, you said last night that most souls slip away before you can catch them,” I say.

“That’s right,” Lee says.

“So how come Brody’s didn’t?”

Lee frowns. “That’s a good question. You usually have to make arrangements beforehand. Maybe he just couldn’t bear the thought of being away from you.”

“Oh, come on,” I say, wincing.

“It’s a real phenomenon,” Lee says. “Souls that can’t bear to leave something here behind stick around for as long as they can. Of course, if the other party can’t see them, then they eventually get pulled away. So hey, maybe it’s true love. Or maybe he really needs to finish watching a TV show. Something’s keeping him here.”

“And we’re gonna give him his body back after we eat?” I ask.

“That’s the plan.”

“Can’t wait,” he says.

You and me both, bub.

“I can still read your thoughts, you know,” he says.

“Oh my God,” I say, pressing the back of my head against the booth and lifting my eyes skyward. “This is unbearable.”

“Well, technically, it’s not, since you’re still bearing it, so...”

STOP. Or I will figure out how to send your soul to the deepest reaches of darkness, never to return, dudebro.

...That’s better.

I go through my texts. “*How’s ur head?*” from Steph (she’s too good to me, y’all); about a half-dozen worried “*Are you feeling OK???*” messages from Mom; a text from...

Oh, Lord.

A text from Arthur.

Of course a text from Arthur.

“*Hey! Just wanted to check in. Can’t believe they let you go! If you pick up any leads, let me know, huh? ;)*”

It wasn't enough for him to hover by my desk every time he got a break. Now he has to continue his legacy by texting me, only adding to my pain and woe.

It'd be one thing if he'd just ask me out, but he does the non-committal not-flirting-but-totally-flirting thing with me.

I don't have time for this. I shoot back a "K" and hope that settles it, at least for the moment.

"Here y'are, y'all," Betty says, setting down two mugs and a pot of coffee, along with a two tiny, adorable cups of cream.

"Bless you, Betty," I say, watching her pour my first cup and hand it to me. "May your life be long and prosperous."

"Same to you, Jenn," she says, smiling as she serves up Lee's first round. "And here's yours, sir."

"Thank you, ma'am," he says, taking the cup.

"Y'all's orders are almost done, so sit tight for a spell and enjoy."

"Thank you," I say, pouring the cream into the coffee and watching it swirl, hypnotized by the emerging amorphous forms.

Of course, my brain is too distracted to focus on even swirling creamer for too long.

"Honestly, I'm surprised how OK with this whole situation you are," Lee says, adding an amount of sugar to his mug that I would call irresponsible if he were attached to his current form as much as most of us are.

"Excuse me?" I say before taking a sip. So good.

"Well, you know, the fact that you're now... different. Radically different from everyone around you. You're adapting quite quickly to the idea."

"Do I have a choice?"

"I suppose not," he says.

"When you grow up bi in the middle of Nebraska, you get used to it," I say.

He nods. "The thing is, you're not, uh... how do I say it? You're not revelling in it," he says. "You're not pondering the various dastardly schemes you could pull off with the power, or the altruistic ones, either. Not out loud, at least. That's weird."

"There are some things that I'm sure these powers could never do," I say as I hear Betty's footsteps approaching. "...This is one of those things."

Betty walks up and sets down a beautiful platter, almost overflowing with hashbrowns, three slices of bacon, two scrambled eggs, and a basket full of biscuits with a lake-sized bowl of sausage gravy.

After she sets all that down, she places a humble stack of three pancakes with a pat of butter on top in front of Lee.

“Breakfast is served,” she says with a genuine smile. “Syrup’s over there if you need it, sir.”

“Thank you kindly,” Lee says with a smile, pretending not to be immensely jealous of your plate.

“Oh, Betty,” I say, looking up at her and taking her hand. “Betty, you’re a beautiful person, inside and out. You know that, right?”

Betty laughs. “Same to you, Jenn! Your ticket’s on me today.”

“What? No way! But I...”

“No ifs, ands, or buts,” she says. “Once you’re back in a decent job, you can pay me back if you feel like it. Holler if you need anything!”

With that, she walks away.

A perfect human being walks among us, and her name is Betty.

“See?” I say. “Can these powers or whatever make someone as nice as her?”

“Probably not,” Lee says. “We tend to be more in the exacting-justice business. Not sure covering someone else’s bill would fly.”

“And that’s why us mortals are great,” I say, unwrapping my silverware from the rolled-up napkin and getting ready to dig in.

“...Could I please have a taste of your gravy?” Lee asks. “It looks divine.”

I look up at him. He looks so damn earnest.

“You’re not just gonna take it with your powers?”

“Maybe I could learn a thing or two from you mortals,” he says.

I hand him a biscuit. “I ordered the extra one for you. Dig in.”

“Ugh, just bang each other already,” Brody says.

I close my eyes, using all of my strength to keep myself from asking Lee how to blast him to the farthest realms of reality, focusing instead on my food.

Lee wasn't kidding; I normally tear through this breakfast as it is, and today I power through it with a speed that makes me wonder how much money there is in competitive eating.

For his part, Lee is staring at me, a combination of shock and admiration on his face.

"Biscuits and gravy are my surest evidence of God's existence," I say, mopping up the last few sausage morsels with a fraction of a biscuit.

"You don't fool around with breakfast, do you?" Lee says, smiling as he makes sure that all of the fragments of his breakfast are gone. "I mean, I can't blame you. Those were some damn good pancakes."

"Breakfast is not a time for fooling around," I say, licking the stray bits of foodstuffs off my fingers. "It's a holy time."

"...Holy?"

"That's why you can have breakfast for dinner, but not dinner for breakfast," I say. "There are a few exceptions, of course. Pizza, once sanctified by the refrigerator, is an acceptable choice. A caesar salad is not now, nor will it ever be, breakfast."

"You've spent a lot of time thinking about this."

"I have flowcharts," I say, now grabbing my wallet out of my purse. "My job was pretty dang tedious."

Lee nods. "Well. Speaking of jobs. Ready to go accomplish ours?"

"Oh, yeah, we need to give what's-his-name his body back," I say, dropping three ones on the table and rising out of the booth. She might be covering my bill, but there's no way on God's green earth that I'm not gonna tip.

"Brody," he says. "My name's Brody."

"I think it was Hank?"

"That's not even close," he says.

"Maybe Russell?" Lee says, following me. Spotting Betty, he adds, "Thanks again, Betty!"

"Yes, thank you, Betty! For real!" I say.

"Don't even mention it, y'all! Take care of yourselves out there!"

Good advice, I think to myself, walking outside with an immortal being on my left side and an attempted molester inside me.

The outside air, while lacking that delightful Mickey's aroma, is fresh and clean. I'm finally un-hungover enough to enjoy the sunshine, and it feels

marvelous. As an added bonus, there's hardly anybody on the sidewalk since most people are already at work, so I feel like I have more room to breathe.

"You have sunny late-summer days like this where you're from, Lee?" I ask as I head back to my place. "That kind of weather where everything feels OK?"

"Well, since where I'm from is here, the answer is yes," he says.

"You're from regular ol' Earth?"

"I was mortal once," he says. "As far as we know, every soul was."

"Any chance we knew each other once upon a time?" I ask.

"Unlikely," Lee says, "unless you were around before the invention of gunpowder."

"...You're that old?" I say.

"I moisturize," he says.

"It's not that; I mean, obviously you can change your appearance and stuff, but you seem so..."

"Cool?"

"Obnoxiously modern."

"Same difference. Unlike a lot of souls, I tend to stay well-versed with the affairs of mortals such as yourself. I'm not fully versed in the latest trends, but I can fake it. I know that Mac versus PC is still kind of a thing, though now it's... Mac versus Droid?"

"Close enough," I say. "So, when do we get to training?"

"After we get Ebenezer back into his body."

"That's so obviously wrong," Brody says.

"Couldn't you just teach me how to shut him up and leave him in there?" I ask.

A look of surprise flashes across Lee's face. "That's rather diabolical coming from you."

"Well, maybe I don't want the guy that tried to grope me alive again," I say.

"...I mean, that's not an opinion that's totally without merit, but..."

Before he can continue, he's interrupted by a brilliant pillar of blue light shoots out of the sky and hits the ground in front of me, along with a solid *thud* of something hidden by the light's brilliance.

"What the..." I say.

"Oh, no," Lee says.

The light fades away, revealing a woman wearing whiter-than-white robes and flexing her wings inquisitively as she looks them over.

I see before me an angel. The kind that shows up in classical artwork and on Christmas cards, not the spooky four-headed type they actually talk about in the Bible. She looks... mostly human. For the moment, she seems to have not noticed me, and is instead looking towards my apartment building.

“Uh... hi,” I say.

She turns her attention to me, smiling as our eyes meet; hers are the truest blue I’ve ever seen. Two unreal circles of a color that would make the sky jealous on a cloudless day.

“His soul is within you, is it not?” she asks, approaching me and apparently ignoring Lee.

I blink.

“The one named Brody,” she says. “He belongs to me.”

“Yeah, he’s in here,” I say, gesturing to my general self. “I kinda accidentally... killed him last night,” I add after glancing around to make sure there weren’t any non-spiritual beings listening in. “Who are you?”

“Bad news,” Lee says.

“Ah, Lethanos,” she says, as if seeing him for the first time. “I would not have expected to see you involved in this business.”

“Bad timing on my part,” he says. “Seriously, she’s bad business, Jenn. Nothing but trouble. Please, I know I’ve jerked you around so far, but you need to run right now.”

“My name is Artene,” she says as I ignore the soul who’s given me little reason to trust him and turn my attention to the one with the eyes and such. She extends her hand to me for a handshake.

I take it. Oh my God, it’s so soft and wonderful! Woof. Calm down, Jenn. Find your cool.

...So, lemme take a time-out here to address something.

I need a second to collect myself anyway.

There’s this super-gross idea that all bi people are equally attracted to everybody and anybody. That we’re just constantly looking at people and thinking about how much we want to have sex with them.

That’s not my scene on any day but today, I promise. And if that’s your thing, more power to you! Like, don’t harass people and such, but you do you, friend!

Generally, though, the most reserved flirt in any given room I occupy. This woman standing in front of me just so happens to be the most beautiful being I've ever laid eyes on, and I can't believe I ever thought that anyone else could ever even come close. Like, Lee is OK, but my attraction to him was more of a, "Hey, this person is hot" kind of deal. With Artene here, I feel something more than that. Something that makes me feel like I know what love actually is.

On the other hand, I'm still rebounding pretty hard and just had a delicious breakfast, not to mention all of the other malarkey going on, so my judgment isn't exactly guaranteed to be error-free. Still. Thought it'd be important to clear that up.

OK, now we can keep going!

"I'm Jenn Lewis," I say, keeping it together. "Nice to meet you."

"He's telling the truth, Jenn," Brody says. "I know her too, and she's gonna give you nothing but grief. You've gotta get out of here!"

"Likewise," Artene says, smiling. "If I am not mistaken, Brody is currently presenting you with a tremendous amount of turmoil. Am I correct?"

"Regrettably, yes," I say. "Could you do anything about that?"

"Please," Lee says. "I'll teach you how to make Brody shut up! I'll even teach you how to make me shut up! Just run, right now!"

"I might be of some assistance," Artene says, brushing her hair out of her eyes and ignoring Lee. I like her style already. "My specialty is in taking care of mortals that have had problematic dealings with the spiritual realms. But tell me, is there some place more private that we could discuss this matter?"

"My apartment's just over there," I say, pointing to the building.

"Marvelous. Lead on, then?"

I do.

"...Well, the multiverse had a good run," Lee says, trailing behind.

Chapter 6

“I hope you don’t mind the, uh, mess,” I say as I unlock my apartment door to reveal Brody’s body.

“Ah! His body is still intact, then?” she says, rushing over to investigate it. “And perhaps... Yes, it should work! Hurry, there is no time to lose!”

“...You want him alive again?” I say.

“I apologize for Brody’s actions, whatever he may have done,” Artene says. “However, for reasons too complicated to explain in detail at this moment, his mortal life is essential to my plans. If you restore his life, I promise that you shall be rewarded appropriately in due time for your actions,” she says.

“Why does that sound like a trap?”

Artene smiles. “What would you like in return, then?”

What kind of question is that? I don’t know what kind of currency souls use.

...On the other hand, there is one thing that has me markedly curious.

“A date,” I say, hoping my instincts are right.

Artene’s expression shifts for the first time, though it’s a small change; the tiniest hint of a smirk appears on her face. “I normally charge far more for my presence, of course. But a date it shall be. Shall we begin?”

“Right,” I say, kneeling beside Brody’s corpse. “So, uh... What do I do?”

Artene glares at Lee. “You have not been teaching her, Lethanos? What have you been doing with your time?”

“None of your business,” Lee says.

Artene sighs and turns back to me. “All you must do is picture every part of him that is within you going out into his body,” she says. “Here, hold

your hands out like this.” With that, she takes hold of my wrists and extends them in front of me.

I nod, picturing all of the Brody bits rattling I have inside me going back into his corpse.

(As a side note, “Brody Bits” is not something I would like to see at the grocery store either now or at any point in the future, please and thank you.)

For a moment, nothing seems to happen. I try my hardest to get all of the garbage boy out of me, pushing and straining every iota I can find of him out of me and back into him.

Then, causing me to make a startled jump, some of that green ooze-gas from last night starts flowing out of my fingers and towards Brody.

“Good,” Artene says. “Keep going.”

“What happens if I stop?” I ask.

“His soul is split in two.”

“That sounds... problematic.”

“Not so bad as you might think,” she says. “Splitting a soul is sometimes useful in a pinch. Still, getting this all in one go would be preferred.”

I watch the last of Brody’s soul flow into his body. Good riddance. “Very good,” Artene says, placing a hand on his forehead. “Awake.”

Brody doesn’t move.

“...Did I do it wrong?”

“Unlikely,” Artene says. “It is probable that he requires some power to serve as a jumpstart. Here...” She produces a bottle of that same ooze-gas, this time in a lovely shade of crimson, from thin air. “A little something I had prepared for just such an occasion.”

As she uncorks it and pours it into Brody’s mouth, his eyes start to open.

Maybe this whole magic business is easier than they make it look on TV.

“I... I’m alive,” Brody says, sitting up and looking himself over. “Thank you,” he says. “Both of you. I don’t know how to put it into words how wonderful this is.”

Maybe he’s not so bad after all.

“I mean, do you know how good it feels to have a dick again?”

Ugh. Right. Back into the trash pile for you, Brody.

“You are no longer under my charge,” Artene says, straightening out her clothes as she stands back up to her full, impressive height. “Your conduct up to this point is not in line with my standards. I wish you well, but I shall not be there to aid you in the future.”

“Fine by me,” he says, pushing his way to his feet. “So I guess I just go back to being alive now? Pretend this never happened?”

“Or find another protectorate,” Artene says.

Lee gives a small cough.

“Yeeeah, no thanks,” Brody says. “I need a little time to figure out what I want to do with my life. So, uh... Later.”

With that, he walks out of my apartment.

What the hell? That’s all the gratitude I get?

“I suppose that I am your protectorate now,” Artene says.

“What’s gonna happen to Lee?” I ask.

“Oh, I’ll find another soul in need of my assistance,” he says. “And hope that my quarry isn’t bogarted by an opportunist such as Artene here.”

“You call me an opportunist; I say that I am dedicated,” Artene says.

“When you figure out the difference, let me know,” Lee says, heading for the door. “I’m gonna see if I can be ‘dedicated’ enough to get some of that Brody guy’s power. I know better than to go after Jenn any further at this point.”

“So it turns out that you can learn,” Artene says, smirking.

“Fool me one thousand times, shame on me...” Lee says, disappearing from sight.

...He gave up on me just like that?

I turn to Artene.

“So, you seem at least halfway reasonable. Could you explain to me what’s going on?”

“We do seem to have a moment to catch our breath. But perhaps this would be easier for you if I were not so... intimidating,” she says, gesturing to her wings.

“Yeah, I guess so,” I say. “Lee had a bit more of a demonic vibe going on, but the angel thing might be just as scary.”

She smiles. “Indeed. We are, paradoxically, both diametrically opposed and very similar. May I have the privacy of your restroom, though? The process is somewhat exposing.”

“Oh, yeah, go for it,” I say, pointing to the half-closed bathroom door.

“Thank you,” she says. “I will only be a moment.”

As she closes the door, she gives me the best gift anyone could give me at that moment — a bit of peace of quiet.

Like any good millennial, I use it to pull out my phone.

Ugh. Another text from Arthur.

“Hey, if you ever want to meet up for food or whatever, lemme know! I guess we both have pretty free schedules at the moment, huh? lol”

I sigh.

And then I sigh again.

And then:

“I kinda have some stuff going on in my life right now? So maybe not anytime soon??”

I mean, how do you say, “I normally wouldn’t want to spend time with you in a non-date date setting, but since I’ve had the contract on my soul passed around like a hot potato for the last twelve hours or so, I can’t even conceive of a universe where such an event would take place” without sounding like a total jagoff?

Can I use “jagoff” in everyday conversation even though I’m not from Pittsburgh?

Anyway. Those are the sorts of questions that keep me up at night.

As I’m pondering, Artene exits the bathroom and stands before me.

She.

Ah.

She...

“Is... Is something the matter?”

“Huh?” I say.

“It is just... You are staring at me quite intently, so I was wondering...”

You know how A-list celebrities always look amazing in everything they wear? Imagine that effortless look, but on someone with legitimate fashion sense. I guess when you’re conjuring clothes out of the aether, you don’t need to worry about it stretching or fading. Come to think of it, that’s probably why Lee’s suit looked so good...

“You are still staring.”

“Ahh, sorry!” I say, shaking my head briskly to jar my eyes loose. “I’m just... You’re so... Uh. You look very nice.”

And her eyes are the same impossible blue, so I can’t even look there as a safe haven!

“Thank you for saying so,” she says, smiling as she straightens the pleats of her skirt. “I tried to look somewhat contemporary. Will this be satisfactory?”

“Yes, absolutely,” I say. “Please don’t change a thing.”

“Very well,” she says before clearing her throat and taking a deep breath. “Before we get to any questions you might have, I have one of my own. An important one.”

“Shoot,” I say, expecting a high-brow question about my heart’s deepest desires again.

“Do you have any alcohol available to drink?”

Once I process the question, my face slides into a big smile. “I most certainly do,” I say, opening my booze cabinet to reveal two mostly-full bottles of whiskey and vodka, respectively, along with three clean glasses. Looking at the bottles now, I see that the labels look like they came straight off the “I Only Care About Getting Drunk” shelf. “Err... What’s your drink of choice?”

“It is not for me,” she says. “The alcohol serves two purposes. First, it shall mask your presence from other souls such as myself that might be pursuing your power. And second, it shall make the truths I shall soon reveal to you more palatable.”

“Gotcha,” I say, grabbing a glass and the whiskey before heading for the couch. “This OK?” I ask as I sit down.

“It is,” Artene says, taking a seat on the opposite side. “Do you take it straight?”

“...I could make a lame joke about the fact that I like guys doesn’t make me straight, but it’s not 2011 anymore,” I say. “Having said that, I’m out of mixers for whiskey at the moment, so yeah, straight for me. Lee was telling the truth about the whole alcohol plus souls equals trouble thing?”

“Who?”

“Lee,” I say. “The demon-type guy that was here.”

A puzzled look comes over Artene’s face. “...You mean Lethanos?”

“He told me to call him Lee.”

“...Interesting,” Artene says. Her look of confusion lingers for a moment before reverting to her resting pleasant-smile face. “Regardless. Yes, I suppose he was right. He is... disagreeable, but not always wrong. Even a broken clock is right twice a day, as the saying goes.”

“Unless it’s just out of sync,” I say taking a sip of my whiskey. “...I don’t think there’s any deep metaphorical significance there, I just... Y’know, factually speaking, it’s true.”

“Fair enough,” she says. Then, preceded by a long sigh, “So. You have experienced much in the past few hours. None of which is within the realm of the standard mortal life, and much that contradicts what you believed was true about the very nature of reality. And I am sure you have many questions.”

“Truth,” I say. “You’re sure you don’t want a drink?”

“I am sure,” she says. “I need access to my faculties in case we are interrupted.”

“Sure, sure, just checking,” I say. “Who would interrupt us, though?”

“Somebody seeking your power,” Artene says. “There are not many mortals with as much at their disposal as you, Jenn, which makes you a highly-valued commodity for those with less than honorable intentions.”

“So you need to be able to keep me safe,” I say.

“Precisely,” she says. “Now. Questions.”

“Right, um... How do I use my powers?”

Artene smiles. “The simplest question to answer,” she says, taking the glass from my hand and releasing it, suspending it in mid-air. “Envision it in your mind’s eye. If you have sufficient energy, it shall be done.”

“Really? That’s it? No fancy incantations or hand gestures to learn?”

“That is it,” she says, taking my glass from the air and handing it back to me. “The real trick, of course, is knowing what not to do with your power.”

I nod. “Restraint is a good thing. Check. So, uh, next question... What’s it like being immortal?”

She looks surprised, and maybe a bit alarmed. “Planning ahead?” she says.

“Kinda,” I say. “And just... hoping that there’s something better than this right now.”

“Oh? Is something troubling you recently?”

“I’d rather not get into it at the moment,” I say. “Besides, I’m the one asking questions, right?”

“Of course,” she says. “Then, to answer your question... It is altogether different, but also the exact same.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes. There are still petty jealousies, and cutthroat business dealings, and just about every form of depravity you might care to mention. On the other hand, there are also kind-hearted spirits, seeking to make our multiverse a finer place.”

“Like you,” I say.

“If I may be so bold, yes,” she says.

“You may. Just looking at you is making my world a finer place.”

“Are you generally so forward in your advances?” she says, laughing not unkindly.

I make some guttural noises and sigh before saying, “This is the cheesiest line in the world, but... You’re so kind and so beautiful, I honestly can’t help it. Plus, I’m rebounding hard right now. But even if I weren’t, I’d be way into you.”

“I am flattered,” she says, taking my hand. “And if you were not mortal, I might be more tempted.”

“You’re not tempted?” I say. “So, our date’s just gonna be a sham?”

Artene looks me in the eyes and offers a kind smile. “Call it preliminary research. In fact, here,” she says, producing a small bundle of blue ooze-gas. “Project a small portion of your soul, like this.”

I do so, following the same procedure I did when I pushed Brody out of myself, but this time with... me.

It’s kinda auburn. Guess my aura is auburn. No idea what that means.

Artene takes the portion of my soul and breathes it in, and then offers the portion of her soul to me.

“What was that?” I ask.

“A test balloon,” she says. “Not enough to do much of anything, but enough to perhaps find each other across the vastness of the multiverse some countless centuries from now. If our date proves to be successful, then I for one would be more than happy to wait. For the time being, though... Let us say that I have learned that lesson already, and once was sufficient.”

“Oh? Sounds like there’s a story there,” I say as I take her soul into myself.

She releases my hand and brushes back a few loose strands of hair. “Let us return to the differences between mortals and immortals for the time being.”

“Only if we get back to your heartache tale eventually,” I say.

“If all goes according to plan, we should have plenty of time for such things,” she says.

Even now, she’s not in a rush. Compared to Lee, she almost seems apathetic, cradling her face in one hand as she talks to me, speaking in a measured tempo.

“Your mortality is your greatest asset,” she says. “It gives the power within you an unbelievable catalytic effect. The power you now possess is enough to challenge most souls, though I would not recommend such an action at this juncture.”

“Why would I want to challenge them at all?” I ask.

“To gain more power,” she says. “It is the most straightforward way to do so, though I would argue that it is not the noblest. There are those who seek to consume others’ power wholesale, but generally they agree to wager a set amount of that power in such cases.”

“A duel, in other words,” I say, taking a sip of my whiskey.

“Precisely,” she says. “Still, I would not even recommend that for you until you are better acquainted with your power.”

“It seems pretty straightforward so far,” I say. “I picture the thing happening, and it happens.”

“Your glass is empty,” she says.

So it is. I pour myself another glass.

“Your instincts are good. However, just like with anything else, there are limitations to what you can do,” Artene says. “First, you cannot stop or reverse the flow of time. Second, you cannot create or destroy a soul, though one may be scattered beyond the point of recognition. Third, while you can reform matter into whatever you wish, it is typically a better use of your energy to summon it from somewhere else, although even this must be used with restraint.”

Restraint?” I say. “How do you mean?”

“If you do not know from where that which you are summoning is coming, how do you know you are not stealing it from a person in need?” she says. “Even something as benign as a screw could come from someone’s prosthetic leg, or a crucial support in a building somewhere. An apple could come from a hungry child’s lunchbag.”

“Can’t I specify that I want to take an apple from, like, a grocery store?” I say.

“And when that apple topples over a display, or goes missing during inventory, who gets blamed? No; honest exchanges of money for goods is preferable unless it is an absolute emergency.”

“Can I generate money? Like, even though it takes more energy, could I just create a stack of hundred dollar bills and go nuts?”

“I... suppose you could, yes,” Artene says, pondering it before answering. “I am not sure if those bills would hold up against somebody checking for counterfeits, though. You would be the one creating them, after all; I suppose you know roughly what your currency looks and feels like, but you would need to know every minute detail of it to create an accurate reproduction.”

“Weak sauce,” I say, flopping my head against the top of my couch and staring at the ceiling. “Looks like I’ll have to find a new job after all.”

“A new job?” Artene says, her eyebrows shooting up. “So you are currently unemployed, then?”

Eesh. This is getting more and more awkward by the minute.

“Hey, how much of this am I gonna drink?” I ask, noticing that my bottle is now half-empty.

“That should be enough for the moment,” she says, taking the bottle and walking it back to the cabinet. As she does, she takes a swig from it. “Better than I had feared, given the label,” she says, studying it before capping it and putting it away. “You have fine taste, Jenn.”

Well, at least she doesn’t think I’m total trash.

We keep talking for a few hours, mostly about the details of my new-found powers. We dip briefly into personal stuff, but when you’re granted access to a whole new reality, that takes precedent. Artene gives me a few tasks to try: I’m pretty good at picking up objects and moving them from across the room, but I have trouble summoning things if I can’t see them.

I’m a little frustrated, but it’s overwhelmed by how cool I find this whole scenario.

“Geez, this is tricky,” I say. “I mean, I’m basically doing magic, so that makes sense, but still.”

“Skill comes with practice,” she says. “Do not worry. You have plenty of time to learn, and are already doing very well, especially considering your intoxication.”

“Thanks,” I say. “Glad to hear I’m doing something right for once.”

My phone buzzes in my pocket; I pull it out to find a text from Steph. Steph! My dear, dear friend! I hope my presently-drunk self doesn't say anything horrible that makes you hate me!

"You wanna grab lunch? I wrapped up a project early and I know you don't have anything else to do, sooo"

I blink. How do I explain this situation?

For that matter, do I explain this situation at all?

Am I gonna have to lie to Steph about this?

"What is it?" Artene says.

"One of my friends wants to have lunch," I say.

"Ah," she says. "Where?"

"That's cool?"

"Why would it not be?"

"I dunno, I just figured... I dunno."

"You must maintain your connections to your mortal life, Jenn," Artene says. "For your sake. Mortals who forsake what they knew before tend to fare poorly."

"Good to know," I say. "You gonna come with?"

"I shall not let you out of my sight for the time being after what happened to Brody," she says, rising to her feet. "I hope that is not too inconveniencing."

"Not at all," I say, turning back to my phone.

"Lunch sounds so so good," I type. *"I have someone tagging along with me, btw. Wanna do TWH?"*

Send.

"So you need to eat too, right?" I say, looking up from my phone. "Y'know, like, normal person food?"

"In this form, yes," she says. "Like any other living, breathing being, I burn calories that must be replenished."

"Cool," I say. "You like tacos?"

Artene smiles. "You might as well ask if Libra is a fair arbitrator of the spiritual realms."

I blink. Was that a yes?

My phone buzzes again. I check the text. "Sounds good. Meet you there?"

"Yup," I text back before standing up.

My sense of equilibrium, despite the booze, is still good enough to keep me upright. Still, if I have the chance...

“Whoa!!” I say, stumbling forward into Artene, who catches me and steadies my balance. “Oh geez, looks like I’m gonna need to lean on you while we walk over there. Because I’m so, so drunk.”

Artene smiles. “Such hardship this must be for you,” she says. “Still, I shall not object.”

Score.

Chapter 7

Some people, when they consume an excess of alcohol, lose their filter and speak their mind, often to their personal embarrassment and shame.

I am one of those people.

“Your eyes are real pretty,” I say as we leave my apartment building, still leaning on her arm.

“I thank you,” Artene says. She’s being surprisingly accommodating for an immortal being that could probably banish me to some sort of shadow realm or whatever. So far, so good.

“Hold up,” I say. “This doesn’t count as our date, does it?”

“We are going to meet your friend there, are we not?” she says. “That would, it seems, make for a rather poor date.”

“OK. Just making sure. ...She’ll be able to see you, right?”

