Summary

Her name was Betty Cooper and she was Wicked. Not wicked: evil. Or even wicked: cool. When witches called other witches Wicked, it was said in hushed tones and wary glances. It was said with respect and often in fear. Wicked witches were hated and envied, sometimes coveted, sometimes revered. Not all witches were Wicked, but all Wicked were witches, and they were powerful. Covens wanted them, Slayers killed them.

His name was Jughead Jones. And he was a Slayer.

Notes

So here's that paranormal work that I was talking about in my previous posts. It's hefty, and its got lots of world building, and its got a bit of mystery, too.

I don't know if any of you would like this. It's certainly different from what I've written so far, but hopefully, you like how Bughead exists in this world.
Double, double, toil and trouble
Fire burn and cauldron bubble
Double, double, toil and trouble
Something wicked this way comes!

--Double Trouble, Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban

Her name was Betty Cooper and she was Wicked.
Not wicked: evil. Or even wicked: cool.
When witches called other witches Wicked, it was said in hushed tones and wary glances. It was said with respect and often in fear.
Wicked witches were hated and envied, sometimes coveted, sometimes revered. Covens wanted them, Slayers killed them. Not all witches were Wicked, but all Wicked were witches, and they were powerful.
The Wicked lived a life of extremes, either existing in a constant state of alert or in a steady state of hiding. It was rumored that the strongest of them descended into madness sooner rather than later, unable to control their powers, and for those who weren’t as strong, it was only just a matter of time.

Betty was strong. She was formidable, but unlike many witches, particularly of her caliber, power was not her drug. Xanax was.
She was desperately obsessed with medication, because Betty did not want to go crazy. She did not want to descend into madness and destroy everyone around her in a searing, explosive ball of witch fyre.
She was also obsessively disciplined, her practice deeply entrenched in the dotting of Is and the crossing of Ts. And it wasn’t that she didn’t break the rules--half the time living in the world of the Lost was about bypassing the laws of physics and chance, the permutations of Lost Reality juxtaposed with the reality of Otherworlders like them, it was about casting hexes exactly how it was prescribed, never using too much or too little, to never let her emotions color her spells, not unless that was required.

Discipline.

Self-control.
On rare occasions, propofol.

She always had two vials of propofol on her, like people with severe allergies had epipens, but unlike the allergic, the propofol was to protect others. Whenever her powers started to crackle from her fingertips, like miniature bolts of lightning, the only thing that can wind it back was stabbing her with a vial full of anaesthetic, essentially to put her to sleep.

In her entire eighteen years of life, she’d had to be dosed twice. The first time, at the age of nine, when a rogue witch tried to kill her and take her powers and the second time, not so long ago, when her father was killed.

She didn’t remember either of these events very clearly. She was told most of what happened, and what she did remember were probably the worst parts of it. Like when that rogue witch held an athame high above her heart and swung down, intent on piercing her with it. She did not remember what happened after that, only that she hadn’t gotten stabbed.

And then the day her father died, she remembered a few other things, but none so stark as the face of the man who killed him.

The Slayer.

A man with a thick head of dark hair, thin facial stubble, and piercing blue eyes.

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So long as other witches didn’t know she was Wicked, she was just an ordinary, run o’ the mill witch.

Not that witches were that common.

Even in certain parts of the world, certain towns, certain cities, where witches were supposed to be “common”, they weren’t, actually. Not in a general population sort of thing.

Witches converged. It was their thing. They liked being in covens. Sometimes, it was necessary to stay safe and protected. Witches were more generally social beings, because they needed to draw power from different things and situations. So rogue witches were anomalies.

Rogue witches were not to be confused with witches in isolation. Witches who removed themselves from others aren’t necessarily harmful. Sure, you’d get the occasional witch in the woods who kidnapped people to use for their horrible spells, but most Hermit Witches were just Wood Witches who liked being left alone. Rogue witches actively went out on their own to further their individual, often nefarious goals.

Betty was neither rogue, coven, or isolated witch. She was a teenage girl who happened to have magic. She lived each day, almost aggressive in her quest for normalcy, going to school and talking about homecoming dances in committees. It was hope nurtured and replenished. Each moment she spent filling out college applications and sending it out was a moment she cherished.

But Also:

Each and everything she did, was tethered to her willingness to fight for her life, because every once
in a while, a witch, a slayer, or someone equally as menacing, came along who knew her secret, knew she was Wicked—and tried to take her, kill her, or steal her Wickedness.

Perhaps the most harrowing thing about her Wickedness was that it affected her entire family. While she could defend herself in a fight, the ones who came for her didn’t care if she was alone or out with her sister, brother, parents, or all of them at once.

The Cooper family, by necessity, knew how to defend themselves.

Chic, in particular, earned a living as a bodyguard, employed by a firm who had a network of bodyguards for hire around the country. He was good at his job because he was a warlock among the Lost. He taught his sisters everything he knew about protecting themselves, because at any given moment, someone could attack.

It didn’t happen daily, but fending off an attack once a year was traumatizing enough. Of that one day in the year that Betty had to fight for her life, she would spend the next 4 days in shock and then the rest of the 360 days getting over it. Again, aggressively.

Polly’s ill-made joke about them having a Special Needs kid did not go over-well with most of them, partly because it was insensitive to families with real special needs children (and the Coopers were nothing if not painfully polite on the surface), but mostly because Betty’s special needs involved them all being able to cast a spell while thrusting a ceremonial dagger through the heart of their enemies. They just couldn’t bring themselves to laugh at it. But Betty nonetheless appreciated Polly’s attempts at levity.

People were dying, sure, but honestly, it was a little hilarious that their twisted parallel to reality was their normal: instead of a teddy bear, they took Athames to bed. Instead of saying a prayer before bedtime, they whispered a warding spell to protect them while they slept.

Sometimes, Polly’s mad laughter made Betty cringe, but lately she just felt resigned at the fact that there was no other thing to do but laugh.

So it was still a shock when chaos descended upon their home that one evening, when the next thing Betty knew, their house was on fire, and around them were piles of ash, shaped like bodies and creatures in full pounce.

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What Betty could remember of the night her father died was fuzzy, and chaotic--at best. There was the Slayer’s face, of course, and then there was her father, dying in her arms.

In flashes of memory and snippets of dreams, she recalled (maybe) Hal Cooper drowning in his own pool of blood defending his youngest daughter.

Betty was not a stranger to pain. Pain is what focused her. Pain made her powerful, and this was true for all Wicked.

The Wicked used their pain to make their magic stronger. It was the reason the Wicked were so feared (or revered). The darkness that came with pain was intimidating, and to draw power from one’s own pain was a bit too much, even for witches.
But Betty’s secret, was that aside from her own pain, she could draw power from the pain of others.

No other Wicked can do this. Only Betty, and it was a secret she protected desperately, even more than the fact that she was Wicked, because if anyone else knew about it, she suspected her life would be miserable, ten fold.

So when Betty drew on her father’s pain that night, his lungs filling with blood, she cast a spell that obliterated their enemies with a soft, singular sigh. After that, someone injected her with the propofol. Probably Chic. Probably her mother.

And then she was out for a couple of days.

It was generous, even, to say that Betty’s memories of that night were fuzzy. In every respect, it was possible that her memories were inaccurate. Biased. Possibly even made up.

Except for that one face.

The face of that Slayer.

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Riverdale, the town with pep.

The sign flashed in Betty’s memories like a nightmare montage, just one among the many things in this place that filled the pit of her stomach with dread.

The moment their car rolled into town, Betty felt the weight of magic in the air, like the trees and animals could talk, like everyone she met could be more than human.

Of course, there couldn’t be that many witches in town. Even the fact that Riverdale was the point of intersection for the three biggest ley lines in the world, covens were never so lavish with their territories. But there was no stopping traveling spellcasters from passing through.

With proper permission from the reigning coven, witches from out of town could pass through without incident.

But it wasn’t just the witches. It was everyone.

It was like the whole town was under a spell, and honestly, she wouldn’t be that surprised if it was, because in Riverdale, it was the Blossoms who led one of the most powerful covens in the east coast, and as witches went, the Blossoms were unapologetic and ruthless in their pursuit of power.

As Betty stared across the Blossom home’s dinner table exchanging apprehensive looks with Chic, she reached under the table for her sister’s hand.

Polly cast her a glare, shaking her hand off, and Betty tried not to let Polly’s rebuff bother her too much. They were under a lot of stress, made worse by the intense glare on their mother’s face and the impenetrable one on Penelope Blossom’s.

It wasn’t just Penelope Blossom. It was the entire house. The dark oak wood carvings, the lush heavy carpeting and drapery, the large dining chairs, and the heavy marble table set at the center of an impossibly vast dining room, lit by dim lamps and an iron-cast chandelier, felt looming and
oppressive, pressing down on her shoulders like a lead weight.

This did not feel like a home, but then again it was the seat of coven power, so perhaps it shouldn’t.

“Alice,” Penelope said in a maddeningly quiet voice. “Allow me to express my condolences for Hal’s death. We, too, are grieving his passing. He was a Blossom by blood.”

Alice Cooper nodded. “Thank you. We appreciated the flowers at his funeral, as well as the invitation to come here.”

“You haven’t cashed the check we sent to help you.”

The tension on Alice’s face deepened and Betty tried not to swallow too audibly. She had seen her mother’s face when she found that check tucked in the condolence card. Alice had looked like the devil herself had put forth a contract asking her to sign in blood. However considerable the amount (and it was), Alice did not look the least bit like she wanted to accept it.

“We haven’t gotten to it,” Alice said in a light tone. “I wasn’t sure if you had it right or you made a mistake. I am not accustomed to getting free money.”

Betty bit her lip. Of course it wasn’t free. Nothing ever was.

“It’s basic bereavement pay,” Penelope said, covering her wine glass to prevent the butler from refilling it. “Hal, as a member of this family, is entitled to some funds bequeathed to his beneficiaries in the event of his sudden death. He earned it the moment he cast his first spell. You will owe us nothing for it.”

Alice did not look the least bit appeased, but she did express that she would put the check in the bank the next morning.

Penelope smiled. Her toothy grin may as well have been fangs. “Good. I trust your flight was comfortable. Our private jets are well appointed.”

Jets. Plural.

Betty knew the Blossom coffers went deep, but who the hell had more than one jet? The witching business was clearly good, and there wasn’t a doubt that Penelope was responsible for that. Clifford Blossom’s family may have provided the means, but it was Penelope’s cunning that elevated the Blossoms’ power among the covens.

“It was,” Alice replied. “Could have used more blankets, though.”

Betty did not know whether to laugh or reel in horror. Chic and Polly certainly looked impassive to everyone else, but Betty detected the tension in their body language. Chic’s knuckles were white and Polly’s fingers were twitching on her lap.

Penelope’s lips hardened to a line. “I will let the crew know. Are you sure you and your children don’t care to stay here at Thornhill while your house is in disarray? At least stay the night. Our beds are already made and all you need to do is sink into them. I’d imagine that you don’t even know where your mattresses are yet.”

Alice arched an eyebrow. “For God’s sake, Penelope, they aren’t that hard to find. We got a four bedroom house. You can probably fit it in this dining room. We don’t have secret doors and cellars over there.”
Penelope looked slightly affronted. “I was merely suggesting that you let the wards settle in. On Thornhill, the wards are tightly established. You and your family won’t find a safer place.”

“The house should be fine,” Alice said without a hint of hesitation. “I understand that you sent your best spellcasters to put the wards, or was that just big talk from your lackeys?”

“Blossoms don’t bluff, Alice.”

“Good! Anyway, I had Betty double ward it, just to make sure. She’s quite adept at her craft. We’re very proud of her…”

Betty felt her cheeks burning at that, her eyes affixing themselves to the scars on the palm of her hands. The tingle in her fingers began to build, like blood rushing away from its tips to make room for something else.

*Focus, Betty...*

*Fillet of a fenny snake,*

*In the caldron boil and bake;*

*Eye of newt and toe of frog,*

*Wool of bat and tongue of dog,*

The feeling began to ebb, and her emotions began to calm, like the quiet, undisturbed surface of a lake.

“...as you probably are with your twin children, Cheryl and Jason,” Alice continued. “Twin witches are formidable.”

A hint of anxiety twitched in Betty’s stomach at the mention of Cheryl and Jason.

Cheryl and Jason Blossom, their twin cousins, were not Wicked, but their twin connection made them powerful separately and more so, together. It gave the twins, particularly Cheryl, the respect and power she craved. It made her unstoppable. Her twin brother, Jason, was not as power hungry, but Betty can’t imagine him to be too different from his twin sister. Twin witches were a special class of magic all their own. They could do spells that no single witch ever can. Twins could draw on each other’s powers, which made their magic ten times stronger.

The only thing stopping the Slayers and their enemies from taking them down, Betty supposed, was the fear of the Blossom coven’s wrath raining down on them all.