“She shall indeed,” Artene says. “One of the effects of putting on a corporeal form.”

“What a relief,” I say, watching people eye the two of us as we pass. “Now they think I’m a crazy drunk lady with her super-hot girlfriend instead of a crazy drunk lady talking to herself and defying the laws of physics.”

“I am your super-hot girlfriend now, am I?”

“Oh, uh... I just people would think... Wait, you know that, like, women can love women in public now, right? You know that’s a thing?”

Artene looks at me and smiles as we arrive at one of the busier intersections and wait for the lights to change in our favor. “Perhaps it is time for me to tell you about my mortal life,” she says.

“Ooh, story time!” I say, perking up. “Share, share!”

Artene nods and clears her throat. “How is your knowledge of seventh century European history?”

“Atrocious.”

“Excellent, so you shall not be concerned about particulars,” she says as we continue walking. “Well, in that case, we shall start from the beginning. I was born into royalty; the princess of a since-forgotten kingdom. And, for the first eighteen years of my life, I was happy. My father was a just king, and my mother was kind to all people. I had several older siblings, so I was unconcerned about the prospect of taking the throne; instead, I spent most of my time reading and caring for my horses.

“However, shortly after my eighteenth birthday, a messenger arrived, bearing a message from a distant lord named King Alken, requesting my hand in marriage. ...Well, ‘requesting’ is perhaps too generous a term to use. He threatened to destroy my father’s kingdom and take me by force if I would not go willingly. My father, the type to stand up to such bullies, told him that he would die before allowing Alken to do such a thing.

“To make a long and terrible story short, Alken did as he promised. My father’s kingdom was obliterated within two months; Alken’s army was well-trained and numerous as sand. With my family and its kingdom gone, Alken carried me back to his land to be one of his queens. For the first five years or so... Well, I prefer not to remember it, but he eventually grew tired of me and his attention turned to newer, younger wives. No other king during this time dared to challenge his power; news of my kingdom’s destruction traveled throughout the land, striking fear into the hearts of all that heard it. As such, he had full access to anyone and everyone he wished for his bed.

“During that time, I bore him two children; a son and a daughter. To be frank, I have since forgotten their names; I could not bring myself to love them, as I saw too much of their father in their faces. However, I was tasked with watching them, and one day they decided to explore the prisons.

“As I followed them through the rows of dank cells, one of the prisoners called out to me. I felt myself drawn to his eyes and unable to look away; he offered grant me a share of his power if I would release him from his bonds.”

“A familiar scenario,” I say. “Entrusting yourself to a demon.”

“Not quite a demon, but the situation is not dissimilar from your own,” she says. “He was mortal, like me, and had discovered that the cell had an enchantment that kept him from using his power. I agreed and, surprisingly enough, he kept up his end of the bargain. Once I let him out, he gave me my first taste of power. From my first infusion — not unlike the one you felt last

night — I knew two things. First, I knew that I would need to use it wisely, not out of petty revenge or jealousy.”

At this, Artene sighs and looks away.

“...And the second thing?”

“The second thing... was that I wanted more of it. The man I released told me of a great well of power stored away in the castle; the power which had allowed Alken to overwhelm so many opponents. Unfortunately for the prisoner, the source of that power was sealed in a chamber that could only be accessed by the blood of his line. So...”

“So he needed one of your kids,” I say.

Artene nods. “In exchange for the life of one of my children, he would show me the place where the power was stored and grant me half of the power, allowing me to overthrow Alken and reign in his place.”

“You would kill one of your kids?” I say, eyes wide.

“I agreed to the terms, releasing him under cover of darkness one night, taking my son with me. And...”

“And!?” I say.

“Once the prisoner showed me where the power was stored, I killed him and took his power,” Artene says. “I would not allow my son to die, no matter who his father was.”

“Geez, Artene, you had me worried for a second there!” I say.

Artene smiles. “I may not be the purest soul in the multiverse, Artene, but I could not bring myself to harm a child. Instead, I drew a small amount of blood from his arm, using it to claim my husband’s power for my own before treating and bandaging his wound. Shortly thereafter, I killed Alken as well and took his throne for my own. I released all of his kidnapped wives to return to their homelands under the condition that they seek out a policy of peace with each other. And they all left, save one. Persephone, a woman about my age, had... similar inclinations to my own. While Alken was alive, we were restrained to stealing away for an occasional kiss or a whispered word, but once I was in charge...”

“Oh my God,” I say. “Why haven’t I read about you in my history books? Or on Tumblr?”

“Once all of the other princesses had left, I burned Alken’s kingdom to the ground and took on a husband from the bravest of the soldiers, allowing me to return to my homeland as a victorious queen with my new king at my side. I was supremely fortunate that both of them were open to the

arrangement we had. I altered my eldest son's memory so that he would not remember what he had seen the night I gained the power, and left him in the charge of a farmer searching for a young, strong farmhand; our secret was lost to history."

"...Except that you just told me," I say.

"Yes, but who would believe you at this point?" she says, smiling.

"Fair enough," I say. "So, is that the end of the story? Living happily ever after and all that from then on?"

"There were some other things that occurred between now and then, of course, but..." Artene says.

"So you used to be a bi poly princess with magical powers, and now you're an angel that helps people like me deal with various crises."

"A fine way to put it."

"...Still bi poly? Does that... change when you go all soul-like?"

"For some," she says. "Personally, I am still attracted to people regardless of their position on or off the gender spectrum, but I do find myself more interested in one-on-one relationships. I have found that, in my case, that works out better in the long run. There are many souls that have made very different personal revelations, of course."

"Oh, of course," I say. "I mean... I would assume that would happen. So, are you seeing anyone right now?"

She looks away for a moment before saying, "I suppose that I am not."

"...Yeah, I'm definitely gonna call you my super-hot girlfriend," I say.

"For the time being, I shall permit it."

Score. ...I just hope I'm not gonna regret saying all these awesome things when I sober up.

"Our ship name could be 'ArJenn,'" I say. "That's kinda cute, right?"

"... 'Ship name'?"

"Oh hey, we're here!" I say, pointing up at the restaurant's sign.

Tacos Without Hate, despite its outrageously pretentious name, makes the best taco I've found outside of my mom's kitchen. They're not vegan, but they are super-concerned about animal welfare, which also means that their meat tastes very, very good. They also know to use two corn tortillas instead of just one so that it doesn't disintegrate in your hands, which means you can actually eat their tacos like tacos.

Needless to say, it's one of my favorite places ever.

Side note: Have I been talking too much about food? No. No, I have not. Food is so important, y'all.

"It would seem that it is not too crowded yet," Artene says as we walk inside through the revolving door.

"Yeah, we beat the lunch rush," I say, looking around. "...And Steph. C'mon, let's go order so we can stake out a table for when she gets here."

Artene studies the menu as we wait for the three or four people in front of us to order. "Any questions?" I ask.

I expect a question along the lines of "What is barbacoa?", or even "Why do you have to choose between flour and corn tortillas?"

Instead, Artene turns to me and asks, "Are the fried avocado tacos truly as good as they claim, or are they just following the trend?"

"...Oh, they're pretty good," I say, playing off my surprise. "The batter's kinda tempura-like, and it works. Steph usually gets the carnitas, but it's a bit overpowering for me with the habanero in the sauce."

"Good to know," Artene says.

I'm talking about tacos with a corporealized immortal being.

Not what I thought I'd be doing with my life at this point yesterday, but it could be a lot worse.

We order our food and drinks (With Artene's permission, I skip the booze and get a water cup so that I don't die of dehydration) and find a table.

"So, do you... consort with mortals often?" I ask, sliding our order number into the designated holder as we sit down.

"It is not common for immortals and mortals to consort in this fashion, no," she says. "Taking on a mortal form requires a tremendous amount of energy and focus. We tend to only do it for very special occasions."

"Wow," I say. "I'm honored."

"I have much hope for your potential," she says. "That, along with the fact that I feel obligated to repay you after what Brody did... For now, I merely wish that I can make your education as smooth as possible."

"Education?" I say. "Oh yeah, Lee was gonna show me some kind of video or something."

Artene makes a face. "That wretched old thing? Why was he going to show you that?" Then, her eyes widen. "...Why was Lethanos associated with you, by the way?"

"He said something about a trial?" I say. "I didn't really understand it. Oh, he gave me this card..."

I rifle through my pockets and pull out the business card, handing it to Artene.

Artene studies the card for a long time; long enough that I'm pretty sure she's stalling for time to think. "This is... valuable information to know," she says, handing the card back to me. "Thank you, Jenn."

"You know them?" I ask, indicating the names on the card.

"Ratchet and Elmmtree? We are acquainted, yes," she says. "They do fine work over in Equinox. Not lovers of power. I am surprised that they have taken on Lethanos, to be honest."

"You know about Equinox too, huh?"

"Indeed," Artene says. "Even if you did not have a case, it is... quite a sight. If a bit outdated. I shall take you to see it some day."

"Yeah, I'll look forward to it."

As I say that, I realize something.

It dawns on me that... this is real. That I will, in fact, be going to Equinox in the future. That I'm gonna be permanently changed by this experience.

"So I'm not going to wake up in my bed at the end of all this and wonder if it was all a dream?"

Artene smiles. "I have always hated those endings."

"Oh my God, me too!" I say.

"However, such an ending might have been the best case for you. You are in possession of a great deal of power, and there are spirits that will pursue you relentlessly to get it. Without the proper training, you will be left vulnerable to their stratagems."

"We better get that proper training in place, then," I say.

"For the time being, I will be able to protect you," Artene says. "However, I suspect there will eventually be a time when we shall wish to depart from each other's company, so it would be best if you were able to defend yourself."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," I say. "I mean, they're gonna pursue me forever, huh?"

"Well, at least until you die," she says. "You will not be quite so valuable to the spirit world at large after that."

"Oh, just my whole life, then?"

"Ah, forgive me. That was insensitive. The immortal perspective has colored my perception of time."

“Yeah, I guess I can see that,” I say. “Did you have a lot of people going after your power while you were alive?”

“That is quite a story, in fact. See...”

Before she can continue, I see Steph come through the front door. I give her a wave.

“Hey!” Steph says, coming over to us and looking me over. “You... Jenn, have you been drinking?”

“Long story,” I say. “Steph, this is Artene.”

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Steph,” Artene says, rising to shake her hand.

“Likewise,” Steph says. “Dang, Jenn, quick work.”

I feel my face glowing red. “No, it’s not... We’re not... I mean, we’re maybe? But...”

“You can tell me all about it after I order,” Steph says, heading for the line. “Want chips and guac?”

“It is already ordered!” Artene says.

Steph gives a thumbs-up and enters the line, out of earshot for the moment.

I bury my face in my hands.

“Jenn?”

“Huh?” I say, jumping as Artene places a hand on my shoulder.

“About Steph. Do you trust her?”

“I... Yes,” I say. “What do you mean? But yes.”

Artene nods. “That is good. You must be careful about whom you trust from now on. There will be many that will seek to use you, or that will be used by others, for your power.”

“You keep talking about my power like it’s some huge treasure or something,” I say. “Do I have, like, a legendary amount or something?”

Artene gives me a worried smile.

“Wait, do I!?”

“It is... considerable,” she says. “The amount you received last night is one of the most concentrated bundles of power ever given to a mortal.”

Whoa.

“I am not sure why Lethanos would give you such a sizeable amount of power for this situation. However, after we have filled you with good food, we shall begin your training immediately.”

“What’s the training going to be like?” I ask. “Like, Lee said he was going to give me some training, but we never got around to it because, well, you showed up.”

“What are we talking about?” Steph asks, setting her order number in the holder next to ours. “New job plan? Forget about Linda plan? I’m in, whatever the plan is!”

“Something... mildly different,” I say. “See, Artene is... How do I say this, Artene?”

“I am a corporealized immortal being, working with Jenn to protect her from souls that would capture her new-found power which she acquired during her first encounter with our realm last night.”

Steph blinks.

Then blinks again.

“...You wanna run that by me a couple dozen more times?”

Chapter 8

After a few minutes of trying to explain the situation, Steph still looks justifiably confused. “So, you’re not actually alive?”

“Yes and no,” she says. “What you see in front of you is a living, breathing human body. I have a heart, a brain, a stomach... However, this is not the body I had when I was alive; it is a construction made of base elements held together by my will. As a result, I must use a considerable amount of energy to maintain a connection between it and my soul.”

As she speaks, our food arrives.

“Speaking of energy...” she says, rubbing her hands together.

As our pseudo-waiter walks away (What do you call them when they’re not really waiters? Food-runners? Taco-bringers?), I offer some chips to Steph before digging into my tacos.

“So energy is different from power?” I ask, digging into my first taco. (Fried chicken and pico with queso blanco and a little cilantro. NOM.)

“Very much so,” Artene says. “Energy is physical, while power is spiritual. Energy is temporary; power endures. This taco gives me more energy, but not more power,” she tacks on, taking a bite and offering a contented sigh as she chews.

“Then Jenn is, like, super-powered?” Steph says.

“A good term for it, yes,” Artene says. “Her power could irrevocably change the world if she is not careful. For good or for ill.”

“Wait, what?” I say. “I wouldn’t do anything like that.”

“No, I do not suppose you would, but there may be others who would take control of you to use your powers.”

“Other people could take control of me?” I say. “Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

“I did not wish to overwhelm you,” Artene says. “I realize now that was a mistake. I apologize.”

Aw, geez. She thinks I'm mad at her.

When, in fact, I'm just terrified now.

"What about other people like you?" Steph says. "How does Jenn compare to them?"

"Given her power, in a fair fight, Jenn could hold her own against almost any being in the known realms," Artene says. "However, she is still unpolished, so it would not take very much power at all to defeat her right now."

"Unpolished, huh?" I say. "Are we gonna fix that?"

Artene smiles. "I certainly hope so."

"So where does the power come from?" Steph says.

"Humans," Artene says. "The one and only source of power is human souls. When mortals die, we may be able to collect their souls, gaining their power."

"...So why don't you focus on getting people to make babies non-stop?"

"Some of us do," Artene says. "Love spirits are abundant. They trawl through singles mixers and dating apps, seeking out lonely souls to bring together."

"Man, I can't wrap my head around this," Steph says. "So, like, what about religion and stuff? You should have a pretty solid handle on what's going on, right?"

"Not really, right?" I offer.

"Indeed," Artene says.

"For real? Y'all have conquered death and all I get is a 'Not really'?"

"From our standpoint, what happens to a soul after death does not vary based on a person's religious beliefs. If they have previously made a deal with one of us, then they are acquired almost immediately; if they have not, they..."

"They slip!" I say. "Their souls disappear into one of the unknown realms. Dang, I feel smart!"

"Unknown realms?" Steph says.

"Parallel dimensions which we cannot yet safely enter," Artene says. "We know of some of them, but the overwhelming majority remain as undiscovered territory. There could be literally anything inside them."

Steph shakes her head. "Woof. Glad you're dealing with this business and not me, Jenn."

“Wait, doesn’t Steph have a tag on her now, too?” I say. “I mean, she’s not as powerful as me or whatever, but now she knows about all this stuff, right?”

“She knows, but she cannot see non-mortal souls,” Artene says. “Enabling that would require transferring a considerable amount of power to her. I could if you truly wish it, of course...”

“Nah, I’m good,” Steph says. “I’ll stay on as cheerleader or whatever.”

“Wow, so much support, Steph,” I say.

“Hey, I’m still here for you, Jenn!” Steph says. “I just... Y’know...”

“I’m kidding,” I say, smiling. “If I had the choice, I wouldn’t be in this situation either.”

Hot angelic guardian friend who *totally swears she’s not into me right now* aside, this isn’t an enviable position.

“I do want to help, though,” Steph says. “Jenn’s my best friend. Is there anything I can do?”

“You can do things like this,” Artene says. “This lunch. Remind her what being mortal is all about: Time spent with friends. Enjoying a good meal. Savoring the moment. In the company of eternity, a lifeline in the here and now is priceless.”

“Got it. Jenn, anytime you need to make a taco run, gimme a call. I might be able to convince Phil to come along, too.”

“Yeah, where is he?” I ask. “Y’all usually do lunch together.”

“Business trip. Should be back early next week.”

“He caught a flight this morning? He wasn’t too hungover, I hope?”

“He was the designated driver, Jenn,” Steph says. “He had, like, one sip of my drink. I mean, he wasn’t getting over a lost job and a breakup.”

I nod. “Right, right. God, that all seems so petty now...”

“Hey, that’s good, right? Moving on to grappling with immortal forces is, like, the grief step after bargaining, right?”

“Something like that,” I say.

“If you ever do need assistance with supernatural beings, Steph, please do not hesitate to let me know,” Artene says.

“Yeah? Just text you or whatever?”

“Place your thumb, index finger, and pinky together,” she says, holding up her hand as she described it.

“...I’m not doing some weird soul-transfer ritual, am I?” she says.

“This is so that I may place my protection upon you,” Artene says. “If you are ever in danger, make this same gesture and I shall help you if I am able.”

“Sweet deal,” Steph says, holding up her hand as instructed. “...I look like I’m doing a terrible shadow puppet.”

“You look like you forgot how to do the rock horns and are trying to fake it anyway so you don’t look out of place,” I say.

“It symbolizes bringing together three discrete elements,” Artene says, pointing to her fingers with her other hand. “Heart, mind, and soul. It is the symbol I chose centuries ago.”

“...Yeah, but it looks kinda ridiculous, right?” Steph says.

Artene smiles. “To be sure.”

“Should I do the thing, too?” I ask, holding up my hand in the shadow puppet form.

We probably look like we’re in a cult.

...Maybe we kinda are in a cult.

“You shall be under my constant watch, so it should not be necessary,” Artene says. “Still, I suppose it could not hurt.”

“Cool,” I say. “So... do we say some sort of incantation, or...?”

“Oh, no,” she says. “It is completed. I merely wished to make sure Steph knew how to form it correctly.”

“...Ah,” I say, putting my hand down. “Right. Good to know.”

Steph’s phone buzzes. “That’d be my boss calling me back in,” she says, opening her newly-received email. “Gotta jet. Nice to meet you, Artene! ...Kinda earth-shattering and whatever, but nice! And Jenn, seriously? Any time you need me, I’m just a text away.”

“Got it,” I say, giving a small salute. “You have fun managing that office.”

“Hey, it’s a tough job, but somebody’s gotta do it,” she says as she grabs her purse. “Text me later?”

“For sure,” I say.

I watch her leave, still unfathomably grateful for her friendship. I mean, who else would be so chill in the face of learning that their best friend is suddenly holding this huge store of power and has no idea what to do with it?

Because I, for my part, am internally wigging out more than a little bit.

“Are you ready to go?” Artene asks.

“Go?”

“Back to your apartment for more training.”

“Oh. Yeah, sure, let’s do it.”

“Very well,” she says, standing up. “Let us be on our way.”

Chapter 9

As we step outside, I notice that the sun has broken through the clouds, raising the temperature to an almost comfortable level. “Not bad for a late summer day,” I say.

“It is surprisingly warm,” Artene says as we walk back to my apartment. “I somewhat regret choosing so warm a sweater.”

“Hey, yeah, about that,” I say. “Like... What are your clothes made of?”

“I used the towels in your bathroom and, using my power, restructured them to form my apparel,” she says.

I stare at her.

“...Apologies. My attempt at a joke.”

“Oh! See, ‘cuz to me, that sounded legit,” I say.

“My sense of humor has been called ‘deader than deadpan,’” she says. “The truth is, I have various stashes of goods scattered throughout this realm which I draw on when I require them.”

“Whoa,” I say. “That’s hella rad.”

“People around this region truly say ‘hella,’ then?”

“I mean... I’m trying to get into the habit,” I say. “Blending in and whatnot.”

Artene nods. “It is hard for me to keep up with what is genuine vernacular from this era and what is simply recycled in an attempt to be ironic.”

“You’re not the only one,” I say.

Artene freezes mid-stride, her eyebrows arched as she scans the area around us.

“What’s up?” I say.

“...Someone is near,” she says.

Everything goes black and I smell sulfur.

Hang on, what?

As far as I can tell, I'm still standing on the same sidewalk, but it's all gone. Or, at least, hidden.

"...Artene?" I say.

"Remain calm," she says. "I am still here. But this is..."

I hear a snickering through the darkness.

"So, Artene, this is your new charge."

A raspy voice, like chains dragged against a stone floor, rattles through the air and sends a shiver up my spine.

"Tell me, girl, has she told you the truth about who she is yet? Or are you still being strung along?"

"...Artene?"

"This is a dark spirit," Artene says. "He shall attempt to deceive you. Stay close to me."

"Oh, I'm not interested in talking to her, Artene," the voice says. With a rumbling roar, an imposing figure wearing full plate blood-red armor appears in front of me, hands bound.

"...Impossible," Artene says.

"Not impossible, as it turns out," the voice says. "You recognize your beloved Red, don't you, Artene?"

"...Where did you find Red?"

"Looks like that trial was a waste of everyone's time, eh?" the voice says. "Here's the deal, Artene: Give the girl to me, and you get Red back. Not a hard offer to weigh, is it?"

Look, I'm flattered that everybody wants me, but being a friggin' bargaining chip is starting to get hella old, you feel me?

(Did I pull it off? Did I... Did I hella pull it off? Ugh, that was way too forced. I'll keep working.)

"...No, Bondur," Artene says. "I do not believe your falsehoods."

"Artene," Red says — or, at least, a man's voice coming from under Red's helmet says. Gruff, but not unkind. "Please, you don't know what he's done to me. He—"

"Silence!" Bondur says, his voice echoing through the darkness. Red falls silent. "As for you, Artene... I shall leave my offer on the table. If you should reconsider, you know how to contact me."

As Red fades into the darkness, reality starts to reappear around me, starting at my feet and radiating out like a firework. A few seconds later, all traces of a supernatural event are gone.

Well, except for Artene.

“What was that?” I say, turning to her.

She’s gritting her teeth.

“Artene?”

“Please, take my hands,” she says. “We must return to your apartment and access your alcohol post-haste.”

“I need to hide myself again?” I ask as I take her hands in mine.

“No,” she says, taking my arm. “I need to drown my emotions. You might feel a slight tug, by the way.”

I feel a wrenching in my gut as my whole body is pulled by the bellybutton through what feels like a single point in space and pops back into form in my apartment. All of this takes about a tenth of a second.

I try to steady myself, but the momentum is too much; I land on the carpet, near the spot a certain dead body was a few hours ago.

“Ahh... Apologies,” Artene says, kneeling beside me and offering a hand. “I forget that jumping is an unsettling experience the first few times.”

“Yeah?” I say, taking her hand up and rediscovering my balance.

“Yes,” she says, taking a seat on my couch. “Now, then. Alcohol. Please.”

“Right,” I say, heading to my cabinet. “How do you take it?”

“Just bring me the bottles,” she says.

This shoots up a red flag.

“Artene, we don’t know each other well, and you’re a being that has more power than I can presently comprehend, but you’re on a bad path right now. I’ve known too many people on that path.”

Artene closes her eyes and takes a few deep breaths. “...You are right,” she says.

“Although I guess you don’t have to worry quite so much about alcohol poisoning,” I say.

She smiles. “Regardless, you are correct. Moderation is key. Only bring me the vodka.”

“Compromise is a wonderful thing,” I say, grabbing the bottle. “No glass? You sure?”

“It would be nothing more than a formality,” Artene says as I hand it to her. “Come, Jenn! Take up your whiskey bottle, and we shall reminisce about regrets with how we treated our lost loves.”

“I dunno, my lost love’s still kinda fresh,” I say, whiskey in hand as I land on the couch.

“And you think that mine is not?” Artene says, pointing to her face. After that, she opens the bottle and takes two or three greedy gulps.

“Geez!” I say. “I mean, I guess you’re right... So, uh, you wanna start, or...?”

Before we can continue, there’s a knock at the door. I look at Artene, but she just shrugs, so I get up and check the peephole.

“...It’s Lee,” I whisper. “And he’s alone.”

Artene frowns. “Lethanos? His knocking would imply a corporeal form. Why is he...?”

“Should I let him in?”

He knocks again. “I can hear you, y’know. Or I could just jump in there. I know the way. Trying to be polite for once.”

“...Fair enough,” I say, unlocking the door. When I open it, I see Lee looking far less composed than when I saw earlier.

“Can I come in?” he says, checking down the hallways for who knows what.

“Sure,” I say, stepping aside to make a path for him.

“Thanks,” he says. “It’s just the two of you in here, right?”

“Yeah, we were just drinking and talking about lost loves,” I say.

Lee’s eyes narrow. “So, you were talking about—”

“Please, do not use your tongue to speak that name and so dishonor it if you cannot protect the one who carries it,” Artene says.

“...OK, if that’s the way we’re playing that game, then that’s the way we’re playing that game,” Lee says. “Brody is too smart for his own good. He’s started killing people and taking their souls.”

“Ah,” Artene says before taking another drink.

““Ah’?” I say. “You just heard that someone is killing people and your reaction is ‘Ah’!?”

“He will soon be taken in by the higher realms for judgement,” Artene says. “Those harmed will be revived, with no memory of the crime. A small matter.”

“About that,” Lee says. “See... Since Jenn here killed him last night, he has grounds for a case against her. A case which he, or somebody working for him, has filed. Since that’s going on, they can’t take any action against him.”

“OK, so we go and settle that case,” I say. “Should be easy, right?”

“About that,” Lee says. “You have another case against you awaiting judgment.”

“Oh yeah, I totally do, don’t I? ...What’s that case all about, anyway?”

“I don’t really know,” he says. “That’s why I came to you. I need you to come with me to Equinox to help sort out this mess.”

“Can Artene come, too?”

Lee sighs. “Fine. But please, we need to take care of this sooner rather than later.”

“Why are you so concerned about law and order?” I say.

“I know, I know, it doesn’t seem very demon-like,” Lee says. “But if Brody keeps gaining power, he could soon be unstoppable. When my very existence is at risk, I feel obligated to submit to the laws of the... Well, ‘land’ isn’t quite the right word, but...”

“Please, instead of talking, could we simply perform the required work to resolve this task?” Artene says, fighting to her feet and putting down the bottle, which I now notice is three-quarters empty. “If I cannot drink, I would like to eliminate whatever obstacles there may be to my drinking.”

“A fine worldview,” Lee says, holding out his hands. “Come on, I’ll take you. Now, Jenn, you’ll feel a tugging sensation, but—”

“I have already shown her,” Artene says, taking his hand. “Let us go at once.”

I take his other hand. He nods. “Right, then. Here we go!”

I know what’s coming this time, but it’s still disconcerting. The tugging sensation at my gut feels stronger this time, leaving me staggering back and forth to find my balance in this new environ.

...Which, apparently, is a detective’s office from a film noir movie. Difference is, the books on the shelf are all about three or four inches thick, and the odor of stale cigarette smoke is replaced with generic cleaning supply scent.

In front of me, I see a backwards-facing high-backed chair, just waiting for somebody to spin around and say something clever. I check behind it and am disappointed to find it empty. While I’m there, though, I notice a pneumatic tube; as I’m looking at it, a capsule arrives in the tray with the word “URGENT” printed across it in big, red letters.

“Where are we?” I ask, turning to my two immortal companions and hoping for some guidance.

“Ratchet and Elmtree’s office,” Lee says, looking around the cozy room. “Looks like they’ve stepped out for the moment, though. Let’s make ourselves comfortable.”

“Ratchet,” I say, shaking my head as I sit in one of the creaking wooden chairs. “What kind of name is Ratchet?”

“The perfect kind of name, when you need something fixed,” a too-smooth voice says from behind the high-backed chair. Spinning around, I find the source is...

Well, the source is a goblin. That picture that just popped into your head? You nailed it. Green skin? Pointy ears? Bingo.

Thing is, though, this goblin look more trustworthy than anyone I’ve seen today, and that includes Steph and Artene. None of that creepy, ugly, gold-hoarding vibe that the media has been feeding us for years. This particular goblin is well-coiffed and dressed to the nines, and doesn’t seem the least bit interested in hoards of wealth.

“...You weren’t there a second ago,” I say, pointing at the chair.

“Ah, but now I am,” Ratchet says. “And you’re welcome for that fact. Ratchet’s the name, and protecting you from ne’er-do-wells my game. I recognize two of your lovely faces, but who’s this third inquisitive guest that seems more nervous around sharp implements than the rest of us?”

“Her name is Jenn Lewis, and she needs your assistance,” Artene says. “Jenn, you can trust Ratchet. I will vouch for them as one of the best lawyers in all of Equinox.”

“Them?” I say.

“That’s my preferred pronoun, yes,” Ratchet says.

“Gotcha,” I say. “Well, I don’t have much of a metric to compare you to other spirit-type lawyers at this point, but hey, sounds good.”

“You said you need my help?” Ratchet says, drumming their claws against their desk.

“Yes, of course,” Artene says. “One of our... mutual acquaintances is currently wreaking havoc in the mortal realms, and Jenn here has a pending case against him. But...”

“But Jenn’s caught in a case of her own,” Ratchet says, now scribbling notes on a legal pad. “Happens all the time. Shouldn’t be half an issue if your current case isn’t too complicated.”

“And what do you get out of it?” I ask.

“Other than a profound sense of satisfaction?” Ratchet says, grinning. “We’re compensated by Equinox to deal with cases involving mortals, since you probably don’t have the power to hire your own team.”

“You’re good, though, right?”

“In more than one sense of the word,” Artene says.

“That’s kind of you, Artene,” Ratchet says. “We’ll get right to work, though. Don’t even worry about it. Won’t take us more than a decade.”

“...A decade?” I say.

“Sure,” they say. “Chocolate?”

They offer me a dish of fun-size candy bars. I look over at Artene, who nods, so I take a piece of milk chocolate and unwrap it. “Good, good,” they say. “Anyone else?” Both Lee and Artene shake their heads. “Suit yourself.”

“Sorry, but... a decade to clear up this thing I have going on?”

“Equinox is a busy place, Jenn,” Ratchet says. “Your case is pretty low on the priority list, it seems. Don’t worry, though! We’ll make sure we get it right. It’ll be like it never happened. And, if we don’t, we’ll just revert everything. So no worries.”

“But... What if you mess it up?”

“I don’t follow,” Ratchet says.

“She’s under the wild notion that Equinox might mess up a reversion once in a while,” Lee says, dripping with subtext I don’t understand.

Ratchet smirks. “An understandable concern,” they say, idly spinning in their chair. “But I...”

As they spin, they notice the capsule in their tube. “Oh,” they say, pulling it out and reading it. “This is... Huh.”

“What is it?” I say.

“I need to go meet with Libra immediately,” they say. “Be back in a few.”

“Wait, who’s—”

Before I can get out three words, they’re gone with a popping sound, so I improvise.

“Who’s Libra?” I say, turning to Artene and Lee.

“High Justice of Equinox,” Artene says.

“She’s the one that runs the whole show around these parts,” Lee says.

“...Are you trying to talk like a mobster?”

“What? No, this is just...”

“I’m getting a heavy style vibe here, and I’m just wondering if you’re leaning into it intentionally or not.”

“...Not?” he says. “Anyways. Libra is in charge. She hands down all of the judgments, from the highest to the lowest.”

“All of them?” I say.

“All of them.”

“Isn’t that...”

“Tremendously inefficient?” Lee says. “Yes, absolutely. But her judgments have always been reliable.”

“Really?” I say. “So you don’t, for example, think Equinox messes up a case once in a while?”

Lee grimaces. “That was... not Libra’s doing,” he says. “And is a longer story than we have time for.”

“Do not fear, Jenn,” Artene says. “We shall have abundant time for such stories later.”

“Oh, good,” Lee says. “Air my dirty laundry. Perfect. Thank you.”

“I... I mean, I don’t care one way or the other about hearing your stories if you don’t want to share them,” I say. “I don’t wanna be a jerk.”

With that, Ratchet pops back into their seat. “...Well,” they say, wide-eyed.

“What’s going on?” I say.

“You’re up,” they say.

“I’m up?”

There’s a knock at the door. “Come in!” Ratchet says. A figure I can only compare to a mix between a dryad and a hobbit walks through the door, just as wide-eyed as Ratchet.

“Ah, Elmmtree, my esteemed colleague,” Ratchet says as the newcomer leans on their desk, staring at the capsule. “Whatever brings you here?”

“You... You got someone bumped up the list to right now?” she says, forming the words the way a seven-year-old figuring out that Santa is their parents might come to that same conclusion.

“I... accidentally did, yes,” they say.

“What’s the case?”

“Our client is here, by the way,” Ratchet says, gesturing in my direction.

“Oh, gosh, I’m sorry,” Elmtree says, turning towards me and sticking out a leaf-covered hand. “Name’s Elmtree. Of Ratchet and Elmtree. They bring the style; I bring the substance.”

Ratchet shrugs. “Can’t say she’s wrong.”

“I’m Jenn,” I say, taking Elmtree’s hand and shaking it. I figure it’d be rude to ask what exactly she is, so I refrain. Sorry not sorry.

“Pleasure to meet you, Jenn, an absolute pleasure,” she says. “Now. What’s the case?”

“You know about religion-based entraps, right?” Ratchet says.

“It’s my specialty!” Elmtree says. “Oh, uh, not my personal specialty, mind,” she adds, turning to me. “I specialize in cases relating to them. Don’t want you to get the wrong impression.”

“Sure,” I say, still not sure if I can form any opinion about her except that she’s eager to please and doesn’t want to kill me. So far so good, in other words, based on my recent track record.

“Listen, Jenn, here’s the situation in a nutshell,” Ratchet says. “Libra personally asked that your case be moved up to as soon as possible. They had a bit of a messy situation with the last case in her chambers, so it’ll probably take another hour until we’re up, but after that, it’s go time.”

“So... what does that mean?” I say.

“It means that we shall leave these two to work on your case, and we shall spend some time in the... less bureaucratic portions of Equinox,” Artene says. “Lethanos, would you care to join us?”

“I’ll stay put in case there’s anything I can help with,” he says. “Enjoy yourselves.”

“Of course,” Artene says rising to her feet and taking my hands. “Come, Jenn.”

“Where are we going, exactly?” I say, also standing.

“To a place of beauty and grandeur,” she says.

“And roller coasters, if that’s your thing,” Lee says.

“...A place of beauty and grandeur, and also roller coasters,” Artene says. “Come.”

When she takes my hand, I expect her to teleport me, but instead she walks to Ratchet’s office door and opens it.

Right. Doors are still a thing.

Through the doorframe, I can see an enormous corridor, at least a thousand feet wide and stretching for what seems like forever in either

direction. On the far side, I see something whizzing past at an incredible pace in a rainbow of colors.

“What is this?” I ask.

Artene smiles. “This is Equinox.”

Chapter 10

As we exit Ratchet's office and get a better look at the scene, I notice that the ground between us and the opposite side is moving and incrementally faster rates, until the speed on the opposite side is almost too fast to comprehend. I see a blur of color going by over there, but I can't make out any details.

"How come that side's moving and we're not?" I ask.

"Surely you have a better understanding of physics than that, Jenn," Artene says. "You did study the sciences in college, did you not?"

"...Yeah," I say. "How did you know I went to college?"

"Your diploma, humorously hung over your restroom toilet," Artene says.

Oh, yeah. I did do that.

"Is that a funny joke? Because, like, my diploma is worthless is the idea. So it's above the toilet. But..."

"It is amusing," Artene says. "You are perhaps too proud of it, but it has merit."

"OK, cool," I say. "...Anyways."

"Yes, anyways. Do you see that section in the middle?" Artene asks, pointing to a broad strip of what looks like linoleum, moving at half the speed of the far side and containing a number of souls standing and waiting with characteristics far too alien for me to fully grasp before they passed from my sight.

"That section is, in fact, stationary. Well, relatively speaking. It is the rest of Equinox that is rotating at immense speeds, in opposite directions. Since the rotation is constant, you have not felt any sort of acceleration to tell you that you are moving in such a way, just as you do not feel the rotation of the earth. However, the two halves are constantly rotating against each

other, making it simpler to get from place to place; simply stand in the middle until your desired destination arrives, and walk to it.”

“That... is really smart,” I say. “I mean, assuming you can create such a structure, I guess.”

“It is, perhaps, too efficient,” Artene says, walking to the central platform. “Those in charge have refused to perform any updates for the last seventy-one years. Even then, all they did was insert the pneumatic tubing system. Come, follow me.”

I follow her. As I do, stepping from strip to strip, it’s a bit disorienting, but the increments are small enough that I never lose my balance. “So, what are we looking for?”

“We’re in the reds right now,” Artene says, pointing to the far side. “Our destination is just on the green side of yellow.”

The colors serve as markers for when to step on or off. Of course.

“Who made this place?” I ask.

“Libra was the initial designer,” Artene says. “Several others have made adjustments since then, but her original vision is still intact. Ah, here comes our stop.”

“And why didn’t we just teleport to our destination?”

“Because,” Artene says, smiling as she walks to the far side, “this was much more fun.”

I follow her to a yellowish door with a slight hint of green labelled “Leisure Retreat” and look it over. It looks, for all intents and purposes, like the one we just walked out of from Ratchet’s office. (Which, looking back, I now recall was a lovely shade of cyan; the colors on the other side are flowing in the opposite direction, but they seem to have the same coding mechanism.)

“Not a very big place, is it?” I say, studying the door.

Artene grabs the door handle and says, “Looks can be deceiving.”

What I see on the other side of the door takes my breath away.

I find myself on a scenic mountainside, overlooking a gorgeous valley, filled with autumnal trees showing off their best colors. It’s a perfect day, temperature-wise; a little warm, but with a cool breeze to keep things pleasant. In the distance, I can hear a trickling stream and birds singing their cheerful tunes.

“...OK, so I see the appeal of this place,” I say, looking around.

“Welcome to the Leisure Retreat,” Artene says with a smile. “In addition to its beauty, there are several protective charms placed on this place, so we will be safe from Brody or any other interlopers.”

“Protective charms?” I say. “Like what?”

Artene smiles. “I apologize in advance,” she says, “but try picking a blade of grass.”

I bend down to the grass at my feet. “...This isn’t gonna kill me, is it?” I say.

“Assuredly not,” she says.

I get my fingers around a blade of grass and pull. As I do, though, I feel a splitting headache shoot through my head like a red-hot spike.

“Ah, frig me,” I say through gritted teeth, clutching my head as I spill onto my back.

“Even something as small as a blade of grass is protected with such a punishment,” she says. “Non-lethal, but incapacitatingly painful. So imagine the protection placed over your life.”

“Yeah, that’s awesome,” I say. “This headache sucks in a major way, though.”

“It should begin fading momentarily.”

“Good,” I say, still wincing.

Ah, there it goes. Much better.

“Here,” Artene says, offering me her hand.

“Thanks,” I say, taking the help to get back on my feet. “So... That’s not gonna happen when I accidentally snap a twig or something, right? Because that would majorly suck.”

“Fear not,” Artene says. “You shall find it impossible to accidentally harm anything in this realm.”

“Cool,” I say. “...Curious about the mechanics of knowing what’s accidental and what’s not, but... Cool. So what do we do here other than enjoy the view and not pluck the grass?”

“Explore, mostly,” Artene says. “This realm was designed for those souls awaiting arbitration in their case. We may run into another group, but it is unlikely. Discovery of unknown things is a rarity for immortals, so the Leisure Retreat is almost entirely redesigned every year to provide a new chance to explore.”

“Every year?” I say, looking around at the seemingly endless space surrounding us. “Isn’t that kinda... excessive?”

“If I were not with you, I would be traversing this realm far more quickly,” Artene says. “Your mortal form has many benefits, but speed is not one of them.”

“Oh, yeah,” I say, looking myself over. (Still hella mortal, y’all.) “Oh, hey, will people... judge me for being mortal? Maybe judge isn’t the right word, but do they think less of me?”

“On the contrary,” Artene says. “They will likely be quite jealous. You have a certain characteristic which they can never reclaim.”

“What’s that?” I say.

“A sense of urgency.”

“You don’t have one?”

“Only by virtue of your presence,” she says.

“I guess making sure that I’m not responsible for a horny maniac killing all of mankind is giving me more than enough concern to go around,” I say with a rueful smile.

Artene holds out her hand. “Come,” she says. “Let us explore.”

“Oh?” I say, taking her hand. “I thought you didn’t get romantically involved with mortals?”

“I do not, but you deserve somebody to hold your hand at the moment,” she says.

“Truest thing I’ve heard in a long time,” I say, smiling. “So where are we going?”

“Pick a direction,” she says. “We shall walk and finally discuss your love life and, time permitting, mine as well.”

“I’ll keep it brief, then,” I say, examining my surroundings. Down in the valley, I see an amusement park with the roller coasters Lee mentioned, but I’ve already had enough adrenaline rushes in the past few hours for my tastes. I finally look up the mountain we’re standing on; the top seems to go up for miles, becoming snow-capped a few hundred feet above us and creating gorgeous crystalline structures in the cold air. “That way?” I say, pointing up.

“A fine choice,” Artene says.

Plus, if it gets cold, I can take that excuse to use Artene as a heat source. Double bonus!

“So,” Artene says as we start to walk.

“So?”

“I wish to hear about your past love,” she says.

I wince. "Right. But... I mean, why drag this up now?"

"There must be trust between us, and sharing our souls' dearest feelings is the surest way to form trust."

I waver for a moment, but I look in her eyes and I just... I just know that she isn't going to judge me for what I say. That she's on my side.

And that's a great feeling.

"Right," I say as we start to walk. "So, to start from the beginning... I grew up in the middle of the country. Like, a few dozen miles off, but pretty dang close. My parents took me to church most Sundays, but they also let me watch some R-rated movies when I was fourteen and helped me pick out my first nose piercing, so, like, they were chill. I didn't have a tragic 'I'm moving out and I never want to see you again!' story or anything when I came out to them, and their reaction was all love. I met Steph in kindergarten, and we've been best friends ever since. There wasn't any sort of great story where we met or anything; it just kinda happened. I lucked out in a major way in both the parental and the best friend departments.

"Thing is... Not many other girls in middle-of-nowhere, Nebraska were out. I was really hoping Steph was gonna say, 'Yeah, I totally feel the same way!' when I told her, but no, she's only into dudes. I mean, she was accepting and everything, but definitely straight. I now realize that it was probably for the best; having her as a best friend and confidant was also super-great. Still is, in fact. I went on a few nice enough dates with nice enough guys, but we never had any chemistry. Never got close enough to any of them to come out to them, which might be just as well.

"Same deal in college. State school, since they offered me enough scholarships to keep me from going too horribly in debt. I roomed with Steph, and we kept each other sane. In retrospect, I can't believe we didn't end up hating each other. I think she's too good of a person to hate anyone, though.

"Anyways. About love. Met a few girls, but most of them were looking for sex first and a relationship later. Works for some people, but it's not my scene. The girls that didn't fit into that group... I dunno, I guess they had already found somebody, because they sure never asked me out and I was way too nervous to ask them out. To my surprise, the selection of guys was worse than it was in high school... Well, either that or my standards were higher.

“In any case, Steph and I, by some minor miracle, both graduated in four years and moved out to the city to find work; me with my math degree, her with her theatre arts. She started doing some temp work as she auditioned and I got a job at BroaderSoft doing some QA work.

“And that’s where, three desks down, I met Linda.”

I sigh.

“And... Well, it was love. For a time, at least.

“We found in each other what we had both been seeking — somebody we could open up to about anything and everything buried inside us. Steph was — is, don’t get me wrong, definitely is — great, but there are some secrets you can only tell a lover. We were each other’s refuge in the storms of life.

“But the thing is... Linda’s not religious. And I am. So when I started attending this new church, I was just this young woman that was awkward in the young adults Sunday School class or whatever. No big deal. But once I convinced Linda to tag along because, y’know, what happens to her soul in eternity was kind of a big deal to me if we’re gonna spend our lives together, there were some whispers.

“And those whispers turned into murmurs, which turned into... Well, you get it. A few months ago, one of the pastors confronted Linda and me about it and said we couldn’t attend the church as a couple anymore. For the sake of the children or whatever. I guess we were making them hella jealous because of how amazing we are. Were. Whatever.

“Anyway. The pastors pulled us into a meeting, and I said some things about hypocrisy to the main pastor accusing us while Linda cried. Needless to say, neither of us have set foot in that church again. I started church-hunting again, this time without Linda, but never with any success. Yesterday, Linda called and gave me an ultimatum — her or the Church. The big-C Church, that is.”

“And that is when you made your choice,” Artene says.

“Well, at a certain point, the choice was made for me,” I say. “I had just been told that I was joining the ranks of the unemployed a few minutes ago, so I used some words that I now regret in a tone that I also regret and... well, here we are now.”

Artene looks surprised.

“You spoke unkindly to her, then?”

“I have a hidden fire burning within me at all times, Artene,” I say. “If you’re lucky — or maybe if you’re unlucky — you’ll see it someday.”

“I look forward to it,” she says.

“Yeah, sure,” I say, smiling. As I do, I notice the climate around us has shifted notably; what was previously a pleasant autumn day has turned into a crisp winter’s early evening; I can just barely see my breath in front of me. The scenery has similarly changed, turning into a perfect snowscape. I also now realize for the first time that there isn’t a single sign of human activity in sight on the mountain.

“Are there any fun easter eggs around here?” I ask. “Or is this just one big walking simulator?”

“We may find a surprise or two,” Artene says. “Or we may not. There is a considerable amount of terrain to cover.”

“Uh-huh,” I say, slipping my arm under hers. “Getting kinda chilly, huh?”

She smiles. “I suppose it is, yes,” she says, pulling me closer.

“Your turn to share now, right?” I say. “About Red?”

Artene sighs. “I suppose so.”

“If you don’t want to talk about him, we don’t have to,” I say, giving her a gentle squeeze as we walk, still hoping we could totally talk about him.

Instead, she stops and looks at me. “...Talk about... him?” she says.

“Yeah,” I say. “Red. Isn’t that the topic of discussion?”

“Oh!” Artene says, her eyes lighting up. “Of course! Because of the voice in the decoy!”

“I’m missing something,” I say.

“Most souls do not know who Red is,” Artene says. “Only that I have been seeking her for the last four centuries.”

“Oh!” It’s my turn now. “Her, not... Ah, geez, sorry about that! But with the voice of the... Well, whoever or whatever it was in the armor...”

“Indeed,” Artene says. “An understandable misconception. But no; if I am notorious for one thing, it is for pursuing lost causes for too long. In this case, it is Red.”

“So, who is she? I mean, I spilled all of my guts, so...”

“Of course, of course. Red was a pirate captain; we met while I was escorting an aspiring poet of little promise across the Atlantic. I had hopes for him to produce some truly noteworthy works for a time, but when he had the chance to show his true character when a pirate crew boarded our ship,

he jumped overboard and swam for shore; I decided to abandon him and attempt to aid our adversary instead.”

“You can switch sides just like that? Abandon your charge and join up with somebody else?” I say. “...Speaking of switching sides, my left half is getting kinda chilly; can we reconfigure ourselves?”

“Certainly,” Artene says, walking behind me to my left-hand side and once again holding me close. I’m getting all kinds of mixed messages, but I’m not complaining. “At any rate. Yes, it is common for spirits to change loyalties mid-conflict. I am typically loyal to my side, but I have no stomach for cowards.”

“What about people that look to the comfort of biscuits and gravy when life becomes overwhelming?”

“Well, that is only sensible,” Artene says with a smile. “In any case. Red carried herself with a fearless abandon I greatly admired. I gave myself up to Red’s crew, at which point she eyed me over once or twice before offering me a choice: a position on her ship, or a swim in the ocean. I, of course, could have simply disappeared, but I was intrigued by her. After some further discussion, I revealed my true nature to her, and she saw the potential of my power. We joined forces; officially, I played the role of her first mate, ensuring her victory against any vessel that dared to cross our path; unofficially, we loved each other with a passion that made the moon and the stars jealous.”

“...Wow,” I say. “You were an honest-to-God pirate?”

“I was, indeed, an honest-to-God pirate,” Artene says.

“...So, how long do mortals have to be dead before you’re willing to make out with them? Because there’s a cliff right here, and I could just...”

“Jenn, do not ever joke about such things,” Artene says, stopping in her tracks and grabbing me by both shoulders. “Red had the same thought. After a decade of pillaging together, she... She decided that the differences between us was too great. One night, while I was off settling some case or another in Equinox, she plunged a dagger through her heart of her own volition and destroyed her mortal form, making it impossible for her to go back.”

“Geez,” I say.

“For a brief period after that, we were happy, but Red began to miss her mortal self. She resented me, even though she knew I had not asked her

to do the tremendously reckless and foolhardy thing she did; she could not help herself from correlating me with her loss. We... began to drift apart.”

“Wait, you two broke up!?” I say. “I thought she was just, like, lost out there somewhere or whatever!”

Artene looks me over. “May I ask you to keep a secret?” she asks, looking at me now with grave seriousness.

“Sure,” I say.

“You must not share this information with another soul,” she says. “The fate of the multiverse may depend upon it.”

“Then... maybe you shouldn’t tell me?”

A rueful smile crosses Artene’s lips. “I wish I could take that route. But this is crucial, Jenn. Do you swear to keep the information safe?”

Her eyes are filled with equal parts trust and desperation.

How could I say no to that face?

“Of course,” I say.

Artene nods. “I am the one who... lost Red,” she says. “I was attempting to help her reclaim her mortal life, but the experiment went awry. She is now lost in a place called the Infinite Abyss, where souls can enter easily, but leaving is nearly impossible.

“When I designed it, I was quite proud of myself; you can only enter if you have split your soul into at least two pieces. Once inside, you cannot escape unless your soul is complete; however, on the outside, your soul will believe that what awaits is excruciating, inescapable agony.

“I thought that I would be strong enough to go back in to retrieve her. That I would be able to overcome my own trap. But... to this day, I cannot. I designed it for her in an attempt to help her gather power; instead, I trapped her inside, perhaps for eternity.”

I’m perplexed.

“...Why are you telling me this?” I ask, finally able to put words into a sentence again.

“Because you knowing it might save the multiverse some day,” she says. “And because I do not want for their to be any secrets between us.”

“...OK,” I say. “Is there anything else I need to know about it?”

“Yes,” she says. “That I am very sorry that I did it. It is my greatest sin. I hoped to atone for my mistakes, and I only made matters far worse.”

“So... If Red wouldn’t be enough to get you to go in there, what would be enough?”

She has to consider her answer before she gives it. "I do not know," she says. "Even with the small portion of Red's soul I retained, the fear I faced made it impossible for me to act. I suppose I would require a stronger affection than the one that I have for Red, then."

Neither of us says anything for a little while. I listen to the snow crunch underfoot as we walk, our steps in perfect sync.

"I see why you don't want to get involved with mortals, then," I say.

"Indeed."

"But we're kinda... close, aren't we?"

"...Indeed."

"You said you're famous for going after lost causes. Am I one of those?"

"Do you think you are a lost cause, Jenn?"

"I didn't have a strong argument one way or the other until yesterday," I say. "Now, though... I mean, other than this whole business, I'm an unemployed dumpee whose only marketable skill is computing numbers way slower than a computer could. I can't see my value."

"I am afraid that we must strongly disagree on that point, Jenn Lewis," she says. "You have tremendous potential. You may not see it yet, but I do, clear as day. It is my fondest wish that I might help you realize it. But beyond that, you are... You are a kinder, warmer soul than any I have ever met. You love people, romantically or no, with an intensity the likes of which I have never seen. I am very close to being almost tempted to break my rule and kiss you right now."

A small smile creeps across her face.

One slides onto my face, too.

Still, after that story, I think she's right. Us kissing while I have a pulse could lead to bad business. "Well... Can we hug?" I say. "Is that OK?"

Artene wraps me in her arms, her warmth better than any roaring fireplace. I hold her tight, not wanting to let go.

"Would you go to the Infinite Abyss for me?" I ask.

"I would try my very hardest," she says. "It would be best for you to avoid it altogether, however."

"Makes sense," I say, still hugging her. "Do you think we could just... walk around like this?"

"Alas, as a matter of fact, Ratchet is calling us back," she says. "It looks like we shall have to continue this exploration at a later date."

Reluctantly, I release her from my embrace and take her hands. “Lead on,” I say.

Finally, something’s going right.

Chapter 11

Something's wrong.

As we re-enter in Ratchet's office, no one's saying anything. Ratchet and Elmtree just stare at us, Ratchet from behind a tall stack of binders piled on their desk and Elmtree leaning in the back-right corner, arms folded across her chest and a concerned look on her face. A moment later, I realize Lee is nowhere to be seen.

"What's wrong?" I say.

"So, uh... First of all, welcome back," Elmtree says.

"Thanks," I say. "What's wrong? And where's Lee?"

"He said he had some other business to take care of," Ratchet says. "Kinda vague, but that's Lethanos for you."

"OK," I say. "For a third time, what's wrong?"

"You have a case against you," Ratchet says.

"I thought we knew that."

"Yeah, but it might be a pretty serious case, as it turns out. You wouldn't happen to know a spirit by the name of Thekron, would you?"

"People keep asking me if I know who this Thekron character is," I say. "Is he famous or something?"

"No, sorry, sorry," Ratchet says, picking up one of the binders and thumbing through it. "Then would you know a mortal named... Yep, here she is... Helen Smith?"

"...How is she related to a spirit named Thekron?" I say.

"You do know her, then?" Elmtree says.

"Yeah, she... She was the pastor of the church I used to go to," I say. "Until she got all judgey and kicked me out."

Ratchet frowns. "She kicked you out? Not the other way around?"

"How would I kick out a pastor?"

“Nothing, it’s just... That means I don’t know quite what to make of this charge.”

“Please, it would make this far simpler for all of us if you would tell Jenn the details of the case,” Artene says.

“Sure thing, sure thing,” Ratchet says. “Says here that ever since your last discussion, Ms. Smith is no longer able to carry out her pastoral duties; this hindered Thekron’s various and sundry plans, so he holds you responsible and wants some amount of restitution.”

“...I have no idea what to make of that,” I say. “I didn’t think what I said had any effect on her.”

“I don’t think this case is as bad as Ratchet’s making it sound,” Elmtree says. “All you need to do is go in there, tell the truth, and we’ll handle the rest. You just started seeing spirits last night, right?”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I say.

“Cool. Then everything should be fine.”

I frown. “So I just need to say ‘I didn’t do it’ and that’s enough evidence?”

“Equinox has no need for the same sort of rigor as is found in mortal courts,” Artene says. “The whole realm is covered with a charm of truth-telling, so all that is required is your statement.”

“...Wait, really? I can’t lie?”

“Try it,” Artene says.

“I’d rather not get another headache, thanks,” I say.

“Ah, so you can learn.”

A capsule pops into Ratchet’s mailbox pipe with a ding. “Ah, they’re ready for us,” he says, pulling it out. “C’mom, let’s go!”

Ratchet leads us out of his office into the corridor, walking to the middle effortlessly. I hurry to keep up so that we don’t get separated, making sure I don’t step in between tiles and trip myself.

“Just missed it,” Ratchet says as we reach the center. “I swear, she times it so I’ll have to wait.”

“So where are we going?” I ask Artene.

“Libra’s High Court,” Artene says. “A place of great authority.”

“Anything I should know before we head in?” I ask.

“Don’t speak unless you’re spoken to,” Ratchet says. “And, when you are spoken to, be as respectful as you can. Imagine you’re meeting the most famous person in the whole world and multiply that by roughly a million.”

“Got it,” I say.

“Also, we may be waiting for a while,” Elmtree says. “We’re on her time, not the other way around.”

“Speaking of waiting...” Ratchet says, tapping their foot.

Elmtree looks over to me. “Have you looked up yet, Jenn?” she says.

“Up?” I say. As I do, I gasp.

Above me, surrounding the midsection of Equinox, is a plate glass window. On the other side of it is a dazzling view of a night sky filled with more stars than I’ve ever seen. I feel like I could reach out and touch them. Around them, I see swirling streams of colored light, seeming to ebb and flow around the distant stars.

“Are we in space?” I say.

“Kinda,” Elmtree says. “We only have this air and that glass between us and the stars, so they’re bright and beautiful as can be. Quite a view, huh?”

I stare out into space, pondering the infinities of the universe.

Well, this universe, at least. Is this really different from the one I know? Because that part’s still super-wild.

“What’s all that swirly stuff?” I ask.

“Disentwined souls,” she says. “Souls that have lost their connection to themselves and are now nothing but free-floating power. It might be possible to regather them, but we haven’t figured it out yet. Libra’s made it illegal for anyone to gather them in case we ever do find a solution, though.”

I stare at the swirling souls, wondering how many millions of stories are lost in those pulses of color.

“Here we go,” Ratchet says, bringing me back to reality. He steps forward as the color of the oncoming doors shifts from blue to indigo, leading us across the rotating strips towards a pair of impressive oaken doors ensconced in a purple stone arch.

As I walk across the rotating strips, still catching glimpses of the sky above, my foot lands on two of them at once, causing me to lose my balance.

Artene steps in, taking hold of me and preventing me from busting my face on the linoleum surface. “Are you alright?” she asks, looking me in the eyes.

“...Yeah,” I say. “Thanks.”

She smiles. “I would not be doing a very good job of protecting you if I allowed you to trip, hmm?”

“Yeah, I guess not,” I say.

“C’mon, c’mon,” Ratchet says, opening the doors. “Step quickly!”

Beyond the doors, the chamber is massive. Cathedral-like, even; the seats are essentially pews, which only adds to the similarity. My feet echo against the stone floors as we walk in. I look around the chamber; there are a few bored-looking spectators, but I don’t see anyone quite so worthy of attention as they’re propping up this Libra character to be.