Penelope took a deep breath, probably to control her anger at the mild insult to the coven witches. “The initial cast would have been enough, and you know that being in Riverdale makes your home the safest of havens. Our running of the place demands neutrality among the otherworlders. Someone is always watching. Break the accords and the consequences will be severe. No one will dare come here to harm Betty, especially now that we’ve warded her and that you have officially pledged her loyalty to the coven.”

Betty wanted to throw up. Did her mother pledge her to the coven? Did she *tell* Penelope Blossom
that she was Wicked?

Alice frowned. “What I told you—that was not a pledge. That was a reason, among many.”

Penelope arched an eyebrow in feigned surprise. “Of course. My mistake. Charles however, did pledge his loyalty. Isn’t that right?”

Betty turned to Chic, her horror radiating from her eyes like tears. “Chic?” Not again. Not another one in the family putting themselves on the line for her.

“It’s not a big deal,” Chic replied, his face indicating no tension or any feelings whatsoever. “I’m a Blossom by blood, for one. It’s in me whether I like it or not. And besides, what I’ll do for the Blossoms is exactly what I would do on my regular job. We--Betty, needs protection and I want to make sure she gets it. We all do. Mom, don’t look at me like that.”

Betty shook her head, her tears spilling. “Chic…”

“Betty, stop. It’s just a job.”

Polly’s lips tensed. “Yes. With a dental plan.”

“We will discuss this later,” Alice said shortly. “Chic is an adult and he can do what he wants, but Betty is—“

“Eighteen,” Penelope interjected. “An adult, as well. That said, she is a Blossom and is entitled to some protections whether her brother works for us or not. She will be going to her new school tomorrow, won’t she? Cheryl goes there, too. Cheryl will walk her into school. That should ease her into Riverdale High’s top rung. The Lost are so easily persuaded in that way.”

The Lost. They’ve been called many things through the centuries. The ordinaries, the unenlightened, the muggles, but in the last century or so, they were called the Lost, because it was believed that at some point, everyone had magic. Without magic, they were lost.

“Are you excited for school tomorrow, Betty?” Penelope asked.

Betty stared into those cold, dead eyes. A shudder ran down her spine and she knew no other answer would suffice: “Thrilled.”

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Walking into Riverdale High for the first time flanking Cheryl and Jason Blossom was a surreal experience.

Over the course of her life, Betty has had to change schools more than a couple of times, because when the Coopers had to raze things to the ground, flattening property, taking memories, and even killing a few people who happened to be their enemies, their only recourse was to move out and avoid the inconvenience of the authorities.

So this was not her first “first day.” Each time she did it, she tried to slink in unnoticed, arriving just with enough time to fill out papers, avoid the student buddy assigned to her, and slip into class with as little ceremony as possible. Always, she would ask schools to inform teachers not to introduce her. At any rate, if they tried, she cast small spells to deter them, or distract them, whatever was appropriate and wouldn’t attract suspicion.

This time, though. This time. It was like Cheryl cast a spell so that everyone would notice her. Not
Betty. Not even Jason, but _her_, Cheryl. Unfortunately, that meant by default, Betty got a bit of that attention as well.

Cheryl sauntered through the doors like a queen, her red hair cascading down her back in rich, luscious waves. Her body was clad in sexy, designer clothes, cute short skirts and clingy tops that showed off her cheerleading captain’s body. She was glorious and Betty would not have had it any other way.

Betty tended to be more low key, with her shades of pastel encased in a thin layer of black armor. As much as she wanted to disappear, she had found in the past that dressing in all black was just as loud as dressing in all pastels. She had a nice, blended mix, just so she could have one foot in grunge and the other in preppy, which made for a good look when you wanted a bombshell like Cheryl to outshine you.

Jason had his letterman jacket on. He was captain of the football team and not long after they walked through the doors, he was high-fiving with teammates who were asking him loudly who the new girl was.

Jason eyed her with a grin and her eyes widened at him pleadingly. _Please, not now_…

“I’ll introduce you later at lunch,” Jason said, dragging them away. And they listened in spite of the fact that several of them looked over their shoulders at her as they left.

Betty wanted to melt through the walls, but she was a little glad that Jason was not as mean spirited as Cheryl was, or maybe he was, just that she was a witch woman—more importantly, the older twin. Witches and Warlocks tended to respect that.

Cheryl, as mentioned, had no such compulsion to be kind to her. The woman was powerful in her own way.

“Stop hunching over, Betty dear,” Cheryl said haughtily. “I refuse to be seen with a wilting flower. If we have to hang out, I want those perky boobs out and that ass preaching the fucking truth. Besides, mommy said you were powerful, and she doesn’t lie about such things. You can probably smoke all these losers with a single swish and flick.”

Betty paled and looked around them. “Keep your voice down! I don’t want anyone _here_ knowing that.”

Cheryl scoffed as student after student passed them by, waving at them like they were celebrities. “These idiots wouldn’t know a witch from a bitch. Their fearful little minds couldn’t process that we even exist. Besides, this is Riverdale. The magic works for _us_. You’ll see. Follow along, minions.”

Cheryl flipped her hair and hit Betty in the face.

Betty had to close her eyes and count to ten to resist her immediate urge to pull that beautiful red hair and drag Cheryl to the ground. Cheryl’s minions were Tina and Ginger, two perfectly nice ladies, not witches, were it not for Cheryl’s ruthless influence. They giggled and bounced after their queen, tugging viciously at Betty’s blonde ponytail as they went.

“Ow!” Betty hissed at a particularly heinous tug. She batted their hands away, scowling as she dragged her feet to follow them.

The hair on the back of her neck began to stand on end. Someone was watching her. As she turned to look, her eyes met the steely blue gaze of a boy clad in a black leather jacket, a white tank, dark gray jeans, and heavy black combat boots. A blue plaid blouse was tied around his hips and she
could have sworn she saw suspenders under his jacket, but most distinctly was the beanie on his head, trapping what was most assuredly a head of black hair, some of which had come loose over his forehead.

He stared at her with what Betty could only describe as blatant curiosity and she couldn’t resist staring right back. He tore his eyes from her first, stuffing a motorcycle helmet into his locker, and slamming it shut so loudly that she jumped.

Slightly flustered, she hurried after Cheryl, hoping she could get through the rest of the day without more attention than that.

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First period was English class, and Betty could only be relieved at the fact that she didn’t share it with Cheryl.

She shuffled in with the rest of the students and slunk towards the back, but not all the way back, because that called attention as well.

She was just settling in her seat and keeping her head down when she saw heavy black boots edging the perimeter of her vision.

She looked up and sure enough, it was the boy with the steely blue eyes. He slid into the seat beside her and slunk low, long legs stretching out to the aisle and his arms splayed out on his desk. He was looking at his phone and tapping briskly on its screen.

She pressed her lips together and trained her eyes to the front, growing conscious of his amazing cheekbones and that razor sharp jaw. She realized how tall and lean he was, and most aggravatingly, she noticed the nimbleness of his long fingers.

What a witchy thing to think, she scolded herself.

The class started with the teacher calling everyone’s attention.

Betty braced herself for that moment the teacher would start to introduce her. The window was open and there was a candle, of all things, resting atop a skull. It was unlit, of course, and it was probably some prop or mood setter for a Hamlet reading, but she had a plan and she was ready.

“Good morning, everyone,” said the English teacher, picking up a slip of paper from off his desk. “I believe we have a new—“

Betty flexed her fingers and blew a soft breath through her lips. That familiar rush of magic tinkled from her tongue and a strong wind blew through the open window, knocking all the papers from the teacher’s table and, the introduction sheet, from the teacher’s hand. Papers were everywhere, and impossibly, the candle lit, catching that intro sheet on fire.

The teacher cursed and some students scrambled to help. The class was on the verge of panic, but the teacher hurriedly soothed everyone when the fire was quickly put away.

“God, I didn’t even know that thing was lit!” The teacher gasped, pushing the window shut. “Okay, everyone settle down!”

The mood had slightly lifted and everyone was chattering distractedly. It took another few minutes
for Mr. Gregory to get everyone to focus again.

Betty leaned her chin on the heel of her hand, calmly watching it all happen.

“Okay,” Mr. Gregory said, clapping his hands once and pointing his folded hands in Betty’s direction.

She tapped her pinky against the side of her nose three times, and before the teacher could continue, a student sneezed, then another, then another. The sneezing continued between the three students and everyone else began to giggle and laugh.

“What is going on?” Mr. Gregory said exasperatedly, running to the window to open it again, presumably to let out the allergens.

Betty managed to stifle her own laughter, opening her notebook so that she could concentrate on the coming lesson, but she caught Blue Eyes staring at her suspiciously. She quickly averted her gaze.

When the students stopped sneezing, Mr. Gregory once again turned in her direction, and she was about ready to explode the overhead lights when Blue Eyes raised his hand and said, “Mr. Gregory, can we get to the assignment? I want to talk about *The Thorn Birds.*”

“Ah, and why is that, Mr. Jones? Something to do with the racy scenes?”

The class laughed and started to make hooting sounds, but Mr. Jones did not laugh with everyone else, instead he said, “No. I wanted to talk about whether, in the context of the book, obligation and love can ever coexist, or if that’s just a one-way ticket to fucking up your life.”

Jones’s cussing earned him oohs and laughter, but the teacher clapped. “Excellent point of discussion! Let’s get to it, shall we, class?”

*So, not just an emo dude with a biker aesthetic.*

She resisted the urge to look at him again, but she wondered throughout English class whether his eagerness to get to the lesson was just a coincidence or whether by some intuition he knew that she didn’t want to be introduced.

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Her next class was History, and incidentally, Jones seemed to be in that class, too. He was sitting in the back and of course, the only seat available was the one in front of him.

Quietly, she took the seat and leaned over her desk, bracing for any further introductions.

Thankfully, Ms. Guzman assumed she had gotten introduced in the previous class and did not bother going through the motions. She launched right into the lesson, which was about, of all things, the Salem Witch trials, a subject that Betty was so well versed in that she allowed her mind to drift off. She stared out the window, wishing she could just get up and run.

Why couldn’t she just run? Why couldn’t she just save her family the hardship and grief and run away, far from them? They would be safer and nobody except her had to die.

_Because I don’t want to be alone._
She sighed softly.

*Because apparently, I'm a needy little bitch.*

“Ms. Cooper?”

She blinked, staring up at Ms. Guzman’s frowning face. For a moment, Betty panicked.

“I hope it’s worth it,” said Ms. Guzman.

“I’m sorry, what?”

“Whatsoever you’re daydreaming about. I hope it’s worth your History grade point average.”

She felt her face warming as giggles rippled through the room. She considered telling Ms. Guzman that she was thinking of her father who was recently killed, but it was too painful. She couldn’t bring herself to do it.

“I’m sorry, Ms. Guzman, can you repeat the question?”

Ms. Guzman sighed but she did, asking her to give them a brief introduction about the Salem Witch trials.

Betty knew this by heart. Without pause, she started to speak. “Between February 1692 and May 1693, a series of hearings and prosecutions were conducted on citizens accused of witchcraft in Colonial Massachusetts. Contrary to popular belief, the trials happened not just in Salem Village, but also in Salem Town, Ipswich, and Andover. The most famous trial conducted by the Court of Oyer and Terminer in 1692 in Salem Town was what earned these heinous proceedings its name. The trials, all in all, including ones conducted before the infamous Salem Witch Trials, resulted in the execution of over 30 innocent people, most of them women, some of them them children, and all but one by hanging. The trials continue to be a cautionary tale about the dangers of isolationism, religious extremism, false accusations, lapses in due process, and putting fragile, insecure, misogynistic bro-dudes in positions of power.”

Ms. Guzman blinked while impressed whistles and hooting erupted sporadically throughout the classroom.

“Well,” Ms. Guzman finally said. “You obviously know the material, but I know you didn’t get all that, especially that last part, from your assigned history books. Nevertheless, good work, Ms. Cooper.” She turned away, walking down the aisle to continue where Betty left off.

Betty figured she could drift off without being called on again.

As the bell rang signalling the end of second period, she gathered her things in one sweep and turned to leave.

“You should read *The Heretic’s Daughter* by Kathleen Kent,” said a familiar voice behind her. She looked over her shoulder, even if she knew it had been Jones. “You’ll like it.”

She nodded. “Read it already. I do like it.”

“The prequel’s just as compelling.”

She hated to admit that she was growing fascinated by this well-read biker. “*The Traitor’s Wife.* Yes, I read that, too.”
“Previously called *The Wolves of Andover.*”

She arched an eyebrow. Previously? Who changes book titles?

He smirked, his eyes sparkling with amusement. “Look it up.”

He left and Betty realized she stood transfixed, still thinking about that smirk of his.

Taking a deep breath, she went to her locker to get her science book. As she walked down the hallway, she tried her best to ignore the stares and whispers following in her wake. It would be very easy for her to find out what they were saying about her, but experience had taught her that she wouldn’t want to know.

Swiftly, she undid the combination on her locker and swapped her books out. It was almost third period by the time she began to make her way to science lab. When she stepped through the lab doors, she desperately searched for a vacant slot amongst the tables.