I try to count the pews as we walk up to the front of the court, but I lose count around two hundred. I guess when it’s the sole source of judgment in the non-mortal realms, you gotta build for a big crowd.

Makes this feel pretty awkward, though.

“So, is this—” But before I can continue, Artene has placed her hand over my mouth. She raises a finger to her lips.

Guess they were serious about that “don’t speak unless spoken to” business.

When we reach the front of the hall, we take our seats on the defendant’s side and wait. I, still in the middle ground between drunk and hungover, welcome the respite.

For the first hour, at least.

The seat that, I assume, is reserved for this Libra is massive. It looks more like a couch than a seat, though the towering back suggests otherwise. I guess souls don’t have the same physical restraints as humans? The doors were about twenty or thirty feet high, so at least that puts an upper limit on things, but still. How am I going to feel around this massive arbiter of justice?

We wait.

I count to a thousand in my head.

We keep waiting.

Nothing happens.

I keep trying to make eye contact with Artene, but she’s staring straight ahead. Same with my new goblin and dryad pals. (“My New Goblin and Dryad Pals” would be a top-shelf kids TV show name, TM TM TM, I own it now, plz don’t steal.)

Nothing happens.

Still.

I count to a thousand again, and then count backwards from a thousand back to zero.

My stomach starts growling.

How long has it been?

I'm about to snap and ask Artene what's going on, but just as I open my mouth, the doors behind us open and a booming voice cries out, "All rise for High Judge Libra!"

I stand up and check out of the corners of my eye to see what my defense team is doing. Watching them keep their eyes facing forward, I do likewise. Though, let the record show, I'm not happy about it.

(Is "let the record show" the term? Am I doing this right?)

After another few minutes of waiting and listening to footsteps, growing ever closer, I finally catch a glimpse of Libra, straining my eye to catch a peek.

I'm gobsmacked.

OK, but real talk, I'm starting to see why those classical artists made the gods and goddesses so attractive. I can't even call her beautiful; it's too small of a word. She's awesome. Libra's topaz skin glows, as if illuminated by an inner light, which reflects off her impossibly shiny, impossibly dark hair. Her posture and bearing make me sit up in my seat.

I see what Ratchet meant about being star-struck. I'm enchanted. And I feel very, very small in her presence, even beyond the size difference.

"Please forgive the delay," Libra says, looking at me as she takes her seat. Her voice is crystal-clear and warm; not at all the booming bass one might have expected given her height. "I encountered an unexpected difficulty on the way over."

I nod, not sure if I'm supposed to speak or not.

"The prosecution has not arrived yet?"

"No, High Judge," one of Libra's entourage says. "We have not been able to locate them."

Libra frowns. "That hardly seems fair," she says. "Jenn here, after all, has a far more limited schedule than the rest of us." (She knows my name. BREATHE, JENN.) "We shall hear Jenn's defense, and allow the prosecution to make its case later. Jenn? Please rise and come to the stand."

As I stand up, I feel my legs tremble; I catch myself on the arms of the chair.

"You are nervous?" Libra says.

"Y-yes," I say.

“I will not tell you not to be nervous,” she says, her voice warm and oozing with empathy, “for I cannot order your feelings anymore than anyone else could. I will tell you, however, that no harm shall come to you in this chamber. All we desire here is justice.”

Right. Justice. Yeah. Deep breaths, Jenn. You can do it. For justice.

Through sheer willpower, I make my way to the stand without fainting, making a point to avoid looking at Libra for fear of losing all hope. Once at the stand, I’m able to lean against it, so at least if I do lose consciousness, I have something to hit my head on to make it look even more dramatic oh God oh God I need to pull myself together.

“Tell us your story, Jenn,” Libra says. “What happened between you and Wendy Smith?”

“Well,” I say, “she told me that I wasn’t allowed to bring my girlfriend to church with me anymore, and I told her that she was the kind of person Jesus was talking about in Matthew 23, and that I hoped that she would stop being a bigot soon for all of our sakes.”

A brief silence in the chamber.

Every eye is on me.

Did I do something wrong?

Am I not supposed to know my Bible after going to church pretty much every Sunday of my life up until a few months ago?

“...And at that time, were you aware of Thekron’s involvement, correct?” Libra asks.

“Correct,” I say. “I didn’t know about any of this until last night.”

“Very good,” Libra says. “Thank you, Jenn. You may return to your seat.”

I do, walking with more confidence on my return trip. This is still scary, but at least I know that Libra’s on my side.

“Even lacking the opposition’s argument, this case is impossible to push forward,” Libra says, still looking at me as I take my seat. “Case dismissed. All charges against the accused are dropped.” With that, she taps her gavel and rises to her feet.

...That’s it?

We waited for God-knows-how-many hours for that?

“Excuse me?” I say, indignant.

Every eye in the courtroom locks onto me.

I freeze.

Nobody breathes for a few seconds.

My cheeks burn red-hot; I can feel the heat radiating off of them.

Oh, God.

I'm gonna die.

This is how the story of Jenn Lewis ends.

Can I melt into the floor now? Or is this going to be a drawn-out thing?

"I... I mean..." I say, meekly raising my hand, "...excuse me?"

"Speak," Libra says, her tone lowered, though still not unkind.

"I..." is all I manage to say for a moment.

I feel a surge of warmth and confidence rising from my gut and filling my whole being. I rise to my feet and say all at once, "I just feel I could have submitted all of that in writing, is all."

I'm either dead, or...

No, I'm definitely dead.

I look over at Artene, who gives me a sly wink. I smile, but try to play it off as... I don't know, what do you play a smile off as? A twitchy eye? I go with that.

"Are you questioning my judgment, then?" Libra asks, sitting down again.

I weigh my words as carefully as I can. I'm talking about the level of precision used to move around grains of rice with needle-nose pliers here.

"No," I say. (Good start, Jenn! Keep it going!) "...But I am questioning your methodology and workflow. It seems inefficient for your time and, as you noted, mine. Your judgment is solid, but I'm not sure you have all of the relevant information."

Again, I wonder if melting into a puddle is an option. I look around for some sort of Jenn Melting Ray. Alas, no such luck.

To my surprise, Libra reaches into the pockets of her enormous robe and pulls out a pencil and paper. "I shall note your complaint," she says, writing. "Your feedback is appreciated."

Wait.

Really?

I look over at Artene, but she's just as surprised as I am. Same for Ratchet and Elmtree. I even hear some murmuring from the dozen or so spirits behind us.

"Now, if there are no further interruptions..." Libra says with a smile, once again rising to her feet.

The chamber doors bang open behind us.

A figure comes sprinting in, full stretch.

“Libra!” he yells, panting as he reaches the front.

“Lethanos?” Libra says, just as surprised to see him as I am. “What is the matter?”

“He’s back,” Lee says, panting for breath. “Erebos is back.”

Everyone — except for me — is visibly and audibly unsettled by this news. “It must be a mistake,” Ratchet says.

“I wouldn’t say he’s back unless I saw him with my own eyes,” Lee says. Then, turning to me, “It took me a while to verify it, but it’s definitely him. And I’ll give you one guess which mortal he’s working with.”

“Brody,” Elmtree says. “So did he conquer him outright, or was it a mutual agreement?”

“Brody conquered him,” Lee says.

Nobody says anything for a moment, stunned by this news.

“Hold up, what’s going on?” I say.

“No time to explain,” Artene says. “Libra, we need an injunction right now to keep—”

She stops short with a gasp.

“Artene?” I say.

“Steph,” she says, a look of terror in her eyes. “She is in danger.”

“What?”

“She is calling me, and I can sense... Jenn, we must go to her now.”

“I’m coming, too,” Lee says.

“You?” Ratchet says. “When’d you find a sense of nobility?”

“Please, Steph is in danger,” Artene says. “We all need to work together on this. Let us go.”

“Lead the way,” I say.

Artene takes my hand in her left and Lee’s in her right.

“We’ll keep working on your case,” Elmtree says. Artene nods.

“Libra, would you please dismiss us?” Artene says.

“Certainly,” she says, waving her hand. “I wish you well in your endeavors.”

A second later, we’re gone.

Chapter 12

We arrive in Steph's kitchen, and there's nothing good about the situation.

(Oh, except that it looks like that water damage hole in the ceiling finally got patched. She had to bug her apartment's maintenance crew, like, five times about that.)

Steph is standing in front of us, her eyes big and her legs trembling. Behind her, a man has a knife to her throat and her arms tied behind her back.

Well, "man" is too high a title for him.

"Brody."

"You remembered!" he says, grinning. "I've been on a bit of a power spree, and I realized that I could find your little friend from last night."

"Leave Steph out of this," I say. "Let her go. She has nothing to do with it."

"Hmm..." Brody says. "You came to her rescue, and I can use her as a bargaining chip. Letting her go sounds like a bad idea at the moment."

"Why have you entered into an arrangement with Erebos?" Artene asks. "Did I not warn you about such spirits?"

"Yeah, you said that they tend to manipulate people in an effort to gain power," Brody says. "Sounds awesome to me. We're getting along just fine so far, thanks. That whole program you had me on was going way too slow."

"So you struck a deal with an unbalanced, power-hungry, disgusting excuse for a spirit," Lee says. "Sounds like you, you—"

"I'm doing fine, by the way," Steph says.

"Hang in there, Steph," I say. "You're gonna be fine."

"Don't make promises you can't keep," Brody says.

"What do you want?" I say. "Steph's your bargaining chip. Let's bargain."

He grins. "You."

"What about me?" I say.

"I want you, Jenn. I almost had you, and if you hadn't gotten that little burst of power, I would've had you."

"I only got into that elevator because I got that power, you idiot," I say.

"You really want to call me an idiot right now!?" he says, pressing the knife closer to Steph's throat.

"Yeah, I agree with a moratorium on name-calling for the moment," Steph says.

"So, what? You want me to just give myself up to your clutches?" I say.

"I think it's a reasonable trade," Brody says. "A life for a life."

"Yeah, right," Lee says. "No offense to you, Steph, but Jenn's soul is way more powerful. This deal is bogus."

"I mean, I could just kill her now and take her soul," Brody says, now grazing Steph's neck with the blade.

What do I do?

What *can* I do?

"Go ahead, then," Artene says. "Kill Steph."

Hold up, what?

"Your misdeeds here in the mortal realm will soon be rectified. Jenn has been cleared of any charges in her other case, and you will soon be stripped of your new-found powers. To be quite frank, your actions in this moment are trivial at best."

I look over at Artene, her calm and cool posture standing in stark contrast to Brody's billowing rage.

Brody scowls. "There's no way what you're saying is true."

"Erebos is telling you right now that it is," Artene says. "You have profoundly bungled this, Brody. And you had best think long and hard before you try something like this again on my watch."

Brody looks at Artene, then at Steph, and grits his teeth.

After a moment, Brody shoves Steph in my direction. I catch her, holding her close, feeling her pounding heart.

"There's always another move!" he shouts before disappearing from view.

I feel Steph's heart slowly, very slowly, return to a normal rhythm.

"...Thank you," she says, her arms cinched around my torso. "I... I didn't know what to do, so I called for help, and..."

“You absolutely did the right thing,” Lee says.

“She cannot see you,” Artene says.

“See who?” Steph says, loosening her grip on me and looking around.

“Steph... Are you prepared to see the realms beyond your own?” Artene says.

Steph sighs. “At this point, that would probably be best, huh?” she says, releasing herself from my grip and standing upright again. “For self-defense, if nothing else?”

“It’s not so bad so far,” I say. “...I mean, it’s terrifying, and I don’t know from moment to moment if I’ll still be alive most of the time, but... not so bad.”

Steph smiles. “Well, with that ringing endorsement... Yeah. Let’s do it.”

Artene places a hand over her eyes. “See beyond the mortal realm,” she says before removing it again.

Steph blinks as she looks around. She gives a yelp when she sees Lee. “Who are you? How long have you been standing there?”

“Nice to meet you, too,” Lee says, extending his hand. “The name’s Lethanos.”

“O-oh...” Steph says. “I’m... Steph. But I guess you knew that?”

“I guess I did,” he says. “C’mom, let’s get back to Equinox. We’ve got work to do.”

“Equinox? What’s that?” Steph asks.

“Oh, we have so much to catch you up on,” I say, taking her hand and Artene’s. “Get reading for a tugging sensation.”

We arrive back in Ratchet and Elmtree’s office, this time with another member of our ever-expanding crew. I feel like I’m about to hit my party member limit in a JRPG.

Steph looks around Ratchet’s office quizzically. “I was expecting, y’know, more chalices or whatever,” she says. “Fancy fantasy stuff like that.”

“They’re off getting cleaned,” Ratchet says.

“I guess goblins speak sarcasm, too,” she says.

“Welcome to Equinox,” I say. “Steph, this is Ratchet and Elmtree. They’re helping to make sure Brody gets his just punishments. Ratchet and Elmtree, this is Steph. She makes the best hot chocolate in the universe. ...Er, multiverse?”

“Whichever you’re more comfortable using,” Ratchet says.

“So, are we gonna bust Brody soon?” I say. “Restore order amongst mankind? Do all that good stuff?”

“We’ve hit a snag,” Elmtree says.

“A snag?” Artene says.

“So far, he hasn’t broken any of Equinox’s laws,” Ratchet says. “Mortal laws, sure, but he hasn’t used his spiritual power for any of his killings. It’s been more of the... stabby and slicey way of doing things.”

I shudder.

“But wait, Artene here just said that if he killed me, it’d be all spirit-illegal or whatever,” Steph says.

“In that case, it would be,” Ratchet says. “You know about our realms. Most people don’t. What happens in the mortal realm isn’t in our jurisdiction until it reaches a way bigger level than this.”

“That sounds terrible in a lot of ways,” Steph says.

“Yeah, it really kinda does, huh?” Ratchet says.

“We’ve got to take the fight to his turf,” Elmtree says. “Your turf, that is.”

“We’re going to sue him?” Steph says.

“We’re going to kill him,” Lee says. “More specifically, you and Steph are; we can’t be directly involved.”

“Didn’t I already kill him, though?” I say.

“Yes, but this time, we know better than to give him a second chance,” Artene says. “This is the best solution.”

“...And it won’t be illegal?”

“He has threatened your life already,” Artene says. “If it is done honorably, then there will be no legal complaint against you.”

“OK, sure,” I say. “How are we going to kill him, then? Have me dress all slutty and wiggle my butt as a distraction while Steph guns him down?”

Nobody says anything for a moment.

“...You know, if we can catch him off-guard...” Lee says.

“I was kidding,” I say.

“Doesn’t mean it’s a bad idea,” Ratchet says. “How slutty can you dress?”

“Why are you still helping us plan this?” I ask. “Aren’t we venturing out of your jurisdiction or something?”

“We all want to help stop Erebos,” Elmtree says. “He’s bad business for all of us.”

“Who is this Erebos person?” Steph asks.

Bless you, Steph, for voicing the question I so desperately want answered.

“He’s the spirit behind many of the atrocities committed in your realm over the last five hundred years or so,” Ratchet says. “We thought we finally had him sealed up, but it looks like even the best of plans can’t fully seal up evil.”

“So we’re going up a lecherous dudebro that’s in league with the spawn of darkness himself,” I say. “Any protips? Can we do double damage if we use water attacks against him?”

“I’d recommend just what you said,” Lee says. “Gun to the head. If you can shut down his brain, he’s done. He’d need somebody else to heal him, which isn’t going to happen. We’ll make sure of that.”

“Great,” I say. “So how exactly are we going to get him?”

“That... is an excellent question,” Artene says. “For now, we shall set up our base in your apartment.”

“Where it’s easier for him to kill us?” I say. “In what sense is this a good idea? Why don’t we plan it out in the higher realms?”

“We need more than a plan,” Lee says. “We need weapons, and there sure aren’t any around here.”

“And it’ll be safe?” Steph says. “Because, having recently been at the wrong end of a knife, I’d like to stay away from that in the future.”

“I shall protect you, Steph,” Artene says. “I swear it. So long as I am by your side, you shall suffer no harm.”

“And lying is forbidden here, so she’s telling the truth,” Ratchet says. “Seriously, if you die, you could sue the pants off of her.”

I cough. Steph raises an eyebrow at me. “Lying’s forbidden, huh?” she says. “So, Jenn, I bet you wouldn’t mind suing the pants off...”

“OK, let’s go back to my apartment or whatever!” I say, grabbing Artene’s hand. “Ready? Yeah? Let’s do it!”

“Watch your backs,” Elmtree says, placing a concerned hand on my shoulder. “I want to see you back here soon. Alive.”

Aw. Elmtree, I didn’t know we were developing this kind of friendship.

“I mean, the potential for a mortal-on-mortal lawsuit that’s legitimately held in Equinox is the stuff every lawyer dreams of!”

Ah. Well, I'll take what I can get.

"Let us be off," Artene says, taking Steph's hand. "Time is of the essence, even for those of us with both dates on our tombstones."

Chapter 13

We jump back to my apartment, and Lee and Artene get to work right away on doing their supernatural business that I still don't fully understand. "Get some protection spells up, yeah, Artene?" Lee says.

"Certainly," Artene says, waving her hands around my front door in a measured way.

As they do, I run and make a trip to the bathroom. I was holding it for a *long* time in Libra's chambers, y'all.

"So, your power," Steph says as I return. She's now seated on the couch as Lee and Artene place protective seals on the door. "Is it actually magic? Or are you just using 'spell' as a convenient catch-all phrase?"

"The idea of charms, hexes, and the like came from those that have dealt with our kind," Lee says, also putting up various enchantments. "They are, for all useful purposes, one and the same."

"Cool," Steph says. "You mind if I watch some TV?"

"...How can you be so calm?" I ask.

"What else am I gonna do?" she says, grabbing the remote. "I don't have the same power that you do, so unless there's something I should do...?"

"You do not have any, say, co-workers with a gun we could borrow, do you?" Artene asks.

"Uh, no," Steph says. "None that have admitted to me that they own a gun, anyway."

Who did I know that owns a gun?

"I suppose I could go out and purchase one," Artene says. "Or are there regulations against such things at this point?"

"I think there are, but that's not really my realm of expertise," Steph says, settling the cable box on some sort of food competition show.

I pull out my phone and check my notifications. Another text from Arthur (“We should totally do lunch sometime!” Ugh, dude, take a *hint*), and an email from...

Oh, yeah. That’s who has a gun.

She used it in a sermon illustration once.

“Listen to this,” I say, reading from my phone.

“Dear Jenn,

I’m sorry about how our last conversation ended. Since then, I’ve spent a lot of time thinking and praying and, despite what you may read on Twitter, thoughts and prayers can make a difference. I don’t expect you to forgive me, but I wanted to apologize for my insensitivity and ignorance. In the future, I will seek to be a better pastor to all souls, regardless of who they love. If we could set up a meeting in the near future so that I could learn more about your views of the church’s role in reaching out to non-traditional romantic individuals, I would love to hear them.

Yours in Christ,
Pastor Wendy Smith”

I look up at everyone else.

“...So?” Lee says.

“She owns a gun!” I say. “A hunting rifle of some sort! She talked about it in a sermon once, which was distracting to me at the time, but now it’s just what we need!”

“And the fact that she’s trying to reconcile, is, y’know, kinda good too,” Steph says.

“Yeah, but that’s a secondary detail at this point,” I say. “I’ll ask her to meet me here and to bring her gun because, I dunno, I’ve taken a sudden interest in hunting pheasants or whatever.”

“Or you could tell her the truth,” Artene says. “She is already aware of the alternate realms, so the story would not seem so far-fetched to her.”

“...Or the even better idea that Artene just had of not lying to a pastor! Both viable options!”

“Sure,” Steph says.

“Sounds good,” Lee says.

“That is our best next step,” Artene says.

“Right!” I say. “So who’s gonna talk to her?”

I look around.

Everybody looks back at me.

Right.

I should probably be the one to do it, since she emailed me.

“Fine,” I say, typing out a message explaining a rough outline of the details and asking if she can meet at my apartment. “Do we have a deadline for when we need the gun?” I ask.

“About half an hour ago,” Steph says, rubbing her neck.

“Steph is not wrong,” Artene says. “Highlight that this is an urgent matter.”

“Right. Highlighting. Got it.” I type in a few more sentences and my apartment’s address before hitting send. I make sure my phone’s off of silent mode and slide it back in my pocket.

“...So... Now what?” I say.

“Now we wait,” Artene says.

“I don’t know about you, but I’m worried about how this dude’s going to finish his risotto in ten minutes,” Steph says, still glued to the TV.

“Isn’t there anything we can do?” I ask, trying to feel productive.

“You’ve done enough so far,” Lee says. “And I mean that in a good and bad way. Though the bad stuff wasn’t your fault, it was... someone else’s. Can’t quite remember her name at the moment, though.”

“If I had known this series of events were about to unfold, of course I would have not advised Jenn to revive Brody,” Artene says. “But I could not have known what would happen, and neither could you.”

“Oh, I had a pretty good idea,” Lee says. “Jenn, you may recall that I was urging you to not get involved with Artene. But... that’s in the past now. What’s important is that we acknowledge that you were wrong and may have doomed all of us.”

“Doomed all of you?” I say. “Couldn’t Libra just put him in his place if he gets out of hand?”

“And what do you mean ‘all of you’?” Steph says. “I mean, I would’ve figured I’d be seeing thousands of y’all wherever I go now, but you’re all pretty sparse. What gives?”

“It takes a tremendous amount of energy to maintain this sort of form in the mortal realm,” Artene says. “Thus, only the most powerful spirits remain here. Most travel to the safe realms almost instantly by a force we do not fully understand; the rest, about two or three percent of people, are intercepted by one such as Lethanos or myself and remain in our retinue.”

“The lucky ones, in my case,” Lee says.

“Man, I have a lot to catch up on,” Steph says. “Oh geez, he’s scrapping the risotto and going back to the pantry! What a gutsy move!”

I sigh and take a seat next to Steph on my couch. Spirit-realm stuff is starting to melt my brain a bit. “So what’s the point of this show?”

“They have to tag-team with the other chefs on their team, see,” Steph says, “but they can only touch the ingredients or pans or whatever that match the color on their wristband. So he can’t touch that frying pan, but his tortillas are gonna burn if his teammate doesn’t pull ‘em off the heat. But she can’t touch the tortillas once they’re out! It’s really intense!”

I try to get into it, but my brain is going in seventeen directions and isn’t willing to be funneled into a cooking show at the moment. “I... Is it OK if I go take a nap in my room?” I ask.

“Of course,” Artene says. “There are four of us. As long as we do not go off on our own, we should be safe. Or, at least, we should be able to recover from any incident that may occur.”

“Right,” I say, getting back up. “Steph, I’m glad you’re into this, and you know I love food, but I need some time to decompress.”

“Totally get it,” Steph says. “I’ll turn it down a few notches.”

“Thanks,” I say as she adjusts the volume. “So... who’s gonna come and awkwardly watch me sleep?”

“...Well, I’m the natural choice based on experience, aren’t I?” Lee says. “That OK with you, Artene?”

“Very much so,” Artene says. “As you are not in a physical form, you could not do as much to protect Steph, who is the more vulnerable party here.”

“Right, Jenn. Just pretend I’m not even here,” Lee says, heading for my room. “...Unless that makes you feel less comfortable, in which case, pretend I am here, watching your every move, cataloging every breath, capturing every—”

“OK, OK,” I say. “C’mon, let’s go.”

I enter my bedroom, followed closely by Lee. As I shut the door, he hops back up on top of my dresser, reclaiming his perch.

“Of course you would,” I say, shutting the door.

“Old habits die hard,” he says. “Don’t worry, I’ll be quiet as a mouse.”

“...Actually, can we talk?” I say, sitting on my bed and kicking off my shoes.

Lee looks surprised. “You want to talk to me? Not Artene or Steph?”

“Yeah,” I say. “I mean, you’re the one that got me into this, so I thought you might have some answers.”

“Got you into this?”

“Yeah. You’re the one that made me see you, right?”

Lee sighs. “Well, honesty is the best policy, so... No.”

“...Excuse me?”

“I was at that bar to scout out Brody,” he says. “Artene’s activity had me concerned. I didn’t know you could see me until you acknowledged my presence, at which point I did a quick scan and discovered your little trial, which is what I assumed was the motivation for your being able to see me.”

“But you were looking in my direction,” I say.

Lee hangs his head. “I was... also scouting out Steph.”

“...Excuse me?”

“Equinox is in need of someone who can bring some big updates to Equinox,” Lee says. “I was looking for someone who could do that, and also keeping tabs on Brody.”

Y’know, I was starting to think I had a handle on what was going on, too.

“So, let’s take these one at a time... What about Artene’s activity was concerning you?”

“Artene has been acting oddly for the last few decades, to be honest,” Lee says. “I think she honestly wants the best for you, but there’s something off about her I can’t figure out. She gave him a huge dose of power, and we’re now reaping the consequences of that action.”

“She gave him that power?”

“He had some of it when you two met, and he got more from her when you revived him. She’s playing both sides of the ball, and I don’t know why.”

Well, that’ll be a topic of conversation in the near-future.

“What about Steph?” I say.

“You’ve seen Equinox,” Lee says. “It’s amazing, but it’s horribly dated. They’re wasting energy on pneumatic tubes and incandescent lights, not to mention monolithic justice systems, just because that’s the way it’s always been. I want to bring in somebody to change that. I think Steph might be that person.”

“...So why were you flirting with me like that last night?”

“Like what?” Lee says, sliding off the dresser and sitting next to me. “This too close?”

“No,” I say. It’s really not; there’s room for a refrigerator between us. He’s impeccably polite in spite of any other flaws he may have. “But... I mean, I guess the big question is, ‘Why me?’”

“Because you attract me,” Lee says, smiling.

I sigh.

“It’s true! It’s not the way mortals are attracted to each other — well, not exactly — but there’s an attraction between your soul and mine. I... I would do whatever it takes to keep you safe, Jenn. To make you happy.”

“So you revealed yourself to me when I was excessively drunk on the worst day of my life?” I say.

“I admit my timing may have been questionable,” he says. “On the other hand, I didn’t choose the timing.”

I shake my head and don’t say anything for a while. I hear the low chatter of Steph and Artene in the other room, distorted by a commercial for some sort of low-calorie snack cake.

“Why is all of this so hard?” I say.

“All of what?”

“All of... Life, y’know? Or, in your case, afterlife, I guess...”

“Because we all think we want life to be easy, when what we really want is for life to be hard,” Lee says. “Honestly, Jenn, would you have rather had what you’ve had the past twenty-four hours or so, or would you rather be moping around, searching for a new job and a new significant other?”

“I’d rather not be fearing for Steph’s life right now,” I say, rubbing my face in an attempt to regain some semblance of composure. “I’d rather not have my fears resting in the hands of a sorry excuse for a man who tried to molest me last night and now has unfathomable power.”

“Well, that’s reasonable,” Lee says. “And that’s our end goal. But for now, you need some rest.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. Give me your phone and put on your PJs or whatever. It’s gonna be OK.”

His smile seems so certain. I’m not sure I believe him, but I believe that he believes himself.

For the moment, that’s good enough. I don’t know what his endgame is, but I know he wants me to stay alive, and that’s all I need right now.

“Sure,” I say, standing up. “Here’s my phone. Can you use it in your current state?”

“Well enough,” he says, taking it. “Haven’t used this model before, but I’ll fake it.”

“Cool,” I say, digging through my dresser. “...Is this all an excuse to see me in my pajamas, though?”

“I can’t say it’s not an ulterior motive,” Lee says, grinning. “If you’d rather sleep as you are, that’s fine, but... Sleeping in jeans? The principle of it all seems...”

“Right, right,” I say, starting to strip down. Lee graciously turns his head.

“Keep talking to me so I know you’re still there,” he says.

“Oh my God,” I say. “I’m an adult and you’re *definitely* an adult. Given the circumstances, I think we have bigger concerns than you seeing my underwear.”

“That’s good, that’s good,” he says. “Keep it going.”

“I don’t know what to say.”

“Say whatever pops into your head. It doesn’t matter.”

“...I miss my ex,” I say, slipping on my pajama pants. “I really want to hear her voice.”

“I know the feeling,” he says. “What was your favorite thing to do together?”

“We’d go to the movies. The ones that had been out a few weeks, so we’d have the theater pretty much to ourselves. A little bit of time for us to just be us, you know?”

“Sure,” Lee says. “I remember when I would take... Ah, but that’s a long story.”

“Wait, wait, wait!” I say, now fully pajamafied. “You can’t start what’s probably a romantic story and not finish it!”

“You know, you say that, but the evidence suggests otherwise,” Lee says.

“...Fine,” I say. “You can look now, by the way.”

He does.

“...Well?”

“Less of a cat motif than I expected, but...”

“Oh, shut up!” I say, hands on hips.

“What am I supposed to say? I mean, are you comfortable?”

“Supremely so.”

“Then they’re perfect.”

“You’re not going to make a quip about bisexuals and flannel?”

“C’mon, Jenn. That’s not my scene.”

He’s right, of course.