Her stomach did a little flip when she discovered that the only remaining seat would partner her with Jones.

Swallowing her anxiety, she marched up to the table and took the seat next to him.

“Are you following me, Jones?” she asked, softly, as the bell rang in the background.

He seemed slightly amused. “Pretty sure I got here first. And by here I mean the school in general. I should be asking you if *you’re* following me, New Girl.”

“If I had any say in my schedule, I would be at home most days.”

He gave a grunt which sounded vaguely like a short chuckle.

Professor Flutesnoot started the class and Betty opened her notebook, intent on taking notes, but she had difficulty focusing, her mind floating away at the events of the last few days: being at the Blossoms, settling in their house, sending a text to her cousin on her mother’s side, Sabrina Spellman, and figuring out what the hell she should do with her life.

She and Sabrina hadn’t exactly met, but they private messaged each other like old friends on Facebook. It was nice to be able to follow on the lives of the Spellmans. They were as close to normal as Betty aspired to be, even being witches.

The difference, of course, was that the Spellmans were wood witches. They pulled their magic from nature. They were excellent potion makers, they healed people and animals, they nurtured the soil, and they lived to help everyone and everything around them.

Wood Witches were so often the goodwill ambassadors between covens and the Lost, or covens and Slayers.

Slayers.

Betty wondered if there were any in Riverdale.

She looked down at her notebook and realized she had drawn a picture of a toad, mostly because there was a distractingly frisky bucket of frogs on the floor beside the professor.

She wondered whether the rumors about the Blossoms turning their enemies into frogs was true. Was that even a thing? Turning people into animals? It occurred to her that if there was any truth to it,
they could potentially be torturing and killing a human being.

The thought made her shudder. She drew a crown on her frog.

“You gonna kiss them all in case one of ‘em turns into a prince?” Jones whispered behind his cupped hand.

She almost forgot that he was there. She took a deep, steadying breath. “Why do we have to operate on them at all? We know what’s in there.”

The corner of his lip lifted slightly. “This school is deep in the pockets of the frog trade lobby. They are contractually obligated to make us operate on frogs.”

She pursed her lips to prevent a bubbling giggle from escaping. “Smart ass.”

He shrugged. “Tell the professor you’re not comfortable inflicting pain on a living creature. He’ll probably exempt you.”

Betty stilled at his words. “...not comfortable inflicting pain...” She almost wanted to laugh at that.

“We should just kill it quick before operating on it,” she whispered. “I couldn’t bear it if it wakes up while it's—” she swallowed. “—open.”

When she thought about it, killing a person trapped in a frog’s body was almost as bad as torturing it, but unless she knew how to undo transformation curses, she was out of options.

“But the point is that we observes the insides while they’re moving,” he pointed out, obviously for argument’s sake, because he seemed to be enjoying her turmoil.

“What could we possibly not figure out ourselves without seeing it? A heart would beat, lungs would expand and contract, a stomach digests food...”

He cocked a small grin. “Fine, Sunshine. We’ll kill it and make up our observations. Sheesh, what a rebel.”

_Sunshine_. She’d never been called that, and she was surprised to note she liked it. Though whether it was the nickname itself or the one who coined it, she wasn’t sure.


He stared at her for a couple of seconds before he stuck a toothpick in his mouth and put his hand out. “Jughead.”

She shook his hand. It was warm. And firm. Her hand was probably clammy and freezing to the touch. She had been feeling cold and nervous all morning.

It did not escape her that his name was odd, but given that he looked different from the preppy crowd of Riverdale High, it was probably some biker handle name, or something.

The professor started walking around, distributing frogs and teaching students to knock it out with chloroform. One by one, the frogs were put to sleep.

When the frog was plopped onto their tray, Betty cupped it it tenderly atop, keeping it still as Jughead pressed the chloroform over its nose. It stopped struggling in a few seconds.

“Excellent,” the professor said, moving on to the next table.
They were supposed to pin it's feet and hands to the styrofoam block, but Betty said, “We kill it now.”

With practiced ease, she took a pin and pierced it right through its brain. She was half a blood witch. She knew how to pierce things with pins.

The frog twitched a couple of times before stilling. It was dead.

“Savage,” Jughead said.

“Mercy,” she corrected, firmly. “Now let’s see what we have here.”

They worked together, pinning it down and opening it from its throat, down its sternum, and then past its abdomen. They jostled its insides with their scalpels. They made notes on their shared worksheet.

Jughead made her laugh a couple of times by putting dramatic flairs to their invented observations. She almost retched when they opened the frog’s stomach and found a couple of partially digested bugs.

She covered her mouth and turned away.

Jughead smirked at her discomfort. “Not a fan of bugs?”

“Not a fan of decomposition,” she said, making a face. “I have no future in necromancy.”

His eyebrow arched.

She arched her eyebrow right back. “What?”

“Necromancy? That is the first time I’ve heard that word in these parts. Not that I don’t know what it means. I do.”

“So I have a fascination for the occult. You obviously do, as well.”

“Obviously. The occult is totally my life’s work.”

She chuckled. “Stop. I get it. I’m weird.”

“You think you’re weird? What do you call me?”

It was at that point that she realized that she and Jughead Jones were actually flirting. Had been flirting. She frowned at her own silliness. Flirting was for normal people. Flirting was for girls who could keep friends without getting them killed, just for being around her. Here she was, worrying about frogs when human lives were being endangered just by talking to her.

It wasn’t paranoia. It’s happened before.

Before she could say that she thought he was a poser in a leather jacket, thinking that he could charm his way into the New Girl’s pants, the professor asked them to clean up their work tables and submit their work.

Pursing her lips, she focused on the task of cleaning up and putting everything away. As the bell rang, she hurriedly gathered her things to get the hell out of there.

“Hey, you got someone to sit with at lunch?” he asked, having packed his things just as quickly.
She steeled herself and took a deep breath. “I think I’ll just go it alone for now, Jones.”

His eyebrow arched. “You sure Cheryl Blossom approves of that?”

Frowning, she grit her teeth. “She is not my keeper.”

“Don’t know if that’s your decision.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

This was good. She can build this into a fight. She can make it so that he would never want to speak to her again, even as that moment, her stomach was twisting at the thought that she was plotting to drive this boy away, but as they stepped out of the classroom, a commotion was erupting in the hallway.

Two tall guys in letterman jackets had a student shoved up against the lockers. The kid was much smaller than they were, his glasses askew from the rough handling. He looked terrified and no one was stepping in to help.

“That paper was a joke, Doily,” said one jock. “I got a C on it. What sort of shit book report did you give me?”

“What did you expect, Chuck? My heart wasn’t in it. It’s what happens when you get bullied into doing stuff!” Doily was trembling and he was pale as a ghost, but what he said took a lot of courage and Betty was a social justice warrior by heart--a weakness, Polly called it, but Betty didn’t care. She had shed so much blood already. The least she could do was give back some of it.

Chuck pulled his fist back. It was as large as a ham and Betty knew Doily’s delicate facial bones weren’t likely to survive it, unscathed.

She curled her fist tightly, digging her fingernails into her skin as she blinked. Violence needed pain, and this was going to get a little nasty. She felt the heat in her eyes gather and she flung the spell at Chuck. “Miss,” she whispered under her breath.

Chuck swung and a loud boom rang out through the hallway as his fist connected with the locker beside Doily’s head. A dent the size of Chuck’s fist was now imprinted on it.

Chuck screamed in agony, cursing and holding his wrist as he bent over himself. His companion, at first slack jawed, started calling him a huge idiot.

“Shut up, Mason! Goddamn it, my hand!”

Doily, rooted into place, was too shocked to move.

Betty flung another spell. “Run.”

Doily jerked back to consciousness, looking frantically over his shoulder and probably wondering where that voice came from, but he didn’t appear to ruminate on it too long. He took off, making his way down the hall and away from the jocks as fast as he could.

Satisfied, Betty eased her grip and shoved her hand into her jacket.

“I’m sorry, did you just say something?” Jughead asked, startling her. She had forgotten that he was behind her.

Hardening her gaze to quell her panic, she said, “Why would I say something?” she asked, abruptly
walking away to make her way to the bathroom, pushing through its doors.

Even if Jughead had heard her, it wasn’t as if he would ever connect Chuck’s accident with *her*. She was at least ten feet away from the entire thing.

Penelope was right about the Lost. They were so easily persuaded.

Making sure that no one was in the bathroom with her, she opened the tap over the sink and let the water flow over her bloody palm, the red of the water washing down the shiny drain.
Chapter Notes

It's lovely that so many of you were willing to try this out. I thank you for opening your minds to this fic. You are truly the best fandom.

And I hope you all had a wonderful New Year!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“When, however, one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Bronte who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to. Indeed, I would venture to guess that Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them, was often a woman.”

— Virginia Woolf, A Room of One's Own

The first thing he noticed was the Glow.

They all had it, witches. That’s how he could tell what they were the moment he laid eyes on them.

Everybody had auras. Everyone. That was a fact told to him by Seers, of which Jughead was not. He did not see auras on a regular basis. He only saw witches, and if he saw an aura, it was because they were a witch.

New Girl’s aura was bursting yellow, speared with rays of black. According to Veronica Lodge, Riverdale High’s resident Seer, auras only “burst” when people were stressed. Whatever calm the new girl tried to exude that morning as she walked through the doors was nothing but a facade. She was miserable. And she kept putting out that vibe for most of the morning, not steadily, but most of the time.

It usually took Jughead a couple of hours to normalize his senses after seeing a new witch for the first time, so by third period, Betty’s presence was calibrating to his, and her glow was fading from his vision, but he had to admit, Betty had been an interesting light show. He’d never seen that combination of colors before. That kind of contrast.

Cheryl and Jason’s aura had been black and red, and even a deep, foreboding purple, and that was when they were 8. He didn’t know what their colors were, now. After that first meeting, Jughead didn’t usually see their auras again, but throughout the years, his first meeting with witches was marked by varying shades of blending hues. All of them. He had never seen such a contrast like Betty’s. There was no blending, whatsoever. She was literally light and dark, strong in both shades.

He had very little doubt that she was a powerful witch, and yet she didn’t exude the same brash arrogance that Cheryl put out like a damn Banshee in full rage. Even Jason couldn’t resist basking in his power. Betty looked like she wanted to disappear. She probably would’ve slunk into school with
a Glamour if she could have, except Cheryl had demanded her presence.

It was unusual, for a witch with her power, to want to go unnoticed. It was both disturbing and fascinating. Other than her witchy self, of course, he had a feeling she was hiding something more.

Her spellcasting was amazing. Seamless. And apparently, she had a lot of them in store.

Witches, he knew, spent a lot of their free time preparing their spells ahead. They stored their spells in charms, tokens, totems, and potions, utilizing them when needed. It was how they did magic. For all the legends of witches weaving spells from off their fingertips, it was just really sleight of hand. They were actually using something hidden and worn on their person.

Although he couldn’t tell where New Girl wore her charms, it didn’t mean they weren’t there. And honestly, it didn’t matter. It wasn’t as if Jughead could take those charms and dispose of them. She’d just make new ones.

Of course, he’d been told of the witches who could cast spells on the spot, but the best Slayers always spoke of those in whispered tones, maybe for fear of conjuring them.

The Wicked.

He’d never met one. Never fought one. All he knew was that when he asked his father about them, FP Jones told him, “You find a Wicked witch, you run, boy. No exceptions. You save yourself, and then you figure out how to kill them without getting killed first.”

Jughead wasn’t sure if he believed they existed, even if his father did say he’d managed to survive an encounter with only one in his lifetime.

It was an encounter that FP did not like to talk about.

He couldn’t imagine, however, that Betty would be anything near Wicked. She was too low-key. Too…

Unassuming.

Witches liked to use their incredible good looks to their advantage. They put their beauty out there for the Lost to see and admire. They basked in positive attention. Even the best of them liked the way they looked too much to try and hide it away.

Betty’s desire to blend was highly unusual.

So he found Betty intriguing. That didn’t mean anything in the grand scheme of things, but he had been fascinated by the aggressive measures she took to prevent their teacher from introducing her to the class. He had been tempted to find out what she was willing to do at Mr. Gregory’s third attempt to introduce her, but it was technically his job to check witch behavior like that, so he had diverted Mr. Gregory himself.

Her History class recitation had been perfect, so she was smart and she was well read. Granted, a witch should probably be very interested in the Salem Witch Trials and a fiction book about it, but as far as he knew, he was yet to meet another witch who had been interested in studying the history of a bunch of wayward Slayers who, by the power of the law, killed a bunch of innocent and Lost women and children under false accusations of witchcraft. In fact, he was yet to meet another witch who was actually interested in studying anything Lost related. The fact of the matter was, with their powers, witches didn’t need to study anything, really. Magic to them was effortless, so even studying that wasn’t as necessary. Betty seemed a bit more learned than the average witch.
Their conversation at lab had been eye-opening. She was…

_Funny._

Probably in a good way. Their banter had been more than bearable. He may have even enjoyed their conversation a little. He also had a nagging need to find out why operating on frogs bothered her so much, considering witches handled all sorts of gross things to make their spells.

Granted, he got that her primary problem with the frog was its supposed suffering. She couldn’t seem to stomach the idea of the frog feeling pain.

Anthropomorphizing was not a thing blood witches did. That was a Wood Witch thing. Maybe she was a Wood Witch? But that was impossible. Cheryl Blossom would never suffer a Wood Witch.

That said, Betty saved Dilton Doiley that morning from a pretty painful beating. If anything, Betty was willing to use her powers for good, which was no small thing. A powerful blood witch (which he assumed she was) with a conscience was always welcome.

He supposed she was tolerable, so far. As witches went, she seemed _okay._

He was careful that her sweet demeanor and seemingly shy smile didn’t have him jumping to conclusions.

A witch was a witch. It was his job to scope her out. It was his job to find things out about her. His father had given him the responsibility of Riverdale and he needed to know everything about Betty Cooper and her background.

He needed to get to know her so that he could keep an eye on her.

He needed to talk to her and maybe get _her_ to tell him things. And how else was he going to do that if he didn’t carry a proper conversation with her?

She would be another witch for his Riverdale files.

For sure, he already his hands full keeping an eagle-eye out for Cheryl and Jason, both of whom were constantly pushing the boundaries. But witches weren’t the only ones he watched out for.

Josie, full Fey, liked to keep him on his toes, too. And then there were the creatures, Ethel and Trev, mermaid and werewolf, respectively, when the moon was full.

“So,” came a voice behind him. “Witch or not?”

It was Kevin Keller, half-fey, half-human, just mischievous enough to possess the fearlessness of his supernatural half but human enough to understand you didn’t use your powers to take advantage of the Lost. He’d known Kevin since they were 5, and it was almost by default that Jughead went to Kevin for everything.

Jughead gave a tired sigh. “Witch.”

Kevin seemed pleased. “Exciting. Saw her walk in with Cheryl. She with the Blossom coven?”

“To be determined.”

“Did you talk to her?”

Jughead nodded, slamming his locker shut. “Oh, yeah.”
Kevin waited for him to go on. When he didn’t, Kevin rolled his eyes and sighed. “Well? Evil or good?”

“It’s day one, Kev. When have I ever known the answer to that on day one?”

Kevin shrugged. “I don’t know, Jug. You’re the one with the super powers, aren’t you? If you can tell they’re witches from first sight, don’t you have a better feel of what kind of witch they are?”

“A, keep your voice down, and B, I told you, it doesn’t work that way. I just know they’re a witch, but that’s it. There’s no heightened feeling. No spidey senses. No mind-reading. Other than the Knowing a Witch by Sight part, I’m just like any other Slayer. I don’t understand why you still don’t believe me when I say that.”

Kevin scoffed. “Because magic isn’t stagnant. It grows and develops. Maybe today you can’t do all those things, but tomorrow may be a different story. At any rate, that special power of yours can really help out the others, like, with time, and maybe effort. Possibly their safety.”

Jughead shot him a glare. Nobody but Kevin knew he could spot a witch by sight. It wasn’t a power Slayers normally had. Slayers sniffed out witches the usual way--by investigation, just like everyone else, but Jughead’s knack allowed him to skip the formalities. He knew a witch when he saw one, and it wasn’t a power he wanted anyone to know about, especially not the Serpents.

If the Serpents knew what he could do, he would be on Slayer duty 24/7 and he would be shackled to this life forever. He didn’t need that prison.

It wasn’t that he didn’t like protecting the Lost. It was his sworn duty and he knew he would be doing it his entire life, but he wanted something outside of that--something that gave him a reason to live other than killing and checking supernatural beings. He wanted to go to college. He wanted to write a book. He didn’t want to be so consumed by this life that it chipped away at everything else, little by little, like the way it was doing for his father.

“I help where I can, Kev,” Jughead muttered. “I point them in the right direction and help them get to the answers as quickly as possible, but I am not telling them I can do it by sight. They can just think I have a great instinct for this.”

Kevin scoffed. “It’ll help you, too, you know. You don’t have to put up this charade of investigating every new student to ‘find out what they are’.”

“I’ve done my obligatory Losing Sleep Over This Moral Dilemma, dude. I’m over it. I’ve decided. No one has to know.”

They walked into the cafeteria and Jughead scanned the room, his eyes falling briefly on Cheryl’s table. He wondered if Betty was going to join them.

Cheryl saw him looking and she wiggled her manicured fingers at him, blowing him a kiss.

Jughead rolled his eyes and looked away, heading for their usual lunch table, on which Veronica Lodge was already there.

She was, as usual, dressed to the nines with pearls, designer everything, and expensive footwear. “Heard about the New Girl,” Veronica said in greeting. “Started looking into her yet?”

Kevin’s eyes twinkled. “I swear, V. Everytime you ask Jughead that question, I think naughty thoughts.”
“That’s because your mind permanently lives in the gutter,” Veronica said, opening her lunch box and taking out her fancy chef-made lunch. It was freshly prepared sushi, delivered by Veronica’s butler at 12 on the dot. She uncapped a tiny bottle and poured the soy sauce out in a container, then she slid out a pair of chopsticks from a plastic container before uncovering rows of pretty sushi rolls and raw fish.

Jughead took out a sadly thrown together grilled cheese sandwich and some leftover casserole with Italian sausage and marinara.

“Hilda felt sorry for you and your dad again?” Kevin said, looking over Jughead’s lunch.

“We don’t all have sushi chefs hanging out in our kitchens, Kev.”

Veronica gave a soft harumph. “I was asking Jughead a question.”

“I spoke to her,” Jughead said, biting into his sandwich. “She seems nice.”

“Anything to indicate she’s an Otherworlder?” Veronica asked.

Jughead arched an eyebrow. “You mean, other than her walking into the school with Cheryl? I’m sure she’s perfectly Lost.”

“Oh, please. Cheryl met me at this school’s double doors the moment I walked into Riverdale High, but that doesn’t make me a witch.”

“I think in your case, she detected something else kindred in you that rhymes with ‘witch’.”

Kevin grinned. “Oh, was that it? I thought it had to do with something that rhymes with ‘Resbian.’”

Veronica ignored Kevin and shot Jughead a look. “Are you never going to let me forget that I reported you for trespassing that first day of school? You were following me.”

She giggled, and he couldn’t help but laugh, himself. He and Veronica came from different sides of the track, but other than that first day awkwardness, it turned out that they got along quite well. It was easier, of course, because Veronica wasn’t a witch.

Veronica was a Seer. She didn’t have any supernatural powers except that she could see a little past the veil of the Lost, like seeing spirits, or seeing past Glamours. She couldn’t figure out what a creature was by sight, but if they used some form of magic to alter their appearance, like how the Fey disguised the way their eyes and ears looked, Veronica can figure out what they were.

Witches did not disguise, so Veronica couldn’t tell what they were, unless they Glamoured themselves. Betty did not Glamour herself.

A face like hers had nothing to hide.

“Do you want me to ask Cheryl about her?” Veronica offered.

Jughead nodded. “Sure. If your girlfriend is forthcoming with that information, then I’d appreciate it.”

“She’s not my girlfriend,” Veronica huffed. “And she’ll know I’m asking for you, so she’ll give me a
Jughead decided to ignore that retort about Cheryl not being her girlfriend. He’d been watching that
dance for over two years now and it had gotten old a year and a half ago. He just shrugged. “I don’t
care. I’d find out one way or another.”

He could see Kevin rolling his eyes and shaking his head. Jughead got it. He was tired of lying, too,
but this was his life and he was going to live it as he saw fit.

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The weather was not ideal for hiding under the bleachers, but it wasn’t horrible. Spring was upon
them, and the temperatures were going up, not down. It wasn’t summer weather, though, and her
packed lunch wasn’t exactly comforting, chilled as it was. She wished she could have heated it in the
cafeteria microwave, but she didn’t want to risk being spotted by Cheryl and her minions.

Tina and Ginger were on the prowl, so impossibly devoted to their mistress that Betty honestly had
to wonder if they were under some sort of binding spell.

That was the problem with binding. Other than someone exhibiting odd behavior, there were no
overt signs that someone was bound. No odd-colored auras or witch marks, no souring milk or
rotting food. It was so hard to tell, and it was why many witches got away with murder throughout
history. It was also the reason Slayers were so paranoid and killed witches at the slightest suspicion.

Slayers. They weren’t always called that. When they first came into being, they were known as
Guardians, ancient families tasked to protect the Lost from the Otherworlders’ abuse of unearthly
powers.

Betty couldn’t argue that Otherworlders needed to be policed in some way. Mediums, for example,
were beings who communicated and manipulated the souls of the dead, and they’ve been known to
cause village-wide damage.

There were the Fey, ever present for perhaps millions of years, known for causing mischief, preying
on the emotions of the Lost to secure impossible promises from them for favors that often led to more
trouble. The Lost’s despair and suffering fed the Fey’s life force, which allowed them to live for an
eternity.

Then of course there were the Creatures, or Shapeshifters, human in the light of day but creatures
come the fall of night. They were the werewolves and the lamias, perhaps even low-level demons,
thriving in the dark and often feasting on blood, human or otherwise.

There were Seers, too. They had no real powers other than bearing witness to the supernatural
workings of the world. Sometimes, the Slayers thickened their ranks with them, mostly because
Seers were far more common than Slayers.

To this day, Betty believed that Slayers were put on this earth to keep some a cosmic balance of
power. To temper the witches who liked their powers too much.

Admittedly, that balance had been rife with conflict. Witches tended to think Slayers were thugs,
plain and simple. They had spent the last 2,000 years killing witches for the smallest infractions, and
the only reason witches hadn’t eradicated them all was because they weren’t quite so easy to dispose
of.

Slayers were strong, near impenetrable, and they were immune to many of the witches’ spells and the
creatures’ poisons. Werewolves could not turn them, lamias couldn’t consume them, the Fey could
not seduce them.

It was hard enough to tell who was what under normal circumstances. Betty had developed her own system of finding out whether someone was an Otherworlder or Lost, grown from years of experience, but it was still more art than magic. So here in Riverdale, the thick presence of magic clouding everything, it was impossible to tell. If she didn’t already know Cheryl for what she was, Betty couldn’t tell at all that Cheryl was a witch.

The Fey and the Shapeshifters could be walking among them and she couldn’t feel a single thing.

The thickness of the magic was an advantage to her, of course. She had found it easier to cast her spells that morning because magic was so accessible. She hardly had to pull from the spells in her charms, and when she had to cast with pain… she didn’t need inflict too much of it on herself.

She looked at her hands. The wounds were already scabbed over. Witches healed faster and the Wicked even more so. It was by some imperative, no doubt. If they needed to hurt themselves to focus their magic and make it stronger, their bodies had to adapt and be able to heal their self-inflicted wounds much quicker.

“Hi!”

Betty dropped her water bottle--she was so startled.

She gasped as the liquid splashed around her feet, her bottle turning over and causing the liquid inside to ebb from the hole at the top.

The voice was unfamiliar. She didn’t know this person. Her hackles rose and her body tensed. She whirled around, ready to battle this new threat.

“Yikes. Sorry. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

It was a boy, or maybe a man. They were all in the cusp of adulthood. He had red hair and he looked like he filled out his letterman jacket. In spite of this unlikely place to meet anyone, his boyishly handsome face made him nonthreatening. She kept her guard up, however. Threats came in many forms and the unassuming school jock was as good a disguise as any.

“Who are you?” she demanded.

He seemed surprised by her tone. “Um, Archie Andrews? You’re the new girl, right?”

She refused to be lulled by his friendly tone. “What are you doing here?”

“I really ought to be asking you the same question. I just came from the shed to drop off some footballs, then I saw you here. I just wanted to make sure you were okay.”

She supposed that was a reasonable explanation. He was a jock and she was sitting under the bleachers of a football field.

“I’m fine,” she said. “I just want to be left alone.”

This tone of hers--this unfriendly, walled up persona, was not her natural self. In spite of her hard life, she had been a smiling, warm, and open being, ready to take on school challenges and always willing to help out in committees, struggling classmates, and eager teachers.

She liked saying she was “fine”, but since she held her dying father in her arms, she hadn’t felt much
like herself, lately. Nobody in their family did. Alice had lost some of her fire, Chic seemed more paranoid than he already was, and Polly was a beast.

Coping with her father’s death the Cooper way—which was basically “Pretend everything was alright”—was stifling. She didn’t know where she began and her trauma ended.

Archie put his hands up, staying in place. “Alright, but you looked lonely. I didn’t want the new girl to think that Bulldogs don’t care. You sure you’re okay?”

His earnestness was endearing. And it’s funny he mentioned the school mascot, because he was like a puppy. A cute, six-foot puppy. “I am,” she said, her tone softening. “It’s just—it’s all very overwhelming to me.”