I look him over and shake my head. “...Sometimes I forget that you’re not actually a devil.”

“Me, too,” he says.

I step towards him. He stands up and caresses my cheek.

“You really do look nice,” he says.

“Shh,” I say. “You’re most charming when you don’t talk.”

“So I’m told... Quite often, in fact...”

There’s a scream.

A familiar scream.

Steph?

Steph.

We both bolt for the door.

“You idiots!” Brody says, pulling an empty syringe out of Steph’s neck as I open the door. Artene is gone. Without a trace. Just gone. “You put protection on the door, but not the rest of the apartment!?”

The TV is still on. Looks like scrapping the risotto was a good idea.

Everything is happening at once and I can’t grasp onto any of it. Brody turns to me and raises his hands, about to strike.

“JENN!” Lee says.

I have a moment of lucidity. I see the knife sitting on the counter from when I was cutting into that watermelon the other day; I try to use my power to send it through Brody’s head. My aim is true, but just before it would’ve hit, he disappears, leaving Steph to drop to the ground, limp as limp can be. The knife clatters to the ground after bouncing off the wall, leaving a sizeable gash. The least of my concerns right now.

“Shit,” Lee says, kneeling beside Steph.

As he kneels, I see a reddish-pink cloud of ooze-gas appear in the air around where Brody was standing. Without thinking, I rush over to it and scoop it into myself.

“Artene!?” I say, praying. Give me this one, God. Please.

“Wh... who are you?” an unfamiliar voice says. Not Artene. She sounds weak. Exhausted, too.

“I’m Jenn,” I say. “Who are you?”

“Persephone,” she says. “Part of her, at least... I think my soul got split. I was trapped inside Erebus for the last few decades, and now...”

“Wait a minute,” I say. “Are you *the* Persephone? From when Artene was alive?”

“Um... probably?” she says. “Honestly, right now I’m not too sure about anything.”

“Jenn, we have bigger fish to fry right now,” Lee says.

“Right,” I say, now joining him at Steph’s side. “What did he do to her? What was in that syringe?”

“Soul Sugar,” he says.

“...OK, I’ve gone from bad to different but also bad,” Persephone says.

“What’s Soul Sugar?” I ask.

“Very, very bad news,” Lee says. “If we don’t cure her fast, she could be gone. Permanently.”

“But it’s just poison, right? I mean, I don’t want her to die, but...”

“Soul Sugar isn’t natural,” Lee says. “It’s harvested by... Well, I don’t want to get into it now, but...”

“It’s a drug,” Persephone says. “For immortals, it creates a sort of high, and it’s the only way most of us could achieve such an experience in our current state. Mostly harmless unless you use way too much of it. But when it’s introduced to a mortal soul, it has a dissociative effect; your friend’s soul and body are even now beginning to separate, which is very, very bad for a mortal.”

“Steph...” I say, looking down at her, watching her take tiny, desperate breaths. “What can we do? Is there a cure?”

“First things first,” Lee says, looking around my apartment. “We need to put up a protection network that will actually protect us. We need a solid foothold in the mortal realm.”

“No, first we need to cure Steph,” I say.

“Let me know what you need, and I’ll help,” Persephone says. “Anyone against Erebus’s crew is a friend of mine. I’m pretty weak at the moment, but I’ll do what I can.”

What the hell happened to Artene?

She was talking a lot about the Infinite Abyss. Maybe I’m supposed to meet her there?

As I consider this possibility, though, my stomach churns horribly.

Of course, that only makes me think all the more that's where she is, holding that piece of my soul I swapped with her, based on the description she gave me.

But I can't think about that right now. Steph needs me.

Steph has, for better and for worse, stuck with me for most of my life.

"We need to kill him," I say. "We need to absolutely annihilate him. He deserves nothing less."

"Agreed," Lee says. "But he's apparently not only strong, but also well-connected. I don't know how he's gotten so far this quickly..."

"Why did he go after Steph, though? Why not me? And, God, Artene said she was going to protect us!"

"It doesn't matter," Persephone says. "In any case, we need the cure."

"But that means..." Lee says.

"I know. We have no choice."

"What? What does it mean?" I say.

"...We're going to visit the Sugar Queen," Lee says, taking my hand. "And we're going to hope she's in a good mood." He closes his eyes and, a moment later, we blink away.

Chapter 14

I am, for the most part, used to this whole teleportation business by now, but combined with the stress of everything else going on and the fact that I haven't eaten for about twelve hours by this point, when I arrive this time, I land square on my butt, padded by the most luscious carpet I've ever felt.

"Oh," I say, rubbing the silky surface with my hands. "Oh, this is wonderful,"

"...Not the customary greeting, but I can admire a mortal with good taste," the smoothest voice I've ever heard says. "And Lethanos! What a delightful surprise."

The voice belongs to a woman seated on a beautiful, ornate throne; the sort of thing that defines the phrase "opulence" without being garish. The rest of the cavernous room is similarly decorated, with everything giving focus to the throne itself and the woman seated upon it.

"Your highness," Lee says, taking a deep bow.

From my seated position, I bob my head in reverence.

"Rise, those of you that can," she says. "I prefer to talk to my guests eye-to-eye."

I scramble to my feet. As I do, I realize that I'm still in my pajamas and hope that she assumes that they're, I don't know, the new trend for mortals or whatever.

As I finally take a good look at her, smirking at me as she leans on one hand, like one would watch an opening act at an open mic night with material that doesn't fit the audience at all and is scrambling to make the jokes fit better on the fly.

(I've seen a lot of bad stand-up, y'all.)

I know next to nothing about fashion, but looking at the Sugar Queen feels like a master's class in how to look fantastic. Even in her relaxed

position, her outfit is breathtaking, simultaneously modern and timeless, and she looks like she doesn't even care. Like with Libra, I am fully aware that she's out of my league, and observe her beauty more from an aesthetic viewpoint as she idly watches us.

With six well-armed guards flanking her on either side, I guess she doesn't need to worry about much.

"No need for me to speculate on why you're here," she says. "But you know the terms. One soul for one dose, for either the sugar or the cure."

"Yes," Lee says.

"Lee, allow me to take it," Persephone says. "You know better what's going on."

"She doesn't take split souls, Persephone," Lee says. "I'm one of the few I know that's still intact, and time is of the essence."

"What's going on?" I say.

"Soul sugar takes time to harvest, ah... Tell me your name?" the Sugar Queen says.

"Jenn."

Her smile is overly sweet. "Jenn. A wonderful name. Well, Jenn, in brief, to acquire one dose of my product, I need the services of a fully-functioning soul for the duration of a century; same for the cure. As such, the market is, only naturally, rather fixed. To get a dose, you either need to work for me for a century, or..."

"...Or we need to find somebody else that will," I say.

"You're quick," the Sugar Queen says, now sitting up. "If you weren't so very alive, I might take you on as one of my guards..."

"Told you you're attractive," Lee whispers in my ear. The Sugar Queen frowns at this.

"So you're the one I'm stuck with for a century," she says. "Lethanos. I suppose they were scraping the bottom of the barrel and you were beneath it."

"It's not so far from the truth," Lee says, shrugging as he steps forward. "But hey, if I don't do a good job, you can keep me for an extra century. I'm in no rush."

"Hold on," I say, grasping at Lee's wrists.

"Jenn, c'mon," he says. "The longer we wait, the worse Steph's chances are."

“I know, but... You’re willing to do all of this? Give up a century of your existence, doing I don’t even know what, to stop Brody and save the universe or multiverse or whatever?”

“No,” Lee says, grinning. “I’m doing it for you.”

...Oh, frig me.

“You have beautiful eyes,” he says.

I grab him by the lapels and pull him in for a kiss.

He leans in.

Our lips meet.

Um.

Y’all?

If you ever have the chance to kiss an immortal being?

Absolutely, without question, you should do it.

(Unless they’re trying to steal your soul at that moment, in which case, y’know, make good choices, but even then it’s maybe still worth it.)

Lee’s kiss is confident — the confidence that comes from centuries of experience — without becoming controlling or rough. It is, to this moment in my life, easily one of the top three sensations I have experienced, and is very close to beating out the feeling I got during sophomore year in college from writing a term paper the night before it was due to save my 4.0 GPA for the number two spot.

Fat lot of good it’s doing me now, mind you. But still.

Right after it’s done, the only emotion I have is regret that it’s over. For a while, Lee has no visible reaction, and is busy looking deep into my eyes. After a moment, I see him smile. “OK, yeah,” he says, his smile turning into a grin. “I know what’s up.”

“Wait, what?” I say. “Something’s up? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’ll understand soon enough,” he says. “That kiss wasn’t a mistake, Jenn. It’s important that you know that. But we could both do better. And, if everything goes well, we will.”

“No, you don’t get to just do that,” I say, gripping his lapels tighter. “You’ve been cryptic this whole time, and I want some answers, goshdarnit!”

Lee sighs. “That kiss reminded me that I have somebody else waiting for me,” he says. “And I think you do, too. If this all goes right, we’ll see them again soon. I know that’s still cryptic, but...”

“But... you can’t break an oath?” I ask, remembering my conversation with Artene.

He smiles. “That’s a good way to put it.”

“I think I get you,” I say.

With that, he looses himself from my grip and walking towards the Sugar Queen. “It’s time, your highness!” he says, once again bowing low. “Take me away!”

“I have no time for these sappy displays,” she says. “...Not at the moment, at least. Get to work!”

With that, she snaps her fingers, causing Lee to disappear to who knows where. After he does, one of the guards walks to a far corner of the room.

“She’ll give you the cure,” the Sugar Queen says. “Unless we have further business, I will ask you to leave. The sooner you administer the cure, the better.”

“Sure,” I say, shell-shocked.

“I was serious about my offer, by the way,” she says. “You have something about you that I can’t quite put my finger on that makes you... Interesting.”

Oh, cool. I’m vaguely interesting. It’s all I’ve ever wanted. Can you feel my enthusiasm.

I still have to worry about my best friend being in the throes of death, so excuse me if I’m not so intrigued myself.

“I’ll keep it in mind,” I say.

The guard returns with a satin bag. Opening it, she reveals a syringe with a clear liquid inside and hands it to me.

“Thanks,” I say. She nods.

“Go on, now, then,” the Sugar Queen says. “Good luck or whatnot.”

As I walk away, I realize something that I probably should have thought about, and that Lee definitely should’ve thought about.

“There’s nobody left to teleport me out,” I say.

“You have to do it,” Persephone says, still inside me. “Don’t sweat it. Trust in your power.”

“Right,” I say, looking down at the syringe in my hands. “What do I do?”

“Visualize your apartment,” Persephone says. “The sights, yes, but also the feel of the floor and the smell of the couch.”

My couch smells?

...Oh, yeah, it totally does.

“Now hold all of that in your mind’s eye, close your eyes, and picture yourself there.”

I do.

The tugging sensation this time is more like a punch in the back and leaves me gasping for breath.

But it works.

I open my eyes and see Steph, still lying on the ground.

“Hurry, give her the antidote,” Persephone says. “In her heart.”

“Her heart!?”

“As close as you can get. If you puncture anything important, we can heal it later,” she says. “Do it, now!”

I stab.

I squeeze the plunger.

I wait.

I pray.

Chapter 15

An eternity comes and goes.

I'm praying hard. Something I haven't been doing throughout much of this experience, I realize.

Might be a good time to start.

At long last, Steph opens her eyes.

"...Jesus, I hate that guy," she says, blinking a few times.

"Steph!" I say. "Are you... Are you OK?"

"She's gonna take a while to fully recover," Persephone says, "but physically, she should be fine."

I wrap her up in a hug. "I thought I lost you," I say.

"I'm a bit lost at the moment, to be honest," she says, struggling to make it from word to word. "Oh, hey. Cooking show."

"Yes, good," I say, lifting her up and sitting her down on the couch. "Watch the cooking show. I'll get us some food or something. Bring us back to a form of normalcy, at least for a little bit. Lee, what should we..."

I trail off as I remember.

"Sorry," Persephone says. "This is a sucky situation. I'll help in any way I can, though. Especially if you let me camp out in your body, since I don't think I have the energy to hold myself together on my own at the moment."

"Yeah, for sure," I say. "So, how'd you end up here, anyway? Why are you here and Artene isn't?"

"Wish I knew," she says. "I don't remember what happened between this chunk of me getting pulled out from that Brody asshat and you taking me in."

"...OK," I say.

I look down at my hands.

I bring my thumb, index finger, and pinky together.

“Please,” I whisper.

There’s a knock at the door.

My spine stiffens. A moment of hope is immediately chased away by suspicion.

I mean, Artene would’ve just appeared, right?

I grab the knife from the kitchen counter and head for the door, peeking through the peephole.

I am immensely relieved to discover that it is a woman that I hated until a few hours ago, carrying a weapon-shaped case in her left hand.

I unlock the door and greet my former foe.

“Pastor Smith,” I say, now realizing that I’m still holding the knife. “Sorry, this is...”

“No need for apologies,” she says, her Oklahoma accent just as prominent as ever. “I had to chase out a similar situation not too long ago myself, so I understand completely. Those pajamas look very comfortable, by the way. Can I come in?”

I’m too dazed to understand if the pajamas comment was sarcastic or not, but in any case, she seems... She seems different.

And in her case, different is good.

“Please do,” I say, shutting the door behind her as she steps into my apartment and locking all of the locks. “Can I get you anything to drink?”

“You got any Dr Pepper?” she asks, setting the rifle case on my coffee table.

“I should,” I say, checking the fridge and pulling out a can. “You want a glass?”

“Nah,” she says. “Mind if I sit, though? If nothing else, I need to teach you how to work the weapon.”

“Of course,” I say. “We... should probably talk about some other things, too.”

“Oh, hey, you’re the bigot lady,” Steph says. “Nice to meet you.”

I let out a yelp. “I... I’m sorry! She’s not herself, she’s...”

“She’s right,” Pastor Smith says with a small chuckle as I hand her the drink. “It’s an apt label. I’ve been a bigot. I hope I’m getting better, though. C’mon, sit down. Let’s talk. You two aren’t in a rush to get anything done, are you?”

“We’re mostly waiting for Steph to get over being poisoned,” I say. “And it’s the three of us, not two.”

“A spirit, huh?” she says, looking around suspiciously. “You be careful with spirits, Jenn. Take it from me.”

“Oh, I know,” I say.

Although, to be honest, my experience has been worse with twentysomething men, but that’s another story.

“I hope that you can forgive me, Jenn,” she says. “And I wish I could blame my idiocy on Thekron, but my prejudices existed long before we ever met. He just... incentivized them.”

“What was his deal, anyway?” I say. “I mean, the church didn’t have much of a backroom-spirit-worshipping vibe to it, and I certainly didn’t notice anybody’s souls being sacrificed to give him power, so...”

“Jenn,” Persephone says, “if you could lend me some of your energy so that I could project myself in here, I think I could help explain this situation more clearly.”

“Oh, uh, sure,” I say.

“Excuse me?” Pastor Smith says.

“Sorry, Pastor Smith, I’m talking to Persephone.”

“Call me Wendy, please.”

“Right. Wendy.”

“Pleasure to meet you, Wendy,” Persephone says, appearing in between me and Steph on the couch.

Wendy, after giving a small jump, says, “Likewise. ...You don’t look quite so demonic as Thekron, I have to say. You’re more... Would you be offended if I said you give me a feminine-version-of-Steve-McQueen vibe?”

Dang, she’s exactly right. I was trying to quantify Persephone’s level of cool, and that’s precisely what she is.

At the comment, Persephone laughed brightly. “I would be honored if you gave me that title,” she says. “McQueen’s a legend. And there’s a reason for that difference. On Thekron’s end, at least. See, he’s not as strong as spirits like me, so he needs a bunch of mortals’ energy to maintain his presence in this realm. Not many are willing to give that sort of energy out of the kindness of their hearts, so he chose to tap into your fear instead.”

“That lines up with my experience, yes,” Wendy says. “He told me that his strength came from me serving others in a ‘righteous’ way, but that seems to have meant making sure I keep myself an arm’s length away from the people that actually need my help and sticking with the people I’m comfortable with.”

“Two guesses for which group I fell into,” I say.

“In exchange for my support, he would give me different abilities. Nothing too extraordinary, but being able to remember things better, more energy to get things done... A few other perks, too. But I never suspected what I was doing was wrong. Thekron presented himself to me as an angel — a powerful, justice-delivering angel, sent to reward the righteous and punish the wicked.”

“‘Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God’ on steroids,” I say. “That does explain most of your sermons.”

“Most of the rest of the church leadership was under his command, too,” Wendy says. “We built ourselves up as a traditional church that accepts everyone, so long as they’re willing to... Well, the phrase we used was to repent and turn from their sinful ways.”

“But you meant ‘Stop being anything but straight and cis,’ right?” Steph says.

“Among other things,” Wendy says. “But yes. After our conversation, though, I was talking about it with my son... You remember Derek?”

“Yeah, from when I helped with the youth group,” I say. “He’s a good kid.”

“He is a good kid,” she says, smiling ruefully. “He... He started crying when I said what you had said and that you were leaving the church.”

“Crying?” I say. “I didn’t think I’d made that much of an impact on him.”

“He’s gay,” Wendy says. “Maybe bi, or something else; he’s still figuring that out. He’s out now, though, and I’ve made it clear that I still love him just as much. But when I said what I said and made it clear that everyone isn’t welcome in our church, he knew that my love for him was conditional.”

“Was it?” Persephone asks.

Wendy sighs. “That’s a good question. A year ago, if you said my son was attracted to men, I don’t think I would have believed you. But... Well, the best answer I can give you is that I don’t know. It definitely would have changed things, though.”

“But what about now?” I say.

“Now... I’m a work in progress,” she says. “Like all of us. I’ve had some good, long conversations with some of the non-straight folks from my seminary days, and they’ve almost all been happy to share their stories. I’m learning a lot, but I’m still struggling. I mean, it takes a long time to stop

viewing something as wrong, let alone to view it as right. I think I'm getting there, though."

"And you're bringing me a firearm," I say.

"Yes indeed," Wendy says. "I'm not a fan of murder, of course — the Bible's pretty cut-and-dry about that one — but this seems like more than even self-defense. World-defense, maybe."

"Hopefully it's not that bad," I say.

"Still," Wendy says, opening the case. "This is a—"

"A pump-action shotgun," Steph says. "Perfect for hunting turkeys. Literally. And maybe figuratively."

"Exactly right," Wendy says. "You ever used one of these?"

"When I was growing up, Dad used to take me out hunting all the time," Steph says. "Mostly so he wouldn't feel guilty about leaving me home with my siblings or my aunt. But yeah, I've been using these since I was fifteen."

"Well, then we're in luck," Wendy says, "because I'm absolute trash with it. Too much kick for me. For whatever reason, I got this in my father's will; I'm more of a rifle girl myself, but I'm out of ammo for those."

"This'll be way better," Steph says, visibly perkier. "We just need to aim this in Brody's general direction and pull the trigger and we've got 'em."

"I hope that's true," I say.

"Listen, if you need anything else, you have my email," Wendy says before drinking the last of her Dr Pepper and standing up. "Y'all recycle?"

"Leave it there and I'll take care of it," I say. She nods, setting the can back on my coffee table.

"I have other commitments for the day, but I'll be praying for you."

"Thanks," I say as she heads for the door. "You planning on starting a new church? I'm still looking for one."

"...Maybe," she says. "I'm waiting to see if my current one will shape up or not. Giving folks a chance to change is one of the big lessons I'm taking from this experience. But let's keep in touch, huh?"

"Sounds good," I say. "Godspeed."

"And also with you. That's the line, right?" she says before leaving.

Well.

That was not what I had expected.

But it was good.

"We get to shoot the stupidface guy soon, right!?"

Oh, Steph.
Thank God for you, Steph.

Chapter 16

“OK, here’s the plan,” Persephone says. “I know a few other souls that want to take down Erebus, and some of ‘em have inside connections. A buddy of mine has offered to help out. He’s gonna tell Brody that he has a way back into this apartment, and that you’ll be incapacitated. We, of course, will be waiting for him, ready to strike.”

“And by ‘strike’ you mean ‘shoot,’” Steph says, pantomiming the shotgun in her hands. “Right in the face. Kerblam-o. Won’t know what hit ‘im.”

“...Right,” Persephone says. “So. We’ll proceed, if you’re feeling up for it.”

“Oh, she’s definitely up for it,” I say. “This is how Steph acts when she’s focused.”

“Super-focused,” she says.

“Glad to hear it,” Persephone says. “This plan is going to take a little time, though. Maybe we should get something to eat?”

“...Seriously?” I say.

“Judging by the rumblies in your tumblies, you haven’t eaten in over eight hours, and that you’ll need to keep your energy up for the next phase, no matter how this ambush turns out.”

“Isn’t it pretty straightforward if he dies?” Steph asks.

“Even if he loses his mortal body, he’ll still hold a considerable amount of power,” Persephone says. “It’d shift the balance in our favor, but it doesn’t guarantee a victory.”

“Right,” Steph says. “I need to rethink my definition of what ‘dead’ means.”

“It does take a little while,” Persephone says with a smile.

“So... Pizza, then?” I say, pulling out my phone. “For delivery, I assume.”

“Yeah, going outside probably wouldn’t be a great idea right now,” Steph says.

“Are you going to be able to eat it in your non-corporeal state, Persephone?” I say.

“Kinda,” she says. “I can taste it through you.”

“...OK,” I say. “Wait, so you can sense all of the things I can sense?”

“Right. And in my current state, I can’t sense what you can’t sense. If I had a bit more power, I could, but I’m stuck with you until I reunite with the rest of my soul.”

“Are you totally separated?” Steph says, leaning forward. “Like, what if the rest of your soul got lost to the infinite void of time and space or whatever?”

“I can feel vague, imprecise notions about what’s happening to the rest of me,” Persephone says. “Combining that with my prior knowledge, I know that the rest of me is... unhappy. To put it mildly.”

Her usual stoic demeanor shifts to one of unrest combined with sadness.

“I’m sorry, Persephone,” I say.

“Don’t be sorry,” she says, brightening up. “Be ordering pizza instead.”

“Right, sure,” I say, looking up Pizza Tree’s number. (You have Pizza Tree where you live? They’re a local chain, I think. Super-thin crust with plenty of cheese. So good. Plus, they’re open late, which is a big plus for us right now.) “Bacon and mushroom good with you, Steph?”

“Always,” she says.

“Gotcha. Ordering now.”

The transaction goes through, no problem. In fact, compared to everything else that’s been going on today, the pizza delivery is a breeze, mostly thanks to Steph remembering to hide the gun before we open the door. The delivery guy is nonplussed by my pajama’d self (should I change before murdering the man that tried to kill my best friend, I wonder? No, I decide. He isn’t worth it) and hands over the pizza box and a receipt, the latter of which I sign. I leave him a generous tip for his discretion.

As I shut the door and catch a whiff of the pizza, I realize how deliriously hungry I am.

“Would you be terribly offended if I bit into the box right now?” I ask as I return to the couch.

“I’d be impressed, to be honest,” Steph says.

“Well, maybe I’ll stick to the traditional approach for old times’ sake,” I say, opening the box.

“Aw geez, I’m so excited,” Steph says, grabbing a slice of the bacon-and-mushroom-topped wheel of love, joy, and hope.

“Please, Jenn,” Persephone says. “I haven’t tasted food, second-hand or otherwise, in decades. Don’t make me wait any longer.”

“Your wish is my command,” I say, taking a bite of my newly-claimed slice. I watch as Persephone’s face lights up with pure delight.

“Oh my God, this pizza is so good,” she says. “Or maybe you’re just super-hungry and making it taste much better. In either case, keep going!”

I’ve heard of eating for two before, but usually the second party isn’t giving this much feedback in that case.

Still, I keep eating, and Persephone remains elated. It’s an unusual way of literally sharing a meal, but after a while, it grows on me. It’s like I’m getting double the satisfaction from filling my food hole.

“Should I give you two some privacy, or...?” Steph says.

“Sorry, sorry,” Persephone says, still grinning. “It’s just... It’s been a long time, y’know?”

“Don’t worry about it! You do you. Being alone at the moment is kind of a bad idea, yeah? Plus, if I left you two alone, then I’d be missing out on pizza, which makes it a no-go from the start.”

“I knew I liked you when we first met,” Persephone says.

“Although, since I paid for it, maybe I should just take it so that Persephone and I can enjoy some privacy...” I say.

“Don’t even joke about that, Jenn,” Steph says, putting on a melodramatic air. “Don’t take my beloved pizza away from me!”

“That pizza’s no good to you, Steph!” I respond in kind. “You deserve so much better!”

“Oh, my heart!” Steph says. “My poor heart can’t take it!”

“Maybe you two need some alone time?” Persephone says.

“Oh, no, I’m straight,” Steph says, now starting to blush.

“Never said you weren’t,” Persephone says. “Non-romantic relationships need alone time, too.”

“See, Steph? I can respect your straightness and still demand one-on-one time,” I say, grabbing another slice. “How would that even work,

though, Persephone? It's not like you can just walk into the other room or anything."

"You could just partition me off."

I freeze mid-bite.

"I could what?"

"Artene never explained this to you?"

"No, she didn't," I say. "I mean, the idea was mentioned, but... I could have left Brody sealed off and lived the rest of my life without ever worrying about him ever again?"

"It's not quite that simple," Persephone says. Then, licking her lips, "I'll tell you more if you take that bite."

She's a shrewd negotiator. I take the bite.

"Oh, God, it's been so long since I've had a good slice," she says with a contented sigh. "Anyways. As I was saying before, partitioning souls is possible, but it takes a pretty big chunk of energy to do so. Until you have a sizeable collection, it's not really worth it."

"So... Do you have a bunch of souls partitioned off inside of you right now?" I ask.

"Kinda," she says. "They were split, just like the rest of me. ...It's probably weird to think that I have so many souls inside me most of the time, but for the most part, we have a symbiotic — and silent — relationship."

"Not one for chit-chat with your captives?" Steph asks.

"Listening to that many voices at the same time is a one-way ticket to never getting anything done," Persephone says.

"So, you could just hold millions, even billions of souls captive forever?" I say. "That seems kinda... dangerous."

"It is," Persephone says. "But given enough time, the souls can band together and perform a sort of jailbreak by directing all of their energy in the same direction at the same time. That's probably what the rest of my soul is attempting to do right now, but I bet that Erebus is keeping us separated to make it more difficult."

"Have your souls ever tried to escape?" Steph asks.

"Once or twice," Persephone says. "I work hard to make sure they're happy. I create worlds that match their temperaments and allow them to interact with each other. The rotten eggs get their own private sectors, mostly as a courtesy to the others and the rest of society at large. They don't

give me much power, but I feel better knowing they're in here instead of out there."

"So, they all hang out and interact and stuff. Kinda like an MMO," Steph says.

"I'll pretend I know what that means and say yes," Persephone says. "You yourself have many souls within you right now, Jenn."

"I what?"

"The power that you received last night had to come from somewhere, right? ...And it looks like it was delivered to you pre-bundled."

"So how come they haven't escaped?" I say.

"Perhaps they believe in what you are doing," she says. "Or perhaps whoever partitioned them has effectively kept them from uniting their energy up to this point. Or perhaps they are simply waiting for more pizza..."

"Right, right," I say, taking another bite. "...How many do I have in me?"

"I can't say for sure," Persephone says. "Whoever wrapped up this bundle did a really thorough job. But, if I had to guess... Yeah, I would estimate somewhere around three hundred thousand."

The half-chewed pizza falls out of my mouth as my jaw hangs open, and I feel a strange lurch in my stomach.

"...Come again?"

Three hundred thousand?

I can't even get three hundred Twitter followers, let alone...

"You hold a tremendous amount of power, Jenn," Persephone says. "Didn't Lee or Artene tell you that?"

"Yeah, but... I thought they meant I had potential to do great things!"

"They all seem happy, though," Persephone says. "Like they're with their people. Whoever set up that bundle for you did it with a lot of care and tenderness."

"Well, that's something, at least." I say.

"Who's your friend that's coming to help?" Steph asks, doing her best to keep us on track.

"An old friend from my bounty hunter days," Persephone says. "He owes me a favor."

"Bounty hunting, huh? How's that work?" Steph asks.

"That's a topic for another time," Persephone says, standing up. "He's telling me that they're almost here. Come on, we need to get ready."

“Where are we setting up?” Steph asks.

“The elevator,” Persephone says.

Of course it’s the elevator. History has to repeat itself, I guess.

“Right,” Steph says, wiping her hands on her jeans and grabbing the shotgun. “Let’s go deliver some justice.”

I nod, heading for the door and leaving my apartment, hopefully not for the last time.

The hallway I’ve walked through a thousand times has a different air about it today. The space I use for nothing but getting from my front door to the elevator (or the stairs when I’m on a health kick) now feels imminently sacred; a place where something monumental is about to happen.

Hopefully in a good way.

“They’re coming up now,” Persephone says, having disappeared into my skull. I nod and relay the information to Steph, all the while praying my neighbors once again don’t have anywhere to be at this time of night.