Archie nodded. He made a motion to move, but hesitated, and he gestured towards her. “Can I sit?”

_God, do I look that unfriendly now?_

Swallowing, she nodded.

He settled on the space beside her, making himself comfortable on the very uncomfortable metal beam that could barely fit her butt. He was careful not to knock over the rest of lunch, which she had placed precariously on the same beam.

“So, should I keep calling you New Girl or…?”

“Betty. Betty Cooper.”

He grinned, and the smile made him look even cuter. “Betty. I saw you walk in with the Blossoms this morning. God, I think everyone did.”

She winced, a blush coming over her. “Yeah. That was something.”

“I thought you’d be sitting with Cheryl at lunch.”

Betty rolled her eyes and sighed, picking nonsensically at her fingernails. “Our, um, mothers were old friends. Cheryl and Jason were kind of volun-told to show me around, so no, we’re not friends, and I don’t want to sit with Cheryl and her minions.”

Archie laughed lightly. “You don’t want to be a Vixen?”

She frowned. “Either vixen is a name of something or you’re asking an inappropriate question.”

“Cheryl’s cheer squad are called the Vixens. You don’t want to be a cheerleader?”

Maybe a few months ago, she would’ve said yes. Cheerleading was an acceptable extra-curricular to put in a college application. But these days, she didn’t feel capable of having any pep.

She shook her head. “I have better things to do than shake my booty at sporting events.” She regretted her words the moment they left her mouth.

“Hey, cheerleaders are athletes too, you know.”

She pursed her lips, feeling her face flaming. “Yeah, sorry. I’m not slut shaming them. I’m just—I can’t bring myself to do that stuff right now. Things happened in my life and I’m—I’m still dealing with it. Everything that’s normal feels silly.”
He nodded, as if he understood. She wondered if he did but figured he couldn’t possibly know what it was like. He was a football player—a normal dude who probably reigned over the school. He had everything going for him.

“My father got shot in a robbery a couple of years ago,” he said.

She looked at him, shocked.

“I had him in my arms and he was bleeding so much that I thought he was going to die. I took him to the hospital by myself—didn’t know how to drive, but I got him there, and they fixed him, and now he’s alive and recovered, but I remember what it was like in the weeks following that. Everything seemed petty and stupid. My dad almost died in my arms and I was angry at the rest of the world for being okay with that.”

She was at a loss for words. He had taken the words right out of her mouth. Even without her telling him that she had held her dying father in her arms, at this very moment, he had an instinct for her pain.

She fought the tears that were suddenly threatening to overcome her. “I’m glad he’s okay, Archie.”

He smiled, brightly. “Me, too. Whatever it is you’re going through, it’ll get better. People helped. I had friends who were there for me. You just… gotta let them, you know.”

She swallowed. “Are you suggesting I let Cheryl--”

Laughing, Archie shook his head. “I don’t know about that, but I’ve got friends. Maybe we start with that.”

Betty didn’t know if she wanted to be friends with the football team, and he must have seen it in her eyes, because he said, “I’m not going to drag you into the locker rooms, Betty. Just a couple of nice folks, none of them play football. I promise.”

He stood and waited for her expectantly.

She pushed down the voice in her head telling her that this was a mistake, that she couldn’t have friends, that she was a danger to everyone around her.

But she never could resist.

Not when Jughead was being friendly with her in class, and not now, when Archie was being nice to her under the bleachers.

She craved company. She wanted the warmth of people. She wanted friendship and kinship. Maybe it was the Wood Witch in her blood. Maybe she just generally had an optimistic outlook in spite of her less than ideal life. No matter how scared she was of what she could do or what others did to her, she would always be drawn to the possibility that they weren’t going to kill her and she wasn’t going to go crazy.

That she can live a normal life.

It was difficult to resist that optimism, especially in the face of Archie Andrews and his puppy dog eyes.

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When Betty walked into the lunchroom with Archie, she felt Cheryl’s boiling hot rage from across the room. If Betty didn’t know any better, she was almost convinced that Cheryl was about to fly across the room and curse her dead, but of course Cheryl did no such thing.

Instead, Cheryl sauntered over to her, minions in tow, and said, in a regulated voice. “We need to talk, you peroxide bitch.”

Betty glared fiercely at her. It annoyed her that Cheryl thought she could be scared into submission. “Not now, Cheryl. I’m having lunch.”

Cheryl looked between her and Archie and snarled. “Are you seriously going to let this numbskull get in your pants? You’re better than this, Betty.”

Betty supposed she should’ve been grateful that Cheryl hadn’t outrightly called Archie Lost and her a Witch. Witches only went with Otherworlders. Getting with the Lost was kind of like going for the hot dog at the buffet table when you had your pick of lobster.

Or so she’d heard Penelope explain during that cursedly uncomfortable dinner at Thornhill.

“Whoa, whoa!” Archie cried. “Who’s getting in who’s pants, now?”

Betty felt her face burning. “For God’s sake, Cheryl. I just want to finish my yogurt!”

And with that, Betty turned and yanked at Archie’s letterman jacket, hoping he would get the hint and just go.

He did, shrugging at Cheryl and leading the way. She followed Archie, focusing on the lunch table that they were approaching.

And no sooner was that stressor over, another one came along.

Betty’s heart did a somersault when she saw Jughead, toothpick in his mouth, and sitting on the table while he talked to another boy who looked so neat and impeccably dressed that Betty had no doubt that the boy was gay.

There was a girl there, too. A petite brunette with glossy long locks. She wore pearls and an expensive looking outfit, with its lush material and designer cuts. Only Cheryl could rival the couture this girl was wearing.

When she and Archie approached, Jughead’s eyebrow arched in surprise. She was mortified by the way he looked at her, then at Archie. She wanted to tell him that she was sorry she left him so abruptly in the hallway, that she wasn’t going to let Archie get into her pants, that she wasn’t always this socially inept.

“Hey, Arch! Where ya been?” asked the dapper boy. “Who’s your friend?”

Archie introduced her. Dapper boy was Kevin, the designer girl was Veronica, and when Archie got to Jughead, Jughead interrupted and said, “We’ve met.”

“Oh?” asked Archie, surprised.

“Had the same classes. First through third period.”

Betty hurriedly added, “We were partners at lab.”

Kevin, for some reason, shot a grin at Jughead, and Veronica said, “Jug, I could’ve sworn you
always had Geometry, third period…”

Archie’s eyebrows shot up and Jughead turned away and took himself off the table to sit on the bench. “Nah. It was always lab.” He took an apple from inside his leather jacket and started to eat it.

“I found her under the bleachers,” Archie said, making Betty’s face burn even brighter. “She was hiding from Cheryl.”

She couldn’t believe Archie was telling them that.

Veronica smiled brightly. “Well then, anyone who would rather spend time with us than with Cheryl Blossom is welcome on this table.”

“I feel like there’s a story there. Tell us!” Kevin gushed.

Archie joined the table, but Betty hesitated, seeing that the only space there was was beside Jughead.

As if he could feel her apprehension, he looked over his shoulder at her and smirked that smirk that made her dizzy. “Have a seat.”

Sighing, she did, sinking into the space and digging what was left of her lunch--her blueberry yogurt. She took out the packed plastic spoon she had and ate her dessert.

“So why are you running away from Cheryl?” Kevin asked. “Thought you and she were friends. You walked into school together and everything…”

“My mother and her mother are friends from long ago,” she said, carefully. She didn’t want to lie too much, and technically, Alice and Penelope were friends once upon a time. That much she knew. They weren’t related, either. Alice had been a Spellman and Penelope had been a McKenzie. Both of them married into the Blossom family and Betty was willing to bend that truth a little. “When my family moved into town, Penelope insisted that the twins walk me in the first day. I hardly ever talked to Cheryl, Jason never, before today, not even on social media. She is not the kind of friend I would’ve had.”

Kevin looked at her curiously. “So your mother’s native to Riverdale?”

Betty nodded. “She and my father were, but they moved out after my oldest brother was born.”

“My dad grew up here, too,” Kevin said. “He’s the sheriff so he basically knows everyone. I think he may have mentioned the Coopers, but I guess you were upstanding citizens, so he probably only mentioned you in passing at our dinner table. What was your mother’s maiden name, if you don’t mind me asking?”

Betty wasn’t surprised. Her father had worked hard to keep the Coopers under the radar. His grandfather had changed his name to Cooper because of an age-old in-family fight. It was a bit of a wonder that the Blossoms even acknowledged Hal Cooper at all. So of course the Coopers were not as well known. It was possible only the Blossoms knew about their family history. To everyone else in town, they were just regular folks. Her mother, however, had an open family history.

“Spellman,” she replied without hesitation.

Jughead perked up. “Your mother’s a Spellman? You’re a Spellman?”

She was surprised that that’s what caught his interest. “Yes. You know the Spellmans?”
He fidgeted uneasily. “Well, yeah. They’re Southsiders. Didn’t know you had it in you, Sunshine.”

Archie rolled his eyes. “Jug and his Southside homeboys.”

Veronica’s eyebrow arched. “Oh, yes. Didn’t you tell her, Arch? Jughead’s prince of the Southside. The Joneses rule that turf.”

Jughead scowled. “V.”

Betty had briefly heard about the Southside and it’s grittier personality. Sabrina had mentioned it occasionally during their social media interactions, but she was inexplicably thrilled that Jughead seemed to respond to this connection. “Sabrina Spellman’s my cousin. She and I connect fairly frequently. Do you know her?”

Jughead pursed his lips, nodding. “Yep.”

When he didn’t volunteer any further information, she racked her brain for a redirect. “What does Veronica mean by the Joneses ruling the Southside turf?”

“Jughead’s father leads a—” Veronica paused, a twinkle in her eyes. “—prominent organization that their community reveres.”

“Motorcycle club,” Jughead said, quickly, shooting Veronica a glare.

“It’s called a gang, V,” Kevin drawled.

“That gang,” Jughead said pointedly, “has been helping its townspeople and their families out for generations. They help fund schools, scholarships, take care of kids in trouble, weed out crime—“

“Vigilantes,” Kevin interrupted.

“Hey, when law enforcement doesn’t give a shit about us, we have to take care of our own.”

Betty had a feeling they’d had this discussion before. They didn’t appear to be angry with one another, so she asked the obvious question. “So, how is it you’re going to this school if you live on the Southside?”

“Rezoning,” Archie said. “It’s a beautiful thing. Jug’s house has always been on the border of Southside and Riverdale. His house fell on the Riverdale side when he was 8. He and I have been buds ever since.”

“It’s fate,” Veronica said, eyeing Jughead, who shot her a sidelong look.

Betty couldn’t get past the feeling that Jughead and Veronica have been having some type of wordless conversation since she sat with them. Maybe she and Jughead were a thing?

It seemed improbable, what with Jughead’s biker vibe and Veronica’s Coco Chanel glam, but stranger things have happened.

The thought suddenly made her feel lonely and dejected.

“So what are you doing after school, Betty?” Archie asked. “Care to join us at Pop’s after I’m done with football and Ronnie’s done with cheerleading?”

Betty looked at Veronica in surprise.
Veronica grinned. “That’s right, I’m a Vixen, and I’m going to take them from Cheryl. Wanna join the squad and watch me do it? You’ve got the killer legs for it.”

Betty wondered if she should warn Veronica to do no such thing. Cheryl could do things to her that defied the imagination, but she couldn’t exactly tell Veronica that Cheryl was a witch. Instead, she said, “I—I have to meet my brother after school. He’s coming to pick me up so I really can’t.”

“Next time, then,” Veronica said, easily. “But think about what I said about the Vixens. We could use someone like you. Fit, strong, and bewitching. Besides, I need backup to overthrow Cheryl Blossom.”

*You have no idea.*

She gave Veronica a shy smile. “Thanks, but I don’t really think I’m cut out for— you know, leading cheers.”

“So your brother’s picking you up?” Kevin asked, before Veronica can respond. “Is he as hot as you are? Can I meet him?”

“Jesus Christ, Kev,” Veronica said. “Couldn’t you wait a day, at least?”

Betty couldn’t help but smirk. “He’s *much* older than we are. Like 8 years.”

“Perfect!” cried Kevin.

Jughead cocked a grin. “Kev, what do you want me to tell Joaquin? That you’re chasing after some blonde Adonis?”

Betty blushed to her roots and she pursed her lips painfully to stifle her smile. It was nice to know that Jughead at least agreed with the assumption that her brother was good looking because, well— he didn’t think she was a *hag.*

Veronica’s eyes flashed between her and Jughead and Betty wanted to die.

“Oh shush, I love Joaquin,” Kevin said, waving his hand dismissively. “This is just for fun.”

Archie hooted. “Where’s your righteous indignation at the gang when Joaquin’s all up in your pants?”

“I never said I didn’t want to sleep with them,” Kevin said, loftily.

Veronica grinned. “Some of them are extremely fuckable.”

Jughead smirked. “Oh, yeah?”

“Oh, get over yourself, Donnie Darko.” Veronica threw a crumpled up napkin at him and Jughead ducked, chuckling.

Betty bit her lip, trying not to watch them flirt.

“Well, you know, if you can’t join tonight, maybe I can walk you to school tomorrow,” Archie said, surprising them all at the table.

Betty wasn’t sure what to say. It was a kind offer, but if she were being completely honest, she didn’t want Jughead to think that she was interested in Archie *in that way.* Or maybe she shouldn’t care, because it was possible that Jughead and Veronica were together.
She stared at Archie, stupidly speechless.

Archie put his hands up. “I’m just saying--we’re neighbors, Betty. I thought you knew that.”

She blinked, shocked. “We are?”

Archie nodded. “I live right next door. I can see into your room.”

“What?”

Realizing his mistake, Archie’s face turned as red as his hair. “I mean, I don’t, but I could-- dammit, that doesn’t sound any better, does it?”

“Got curtains, Betty? Best keep them closed,” Jughead said.

Archie threw his napkin at Jughead this time. “Shut up, dude! Like I’m the only one Betty has to worry about. You’re at my house half the time. You could look into her room.”

Betty pressed her palms to her cheeks, mortified.

Jughead rolled his eyes. “Let’s be clear. Nobody’s looking into anybody’s room, okay? Betty, you have to excuse my friend over here. His foot has been stuck in his mouth since we were 8 years old.”

“Look, the offer remains,” Archie said. “You can walk into school with me or you can walk into school with Cheryl. Your choice.”

Betty couldn’t help but wonder if she had a choice on the matter. She gave him a wry smile.

“Thanks, Archie. I’ll let you know--give you hand signals through my window.”

That made everyone laugh and Archie looked like he wanted to sink through the floor. She bit her lip, stifling a grin.

Maybe she could have friends in Riverdale.

The Blossoms had espoused that Riverdale was the safest place to live if you were a witch. It was their thing.

So maybe the Blossoms were good for something.

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“Oh, my God,” Kevin whispered, nudging Jughead’s shoulder. “Just look at Betty’s brother.”

Jughead arched an eyebrow, watching Betty descend the steps of the school and going over to a dude with the most golden hair and the most heart-stoppingly handsome face Riverdale High has seen in long while.

And then of course, there was that telltale aura that Jughead saw flaring from Chic. He was varying shades of blue.

How coordinated. So unlike his sister.

Already, Jughead saw all the ladies in attendance staring slack jawed, and when Betty gave the guy a perfunctory hug, her brother seemed amused, as if asking her, “That’s it? That’s all I get?”

Grinning, Betty kissed his cheek before hopping into the passenger side of the very practical SUV
that her brother was driving.

“Fuck me, he looks like a hollywood actor,” Kevin said. “I knew it! I mean, look at his sister. What a smokeshow. And of course, Archie’s all over her now. That didn’t take long.”

Jughead pressed his lips together and nodded. He didn’t really have much to say, except that Archie had no idea what he was getting himself into.

When Archie first told him a few days ago that someone was moving into the empty house next door, he didn’t think much about it, not even when Archie had excitedly texted that there were two blonde and gorgeous chicks their age living there.

Archie had always been girl crazy, so there was really no cause for alarm, and Jughead had more pressing things to worry about, so pretty girls ranked low on his list of priorities, but when he saw Betty Cooper walk in with the Blossom twins that morning, he had to admit that he thought that she was more than incredibly cute.

“You looking for trouble, Kev?” Jughead asked, tiredly. “Joaquin will take it personally if he knew you were crushing over a witch, even if they are half Spellman.”

Kevin snorted. “You Slayers and your Spellmans. They’re witches too, you know. You just suspend your distrust of those Wood Bitches because they talk like Park Rangers most of the time.”

Jughead chuckled. “Stop. The Spellmans have been a friend to the Slayers for generations, and you like them, too. They’re okay. For witches, that is.”

“Listen to yourself. For witches, indeed.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know what I mean. The sexual tension at lunch between you and Betty was stifling.”

Jughead scowled. “Don’t be a fool, Kev. I have to find things out about Betty so I can figure out whether she’s a threat to our community or not. That necessitates interacting with her, which you may misconstrue as sexual tension.”

“Oh, please. You switched your third period class to lab. V’s right. You always had geometry. You never switched classes for a new student. You usually just stalk them from afar.”

He felt the heat creeping up his neck. “I’m just doing my job, alright? There’s something about Betty that I can’t quite place.”

God, even he thought that sounded lame, but there was a lot of truth in it, even if Kevin didn’t believe him.

Kevin shook his head, stifling a grin. “As I live and breathe. I never thought I’d see the day.”

“What?”

“You and Archie liking the same girl. This has never happened!”

“Can it, Keller,” Jughead growled. “You’re getting ahead of yourself. You know I don’t have time for relationships. I’m too busy saving the Ordinaries. And besides that, she’s a freaking witch. I’m a Slayer. That shit never works out. Everyone knows this. It’s practically written.”

Kevin rolled his eyes. “Well, it isn’t written. Ugh! You Slayers and your hang ups with witches.
There was nothing in the old books that said your lot weren’t supposed to hook up with each other. Absolutely nothing. This rule was fabricated by a bunch of old white dudes who couldn’t handle a strong, independent woman, and it still shocks me that a progressive dude like you will let something so outdated dictate what the fuck you want to do. You of all people know that not all witches are terrible. The Spellmans are primary examples.”

Jughead’s jaw ached, it was clenched so hard. “It doesn’t matter what kind of witch they are. Witches and Slayers were meant to negate each other. Us together was not what nature intended.”

“Look, what happened with your mom--”

“I thought we agreed that we won’t talk about her. Like, ever.”

Kevin opened his mouth to say something, then clamped it shut, surely because of the deadly glare Jughead was tossing his way. “Sure thing, chief. But let me just say that I don’t blame you one bit for liking Betty. She’s such a lovely thing, witch or not. There’s a kindness to her and you can’t fake that.. But I suppose it can be wildly entertaining if you let Archie have this one. Let’s see him pull that casanova shit on a witch--see how long before he finds his dick shriveled dry.”

Jughead frowned. “Kev, you know that’s not funny.”

“It is so funny, Jug. Come on. It’s only a matter of time, really. Archie’s going to meet some nice girl, ergo, Betty, and then he’ll treat her like shit, as he always ends up doing inadvertently--the precious thing--and bam, she’ll get witchy and he’ll grow boils on his balls or something equally as disgusting.”

“That’s the Fey in you talking. Archie’s suffering is not funny at all. He’s a nice guy who just loses his head when he sees really shiny things.” Jughead shifted on his motorcycle. “And Betty’s real shiny.”

Kevin’s eyebrow arched.

“For a witch,” Jughead added hastily. “Besides, you’re the one who said we should befriend him. Let him be our in with the Lost. Now you just want to abandon him to the mercies of a witch?”

Kevin sighed. “But he held such promise when he was younger. He seemed like such a harmless puppy! Who would’ve thought he’d turn out to be a womanizing horndog?”

Jughead chuckled. “Yeah, well, we can’t all be perfect like you, Kev.”

“That’s true.”

“I’ll get him to look somewhere else, somehow,” Jughead concluded. He picked up his helmet and put it on. “For his own good.”

“Um-hmm.”

Jughead refused to engage Kevin on this point of him liking Betty Cooper any longer. It was stupid and useless. “Right now, I have to get to the job that actually pays me something on a regular basis.”

“Convenient, but I’m gonna let you go. I have one question, Jones.” Kevin was grinning. “Did you just waltz into Professor Flutesnoot’s class like a boss or did you actually get Ethel to switch you on the record? That girl has held a torch for you since the 7th grade and I know she’d do that shit for you.”
Jughead was glad he had his helmet on, because meeting Kevin’s eyes was too much, at this point.

At least she’s a Spellman…

He pursed his lips to a thin line.

Not that it matters. Witches are witches.

He kicked his bike to life and took off.

He could worry about Betty Cooper later. Right now, the library was waiting.

Chapter End Notes

(I miss Riverdale)
The Most Terrifying Thing

Chapter Notes

I think I'm just gonna let you read this. :D

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“A witch ought never to be frightened in the darkest forest, Granny Weatherwax had once told her, because she should be sure in her soul that the most terrifying thing in the forest was her.”

— Terry Pratchett, Wintersmith

“Again,” Chic said from beyond the practice mat.

The basement of their new Riverdale home was more spacious than anything they ever had in Seattle. In the city, Chic had to pay to get them space to practice in odd warehouses, studios, and abandoned parking lots. Here in Riverdale, they only had to descend their carpeted steps and here they were, a finished basement with some space to practice Chic’s deadly dances, as well as create their potions and charms.

Betty’s shoulders slumped and Polly gave an exhausted sigh.

“We’ve done this a dozen times, Chic,” Polly whined. “Don’t you think we can call it a night?”

“There’s no rest for the Wicked,” Chic replied, seriously. “Again.”

“We’ve been at it two hours.” It was Betty’s turn to make the argument. “I haven’t even started on my homework yet.”

“Just a couple of more times and I’ll let you and Polly go. Get into position.”

Groaning, Betty braced herself.

The moment Chic said “Begin!” Polly let the daggers fly, her aim for all three accurate and true.

Betty pushed nails into her palms with one hand and threw up the other, like a shield, stopping the daggers in mid-flight and whipping them to her left in one fluid motion. The daggers following the trajectory of her arms as they swerved around her and sank hard into the walls behind her.

Polly slid across the mat on her knees, a bokken in her hands, aiming for Betty’s shins. She leapt to avoid it, landing in a graceful roll that allowed her to face her sister, who deftly twisted to get into another attack stance, but Betty took off without pause, taking an offensive swing at Polly, who deflected and countered.
Betty understood on a cognitive level that this was necessary, particularly for her. Chic had drilled into her brain that the worst people would come after her first, and he hadn’t been wrong. But she’d been doing this for years. She could do all this with her eyes closed, and the only thing preventing her for overcoming Polly completely was the sincere reluctance to hurt her sister unnecessarily, because she felt, that on an emotional level, she’d done enough.

Betty curled her fist hard, digging her nails into her palms. The pain came through her like an electric shock, transforming it into magic. She pushed the air and energy around her outward, sending Polly careening back and rolling on the mat. Polly stood instantly, but Betty was on her, climbing Polly’s body fluidly to wrap her legs around Polly’s neck. They both thumped onto the mat, with Betty putting the slightest pressure.

Polly tapped and Betty let her go.

“Good, Betty. What did I tell you, Pol? You don’t have to be standing to cast a curse. You can do it from the ground.”

Polly’s face fell and Betty gave a loud sigh.

“Chic, she knows that, but we’re tired—“

“No, Betty, I’m tired,” Polly said, tersely. “Some of us actually have to prepare charms to cast spells. I can’t just throw them around like you do. I’m just a Blood Witch and I’m only as good as the charms that I have. I couldn’t use them on you for practice even if I wanted to!”

Betty felt her stomach knot. “Pol—“

“Not now, Betty,” she hissed. “I’m done, Chic. If you want to give Betty practice, go spar with her yourself.” She walked briskly to the stairs, leaving the basement. The door atop the stairs slammed loudly.

Betty folded cross-legged on the floor, running her hands through her hair and stifling her tears. “I’m sorry, Chic. It’s not you, it’s me. She’s angry with me. Has been angry with me since dad—“ She couldn’t bear to continue.

Chic’s shoulders sagged, ruffling his own hair in frustration. He went over to Betty and sat beside her on the floor, putting a hand to her head. “We’re all dealing with it, bug. Polly’s always looked outward for her misery and sometimes that makes her point fingers. Don’t let her get to you. If she didn’t care, she’d leave all of us behind.”

She leaned into her brother’s hand, appreciating the warmth and comfort of his palm on her scalp. It felt soothing. Chic always knew how.

“I don’t think I’ve asked you how school went,” Chic said, lightly.

She managed a small smile. “It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be. Made friends, I think.”

Chic nodded. “That’s good.”

“Is it?” she asked in a small voice. “I’m not sure if I should be making friends. What if I put them in danger?”

Chic sighed. “You won’t. This is Riverdale. Things like that don’t happen around here.”

Betty chuckled. “Do you really believe that or is that just you drinking the Blossom flavored Kool
Aid?”

Chic gave a tired half smile. “My first day working for the Blossoms, I didn’t have to throw a single curse.”

She didn’t know if that was his way of saying he believed the hype or if he just didn’t know how to answer her question, so she let it be. She didn’t want to grill Chic for things he had no control over. Instead, she said, “We’re living the life.”

Chic scoffed. “Ah, bug. I want you to live a normal life. I do, and I think coming to Riverdale and reconnecting with the Blossoms can get us that, or at least a semblance of it.”

So it was the Kool Aid, she thought somewhat sourly.

“I mean, I think people will always want your power, but with the Blossoms backing you up, I’m optimistic you won’t get attacked again. Not while you’re in Riverdale. Part of the reason you had to deal with any at all was because mom and dad thought they could do it without a coven’s protection.”