Steph raises the shotgun and pumps it. “Oh, hey, it really does make that ‘cha-chunk’ sound,” I say.

“Focus, Jenn,” Persephone says. “You know your job, and you’re going to do it. Right?”

“Right,” I say. “Paralyzing Brody. I’m on top of it.”

The elevator dings as the car reaches our floor.

The doors slide open.

Steph begins to squeeze the trigger, but freezes halfway through.

“...Phil?”

The figure standing in front of us, as far as appearances go, is definitely Steph’s fiancee.

I immobilize him regardless, freezing his arms and legs in place.

“Steph? What’s going on?” he asks, eyes wide with surprise and fear.

“It’s a trick, Steph,” I say. “Shoot him.”

“But...” Steph says.

“What’s Jenn talking about, Steph?” he says. “Why are you going to shoot me?”

“Steph, please,” I say.

I see the shotgun shaking in her hands. C’mon, Steph, you’re not stupid.

But I get that you can’t shoot him.

Not unless you’re sure he’s a fake.

“...What’s my mother’s name?” Steph says, her voice rock-solid.
“What?”

“My mom. You met her last Thanksgiving. Say her name.”

Phil smiles. “Of course. Your mom’s name is Ma—”

BANG.

An explosion of noise.

“Fuck you,” Steph says. “My mom died when I was fourteen.”

Phil’s body dissolves into another form.

Not Brody’s, though.

“Wh—”

Before I have a chance to say anything else, I feel an instantaneous sharp pain as something pierces into my forehead.

The next moment, everything disappears from my senses.

Chapter 17

“Go to Steph.”

I know that voice.

Artene’s words echo in my...

Well, not my head. I can see a lot of blood pouring out of that. Kind of see, that is. It’s more like I’m sensing that it’s happening through someone else’s reactions.

A lot of blood. Like, that’s way too much if I’m going to survive, right?

“Jenn, listen to me,” Persephone says. “You’re in shock. Go to Steph. Now.”

Shock? Me? Just because I’m watching too much blood pour out of my head?

Also, what happened to Artene?

“Jenn!”

I feel myself being pulled by something. The sensation jerks me back into a version of sense that’s good enough for me to realize what’s going on.

“I’m a ooze-gas thing,” I say in a voice that I don’t recognize. “Oh, God, I hope that’s Steph pulling me in.”

The pulling stops.

I’ve stopped.

I’m inside something now, I think.

I can sense something else.

Someone else.

“...Hello?”

That wonderful, oh-so-familiar voice.

“Steph!” I say. “I... I’m dead!”

“He got away,” she says. “He teleported in, stabbed you, grabbed your body, and disappeared. I got a shot off in his direction and I might have clipped him, but...”

“You did everything you could,” Persephone says. “Now listen, Steph, time is of the essence. Do you remember Equinox?”

“The place with the goblin and cool plant lady, right?” she says.

“That’s the one. You have to teleport us there.”

“...How?”

“First, put down the gun. Then, close your eyes, picture it as fully in your mind as you can, and will yourself to be there. Got it?”

“I think so,” Steph says.

“Good,” Persephone says. “Lend her your energy, Jenn.”

“...How?” I ask. “Why can’t I see anything?”

“Don’t worry about that right now,” Persephone says. “Urge Steph to succeed. Invest your being into her performing the job she needs to perform.”

I do. As I do, I realize how much work Artene must have been doing for me, because it leaves me way more worn out than when I did it.

“That’s what it feels like to use your power when you don’t have a body,” Persephone says.

“Yeah? It sucks,” I say. “How long do I have to keep doing this?”

“You’re good,” Persephone says. “We’re here.”

I release whatever soul muscle I was using and immediately feel back to my very-recent self. The one after the stabbing, which is very confused about this whole scenario.

This is as good a time to tell you what it feels like to be a soul without a body. Are you ready? Here we go!

...

...

...

This concludes my explanation.

Any questions?

In seriousness, not having a body doesn’t feel like anything. I know that I exist, but I have no senses with which I can directly perceive the universe around me. My thoughts aren’t even thoughts; they pass through my consciousness and are gone before I can consider them. I know that I’m still me, but I can’t remember what that means outside of my immediate context. “Memory” isn’t the right word for what I “know;” at the moment, I have vague sensations regarding Steph and, to a lesser degree, Persephone,

but I can't physically sense them at all. When I "hear" Steph or Persephone talk, it's like I'm hearing it through Steph's ears.

"How do I see?" I ask.

"Imagine seeing," Persephone says.

"Imagine seeing what?"

"Anything. Start somewhere and go from there."

I imagine seeing a purple elephant. I don't actually see an elephant, but I do see the purple spine of a book, floating in space.

"I see a book," I say.

"Where do you usually find books?" Persephone says.

"On a bookshelf."

As I say it, I imagine the rest of the bookcase, and it fills in, as if it were spilling into my vision like water pouring out of a fountain. I realize that we're in Ratchet's office, and I begin imagining the rest of the room. It fills itself in; some of the items are still shadowy, but it's clear enough that I can comprehend the images that I'm seeing.

I go through the same procedure with the other senses. I imagine the feeling of Steph's clothes against her body; the generic scent of the cleaning supplies used in the office; the rasping but cheerful sound of Ratchet's voice. (Nothing to taste at the moment, but we'll get to that later.)

It's exhausting.

"Am I going to have to go through that every time I... We go somewhere?" I ask.

"No," Persephone says. "Not to that extent, at least. Just like everything, it's harder the first time. Eventually, you won't even need Steph to help you out! Although hopefully by then you'll be back in your body."

"Well, this situation is bad, but there is a bright, shiny silver lining," Ratchet says.

"What's that?" Steph asks. God, I can feel her mouth and tongue moving to make her speak, and it's so disconcerting. If I could feel all of that while I was talking, I'm not sure I could get more than three words out before stopping out of sheer weirded-outness.

"Brody killed Jenn using clearly supernatural powers, and Jenn is still self-aware enough to act as a witness against him. Isn't that right, Jenn?"

"Tell him yes," I say.

"She says yes."

“Good, very good!” Ratchet says. “Then we just need to get her to the point where she can project herself long enough to deliver her testimony, and we’ll have ourselves a case!”

“That sounds like it’s going to be hard.”

“Jenn says that—”

“That was more for us, actually,” I say.

“Jenn says what?” Ratchet says.

“Er... Nothing important,” Steph says. “Where’s the cool plant lady, anyway? She was nicer.”

“Elmtree is off working on another case,” Ratchet says. “We couldn’t hold up everything for your sake. ...Now that you’re back, though,” they say, grabbing a scrap of paper and scribbling something on it before stuffing it in a tube. “She should be here in a few moments,” they add as they send it off to, presumably, Elmtree’s office.

“How do I do the ‘projecting myself’ thing?” I ask.

“It’s simple, but it’s not easy,” Persephone says. “Imagine yourself — clothed, if you prefer; a lot of people forget that part first time around — standing in the middle of the room.”

I try it. Looking through Steph’s eyes (a bobbing and swaying proposition at times, since I don’t have control over them), I imagine myself standing in the middle of the office.

All I see is a flesh-colored blob wearing a cartoony t-shirt and jeans as I strain to keep it in place.

“It’s a good start,” Persephone says.

“It’s exhausting,” I say, releasing it back into the aether. “How did you do that for so long?”

“I was using your power,” she says. “With as much as you had, your mortal being acted as a catalyst to make it exponentially more powerful. Steph only has enough for herself, especially since she’s recovering from the Soul Sugar.”

“Heya,” Steph says. “Sorry I’m not as awesome and powerful as you are, Jenn.”

“I’ll allow it this time,” I say. “So how do I get better at doing this projecting myself business?”

“Just like anything else,” Persephone says. “You practice it. Over and over again.”

“...Right,” I say. “Let’s keep going.”

After about a dozen more tries, I'm finding it easier to maintain my projected form, but it still looks all... fake.

"Focus on endurance for now," Persephone says. "They won't be judging you on technique, but you'll need to appear before them as long as they ask. And remember to release if you feel yourself getting too fatigued."

"What happens if I don't?" I say.

"Your soul could disentwine and become so disconnected that you lose all sense of self," Persephone says.

Wait, hold up.

I could what now?

"...And why didn't you warn me about this sooner?"

"I've been keeping you in check," Persephone says. "You haven't come anywhere close to it. You're stronger than you think."

"Oh," I say. "Still, that's good information to know."

"Yeah, I'd rather not have Jenn disappear into a senseless void of nothing," Steph says. "Strongly opposed."

"Eh?" Ratchet says, looking up from one of their elephant-sized books.

"Sorry, I keep forgetting you can't hear them," Steph says. "Just ignore me unless I call you by name first, I guess."

The door swings open and Elmtree marches in, grinning from ear to ear. "He really killed her!?" she says. "I mean, I don't mean to sound excited, because it's generally terrible news, but he really did it!?"

"He really did," Ratchet says, keeping their eyes on their text.

"Oh, Jenn," Elmtree says, sighing as she closes the door behind her. "You're in Steph here, then?"

"Go ahead," Persephone says. "Show her you're here."

"Right," I say. I pour as much of myself into creating an image of myself waving to Elmtree. It works; in fact, this time, I look way more realistic and human than my earlier tries, but...

"I look different," I say. "I don't look like me. I mean, I kinda do, but that's definitely not me."

"Of course," Persephone says. "I mean, you don't think we all looked like goblins and angels and such when we were alive, do you?"

"I guess not, but..."

This version of me feels foreign.

On the surface, I look the same, but something's off.

The body I know showcases both my love of food and of walking to work (with the occasional jog when I'm feeling inspired); the wrinkles under the eyes that still remain from my failed attempt at getting into my dream grad school by rocking the GRE; the slight lean to the left from my torn ACL during one of those occasional jogs when I decided to "really test myself."

This version of me is just...

Boring.

"Jenn, I appreciate that you need to work through this and it's no problem that you do, but I hope that you notice that I am facilitating you using my body as your personal mirror."

"Steph, I hope you notice that I bought you pizza earlier," I say. Without thinking about it, I realize that I used my projected self to form the words. At least my voice sounds the same, more or less.

"Fair point," Steph says. "I guess we're even, then."

My projected self disappears as I find myself straining to maintain it. "That was awesome," Persephone says. "You'll be ready in no time!"

"Thanks," I say. "I think I need a second to catch my soul-breath, though."

"Of course," Persephone says. "And I wish I could help you out, but I'm barely a shadow of my normal self as it is."

"It's fine," I say. "We have plenty of time to get ready, right?"

Ratchet's tube mailbox dings.

"Get ready to go," Ratchet says, standing up as they retrieve the capsule. "That'll be our summons. C'mon, let's move out."

"Wait, what?" I say. "But... I'm not..."

"You're gonna be great," Persephone says. "And Libra'll understand if you need to take a break to collect yourself."

"OK," I say. As we leave Ratchet's office, you might expect me say my heart is pounding in my chest, but that's a physical impossibility. As a matter of fact, I'm rather calm about the whole thing considering the circumstances. "...And Brody will be there?"

"Since he's the defendant in a trial of this magnitude, if he doesn't show up, he'll be held in contempt of court and will have a bounty on his head. Any soul could then capture him without repercussion despite his mortal status," Persephone says. "In other words, either he'll be there, or we'll go get him."

“Right,” I say. “I... I’m not sure if it’s any better that he’s going to be there or not. If it’s better for me to be able to confront him, and therefore have to be in the same room as him, or if I’d rather have him out there, doing who knows what to the rest of the world.”

“For sure,” Persephone says.

“And hey, this’ll give Libra another chance to observe Jenn’s judgment, right?” Elmtree says.

“...Not now, Elmtree,” Ratchet says.

“Why would Libra need to observe my judgment?” I ask.

“C’mon, we’re late,” Ratchet says as they lead Steph across Equinox’s spinning tiles to Libra’s courtroom. “Let’s get this over with and—”

As they open the doors, the words escape from their tongue.

The place is packed.

Every seat in the massive chamber is filled with spirits of all shapes and sizes. Rather than going through a vain attempt at describing them all, I’ll leave it as sufficient to say that if you can imagine a figure, there’s a spirit in here with that same shape, size, and coloring.

To my surprise, not a one of them is saying anything.

Not to my surprise, every single one is watching us.

“Right,” Elmtree says. “Chin up, shoulders back, and walk. Don’t even look at Brody and his gang. We’ve got this.”

We walk in. More specifically, Ratchet, Elmtree, and Steph walk in, and Persephone and I ride along. “Persephone... Do you know what they’re talking about? With Libra and my judgment or whatever?”

“...I have some theories,” she says. “But that’s not important right now. Right now, we need to focus on your testimony.”

“We still have about three minutes of walking ahead of us,” I say.

“OK, fair,” Persephone says. “Listen, so, Artene has her problems, but one of her strengths is her ability to pick exactly the right person for a given task. She chose Brody at one point for some reason, right?”

“But she said he was a lost cause.”

“Well,” she says, “that may be what she said, but the truth is that he has proven far too effective in his role.”

“And what role is that?”

“I think... I think she wanted to offer a test of judgment. If I’m right, then this should all go pretty smoothly; Artene will come in and break things up before the situation can get out of hand.”

“Judgment? Whose judgment?”

“...I’ve said too much already.”

Oh my God.

Artene was acting on behalf of Libra.

They’re looking for me to help handle the lower courts they were talking about.

I mean, for the sake of dramatic tension, I’m probably supposed to be thinking, “HMM, WHATEVER COULD THIS TURN OF AFFAIRS MEAN? IT SURE IS MYSTERIOUS! HA HA HA HA HA!” But, like, it’s obvious, right?

“This was all for judge tryouts?” I say.

“Seems like that was the original intention, yes,” Persephone says.

“So this is all just... an audition?” I say.

“No. There’s something else at work here,” she says. “I don’t know who screwed up, but this is definitely off-script.”

“Was Lee in on it?”

“I don’t know,” Persephone says. “He’s more of a free agent.”

We reach our seats and sit down.

“And how am I doing so far?”

“Jenn, focus.”

“...Wait, am I still even—”

“All rise for High Judge Libra!” a voice from the back of the room cries.

I hear millions of spirits rise in unison. It sounds like a breeze rustling through a forest’s worth of leaves.

Steph keeps her eyes locked straight ahead. I feel the tension in her shoulders and her jaw and consider using some of my energy to relax her, but I might accidentally relax the wrong muscles, leaving her sprawled on the floor, so I decide against it.

Instead, I wait.

I understand, though.

If my spirit had a jaw, it’d be clenched too.

Finally, Libra arrives and sits in her position, still radiating that same aura of peace and assurance.

“Please, be seated,” she says. Everyone complies.

Millions of souls sit down at her command.

I’m really being tested to follow in her footsteps?

“Ratchet, the floor is yours,” she says.

“Thank you, High Judge,” Ratchet says, rising from their seat. “Your Honor. Brody is a mortal, true; but he is a mortal that poses a very real, very imminent danger to spirits across all of the realms. Furthermore, he has clearly violated the laws of Equinox by using his power to take the life of another spirit-aware and superpowered mortal as part of ensuring more power for himself. It is in the interest of every law-abiding spirit to see Brody punished for his actions to the fullest extent of the law.”

Ratchet goes on with his opening argument for a few more minutes, getting into more of the minutiae of our case. I’m busy studying Libra, trying to read her reactions. It’s hard; she’s a stoic soul, through and through. She’s listening to Ratchet’s words with rapt attention, though.

“Thank you, Ratchet,” Libra says as our lawyer finishes. “Mainstay? What is the defense’s opening statement?”

“No opening statement, Libra,” the snarling werewolf-like figure evidently named Mainstay says.

This leads to some murmurs from the crowd.

“...None whatsoever?” Libra says.

“We want the witnesses to tell the story for us.”

“That could be bad,” Persephone says. “They’re going to try and break you.”

“I’m ready,” I say.

“Very well, then,” Libra says, almost betraying an air of frustration. “Ratchet? Call your first witness.”

“Certainly,” Ratchet says. “The prosecution calls Jenn to the stand.”

“Go,” Persephone says.

I project myself standing in the witness stand. I hear a number of murmurs from the crowd. I don’t know if they’re judging me for my appearance or what, but I don’t have time to worry about that right now.

“You are Jenn Lewis, yes?” Ratchet says, approaching me with a bit of theatrical posturing.

“Yes,” I say.

“And you were killed by Brody, who is sitting just over there, only a few minutes ago?”

“Yes,” I say again, not allowing myself to look at him.

“And you are sure that he used powers beyond the mortal realm to kill you?”

“Yes; he used some form of teleportation to stab me with a knife through the forehead.”

I feel myself starting to strain.

“What Jenn has described is a clear violation of the Third Law of Equinox,” Ratchet says. “No further questions.”

“Way to go, Jenn,” Persephone says. “You’ve got this.”

“Jenn, do you require a break?” Libra asks.

“I... Yes, please,” I say.

“Go ahead. We shall allow the defense to question you later on.”

“Th... Thank you!” I say before disappearing.

“Objection!” Mainstay says.

“Overruled,” Libra says. “You heard her say in this courtroom that she has only had a few minutes to learn this new form. The fact that she held out for this long is remarkable; I will not force the witness to disentwine her soul. After the next witness, I will allow you to question Jenn, when she will be recovered enough to answer properly.”

“...Very well,” Mainstay says.

“Don’t worry, Mainstay,” Brody says. “Let them call their witness.”

“Is that good?” I ask Persephone.

“If Brody’s happy, it’s probably very bad,” she says.

“Ratchet? Your next witness, please?” Libra says.

“I call... Ah...”

“If you do not have any more witnesses, we shall allow the defense to call theirs.”

I watch Ratchet doing some quick mental math as he looks over at the defense. The smug look on Brody’s face seems to only add to his consternation.

“I call the portion of Persephone’s soul held by Brody,” Ratchet says, his voice faltering as he says it.

“This is bad,” Persephone says.

“Wait, what?” I say as a concerned murmur rises from the crowd of spirits. “Why is he calling... well, you?”

Persephone sighs. “Because Brody is very close to a checkmate, so Ratchet is trying a gambit.”

“Objection,” Mainstay says. “This case is between Jenn and my defendant, not—”

“Persephone has spent decades pursuing Erebos, and is known by this court to be a trustworthy judge of character,” Ratchet says. “In addition, a portion of her soul is currently inside my client’s host, providing a tangible connection between the two of them. Persephone alone will be able to provide a reliable and crucial testimony regarding their connection.”

“Agreed,” Libra says. “Brody, allow the witness to testify.”

A moment later, after some amount of grumbling from the defense’s side, Persephone appears in the witness stand.

“God,” I say. “What happened to you?”

The Persephone I see looks like she’s just run a marathon through a warzone. The one I know looked like she had been through some rough business, but now, looking at her dead eyes and impossibly slumped shoulders gave Steph goosebumps, and me some hypothetical shivers.

“He has been... unkind to me,” the Persephone hanging out with me says. (If this gets more confusing, I’ll introduce a clearer nomenclature to distinguish them.) “To say the least.”

I can’t believe I brought this guy back to life.

“Persephone, I have only one question,” Ratchet says.

“Yeah,” Persephone-on-the-Stand says, shaking herself out of a daze. “I’m ready.”

“What should we do?”

She looks me — that is, Steph — dead in the eyes and answers without hesitation.

“Run. Before he has a chance to consume you. Please. Run.”

Chapter 18

All hell breaks loose.

Or, at least, there are a bunch of spirits that break loose and start running around that look like they may have come from hell.

Sorry, I'm trying to keep things light, but it's kinda tough.

Too many things happen at the same time, but I'll try to talk through all of them.

The first thing I notice is Persephone — the one that, for the moment, is in the witness stand — makes a flying leap towards Steph and enters into her. The two Persephones combine, meaning that distinction is (thankfully!) no longer necessary.

I didn't offer the choice, but that's all of the good news. Here's the bad:

Brody, while Persephone is coming our way, stands up and charges Libra, absorbing her into himself.

To my surprise, she makes no effort to resist. The rest of the chamber is taken off-guard, too; what was previously a concerned conversation becomes yells of "Impossible!" and screams of primal terror as millions of souls begin to flee out the doors that I once thought were oversized, but now seem absurdly small to serve this purpose.

Through the huge doorway, past the crowds of souls, I can see the spinning rings of Equinox speed up, faster and faster, and I feel the force rock Steph's body as it fluctuates from its otherwise constant pace.

I feel a horrible shaking as Brody lifts his hands above his head, and I watch, horrified, as Equinox is torn in two.

"No," I say. "No no no no no."

The shaking gets worse and worse, and Libra's chamber begins to fall apart; a piece of rubble the size of Steph barely misses her as it crashes to the floor.

Brody turns his attention on me (Steph) and grins, conjuring some sort of spiritual blade in his hand.

“Help,” I say.

He steps towards up.

“Run, Steph. Please.”

Steph’s frozen in place.

I feel hands grasp Steph from behind, hear the words “Hold on” in her ears, and feel a familiar tugging sensation.

Next thing I know, I find Persephone standing in front of us in an unfamiliar environment, with our now fully-formed friend projecting herself in front of us, looking Steph over.

“He didn’t hurt you, did he?” Persephone asks, walking Steph over to a sofa.

“No,” Steph says, checking herself for any wounds. “We got out soon enough. But I guess we’re totally screwed now, though.”

“Well, I’m glad to be back in one piece,” Persephone says. “...But yeah, it’s not a pretty picture in front of us.”

I’m still reeling. He took Libra?

“Libra’s gone. Equinox is gone. We might be the only free souls left in the multiverse,” I say. “Is there no hope?”

“There’s always hope,” Persephone says. “But for the moment, let’s catch our breath. We need to lie low for a little while, and this place is as good as any to do it.”

I look around at the space we’re in, and the first thing I notice is Persephone herself; I’d only seen her in her split-soul projection version up until now. She now that I have a chance to get a better look at her, she looks somehow realer than before.

“Geez, Steve McQueen’s got nothing on you,” I say. “You look like a badass action movie heroine.”

“Badass action movie heroines wish they could look as cool as me,” she says with a grin. “C’mon, make yourselves at home.”

We’re in a smallish room — about thirty feet by twenty feet — with some couches, a bookshelf, a bed, a few houseplants by a window, and a small pantry, along with some tasteful landscapes on the walls. It’s nice, if a bit snug. I don’t notice what’s missing for a few seconds.

“...There’s no door,” I say.

“There’s nowhere else to go,” Persephone says, sitting down on the couch. “This is the whole realm. This and that sun outside, keeping it energized and lit and such.”

“Just this?” Steph says. “Seems kinda wasteful.”

“Since there are an infinite number of dimensions, there’s nothing to waste,” Persephone says. “I busted a soul using it to hide from the law and took it over after his trial went through and he was stripped of his power. The small size means that I can put up a lot more protection, so I’m a big fan. Anyways, c’mon, sit down. You’ll need as much energy as you can get for the next few steps.”

“Before that,” I say. “Now that you’re back with all of your... Well, your self, do you know anything else about what happened with Artene?”

Persephone sighs. “Jenn, look, I...” she trails off. “The short answer is no.”

“Well, we’re taking a break, right?” Steph says. “What’s the long answer?”

“Fair enough,” Persephone says. “The long answer is that Artene disappeared right after Brody got there. Didn’t even try to protect Steph. I escaped right after we got there and saw her looking over the scene, but she didn’t even acknowledge me. She just left Steph alone.”

The news hits me like an elbow to the gut.

“...Why?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she continues. “She’s always been mysterious. We’re going to have to do our best with our own plan instead.”

If she wasn’t grabbed by Brody, then where would she be? Maybe my instincts about her taking that part of me to the Infinite Abyss were right.

Or maybe she’s just a terrible person and I need to move on.

“We have a plan, then?” Steph says.

“If this Brody character is strong enough to take down Libra, then our options are limited to just a handful of options,” Persephone says. “Most of them involve desperation moves.”

“Desperation suits us well, though,” Steph says. “Maybe we should just focus on making sure everybody doesn’t die?”

“Good call, Steph,” Persephone says. “As I was saying, we only have a few options. First, we could attempt an all-out assault between the three of us and hope we get lucky. ...This is a very bad plan, and should be immediately disregarded.”

“Got it,” I say. “What other options do we have?”

“We could start recruiting souls to join our cause,” she says. “Save the multiverse and whatnot. This would probably work eventually, but who knows how long it would take? Souls are scattered across countless dimensions. No, it’s too much trouble. Another bad plan. Let’s keep going.”

“Why don’t you just give us the good plan and save us all some time?” Steph says.

“...Because I don’t have a good plan,” Persephone says. “I was hoping I would be able to come up with one by the time I finished saying those two, but nope, I’m out of ideas.”

“Do we know what Brody’s plan is?” I ask. “If we can see his next play, maybe we can react to that and get one step ahead.”

“He’s seeking immortality,” Persephone says. “He and Erebos are probably working together towards that end. Always been one of Erebos’ pet projects.”

“Isn’t that a bit of a moot point?” Steph asks. “I mean, Brody knows he’s gonna be in soul form after he dies.”

“True, but soul forms have their limitations,” Persephone says. “With his current body, he can harness his power far more effectively. He’s looking for a way to maintain that.”

“So we need to kill him before he gets there,” I say. “And to do that, we’re going to need to figure out something better than shooting him.”

“Isn’t there some, like, ‘Break In Case of Emergency’ reserve of power somewhere in case the multiverse goes to hell?” Steph asks. “If not, I would get something like that set up ASAP once this is over.”

“I’m afraid not,” Persephone says. “No one individual would just hold onto that many powerful souls and not use them for their own profits.”

“...I know somebody that has a lot of souls, though,” I say.

“You do?” Steph says. “Who?”

“You were unconscious at the time, but I think she kinda liked me when we talked,” I say.

“Who?” Persephone says.

“The Sugar Queen,” I say.

“Oh, Jenn,” Persephone says. “She ‘kinda likes’ everyone, it’s her business strategy in a nutshell. ...Or a sugarshell, maybe. But that’s all she cares about: business. What could you possibly offer her that would be a

worthwhile trade for the power she would need to deliver for us to stand a fighting chance?"

"I have an idea," I say.

Persephone sighs. Then, after a moment, says, "Well, that's more than I can say." She takes Steph's hand and rises to her feet. "C'mon, let's go visit her. No time to waste."

Persephone knows where we're going, so she takes the lead on the teleportation business. Far sooner than I expected, I'm back in that same luxurious chamber, a stark contrast to the rather spartan surroundings I was just in.

"Ah, Persephone," the Sugar Queen says. "And a visitor bearing a familiar soul, if I'm not mistaken. I suppose you were the recipient of that cure? I don't suppose you've brought me a ne'er-do-well to put to work today, have you?"

"No such luck, your highness," Persephone says. "We have other business to discuss."

"Ah. Persephone. How... factual it is that I'm seeing you again. Well, then, get to it. I haven't got all day."

"Hello, your highness," I say as I appear, bobbing a small curtsy.

"Jenn!" she says. "Glad to see my instincts are still in working order. How wonderful to see you again, although I see you are not quite so mortal as you used to be."

"How astute your highness is," I say. "Wiser than any other."

"See, this is what I have time for," she says. "I eat up praise like candy. But tell me, Jenn, what can I do for you?"

"I have a business offer for you. A chance for you to earn countless workers with one short-term loan."

"I am intrigued, but cautiously so," the Sugar Queen says, leaning forward. "I know better than to be duped by a promise that is too good to be true. With that said... Tell me more."

"As you may or may not know, a dangerous mortal named Brody is currently rampaging through the realms," Persephone says. "Fueled by none other than Erebus himself, he poses a threat to mortals and non-mortals alike. And if he's not stopped, the multiverse may never recover."

"Erebus is back?" the Sugar Queen says, frowning. "Hmm. Well, I don't see why you don't take this to Libra, or—"

“He has Libra,” Persephone says. “Took her right there in her chambers in front of millions of spirits. Didn’t even make a big deal out of it.”

The Sugar Queen leans back sharply in her throne, attempting to process Persephone’s words. “...I would say you’re lying, but you wouldn’t lie about something like that. If he has that kind of power, then...”

“Then we need even more power to fight back,” I say. “And at the moment, you’re the only soul I know that can provide that kind of power.”

The Sugar Queen sits back in her throne, starting to calculate her position. “I have quite a strategic position, then, don’t I?”

“Perhaps the strategicst position of all time,” I say.

She smiles. “Normally I don’t allow people to make up words in my court, but you’ve had a bit of a day, haven’t you? What are you offering?”

“The rights to every soul in Brody’s purview for a standard contract length,” I say.

“Except for Libra,” Persephone says.

“Except for Libra. And anyone else that’s super-important I don’t know about. Everyone else, though, is yours for a full century, if you lend us your power to take down Brody.”

The Sugar Queen doesn’t say anything for a while. She just stares at us. Then, she says, “You really bring this offer to my court?”

“We do,” Persephone says.