Her brows knotted. “Chic—”

“I’m not blaming our parents, Betty. They did what they thought was best. They thought a coven would ruin you, and I get where they were coming from. Ultimately, mom made the hard decision of bringing us back here, and never forget that mom did what she had to do. She adjusted when it became clear that our lives outside of the coven wasn’t going to work out.”

She closed her eyes and bit her lip. “I can hardly even remember what happened, Chic. I mean, what went wrong? What caused it? Did I make a mistake in the wards? Did I do something wrong?”

“You did nothing wrong,” Chic said, quickly. “It was—it just happened, Betty. We can put wards and protections as much as we can, but something will always find its way through if it tries hard enough.”

“Chic,” she continued, looking at him pleadingly. “Sometimes, I forget things about dad. Like I know there’s something about him I’m not remembering but I can’t place it.”

“You know that happens whenever we give you the propofol, Betty,” he said, burying his face in his hands—exhausted, no doubt, by her questions. “You forget parts, but—but nothing really important, I think. So just—don’t kill yourself trying to remember things. Are you taking your medication?”

“Always,” she said with conviction. “I never miss it, Chic. You know that. You know that.”

“I know,” he said, soothingly. “And you’re good, bug. You’re okay.”

She swallowed, feeling her eyes growing hot with unshed tears. “I just wish—I wish you all didn’t have to give so much up to move here.”

Chic shrugged. “I didn’t have to give anything up. The job I have now is the same job I had in Seattle.”

“But mom gave up the Seattle Times, and Polly had to give up university, Chic.”

“She did not have to give it up. She’s taking online classes from that same school. She’s not falling behind.”
Betty shook her head. “I wish mom hadn’t forced her to come here. She could’ve stayed in Seattle. Without me there, she wasn’t in any danger.”

“Mom wanted us to be here as a family. At least until we come to terms with what happened to dad. In a few months, Polly can make the case to fly back out there and I bet you mom will let her.”

“In the meantime, she’s stuck here and she wants to bite my head off at every turn,” she muttered.

Chic shook his head. “You’re our sister. Our baby sister. We will give up everything to keep you alive and keep this family together. Do you understand? Polly’s impossible, but she decided just like the rest of us. We stick together. We are all we have.”

Her tears brimmed over, finally, but she was smiling. She wouldn’t know what she would do without Chic. He gave her a tight hug and stood up, helping her to her feet.

“Go do your homework, kiddo. We don’t want you to get a C in class, now do we?” he said, his eyes twinkling.

She had to laugh at that. Amidst all the blood, tears, and the instinct to survive, they still had to worry about her grade point average.

“I need to go to the library—stay there for a couple of hours so I can do proper research.”

“You want me to drive you there or do you want to take the car?”

“I’ll jog.”

“Bug.”

“Please, Chic? I just need some time to clear my head. Get some endorphins to boost my mood.”

“Have some of the Milk Thistle potion from my shelf. It ought to help.”

She pecked a kiss on her brother’s cheek, thankful for his kindness and consideration. Chic was particularly skilled in mixing potions and he kept a store of them specifically for her. His Milk Thistle potion wasn’t so much magic as it was herbal, but wood witching—something he was better at than all of them—had a way of bringing out the magical properties of what would otherwise just be organic remedies.

She left the basement and prepared for her jog, grabbing the potion quickly as she headed for the door.

Slinging her jogging backpack over her shoulders with her school work, she put on her earbuds and pulled the hood of her sweater over her head. After a brief warm-up, she took off, running the three miles to the library.

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The Riverdale Public Library was an intricate structure of marble and stone, definitely a bit out of place for what was mostly a retro-fifties looking town. It looked ancient and foreboding, but considering the generations of witches that have lived there, she wasn’t that surprised that this old structure had been preserved. She was willing to bet that there was magic protecting this building, especially if it contained old spell books and grimoires.

She climbed the stone steps flanked by the two stone gargoyles. It was a little late—6:30, but this
The library stayed open even later, which was odd, especially when, stepping inside, she barely saw anyone in it.

The place was dimly lit and relaxing, closer to a lounge than a library. Each table had a desk lamp and everything looked cozy. The wide glass windows along the walls ensured that the place would feel bright and airy in the daytime, but the evening welcomed this relaxing ambience.

She took a desk and left her things there. She made her way to the history shelves, then, unable to resist, dipped into the tiny occult section, just to see if there were any hidden gems there. This was Riverdale.

By the time she was done perusing the shelves, she was about twelve books tall, having grabbed the books she needed for her physics class, as well. She carried the stack to her table, sat down, and started laying out the physics books around her. Physics was not her best subject, but she was going to ace it if it killed her.

An hour later, when she was done with her homework, she put away the science texts and started flipping through the history and occult books she had gathered. She wasn’t so arrogant as to think that she was going to get through the whole pile in one sitting, but she definitely had every intention of borrowing some of the books to take home.

She was engrossed in history and occult for another half hour before sitting up straight and stretching her arms over her head to work out the kinks that had settled on her back muscles, hunched over the table and books as she was.

When the stiffness waned, she selected five books to keep and put the rest in the return cart. She packed her things in her backpack and brought her books to the counter to be borrowed. But before she even got there, she saw him. Jughead Jones.

He was sitting on the counter, a book in his hand and his toothpick between his lips. He was smirking, and she wondered how long he’d been there while she was studying.

“Betty Cooper,” he said as she approached. “You borrowing those?”

“Did you just get here?” she asked, slightly mystified.

He shook his head, swung his long legs over the counter, and hopped down behind it. “I work here. I’ve been here since 5:30.”

Her eyebrow arched in disbelief. “You’re a librarian.”

He laughed lightly, shaking his head. “No. I’d need a master’s degree, certification, and teaching experience for that, but the librarian on duty does think I am at least smart enough to man the checkout counter. You got a library card?”

His whole look, which now was sans leather jacket, was still jarring against the scholarly setting. He had his plaid shirt over his tank now, and his suspenders were hanging from his waist. His folded up sleeves revealed some leather bracelets with oddly occultist charms. Tattoos peeked from the edge of both his sleeves, and with the jacket put away, she could spy a few more tattoos from the collar of his blouse.

How could an 18 year old have so many tattoos? He had to have started getting them at 13 or something.

“Sunshine,” he said to get her attention. “Library card?”
Her face felt flushed with heat as she put the books on the counter. She shook her head. “I don’t have a library card.”

“No problem. Any form of picture ID will do, and if you have proof of residence—”

She dug into her bag. She had everything, having anticipated the requirements. She’d had to apply for a card to several libraries throughout her life, not just where she lived, but everywhere she went to look for one. Chic had once quipped that she was a Tome Raider, and he looked so proud that he had invented that, which made her wonder if Chic didn’t have a secret love child somewhere, because that was some serious Dad Joke shit.

Not that he was wrong. She’d been to so many libraries. She loved them. She liked the quiet and being surrounded by books. She liked the possibility of rarities, whether they were witchy or not. She was always ready to register to a new one.

She showed Jughead her documentation and he quickly had a card registered to her name. It came in a set—a credit card sized one and two keychain type ones, similar to the rewards cards they gave out at the grocery store. She had many library cards of the kind.

When he gave her hers, she immediately wrote “Riverdale” on a small strip of paper, asked for some tape, and put it on the card, before sliding it on her keychain, which was full of the things, all of them labeled.

She caught Jughead staring at her collection and she self-consciously put the keychain away.

“I like libraries,” she said, simply, feeling only the slightest blush coloring her cheeks.

He put up his hands, stifling what looked like a smirk. “I don’t hate them.”

With her card sorted out, Jughead started picking up her book selections. “So what do we have here? History, history, occultist history, occult, occult—you really like the occult.”

“Technically, it’s a split between history and the occult,” she pointed out.

He smirked, scanning the bars on her books. When he was done, he pulled out a canvas bag. “For just a dollar fifty, you can have this beautiful reusable tote bag that will make you look like a perfectly trendy hipster and carry your books for you.”

She resisted the urge to giggle, but she could barely keep from grinning. “I’m going to try to stick my books in my backpack. I’m jogging home, so--”

His eyebrows quirked in surprise. “You’re jogging home? By yourself?”

She rolled her eyes. “Why, Jughead Jones. One would think you’re worried about me.”

The look on his eyes suggested that she was being ridiculous, even with a lopsided grin on his lips, but he didn’t contradict her. Instead, he said, “Or maybe they should worry about you.”

That was, she thought, more like it. “Damn straight.”

He chuckled. “Seriously, you shouldn’t be out and alone this time of night. The streets go silent around here at 8:30 and you never know what’s lurking around the corner.”

She wondered if he was being serious. It looked like he was but exactly what kind of dangers did he think Riverdale had? She didn’t ask, however. “I don’t want to wait for my brother to come pick me
up. It would take about as much time to just head on home by foot.”

He paused, as if he were giving it a bit thought. “Well, how about this? It’s about fifteen minutes to closing. If you can spare a few more minutes, I can drop you off at your house.”

The butterflies in her stomach fluttered restlessly. “You’d do that?”

He shrugged. “You’re, what? 3, 4 miles from here? If you live next to Archie, I know exactly where you live. It’s easy for me.”

She bit her lip, deciding. She wanted to let him drop her off, but the politeness her parents taught her (mostly to keep themselves under the radar) was making her hesitate.

“I don’t bite,” he added.

“It’s not that,” she said, hastily, her face flaming. “Won’t Veronica wonder why you’re escorting random girls home? I mean—“

“Why would V wonder about me? She barely covers her mouth when she sneezes in my direction.”

This was feeling slightly awkward. “Aren’t you and Veronica—you know.”

Realization began to dawn in Jughead’s eyes. “Fuck, no. Veronica’s—well, seeing other people. Couple of ladies I know, one of whom happens to be a friend of mine. Not sure what’s going on there, exactly, but I’m definitely not V’s type.”

“Oh,” Betty replied, trying not to let her internal monologue of “he’s not dating Veronica and he’s probably single” show on her face. She gave him a hesitant look. “In that case, there’s still kind of the matter of how tacky it would be of me. I don’t want you to go out of your way. You only just met me and you’re doing me favors—”

“Betty,” he interrupted, gently. “Considering what I drive, the favor is all mine.”

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He drove a motorcycle.

She tried not to grin at his earlier words, about how she was doing him a favor. She tried to tell herself to take it easy, that it was silly to be crushing on a boy at all, even if it appeared that he wasn’t repulsed by her.

That little reminder dampened her feelings on the matter a bit. She had felt this sense of normality in Seattle for a blessed few years. She had let herself like a boy and wondered if he could be more than just a fling. Then it all went to hell.

She was pulled from her morose thoughts when Jughead gave her his helmet.

She arched an eyebrow. “What about you?”

He paused, brows furrowed in thought. “It’s going to take more than a bike crash to kill me.”

“Road rash will be a bitch, though.”

He shrugged. “Tough hide.”

“Stubborn hide.”
Shaking his head, he slipped his jacket on and straddled the motorcycle. “You sound like my little sister.”

If she thought about it real hard, that didn’t sound particularly encouraging, but her insecurities were warring with her innate curiosity. She wanted to ask him what his sister’s name is and how old she was, but he urged her to hop onto the bike with a tilt of his sharp jaw. Seeing him that way addled her brain and sent all rational thought spiraling into the gutter.

She secured the helmet on her head and slid on her backpack. With her backpack strapped and her borrowed books packed, she mounted the bike behind Jughead and hoped that the rumble of the motor masked the rapid beating of her heart.

“Hold tight,” he said.

Hesitating only slightly, she leaned forward, wrapped her arms around his lean and breathtakingly hard body, and held as tight as etiquette would allow.

When Jughead sped off, Betty was perhaps too busy feeling too self conscious of the entire thing to enjoy all 3 miles of the short ride.

It was funny, however, now that she thought about it. Jughead worrying about her walking alone was extremely laughable. Any real danger that may come her way would have to be the worse kind. Anyone foolish enough to attack her probably wouldn’t survive the encounter.

As her house came into view, Jughead slowed down. He came to a stop in front of her house and killed the engine.

He kicked the bike stand and Betty gingerly removed the helmet.

“Thank you for the ride,” she said, dismounting and handing the helmet back to him.

“Anytime.”

“So… the entire time I was at the library, you didn’t come over to say hello.”

He shrugged. “You were busy. It’s part of my job at the library to be quiet.”

“I wouldn’t have minded the company,” she said, a little shyly. She craved that feeling of giggling to herself about a boy, this boy, and maybe she could indulge herself a few flutters. Perhaps it wouldn’t be so terrible to want his friendship, at least.

“Maybe next time you drop by,” he said.

Before she could be thrilled by any prospect of “next time”, Betty heard the sound of her front door opening and she saw that it was Chic. She waved at him, signaling that she’d be there in a bit. He was always watching out for her.

“So are you letting Archie walk you to school tomorrow?” he asked, his gaze darting to the house next door.