She smiles. “This is a win-win for me, then. After all, if he is as powerful as you say, then I would have needed to deal with him eventually; if he isn’t, then I’m picking up some free souls at minimal expense. What’s the catch?”

“No catch,” Persephone says. “We want to end his reign before it begins in earnest. He’s a young mortal, and it could last for many, many more years. Maybe longer if he can accomplish what he’s setting out to do.”

“...It’s a good offer,” the Sugar Queen says, shifting her weight on her throne to adopt a more professional posture. “Too good, in fact. We’ll play it by ear instead of drawing up formal paperwork; Persephone, I know you’re honest, and Jenn, you’re too green to be deceptive. However, if Steph here has recently dealt with my product, then she’s not ready to deal with that much power, and we need a mortal to act as a vessel. One that’s willing to die for you.”

Someone willing to die for me?

Why does that ring a bell?

Steph would, but she's indisposed. I would've thought Linda, but she's a no-go post-breakup. C'mon, I know there's somebody, but...

Oh.

Right.

Him.

"If you bring me somebody like that, then we can talk, but otherwise—"

"I know somebody," I say.

"...You do?" Steph says.

"Yeah. We need to get back to my phone so I can answer a text."

Chapter 19

Arriving back in my apartment is a weird experience.

“Wait, this is what my place smells like?” I say as we arrive. “Through a nose that isn’t mine, that is?”

“I like it,” Steph says. “I think it’s from all the whiskey, but not in a bad way.”

Dear Lord. I smell like a booze baron. My place smells like a distillery.

Well, there are worse fates.

“Where’s your phone?” Persephone asks.

“Bedroom,” I say. “Good thing I didn’t have it on me when I died, or it’d be who knows where by now.”

“Truth,” Steph says, heading back there. “By your bed?”

“Yeah,” I say. “Right there.”

She grabs it off my nightstand. “What’s the password?”

“Uh...” I say.

“C’mon, no time for secrets now,” she says.

“....Zero... Zero... Zero zero.”

“Wow,” Steph says, typing it in. “Why even have one if you’re going to be that—”

“C’mon, we don’t have time for this!” Persephone says. “If Brody finds us, we’re toast.”

“Right,” Steph says. “So, it’s the texts from...”

“Arthur,” I say. “I need you to ask him for his address.”

“What’s his number?” Persephone asks.

Steph shows her the screen. Persephone closes her eyes for a second. “OK. Yeah, I know where he is.”

“...You can do that?”

“You learn all sorts of tricks when you’re in the soul retrieval business,” she says. “C’mon, let’s go.”

“Wait!” I say.

“What’s up?”

“He’s... I mean, he’s not going to be able to see me in this form, since I’m all spirit-like,” I say. “Or you. He doesn’t know Steph, so this is going to be hella awkward.”

“The fate of all of us is hanging in the balance, Jenn,” Steph says. “I think we can put awkwardness on the backburner.”

“...Yeah,” I say. “Yeah, let’s go.”

I now realize that I’m taking a huge risk on a guy that I barely know from work, hoping that he’s enamored enough with me to agree to risk his life to help save the world.

Then again, he apparently thinks I’m super-hot, so it should all work out.

Persephone leads us to Arthur’s place, teleporting in without a sound. Looking around the efficiency apartment, I’m pleasantly surprised by the cleanliness, but everything else is as I expected — figurines of comic book and video game characters, shelves of manga and graphic novels, and a computer that either he or one of his friends built, all on prominent display.

None of those are bad things, mind you. They’re just exactly what I figured Arthur’s apartment would look like.

Not so much in way of a well-stocked kitchen, though.

Maybe he was always asking me out to eat because he hates cooking.

“Ah!” Arthur says, jumping up from his computer when he catches us out of the corner of his eye. I think he’s playing *The Sims*, but I can’t quite be sure as he alt-tabs out. (Dude, if you’re playing *The Sims*, I would be, like, way into that.)

“It’s OK,” Steph says. “I’m a friend of Jenn.”

He blinks.

“She said that you would be interested in helping to save the universe.”

He blinks again.

“I also say I’m sorry for never returning his texts,” I say.

Steph relays the information.

“...Go back to the part about saving the universe.”

“Multiverse, actually,” Steph says.

“OK, I don’t care if I’m getting pranked, I am so here for this,” he says, grinning as he stands up. “Do I need a sword and shield or whatever? I have some pretty convincing replicas in my cosplay closet.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Steph says. “So, you’re in?”

“You just teleported into my apartment and told me that I need to save the multiverse,” he says. “I would kick myself for the rest of my life if I said no. What do you need me to do?”

Oh, thank God.

Persephone waves her hand over his eyes. He jumps again. “You’re on our side, right?” he says, now able to see the badass action movie heroine standing before him.

“I’m not going to kill you, if that’s what you’re asking,” she says. “Not unless you make trouble.”

“Oh, man,” he says. “So should I change clothes, or...?”

“No time,” she says, taking him by the arm. “You’re gonna be given a tremendous amount of power to defeat a man with the potential to lay waste to the ordered universe as we know it. We’re counting on you, because Jenn thinks you’re willing to die for this. Are you?”

He looks stunned. “...You’re serious about this, aren’t you?”

I project myself into the room, being the only one with a legitimate connection with the man. “Arthur,” I say. “I died. This dude killed me. And I need you to go kick his butt. Can you do that?”

He stares at me wide-eyed for another moment. Then, a big grin appears on his face. “You bet,” he says.

“Good,” Persephone says, now also grabbing Steph’s arm. “Let’s go.”

Not much time for catching our breath at this point, eh?

We arrive back at the Sugar Queen’s chamber. Arthur looks around, oohing and ahhing.

“...This is so awesome,” he says. “So, like this power. You mean I could, like, throw fireballs or whatever?”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Persephone says. “However, a more effective attack would be to—”

“Whoosh! Whoosh!” he says, miming a fireball-shooting motion by thrusting his hands forward, palms out. “Oh man, this is going to be so awesome!”

“You need to take this seriously, Arthur,” I say, placing a delicate hand on his shoulder. “I want you to come back alive, after all.”

He looks at me. “...OK,” he says. “Yeah, I want to come back alive, too.”

“I mean... If there’s going to be any ‘us’ between us, then it’d be easier if we’re both alive.”

“...‘Us’?”

“Yeah, you know,” I say. “Like...”

His face registers a sudden recognition. “Oh! You mean, like, a dating thing?”

“...Isn’t that what you wanted with all those texts?” I ask.

“I mean, not really?” he says. “I’m not opposed to that per se, I just wanted to hang out.”

“...Your texts are horribly misleading, then.”

“Oh, yeah, I have a real problem with that,” he says. “Like, I... I suck at making friends? See, I’m not sexually attracted to most people, so my only motivation for asking people out is, like, sharing a meal or watching TV or whatever. Literal Netflix and chill is my dream Friday night. So when I want to do that, my brain goes down the same paths that other people go down when they ask someone out on a this-might-end-in-sexytimes deal. I don’t really get it, but I’m trying to improve!”

“Oh, God, Arthur,” I say. “I’ve been mistreating you in my mental notes so bad.”

“To be fair, in retrospect, my texts were super-sketch,” he says, grinning. “I should be the one apologizing.”

“So you just wanted to be friends?” I say.

“Yeah,” he says. “I don’t have a lot of ‘em, and you seem really cool, so...”

Is Arthur gonna make me cry?

Through my projected tear ducts?

I give him a big hug.

“Of course we can be friends,” I say after breaking away from an appropriately long hug. “But for now, you need to take out Brody, the mega-creep of all mega-creeps.”

“Got it,” he says, giving a thumbs-up. “Mega-creeps beware!”

“Well, if you two are done with your little chat...” the Sugar Queen says.

“Ah, sorry,” I say. “It’s been a bit of a day.”

“Arthur, you seem competent enough,” the Sugar Queen says, “but realize that the power you are about to wield is unlike anything your mortal mind has ever imagined. It is the power to make and destroy worlds. It is the

power to bend and skew reality. It is the power to heal, and the power to kill. Are you ready to accept this responsibility? To accept hundreds of thousands of spirits into your personage at the same time, in an effort to save all of us?"

"...To be honest, I don't know," he says.

"That's a good answer," she says with a smile. "Bring forth the phial."

One of the Sugar Queen's guards goes behind the throne and retrieves a clear glass vial (I guess phial is just a fancy word for a vial?) of a bright-blue ooze-gas. "Come forth, Arthur."

Arthur steps forward, looking back at me for reassurance. I give him a smile. He smiles back before turning again to the Sugar Queen. "I am ready," he says. "Because I need to be."

"An even better answer," the Sugar Queen says. "Take, and drink."

Arthur takes the phial and, after a dubious sniff, drinks it down in a single gulp. His eyes go huge as he hands the phial back to the guard. "Oh," he says. "Oh, wow. This is..."

"Powerful?" the Sugar Queen says.

"Loud. There are a lot of voices yelling at me."

"Ah, yes, I kept putting that off," the Sugar Queen says. "Persephone, be a dear and get in there and run some crowd control?"

"With pleasure," Persephone says, disappearing from sight as she enters Arthur's being.

"Should I head in, too?" I ask.

"Give her a moment," the Sugar Queen says. "Persephone is a master of managing spirits. Let her settle things down first."

"So, what's the plan?" Steph asks. "I mean, if everybody's gonna pile into Arthur and lend him their strength, what am I gonna do?"

"Stay here and stay safe," the Sugar Queen says.

"But...!"

"You'd be worse than a liability going in there," she says. "Plus, you were poisoned by my product, so I feel obligated to protect you."

"...Fine," Steph says. "But y'all better come back victorious!"

"We definitely plan on it," Persephone says, popping her head out for a moment.

"Yeah," I say. "And if nothing else, it's been an adventure, right?"

"Make sure you obliterate him," Steph says. "I don't want a trace of him left in any dimension."

"You got it," I say. "Utterly pulverized. I'll do my best."

“Wow, that’s a lot better,” Arthur says, blinking. “I think I’m ready now.”

“Cool,” Persephone says. “C’mon, Jenn.”

I turn to Steph. “Is there we do the awkward hug and say something cool, like, ‘It’s not goodbye, it’s seeya later?’”

“I think so,” she says. “Although it’ll be even more awkward with your whole technically-being-inside-me.”

“Yeah, but we wear awkward well,” I say, reaching out to her. “Seeya later.”

“Yeah,” she says. I manage to physically project myself for a moment and we embrace, holding each other tight. “I’ll be praying for you.”

“Thanks,” I say.

“...Jenn,” Persephone says.

“Yeah, I’m coming,” I say.

I leave Steph and fly into Arthur. It’s surprisingly simple; I don’t even have to go through the learning how to look through his eyes business again.

On the other hand, it’s way more crowded in here.

I can’t ‘see’ the other spirits, but I can feel their presence and hear countless voices, though they’re so quiet that they’re almost imperceptible. “Do I need to do anything?” I ask.

“Your job will be to provide any information to Arthur that might help him defeat Brody,” Persephone says. “And to allow him to tap into your power if the need arises.”

“Watch out for knives,” I say.

“Good tip,” Arthur says. “Ha! That was sort of a terrible pun. Ugh, sorry, I’m super-nervous and overwhelmed. Right, what do I do now?”

“Return to the mortal realm,” Persephone says. “And prepare for battle.”

Chapter 20

...Of course, before Arthur can return to the mortal realm, he has to know how to return to the mortal realm.

As one of the souls walks Arthur through how to teleport, I hear Persephone's voice. "Hey, Jenn?" she says. "I've set up a partition so we can talk privately. I, uh... have something to tell you."

"Yeah?" I say. "What's up?"

"It's about Artene," she says.

"What about her?"

I don't hear anything for a moment.

"Hello?"

"She lied to you, Jenn. She wasn't a guardian angel or a kind spirit or anything like that. She was a fraud."

"...Well, right, I understand that she's not a literal angel, but..."

"You misunderstand me," Persephone says. "She was using you, Jenn. When she first gained her power, it was only through trickery. For a time, I thought she had changed; the time we shared while she was alive, and for a long time after that, too. But later on... After we had both moved on to other pursuits, I learned her true colors. And they manifested in an ugly way."

"Her true colors? What do you mean?" I say.

"Well... She wasn't always this way, but for the last century or two, she's been searching for what she calls 'gullible souls.' We were both in a bad place a few decades ago and spent a few weeks just getting so drunk and forgetting about our worries. She kept going on about how she just needed to find one easy mark; how she'd do whatever it took to find somebody like that. How that was all she needed to fix everything."

I remember my conversation with Artene about this, of course. I remember her telling me that she had designed the Infinite Abyss.

I also remember that I swore not to tell anyone else about it.

“...That sounds super-evil for Artene,” I say. “Like, I can’t see that being the whole story. There’s no way! She’s too nice!”

“Of course she’s nice,” Persephone says. “She has to be nice to get willing mortals to cooperate with her. Think about it; she found you at a super-low point of your life, and she... Well, she found Brody. You were both pretty gullible and vulnerable.”

“But... I thought she was grooming me to help out Libra.”

“What? No. Artene didn’t have that kind of authority. Libra respects her up to a point, but the only person that Libra would trust to pick someone out is Libra. Or maybe Red, but she’s gone now, so...”

“Red? What about Red?”

“It has to do with why Artene needs to find a sucker. I think. She took to the spiritual realm with an alacrity and intuition nobody’s ever seen before or since. She just... got it. She could do more with less power than anyone else. But she didn’t think she fit in with us as a mortal, and she couldn’t stand that, so she killed herself. And then she couldn’t stand that, so Artene tried to get her life back. Now, nobody knows where she is. We tried to get Artene to tell us, but she refused. Even under the strictest scrutiny of Equinox, she wouldn’t give up the information.”

“Is that what Lee keeps referring to when he’s annoyed about Equinox?” I ask. “Because there’s something between him and Artene, but they kept talking all cryptic-like about it.”

“That’s... part of it, yeah,” Persephone says. “And Red’s definitely part of that equation. That’s a way longer story than we have time to tell right now, though.”

Of course it is.

“...So you have no idea where Red is?”

“None at all. I kinda think Artene has her hidden away somewhere deep inside herself, but we haven’t been able to confirm or deny anything.”

“I see,” I say.

“She didn’t say anything about it to you, did she?” Persephone asks.

“Not at all,” I say, remembering my oath. “That’d sure be convenient, though, huh?”

“It’d be nice to be able to have some kind of lead, yeah,” Persephone says.

“And so you think she’s siding with Brody now? To give him immortality, too?”

“No,” Persephone says. “Not willingly, at least. Despite everything else, she still has a moral compass. ...Or had a moral compass.”

“Why do you keep talking about her in the past tense?”

Persephone sighs. “She wasn’t caught by Brody, or I would have seen her before I escaped. I’ve been trying to find her everywhere since I came back together. I’ve used every method I can think of, and I can’t find even a hint of her. That means there’s only two options. One is that she’s abandoned us and left us to Brody’s whims. The other is that...”

“Is that her soul is disentwined,” I say.

“Yeah,” Persephone says.

Or she’s in the Infinite Abyss, I think to myself.

“But what am I supposed—”

“OK, let’s go,” Arthur says. “Assuming I have this all figured out, that is.”

“You’ll be fine, I’m sure,” the Sugar Queen says. “Take good care of my souls, now.”

Arthur nods, and before long I feel him manage to tug us through whatever wormhole opens up to bring us back to the mortal realm and into his apartment.

“Home again, home again,” I say, noting the distinct energy of the mortal realm surrounding me. I get why most souls don’t hang out here; there’s a certain heaviness in the air that weighs on you when you don’t have a body.

And sometimes when you do, too.

“Where are we meeting him?” Arthur asks, looking around his apartment for... something.

“His place,” Persephone says. “I’ll give you directions, since I don’t think you can teleport there. Plus, approaching this way will give us the element of surprise. C’mom, let’s go. Along the way, we’ll coat you up with a bunch of spiritual armor and stuff.”

“Right,” Arthur says, heading for the door, but hesitating with his hand over the handle. “...You’re sure I shouldn’t break out some cosplay?”

“Whatever you feel will help you is a go at this point,” Persephone says. “But please do hurry.”

“Yeah,” he says, heading to his room. “Lemme just grab one thing...”

I’m still mulling over what Persephone has told me, but this pulls me out of it.

From his room, he pulls out the nerdiest thing I could have imagined.

“Is that...” I say.

“I love the Power Glove,” he says, putting it on. “It’s so bad.”

“Yeah, well, uh, just shove your power gloves into his chest cavity, huh, pal?” I say.

“Whoa, major points for catching the reference and contextualizing it, Jenn!” he says.

“Please, don’t,” I say. “I mean, I’ll say the thing because it makes you happy, but it’s not like I deserve special recognition because I looked up a thing on YouTube once just so I wasn’t out of the loop forever.”

“...Fair enough,” he says as he finishes adjusting the straps. “OK, now I’m ready. Let’s do this thing.”

As Arthur walks out of his apartment, several dozen spirits split off from him and start throwing protective charms in his direction. “Having some of us flying around will help serve as a distraction,” Persephone explains, “but the energy is most efficiently routed through Arthur here.”

“Yeah, I’m pretty great,” Arthur says.

My internal clock is all out of place; it turns out that it’s right around midnight. Fortunately, the cold weather hasn’t quite hit the city yet, so the temperature is still comfortable.

Midnight is something of a blessing, perhaps; during the day, to the casual observer, it would have looked like nothing more than a twentysomething with a horrible old controller on his hand walking down the street.

But I saw an army marching off to combat.

Souls of every shape and size, making their way to defeat a mighty enemy.

And I’m a part of it.

“So what’s my role in all of this?” I say. “You know, during the actual fight.”

“You’re the only person that’s ever killed Brody,” Persephone says.

“Yeah, but that was an accident.”

“Still. He knows that you can kill him. That’s gotta count for something.”

I sure hope it does.

“When the time comes, you’ll know what to do,” she says. “Follow your heart.”

“My heart wants to go spoon queso straight from the jar into my mouth and watch terrible movies,” I say.

“...Why would you want to watch a movie if it’s terrible?”

“Never mind,” I say. “I just... What if I screw this up?”

“You won’t,” Persephone says. “Because we won’t.”

“I hope you’re right,” I say.

“OK, everyone!” Persephone says as we approach my apartment building, her voice taking on a more authoritative tone. “The time has come! I’ve given all of you your orders; remember, the first priority is to protect Arthur! If he goes down, we’re all in trouble!”

A collection of affirmative noises come from the spirits around us.

“Right! Arthur, we’re all behind you. Remember what I’ve taught you!”

“You mean the two basic techniques to either attack or defend?” he says.

“What else do you need?” Persephone says, grinning. “C’mon, let’s go!”

Arthur marches into my building and heads to the stairs. Straight up to the seventh floor, no stops. Once there, he takes a moment to collect himself before entering the hallway. Fortunately, it still looks rather ordinary.

“Could be traps everywhere,” Persephone says. “We’ll keep a lookout. You keep going. Remember, it’s Apartment 703.”

“Got it,” Arthur says, stepping into the hallway. The path to Brody’s front door is uneventful; as he stands in front of it, he flexes his Power Gloved hand.

“Do it,” I say.

He punches the door down to reveal Brody, waiting for us, seated on a replica of Libra’s throne. (Yes, he looks ridiculous.) The apartment has become far larger on the inside; maybe it’s a pocket dimension sort of deal?

Or is his apartment actually this big, and I’m getting ripped off by the management?

Well, in any case, it’s a much better size for the upcoming epic, battle-between-good-and-evil brawl than the expected six hundred square feet, so it’s a welcome change.

“Ah,” Brody says, rising to his feet. “Not who I was expecting, but I detect some familiar energies.”

“You’re going to lose,” Arthur says, creating a shield in front of himself.

“Sounds like something a loser would say,” Brody says, producing fireballs in either hand and making them grow to enormous sizes.

“Oh my God,” I say.

“We can still win this,” Persephone says.

“No, not that,” I say.

“Then what?”

“I placed the fate of the multiverse in the hands of two white dudes,” I say. “I’m reinforcing so many stereotypes.”

“Then let’s make sure the right white dude wins,” Persephone says.

“...Yeah,” I say. “Go, Arthur! I believe in you!”

Brody flings his two fireballs at Arthur, both of which he blocks without trouble; as he throws, Brody summons a collection of spirits to fight by his side, including a nasty figure that I assume is Erebus. “This is going to become very chaotic very quickly,” Persephone says. “Remember, our focus is on protecting Arthur above all else. Let him do the dirty work.”

“Right,” I say.

Arthur, to his credit, charges in full steam ahead, swinging a shaft of pure energy like a club at Brody. (He probably thinks he’s swinging it like a sword and, I mean, more power to him, but his technique way more clublike than swordlike.) Brody is dodging each swing, seeming to toy with him more than anything.

“Is that your best? Truly?” Brody says between swings. “I had hoped for more of a challenge than this.”

“Shut up!” Arthur says, dodging some sort of shadowy wave coming from Erebus’s direction.

“Squads 1 and 5, with me! Let’s take care of Erebus!” Persephone barks out, flying towards the nefarious soul. It looks like they’re subduing him, but barely; as their attention is on him, Brody’s other allies are pressing in on us.

“You have no chance,” Brody says, now striking back with an energy shaft of his own. “You don’t have the power.” Swing. “You don’t have the tactics.” Swing. “And you certainly don’t have the skill.”

A shooting pain envelops Arthur’s whole being as a shaft of something hot pierces his chest from behind, dropping him to his knees.

“UM,” I say.

Arthur pulls in shuddering gasps for breath, looking up at Brody. “You...” he manages.

“Yes? What about me?” Brody says, smirking. “Any last words?”

“You... keep your power gloves to yourself,” he says.

“What?”

“NOW!” Persephone shouts.

A flash of darkness fills the room as a shadowy figure drops down from the ceiling, bearing a huge scythe, crackling with energy. As the figure hacks off Brody’s head in one fell swoop, making a sickening but satisfying “Shick” sound as the blade does its work.

As the figure lands, I recognize the silhouette of my best friend.

“Taste my steel, moron,” she says.

The coolest straight person to ever live.

“Steph,” I say, breathless.

Brody’s head tumbles across the ground, pouring out blood as it does. That’s an incurable wound if I ever saw one.

“Thanks for the assist, Sugar Queen. Rock-solid plan.”

“You did well,” the Sugar Queen says, appearing beside her.

“Steph!” I want to toss her up in the air in celebration and give her a big hug all at the same time! “We did it!”

We’re interrupted, though, by a loud thud as the door closes, followed by a horrible screeching and scraping cacophony.

Because, apparently, we can’t have nice things.

It takes me a second to figure out what’s going on, but the walls of the room around us begin to press in. They slide towards us, moving at a steady and intimidating pace. Some of the spirits try to escape, but to no avail; there’s some supernatural barrier around us too. The walls get smaller and smaller, pressing us into oblivion.

Steph’s screams are heartbreaking.

We’re crushed into nothing.

And there’s nothing we can do about it.

And then...

I see nothing.

Nothing is all I know for a time.

Until I hear a voice a voice.

“I may have lost my life, but I will gain so much more,” Brody’s voice says from everywhere. “Welcome to the Infinite Abyss.”

Everything I know and perceive is pure darkness; pure isolation; pure nothing.

So there’s that.

Chapter 21

This darkness lasts for an unknowable amount of time. I can't even count it out; there's no frame of reference for me to use. Could be minutes; could be millennia. Any hint of the physical realm is gone.

There's only me.

My soul, now without any of the power I knew before.

Without any of my friends.

I feel so small, and so vulnerable.

And so alone.

Completely, utterly alone.

At long last, though, I see something.

It's... Me.

My body, that is. And that's all I see. Still wearing my pajamas, thank God. Other than that, the space around me is a black void. I don't even know how I'm illuminated; at this point, I don't care. I can't get a handle on the size of my surroundings; it could go on for miles, or it could be only large enough to contain me.

"So, the trap really worked," he says.

He.

Who else could it be?

A Brody-like figure appears, but he's grown by at least an order of magnitude. He towers over me, smirking down with that terrible, terrible face.

"I have all of their souls except for yours. And you're on my turf now, Jenn," he says.

"This... This is..." I say.

"The Infinite Abyss," he says. "Artene set this trap up for you — for all of you. It's the only place big enough to contain all of the power in the multiverse! I sent your body here in anticipation for your inevitable arrival.

You'll enter your body, and I'll possess you. That's when the real fun will begin. With all of the power I've gained from your 'friends,' we'll be able to do anything we — well, anything I want to do in this realm!"

"But there's nothing here," I say. I expected to find Artene here, but she's nowhere to be found.

"I'm here," he says. "And you're here. That's all I need. Artene promised me that. Why do you think I've been pursuing you this whole time?"

"You mean other than the fact that you're a dirty, dirty boy?" I say.

He laughs. "You don't get it. Artene orchestrated this whole thing from the start. She's the one that told me to approach you at the bar. She's the one that persuaded you to revive me. She's the one that let me poison Steph, and get the drop on you during your attempted ambush.

"This whole thing has been an enormous trap to get us alone together," he says.

This buffoon.

This clown.

This jagoff, if I may borrow once more from the vernacular of Pittsburgh.

It's my turn to smirk. ...Or, at least, it would be if I had a face. "I may have fallen for your trap, but you're the one that's been played," I say. "You really think Artene would pick you to control an overwhelming amount of power for no good reason?"

He frowns. "I... Of course she would. Why wouldn't she?"

"I'm pretty sure I know how this is supposed to shake out," I say, making a beeline for my body. Brody mirrors my movements, and we arrive at the same time; I feel my heart and brain kick to life, but realize that Brody is controlling it.

"Ha! See?" he says, using my mouth to form the words. "I have absolute power!"

"Ah, a new visitor," a voice says. "...In a mortal form? And I think I detect... Hmm, very interesting indeed."

A woman of unbelievable size — I'm confident that I'm shorter than any one of her eyelashes — is looking at me, right at eye level. She looks amused and tired, and her skin emits a warm light, reminiscent of smoldering coals in a fireplace.

"So," she says. "You must be my beacon. My lure, if you like."

“Wh... who are you?” Brody says.

“I used to be called Red,” she says. “Maybe I still am, for all I know. Welcome to the Infinite Abyss.”

“How... How are you here?” Brody says. “She told me that she set it up for me.”

“She? Ah, of course she would bring you to me. I have been lost in this prison for a very, very long time; centuries, based on what the souls I find tell me. There is something about your souls that intrigues me, though.”

“What is that?” Brody says.

“Something I had not felt in a very long time,” she says. “A piece of my soul from when I was mortal. I don’t know how you acquired it, but sensing it stirred me back to reality. Now I know that I must escape.”

“Is that even possible?” I ask.

“The Infinite Abyss was built to prevent anyone from escaping,” she says. “However, like any locked cage, you can break out if you have the key. It requires my soul to be complete which, with your presence, will soon be very true. By rejoining the part of my soul currently residing in your mortal body — well, I should say Jenn’s mortal body, since that’s clearly not yours, Brody — I ought to be able to escape. With my power gone, this place should become almost impossible to answer. After all, the only thing drawing people here before was the promise of my power. With that gone, there’s not much to see here.”

Brody shakes my head. “No... No, this was supposed to be my kingdom!” he says.

“You seem like you’re fun at parties,” Red says. “C’mon, make room.”

With that, she dives into me. As she does, my body surges with an impossible amount of power, and would be ripped to shreds if that power weren’t also simultaneously holding it together.

“Let me just take over for you, sweetie,” Red says inside my soul, wresting control away from Brody. I hear Brody scream, but in vain; Red is ridiculously more powerful than he is.

“So, you’re the one that’s going to break me out, hmm?” Red says.

“I... I suppose I am,” I say.

“I wish I had time to explain,” she says. “I hope... I hope you can forgive me someday. And that you can forgive her someday, too.”

“What are you talking about?” I ask.

“Jenn... I’m sorry. But your soul is the only one in this group that isn’t complete. And that means you can’t the Infinite Abyss. I’ll keep your body safe and sound in case you ever do escape, though.”

She closes my eyes. As she does, I feel a tugging sensation.

Two things happen at the same time: My soul leaves my body, and my body teleports away.

I’m alone.

Again.

Adrift in nothingness.

Um.

Not OK.

On so many levels.

“So we truly are alone now,” Brody says.

ON SO MANY MORE LEVELS.

Chapter 22

“What the hell!?” I yell, now without any frame of reference to orient myself.

“You’re mine now,” he says. “I sensed you were going to stay behind, so I stayed with you. I may not have the power I desired, but I have you. It’s not what I wanted, but I’ll take it.”

“You realize that you’ve just doomed us to an eternity of nothingness, right?” I say.

“On the contrary, I’ll have you,” he says.

“On the contrary to your contrary, no, you won’t,” I say. “I’m going to get as far away from you as possible.”

“Space has no meaning here,” he says. “This realm is nothing but the two of us, trapped. Without Red’s power, nobody will be drawn in, and neither of us has the power to break out.”

This has to be a mistake.

Someone spilled coffee on the script of my life and this is the last-minute improv bit.

I’m not going to spend the rest of my afterlife with this ubercreep.

I try to escape.

I can’t.

Why can’t I escape?

“I... refuse to accept this,” I say.

“That doesn’t matter,” he says.

“It’s all that matters.”

“So what are you going to do?” he asks.

“I’m not going to give up,” I say.

He starts to say something, but I do whatever it takes to ignore him.

I’m not going to give up.

I’m not going to give up.

I'm not going to give up.

I'm not going to give up. I'm not going to give up.

I'm going to give up.

I'm alone.

I'm lost.

I'm abandoned.

By everyone.

I can't make it.

I can't do anything but make it.

I just

exist

forever

I guess.

I'm using all of my energy

to ignore him

and that's not going to work

so I stop that.

“—And your entire being belongs to me. I own you for all of eternity.

You may have helped your friends, but your soul is mine. I—”

His voice fills my soul

and I hate it

and I hate him

and I hate everything around me

and

and

and

and

and

and

and.

And.

A powerful word.

And I may feel powerless.

Lost.

Alone.

But I'm not giving up.

Not as long as I'm still in control of myself.

Not while there's still even the slightest hint of hope.

I'm not abandoned.

God is still here.

God still loves me.

And so does someone else.

I hope.

I just barely hope.

But that's enough.

I think she just can't find me.

I just need a helping hand.

So I make one.

I channel all of my power into manifesting my hand in the space.

It's faint, and rough around the edges, and generally terrible, but it's definitely a hand.

And it's taking all of my being to maintain it.

“What are you doing?” he says. “That's way too much energy! You're going to tear yourself apart!”

I ignore him. Instead, I focus on the hand.

Specifically on bringing the index finger, pinky, and thumb together.

I hold the hand in place as long as I can. I feel my soul begin to rip and tear, but I don't care; an eternity spent scattered across the multiverse without purpose is better than one more second with Brody.

I feel myself disentwine.

My soul dissociates from itself.

I see the different quintessential parts of myself — my likes and dislikes, my worldviews, my hates, my loves, my opinions about the latest UI design of popular social media websites — I watch them swirl around the hand I've created, threatening to slip away into the aether, never to be seen again.

As I watch this hand, this stupid, absurd gambit, I almost curse myself for ever considering that this might work. It begins to disintegrate, starting at the wrist and building towards my fingertips, until all that remains are three glowing orbs of ooze-gas where my pinky, index finger, and thumb met.

Red, green, and blue.

Heart, mind, and soul.

The core of my being.

About to slip away.

And then I see another pair of hands appear and scoop my soul back together.

With absolute dexterity, my self is regathered into one coherent being.

These hands then hold my soul up to their owner's chest.

The kindest, gentlest hands I could imagine.

(The chest isn't bad either, if you want to know my opinion.)

"Jenn."

That voice. Filled with more tenderness and love than it ever held before.

"Artene," I say.

"What!?" Brody says.

I see the person I thought I would never see again, but always knew that I would.

Exhausted, I release all of my energy, feeling myself scooped into her soul. "Can... Can you get me out of here?" I say.

"Almost certainly," she says. "And in doing so, we will remove a certain individual from our presence. Permanently, I believe. No one would ever want to help this miserable wretch escape."

Brody whimpers.

I almost pity him.

“...Wait,” I say. “I have something I want to say to him.”

“Really?” he says.

“Yeah,” I say. “I just hope you understand where I’m coming from. That you really get what I’m saying.

“Brody.

“Being around you is like bathing in lemon juice with a million paper cuts all over my body while listening to fingernails dragged against a chalkboard from now until the end of eternity.”

As I speak, I feel myself growing, or maybe Brody is shrinking. In either case, I’m now towering over him, and I’m just getting started.

“If I had to choose between spending exactly one more second with you and eating a million dead, rotting mosquito carcasses, I would grab a spoon and start eating like it was triple chocolate ice cream.

“Knowledge of your very existence is enough to make me more nauseous than riding a thousand roller coasters after eating a million funnel cakes on a hot day.

“You are the mathematical inverse of a taco.

“You might have had some redeeming qualities at some point in your life, but you now are nothing more than a pool of ugliness and violence, and the multiverse will in no way miss you. Is that clear?”

With that, before he has a chance to respond, Artene sends him to some unknown corner of the Infinite Abyss, and I hope it’s the last I ever see of him.

God, that felt good.

“...So there’s that hidden fire burning within me I mentioned earlier,” I say, my voice faltering as I realize that I’m absolutely exhausted.

Artene cradles me within her being, making sure that all of my soul is still intact.

“...Jenn,” she says. “I have betrayed your trust to a point beyond what words can convey. I have jeopardized not only your safety, but the safety of the entire multiverse. My actions were driven by selfishness and folly, and I—”

“I love you too,” I say.

She blinks.

“Excuse me?”

“I know what’s happening,” I say. “At least, I think I do. You originally intended to use Brody as a vessel for Red’s energy to save her, and that’s why you were prepping him. You’d leave part of his soul in here and part of it outside, forever trapping him. Maybe not the noblest way of doing things, but he wasn’t too noble himself, and Red was worth it. But he turned out to be too big of a ding-dong to pull off the plan, so you switched to me when you saw I was... Well, available. Vulnerable. When did you first spot me, anyway?”

“In the bathroom at the bar,” Artene says. “I overheard the phone conversation.”

“I was that loud?”

“My senses are remarkably enhanced,” Artene says. Then, with a smile, “But... yes, you were that loud.”

“I’m right so far, though, right?”

“On all but a few details; once I knew that I would not be using him as a conduit, I made a pivot; I decided to use him to prod you here, to the Infinite Abyss. I revealed the immortal realm to you using a portion of Red’s soul, which is why you could see all of us, including Lethanos. At that time, I did not make myself known to you; I made my exit after instructing Brody that you held the secret to accessing the Infinite Abyss. You were too intoxicated at the time to sense the shift in power, which was rather minuscule regardless. Unlike the one you received later that night, of course.”

I nod. “And then I met Lee, blah blah blah, you show up, I fall in love with you, et cetera, et cetera... And then you need to disappear for a bit.”

“Yes.”

“And that’s the part I’m confused about.”

“...Yes,” Artene says. “There were three factors I was not counting on going into this endeavor. First, I was not expecting Brody to be quite so...”

“Horny?”

Artene smiles. “Not the word I had in mind, but yes. I knew that he was power-hungry, but the level of his attraction to you was surprising.

“The second piece I was not expecting was Lethanos’ involvement. His presence counteracted Brody’s... eagerness. I knew that you would be safe with him if I left. I expected him to bow out gracefully after I intervened, but he remained stubbornly committed to you. Although I suppose it makes sense in hindsight...”

“How so?”

“Ahh, but that would be telling,” she says.

“C’mon, Artene,” I say.

“The third thing is that I fell in love with you,” she says.

I don’t say anything. The words aren’t coming.

“...When?” I say.

“The moment I saw you, Jenn.”

I’m speechless.

“I thought you said that you loved me too,” Artene says with a smile.

“Yeah, but I was bluffing! You hadn’t confirmed anything yet!”

Artene laughs, and it’s like music to my soul-ears. “That is why I had to leave, you know. I knew that if I stayed with you, then I would shelter you from entering this Abyss, and that if I did, then all of this would be for naught.”

“...But I thought that all of this was for Red,” I say. “So you could get back your one true love.”

“It was to get her back, yes,” Artene says. “Her power is too important to leave here for anyone to acquire. Anyone such as Brody, for example. But my romance with Red ended long ago. Between the time her mortal life ended and when I created this place, we repaired our friendship, but she had found a new love.”

“...OK, I can put two and two together,” I say.

“I knew that you were a woman of great intellect,” Artene says.

“So she and Lee are a thing? That’s why he was attracted to me?”

“Somewhat,” Artene says. “Her soul within you is what drew his initial interest. However, he must also feel some attraction towards you specifically, Jenn. The amount of Red’s soul within your being would not be enough to draw the level of interest he showed you.”

Good to know I’m at least somewhat desirable.

“You love me for... For me, though, right?” I say.

“With all of my heart, mind, and soul,” she says.

Y’all?

She didn’t hesitate for even a second.

I’m melting.

“Whoa hey, speaking of hearts and minds,” I say, “where’s mine? And, y’know, the rest of my physical body to go along with ‘em?”

“Ah,” Artene says. “Yes, I suppose we should find our way back to the others.”

“Is that going to be difficult?” I ask. “I mean, you needed to arrange this whole scenario to get Red out.”

“Now that I am with you, my soul is once again complete. As is yours.”

“Is that exclusively literal, or...?”

“From now on, Jenn, I will never be able to feel complete without your presence.”

With that, she teleports us out.

Oh, *frig me.*

Chapter 23

“Artene! And Jenn! You made it!” Red says as we arrive back in the Sugar Queen’s chambers. I see her face, though now on a human-sized body. It’s way less intimidating, y’all.

I also see another face on a human-sized body, which I have no problem recognizing.

“Aw, beans, I’m dead again!?” I say, looking at my corpse on the ground.

“Hurry, get in!” Red says. “We don’t know how much time you have.”

Artene dives in and gives me control, and I feel a warm buzz as my brain, heart, and other essential organs kick on again. This time, I’m in complete control, and it feels wonderful.

I’ve never been so happy to be aware of my tongue in my mouth.

“That... was a ride,” I say, sitting up slowly. “Did we get everyone out?”

“Everyone that we want to get out is in here,” Red says, gesturing to herself. “I’m having a hard time sorting through everyone, to be honest. How many souls did you wrangle into this?”

“Just about every single one, I hear,” Artene says, projecting herself next to me. “Persephone is the one you should be looking for; she probably has some semblance of order established.”

“Right, let me check,” Red says. A moment later, Persephone appears, apparently acting as a sort of guide. After her, a whole parade of faces comes out in rapid succession — The Sugar Queen! Ratchet and Elmtree! Arthur! (“Sorry about your life,” I say. “You kidding? That was awesome!” he says.) Libra! Steph!

Oh, dear, sweet Steph.

I run up to her and give her a big hug, even though she’s incorporeal. “You’re OK!” I say. “...Kinda!”

“Yeah, kinda,” she says, smiling. “A little weak, though.”

“The gang’s all here,” Arthur says, looking around.

“Not quite,” Ratchet says. “...Who are you, anyway?”

Arthur starts to answer, but as he does, the remaining figure in our story appears.

Red gives a small gasp.

“Lee.”

“Red,” he says, taking her hands in his. “It’s been far too long.”

“I’m sorry I was an idiot,” she says.

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” he says. “We’re all idiots once in a while.”

They kiss.

I almost expected to be jealous, but they’re just so perfect together.

Plus, I’ve got Artene, so it’s whatever. Cheers, you two.

“So this is what you meant after we kissed,” I say. “That we could both do better.”

Artene looks amused. “I suppose Lethanos was attracted to the portion of Red’s soul I used to awaken you, Jenn.”

“And because Jenn’s amazing,” Red says. “Based on what I’ve seen, at least. And so is Lee, so I understand the attraction.”

“I did everything I could to get you back,” Lee says.

“I know,” Red says. “And now I am! Funny how that works out.”

“...Hold on,” Steph says. “I thought Red and Artene were...?”

“Long story,” I say. “Apparently.”

“I don’t know how I’ll repay you, Artene,” Lee says. “And you too, Jenn. Everyone, thank you so much.”

“Hell, Lethanos, I don’t know how I’m gonna repay you!” Steph says. “You gave yourself up so my soul wouldn’t disentwine. What’s the return value on that?”

“This is all well and good, but we need to have some serious conversations,” the Sugar Queen says. “Especially concerning my owed debt. I’d love to collect it, but even I recognize when a situation goes beyond business. For the sake of the multiverse’s future, we need to figure out a long-term solution.”

“I have a proposition to make,” Red says. “One that involves all of you. Especially two of you.”

“...Go on,” Ratchet says, standing up a little straighter.

“I need a vessel for the power I possess,” she says. “It is... truly incomprehensible.”

“Sure,” I say.

Red snaps her fingers and changes the furniture arrangement in the room.

“Three stations,” Red says, stepping forward and making a sweeping gesture, “for three souls.” The stations are little more than podiums; as far as I can tell, they’re more symbolic than anything.

“One is mine; one is Artene’s; one is the Sugar Queen’s.”

Artene smiles. “I do appreciate the offer, Red, but I do not desire this level of authority,” she says.

“Who would you trust more than yourself for this responsibility, then?” Red says.

“Why not somebody like Libra?” I say.

Red scowls. “Certainly not.”

“Then it seems she would be perfect to maintain a balance of power,” Artene says.

“Yeah!” I say. “Hey, Libra!”

“Thank you, Jenn,” she says. “And Red. I know we didn’t part on the best of terms, but...”

“Don’t ‘but’ me, you heap of detritus,” Red says. “I know you could have fixed all of this if you wanted to.”

“I am sorry for what happened to you. I truly am. But it was your own doing.”

“Yeah, but only because...! Ah, never mind. You’re sold on this choice, then, Artene?”

“She has improved greatly in your absence, Red,” Artene says. “I would choose no other soul at this moment before Libra.”

“...Very well,” Red says. “So... Sugar Queen? You on board with this plan?”

“Only a third of the power seems like a bit of a step down, but... I reverently accept this blessed honor,” the Sugar Queen says with mock gravitas.

“Three distinct parties, each with our own interests,” Red says. “Not bad at all. Now we’ll need somebody to draw up some paperwork...”

“Yes! Hi! Hello!” Ratchet says.

“If you need legal documents, we’re here to help!” Elmtree adds, beaming a big smile.

“Of course, Elmtree,” Red says. “And Ratchet... No time is long enough to stay away from you, old friend.”

“Glad to see everything’s getting a nice, tidy bow on it,” Steph says. “Yup. This sure worked out great for everyone.”

“Yeah, about that...” Arthur says.

“Not to mention the five hundred or so mortals Brody killed before we ended his spree,” Elmtree says.

“Five hundred!?” I say.

“You didn’t know?” Ratchet says. “I mean, that explains your rather chipper demeanor, but...”

“And we will need to repair Equinox,” Libra says. “The damage was quite substantial.”

“...Isn’t there anything we can do to reverse it?” I say.

“Would you truly want to?” Libra says. “You would have to forget all of this. The multiverse would be rewound to before you met any of us.”

“And if we revert, then I’m back in the Infinite Abyss, along with all of the other souls that were trapped in there with me,” Red says. “Erebos is still on the loose. Brody’s loose too, for that matter. Reverting gives us a fresh slate. Leaving it as it is gives us what we’ve painted, mistakes and all.”

“...OK,” I say. “So what do we do?”

“We move on,” Libra says. “Instead of looking back, we look forward. I’ll make sure those five hundred souls are cared for with whatever I am able to provide, but the cost of going back is far greater than the cost of going forward.

“Especially for you two,” she adds, looking at Artene and me.

“I guess we would have to forget each other,” I say to Artene.

“Indeed,” Artene says. “And I for one would be strongly opposed to such an action.”

“So... We’ll leave things as-is?” I say.

“We will,” Libra says.

“Why break from tradition, eh?” Lee says.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“That is a long story,” Artene says. “We can discuss it at a later time.”

“Er... Could I make one request?” Steph says. “Could I get just enough power to act human and stuff? Or, like, kinda human or whatever? There’s a lot I didn’t get to do yet. I know that’s selfish of me, but...”

Red, Libra, and the Sugar Queen share a look. “A unanimous decision?” Libra says.

“An unquestionable yes from me,” the Sugar Queen says.

“She’s good, Lee?” Red says, looking over to him.

“She’s more than good,” he says.

“A yes, then.”

Libra smiles. “I do have one condition, Steph,” she says.

“Oh yeah?”

“I will require assistance in rebuilding Equinox. As you are more familiar than I with recent technological developments, I would be honored to have your assistance in its rebuilding.”

“For sure!” Steph says. “What do I need to do first?”

Libra smiles. “I believe we have all earned a small vacation,” she says. “The three of us will need some time to work through these souls to determine their fates. In the meantime, you can go spend time in the mortal realm with your loved ones.”

“Awesome,” Steph says.

Aw, Steph! Yay!

“I will warn you though, Steph,” Red says. “You’ll be tempted to become apathetic with that much power. To not see the beauty and joy of the world around you. To focus more on what others can do for you than on enjoying them for who they are.”

Steph nods. “Any advice?”

“One word,” Red says. “Don’t.”

“Cool. Maybe not so practical, but cool.”

“Hey, um,” Arthur says. “I don’t know how much sway I have here, but if I could help out with this whole business, I’d be way into that. My mortal life wasn’t all that great, but you guys all seem cool. If you need someone like me... I mean, I’m not going anywhere.”

“...You any good at bounty hunting?” Persephone asks, leaning against the wall in a corner of the chambers.

“I’ve, uh, never tried it,” he says, in awe of Persephone’s coolness. “I’m pretty good at distracting creeps though, apparently. Is that a useful skill?”

She smiles. "You might have a future, kid. Tag along with me and we'll see if we can't make something out of you."

"Awesome," he says. "And maybe get pizza on Saturdays. ...Assuming we can in this version of ourselves."

"See, I like you already," she says, clapping him on the back.

OK, everyone's kinda resolved, right? I sure hope so.

I feel my eyelids drooping.

As I start to fall asleep, I jerk myself back awake. "Woof. It's been a long day."

"Come, Jenn," Artene says. "You have done more than enough. It is time for you to take some much-deserved rest."

"That's the best idea I've heard all day," I say.

Libra smiles. "Isn't there one last question you have?" she says.

"...What do you mean?" I ask.

"Aren't you curious where this came from?"

With that, she throws something at my chest; I feel it hit me and enter me. I take in a sharp breath and wince as I feel that same power I felt outside the elevator return to me.

"That was you?" I say.

"Yes, that was you!?" Artene says.

"I had my eye on Jenn for longer than any of you," Libra says. "Your suspicions of me grooming you as a secondary judge were not unfounded. But I believe it would be best for all of us if you were to enjoy your mortal years before joining us."

I look for the right words, but I can't find them.

"Go and rest. We'll discuss this further in the future. Do you know any places that serve a good breakfast?"

I smile. "I know just the place," I say.

"Excellent," Libra says. "Drop me a line when you're recovered. You know where to find me."

I look over at Artene. She's more stunned than I am.

"And here is yours, as well," Libra adds, walking over to Steph. With a sweeping gesture, a bundle of that same ooze-gas passes over to my bestie.

"Whoa dang," she says. "That's some potent stuff!"

"Use it wisely," Libra says.

"For sure," Steph says. "Thanks!"

"May we leave now?" Artene says, speaking the words I couldn't.

“Please do,” Libra says. “I’m sure that both of you need your rest.” Artene smiles at me. “Come, back to your apartment.”

“Yeah,” I say. “But... I need to make a quick detour before we do. I’ll meet you back there?”

“...You wish to go alone?”

“Yes,” I say. “Definitely yes.”

“Very well,” Artene says. “But if you need help, do not hesitate to ask for it.”

“I know how to reach you,” I say. “No matter what happens.”

With that, I close my eyes and teleport.

Chapter 24

I bring myself to a familiar front door. Same kitschy doormat, I notice as I step on it, take a deep breath, and knock.

And wait.

Well, of course it's the same doormat.

We only broke up, like, thirty-six hours ago.

I notice the sun is rising. It's early — a little before six in the morning, I suppose — but she's usually up by now.

A moment later, the door opens.

She looks confused, disheveled, and still just as pretty.

“...Jenn?”

“Hi, Linda.”

She's in her pajamas, which means I'm even further off my game than usual.

Oh, crap. I'm also in my pajamas.

“You realize what time it is, right? I mean, have you even slept? You look exhausted.”

“I am exhausted,” I say. “It's a long story, and I'm not sure I want to get into it at the moment. I just wanted to say... I'm sorry. I was an idiot on the phone. You deserve an apology from me, and I wanted to give it to you.”

“...Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say.

She looks me over. “You wanna come in and have some breakfast?” she says. “I have some leftover pizza I was gonna tear into.”

“That... sounds amazing,” I say, not caring one iota that I'm about to have pizza two meals in a row. “I'd love that a lot.”

“Sure,” she says, opening the door wider. “Wish you would've texted me first, though.”

“Sorry, it's been a bit of a day,” I say as I enter her place. “But hey, it's not like this is my first time seeing you in your PJs. ...Too soon?”

“I think it's just the right amount of soon,” Linda says with a laugh as she pulls the pizza out of the fridge. “You don't mind if it's cold, do you?”

“Wouldn't have it any other way,” I say. We sit together on her couch, the same couch where we used to...

“So, uh, I didn't articulate this very well last night, but sorry about your job,” she says. “That sucks.”

“Thanks,” I say. “I should've listened to you when you said that job was going nowhere.”

She shrugs. “None of those jobs ever are. My new one isn't any better; just closer to my apartment. What about you? You have anything else lined up?”

“...Kinda,” I say. “Lots of interesting connections. I'll have to tell you all about it some day.”

“Sure,” she says.

We eat our pizza in silence for a moment.

“...Lin?”

“Yeah?” she says.

“You... I mean, I definitely said some things that I regret during that phone call, but I think you were right when you said that we don't fit together.”

“You found somebody else,” she says.

“I... I...”

“Come on, Jenn, I know how to read you,” she says.

“...Yeah,” I say. “But I didn't meet her until after we broke up.”

“I know you wouldn't dump me just to date somebody else,” she says, taking a bite of her pepperoni pizza. “So what's her name? Or his, or theirs?”

“You believe me just like that?”

“Jenn Lewis, you don't have an ounce of guile in your entire being,” she says. “C'mon. Gimme the deets. I need a name.”

“Artene,” I say.

“...Artene?”

“She's... European.”

“Ah,” she says, as if that explains everything. “And she's... nice?”

“Yeah,” I say. “She's helped me work through some things. Helped open my eyes to what I was doing.”

“How so?”

“She put things into perspective,” I say. “What’ll matter in the grand scheme of things and what won’t.”

“...And stopping by at six in the morning is going to matter in the grand scheme of things?”

“Not that specifically, but my new schedule is total garbage, so I wanted to make sure we could talk before...”

“I’m just messing with you,” she says.

“...I want to mend the bridges I burned,” I say.

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“I’ve been wanting the same. And it’s probably a good thing you came to my door instead of texting, because I probably would’ve just ignored the text as I worked up the nerve to respond.”

“Still, I’ll try not to make a habit of it.”

“Much appreciated,” she says. “But yeah, I’d love to keep in touch. I think the break-up was the right call, but...”

“Yeah, totally.”

“...Yeah.”

It’s a moment with no stakes, no conflict.

None of the multiverse-shifting drama of the past day and a half.

Just two people existing together in a space, enjoying each other’s company.

I feel myself start to fall asleep.

“Well,” I say, rising to my feet, “my schedule is up in the air, so you let me know what times work for you and we’ll go get coffee or whatever.”

“Yeah. I’d like that.” She says it earnestly, not in the “I’ll-say-this-but-never-actually-put-forth-the-effort-to-make-it-happen” way.

Which is nice.

“Oh, and I have to tell you about Pastor Smith.”

“Wait, what? What happened?”

“Ahh, it’ll have to wait for next time,” I say, heading for the door. “For now, I need to go collapse in a bed and recover.”

“Well, now I won’t be able to think about anything else all day,” she says, unlocking her apartment door for me. “And hey, if that work thing doesn’t pan out, let me know; I might know some people that know some people.”

“Thanks,” I say. “See you around, Linda.”

“I sure hope so, Jenn. And maybe we’ll be wearing real clothes next time, too.”

I laugh as she closes the door. I feel... weightless. Which might be from the sleep deprivation, but it feels nice.

There’s only one soul in the whole multiverse I want to see right now. I teleport back to my apartment.

My body is only staying upright at this point out of habit. As I arrive, Artene rises from my couch and comes over to me. “Is everything alright?”

I look in her eyes and feel the love and affection pouring out of her all over again. I’m never going to get tired of that feeling. “It is now,” I say.

“Jenn, you... you can forgive me?” she says.

Her face twists to one of apprehension; one that I can’t bear to cause.

“You didn’t think I would forgive you, Artene?” I say.

“I had my doubts,” she says. “I manipulated you, which is not something that ought to be taken lightly, no matter what my intentions were.”

I put my hands on her shoulders. “You’re right. That was super messed up, what you did. And I’m glad you acknowledged it. But I know something.”

“What do you know?”

“I know that you were terrified to come into the Infinite Abyss,” I say. “You told me about it in Equinox, so I know you were telling the truth; from your perspective, your choices were to ignore me and enjoy your existence, or to risk torment to come after me. Even though you believed, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that you’d be horrifically tortured for all eternity. And the fact that you would risk spending eternity locked in there with Brody, too... That tells me that you’re willing to do anything for me. You gambled your soul on rescuing me, so I know that you’re in this for the long run. No apology needed. Ever.”

She smiles. “That is appreciated, Jenn,” she says. “And true. I would be willing to gamble all of the multiverse on spending one more moment with you.”

“I’m flattered,” I say. “Fortunately, I don’t think you’ll have to do that again anytime soon.”

“Indeed,” she says.

I sigh, contented. I look around my apartment; other than the knife I tried to throw at Brody sticking out of the wall, everything's pretty much back to normal.

Well, other than Artene here.

Artene is anything but normal. She's the best.

"Also, you should know that I have been mulling something over in your absence," she says. "My determination to not become romantically involved with mortals."

"Oh," I say.

If she's about to break up with me, this approach play is a lot different than my most recent experience.

"I suppose it was founded on good intentions. However, it was a rather foolish determination, now that I reflect upon it. Especially if it would keep me away from you."

She pulls me in closer.

I lean in.

We kiss.

It's lovely. Literally. I feel love from my toes to my nose. Everything I'd hoped it would be and more. (And let me tell you, my expectations were pretty dang high after my smooch session with Lee.)

Afterwards, she just... holds me. I lean into her, and she keeps me upright.

I'm almost ready to fall asleep, but there are still a few questions that are keeping my brain from resting.

"...So, what was up with your beef with Lee, anyway? Something to do with Equinox?"

"Ah," Artene says. "After Red was lost in the Infinite Abyss, Libra offered Lethanos and me the opportunity to revert back to when Red was alive. Back to before she fell in love with Red and was still in love with me."

"And you were on board and he wasn't?"

"The opposite, in fact," Artene says. "Lethanos was willing to make any sacrifice to rescue Red, even if it meant losing her love. But I knew that their love was so pure that I could not live with myself if I had ended it."

"And if you had reverted and they met again, then..."

"Then it could spell disaster, yes," Artene says.

"So you went through all of this trouble just for them," I say.

“Indeed,” she says. “And I did not let Lethanos know about it. He would not have let me go through with it, I think. Hence, the beef.”

“...Damn, but I got lucky. You’re the absolute best, Artene.”

Artene laughs. “I am the fortunate one. In you, Jenn, I have found a soul that burns brighter than any I have ever met. I would be honored to spend the rest of known time with you. And longer, if possible.”

“You’re that sure already?”

“After a few centuries, you know when you know certain things,” Artene says. “And this is one of them. I desire no position in all of creation more than to stay by your side forever.”

“I haven’t had quite as much experience, but I’m pretty sure I feel the same way,” I say. “How do you feel about church? Like, Jesus church? That’s the kind that’s my personal jam.”

“I have not been in a few decades, but that is mostly from not having anyone with which I might attend services,” Artene says. “Though I believe that some of my beliefs may not be in line with the modern forms of Christianity.”

“Join the club,” I say with a smile. “I am glad to hear that, though, Artene. That just confirms to me that we’re... That we’re right for each other, as cheesy as that sounds.”

“I do not know if soulmates truly exist, Jenn, but if they do, then I believe that we are them.”

“That’s really beautiful, Artene,” I say. “And I think you’re exactly right. As for right now, I wish I could say that I’m feeling ready for anything beyond falling over as a post-battle celebration, but...”

“Come,” Artene says, setting me upright again and leading me into my bedroom. “There will be time for such things later, but for now, you need your rest.”

Then, as we arrive at my bed, “Remove your shoes.”

I do.

She pulls back the sheets; I half-crawl, half-collapse into them. Thank God that I’m still in my pajamas.

My pillows feel so good under my head. For a moment, I think that there’s no better feeling in the world than being snuggled under my own bedsheets, nice and cozy.

Then Artene circles around to the other side, sneaks in beside me, and wraps me up in her arms.

Yep. This is a million times better.

“You’ll be here when I wake up?” I say.

“I shall stand guard over your life, Jenn Lewis,” she says, her lips next to my ears, her heartbeat reverberating in my chest.

“Forever?” I say.

“Yes. So long as it is within my power, I shall keep you hella safe.”

I laugh. “Good to know. And likewise.”

She lets out a contented sigh. “Rest well now, my brave warrior. The multiverse owes you a great debt.”

For the first time in a day and a half, I find sleep.

As much as I need the rest, I can’t wait until I’m awake again.

The End