She didn’t know, if she were being honest. She wouldn’t mind walking into school with Archie. It beat walking in with Cheryl and her brother, but she didn’t want Archie to get the impression that she was interested in him. She didn’t want Jughead to think so, either.

“Maybe I’ll have my brother drop me off,” she said, sighing. “God, I really don’t want that, though.
He’ll be asking me embarrassing questions all morning.”

Jughead looked over her shoulder at Chic. She could see the curiosity in his eyes. He was probably wondering what Chic was doing, just standing there. Chic had always looked out for her, but even this was a little weird for him.

“Is that him?” Jughead asked.

She nodded.

“He seems,” Jughead paused. “Protective.”

Betty giggled softly, impressed by Jughead’s intuition. “He is. I’m his baby sister. It’s the age difference, I think.”

Jughead nodded with an upside-down smile. “I can respect that. I’m a big brother, too. JB always complains that I get all up on her case about her friends and shit.”

She pursed her lips, completely endeared. “Yeah, we hate that.”

“It’s just love, Sunshine.”

She was really beginning to like that nickname. And she was seriously taken by the way he so casually admitted that he loved his sister.

“Listen,” he said, pushing a stray curl from off his forehead. “You got a phone?”

She gazed at him for a bit as that thick lock of hair flopped over his brow. It was so black. Like ebony. Who had hair like that? It must be some form of magic. She resisted the urge to reach up and push it off his eye by focusing on his question.

She did have a phone, and she felt her face warming at the thought that he was possibly asking her number. “Um, yeah...?”

“You sure?” he teased, lightly.

She tried not to giggle at her own silliness. “Pretty sure.”

He held his hand out. “Give it here.”

She didn’t know why she was doing exactly as he asked, but she put her phone in his hand, unlocking it as she did so. Their fingers brushed ever so slightly.

“This is my number,” he said, entering his information. “If you ever need anything, like a ride to school, I promise I won’t ask you embarrassing questions—wait, scratch that, I will ask you every embarrassing question imaginable.”

She laughed, unable to help herself from tilting her body towards his, looking over his shoulder as he typed with his long, fascinating fingers.

“Or, maybe you just need someone to talk to,” he added, rambling as he concentrated more on his task.

The heat she felt through her body at the moment was not necessarily shyness.

He looked up, finally, smirking. “It’s tough to be the new kid in town.” He handed her phone back.
She held it, staring at the glowing screen and touched by his kindness. “Thank you, Jughead.”

“Anytime.”

She had a wild thought—about kissing his cheek. She did, quickly enough that he might not believe it happened. “I guess I better go inside. Maybe I’ll see you in school tomorrow?”

“Um,” he seemed slightly dazed, and she was sure she wasn’t imagining the red glow on his cheeks. “Yeah. Likely.”

She turned and trekked down the walkway and up the steps of their house. It was a good several seconds before she heard Jughead start his motorcycle and she turned to wave at him. He waved back, helmet on. He flipped down his visor before taking off down the street.

“Who was that?” Chic asked, eyebrow arched. If he saw the kiss, Chic was not likely to mention it.

“Just a classmate who works at the library. He dropped me off so that I wouldn’t have to jog home, alone,” she said.

“Nice of him.”

She felt herself blushing. “Yeah. Real nice. What were you doing standing out here? I mean, kinda creeped me out, to be honest.”

“Sorry,” Chic muttered. “I heard a motorcycle and I got nervous. Penelope Blossom told me this morning that the slayers in this town ran around in motorcycles. I guess I’ve just been adjusting to all this. I’m not used to everyone kind of getting along…”

“Everyone?”

“Otherworlders. Apparently, this place is a haven, or something like it. The Blossoms control this town and the behavior of its Otherworlders, and they have some kind of arrangement with the slayers. The slayers keep the Creatures in check and the Blossoms keep the witches and the fey in line.”

Betty arched an eyebrow. “Who’s watching the Blossoms?”

“The slayers keep a close eye on them, I suppose. I’m sure the Blossoms keep tabs on them, too. It’s a complicated relationship, but it works. The town hasn’t had a major incident in a little over five decades.”

“Witches and slayers getting along. What a novel concept,” Betty said, a tad sarcastically. “Or maybe the Blossoms are just better at keeping witch business under the radar.”

“Maybe. Got your homework done at the library?”

She nodded, stepping through the door to go inside. “Is mom home yet?”

“Still at Aunt Hilda’s and Zelda’s,” Chic said. “She missed her sisters.”

That reminded Betty about Sabrina, whom she was yet to meet up with.

She texted her cousin, asking her when they could meet.

Sabrina texted right back, telling her Friday night would be good. It always was.
Jughead parked in front of the Whyte Wyrm. He had barely removed his helmet when he was already being approached by his Southside friends at the parking lot.

“What took you, Jones?” Sweet Pea asked. Immensely tall, dark haired, and a tattoo on his neck of the Southside Serpents emblem, he towered over everyone. “We expected you, like 20 minutes ago.”

Jughead smirked, trying not to let the memory of Betty Cooper frazzle him. “I didn’t think you’d miss me so much, Sweets.”

Sweet Pea scoffed.

Toni Topaz, a petite girl with pink locks and a big personality, waved dismissively. “Don’t pay attention to this grouch, Jug. Sab went into the Wyrm 2 minutes ago with her boyfriend—that Harvey kid. He was a quaint one. Put Sweet Pea in a bad mood.”

Jughead arched an eyebrow, chuckling. He supposed that would make Sweet Pea cranky. He and Sabrina had some kind of “arrangement,” and whenever Sabrina had a new boyfriend, it threw a wrench into that.

“Go get a girlfriend, Sweet Pea,” Jughead said. “Or another ‘arrangement.’”

Joaquin laughed, looking at Toni pointedly.

Toni frowned. “Don’t be gross, Joaquin. Sweet Pea and I were in Kindergarten together.”

“Didn’t stop you with Jughead,” Joaquin replied, smirking from his bike.

Jughead rolled his eyes.

“Oh, he had his moments,” Toni said with a tiny smile, looking him up and down. “But never again. Besides, I’m kind of pursuing a thing with someone.”

Jughead’s eyebrow arched. “Yeah, are you talking about someone I know in particular?”

“What if I am? You jealous? Of her or of me? Or both?”

Jughead scoffed as he put his helmet away. “Now who’s being gross? Get a grip, Topaz. I just want to make sure you both know what you’re doing.” His fling with Toni Topaz during sophomore year lasted about a month and a half, which was about as long as it took for Toni to realize that she was possibly bisexual. So, she cheated on him with a girl, then she dumped him, which was frankly a little humiliating, but in the grand scheme of things a very neat and definite severance. Jughead never looked back.

Toni frowned. “Why? What have you heard?”

Jughead did not want to get into the weeds of that. So he redirected. “I’m told Veronica wears pearls to bed. That true, Topaz?”

“A lady never kisses and tells.”

“You should’ve seen this dude,” Sweet Pea muttered. He probably didn’t hear a single word Jughead, Joaquin, or Toni had said. “Vanilla as fuck. Good luck getting Sabby off with that going for him.”
Jughead tried not to laugh. Sweet Pea never actually gave them details on what he and Sabrina did, but considering she was a half-witch and Sweet Pea was a Seer who worked for the Southside Serpent slayers, it definitely wouldn’t be “vanilla.”

Jughead actually rather liked the idea of Sabrina and Sweet Pea being more than fuck buddies, but that was a whole other can of worms.

“I might actually talk to Sabrina for a bit--have a few questions for her about the new girl,” Jughead mused out loud, wondering if he could ask a few questions about Betty Cooper. Not that Sabrina would tell him much. If they were cousins, there was no reason for Sabrina to get gabby. He and Sabrina got along, but witches were fiercely loyal about family.

Sweet Pea nodded morosely.

This time, Jughead did grin, clapping Sweet Pea on the back of his Serpents jacket. “If you like it, put a ring on it.”

Toni and Joaquin laughed uproariously.

That’s how Jughead left them as he made his way into the biker bar. Music played from the overhead speakers and a baseball exhibition game was up on the TV screens. The chatter that pervaded the scene was merry, punctuated on occasion by billiard balls smashing against one another on the pool tables. It had the look and feel of a roadhouse joint, with memorabilia from local heroes and the occasional out of town celebrity photograph decorating the walls and ceiling. The Whyte Wyrm was an institution. Known best for it’s flaming hot chicken wings and famous craft beers. It was the beer that made the Joneses thrive in their little Southside space. They weren’t rich like the Blossoms, but it made their lives comfortable and relatively stable.

The place was halfway filled by Serpents in their signature black leather jackets. Serpents got 40% off drinks.

A server walked by with her tray and waved at Jughead as she passed him. He tried to pretend he didn’t see her winking.

Jughead saw his father’s oldest friend, Tall Boy, manning the bar.

Jughead perched himself on a bar stool and looked over his shoulder at Sabrina, who had spotted him from across the room. She waved and he waved back, but he tilted his head, hoping she understood that he needed one minute.

Sabrina nodded. Satisfied that she’d join him in a few minutes, Jughead turned back to the bar. Tall Boy was giving him that bearded smirk of his--the one he always had for FP Jones’s son.

“What’re you having, kid?” Tall Boy asked.

Tall Boy always asked, and each and every time, Jughead said something like “Just a beer,” or “Give me a bourbon, my good man,” Tall Boy always fixed him with a Coke or Pepsi, with a hint of lime if he was feeling fancy.

“Scotch, if you can,” Jughead said, glumly. He really needed something strong right now.

The coke was plopped in front of him seconds later. He sighed.

“Your old man coming back anytime soon?” Tall Boy asked.
Jughead shrugged. “Hell do I know? Last time he texted me, he said he’d be home soon, but that was last week. He could be dead right now and I wouldn’t know.”

Tall Boy sighed.

That was pretty much the gist of every conversation he had with Tall Boy. Disappointed sighs.

It wasn’t that FP was a fuckup. It wasn’t that at all. FP Jones was a responsible provider. The Whyte Wyrm was a Southside institution that ran itself, even without its owner, and so long as the designated admin/accountant squared the books each week, the checks were mailed to its employees like clockwork. Jughead never had to worry about the bills in their house, or his allowance, which was on top of what he got from the library, and while he only got to talk to JB twice every month over Skype, he knew she was getting the checks, too.

So it wasn’t the money.

Tall Boy leaned over the bar. “He looks out for you in his own way. You know that, right?”

Jughead didn’t say anything.

“And it probably helps--or doesn’t--that you’re damn near indestructible.”

“Yeah, so long as some psycho creature doesn’t lop off my head. Or rip my heart out.”

Tall Boy nodded sagely. “It’s really hard to decapitate someone. Let me tell you.”

Jughead couldn’t help but chuckle at that. He stirred his coke with its straw and took a sip of the liquid sugar. There were about five *actual* Slayers in Riverdale that they knew of, most of them working as Serpents. There was Jughead, his father, Toni, Tall Boy, and a weirdo whom they knew as Farmer McGinty. The rest of the Serpents were a mix of Seers and Lost, with the Seers acting as support--Slayer Adjacents, as the saying went, and some of the more trusted Lost doing most of the grunt work, like covering up the slaying of a berserker werewolf they had to get rid off last month.

Back in the day, slayers could do their work without having to worry about the authorities and red tape. These days, slaying was a little more elaborate and needed a team of workers to stave off the impractical menace of Lost laws.

A girl with platinum blonde hair and a spray of freckles across her nose slid on the stool beside him. Her pretty bob was nicely put together with some accent bobby pins, and her black painted fingernails were a striking contrast to her pale skin. “Hey, Jug.”

Jughead cocked a smile. “Hi, Sab. How’s it going?”

“Oh, it’s going. A couple of shots of tequila, please, Tall Boy.”

“You got it, missy,” Tall Boy said.

Jughead scowled. “How come she gets a real drink?”

“She’s not my boss’s kid, now shut up and drink your coke.”

Sabrina chuckled as Tall Boy put two shot glasses in front of her and filled them with liquor. He garnished both with wedges of lemon. “I don’t have a lot of time, Jug. I’m here with my boyfriend.”

“Yeah, Sweet Pea told me.”
She bit her lip, a guilty look flashing across her eyes. “I mean… it’s just Harvey…”

Jughead put his hands up. “Not my business, Sab. I ain’t Sweet Pea’s keeper. That’s not what I asked you to come here for.”

Sabrina looked relieved. “Then what’s up?”

“New girl in town,” Jughead said without further preamble. “Betty Cooper.”

Sabrina froze. “What about her?”

Jughead shot Sabrina a look and that seemed to do the trick.

“Fine. She’s my cousin.”

“So--witch?”

Sabrina pursed her lips.

“Blood Witch?”

“If you already talked to her, then you can ask her yourself.”

He grimaced, turning slightly away from her.

Her eyebrow arched pointedly. “Oh, I see. You haven’t told her what you are.”

Jughead pursed his lips, trying to ignore the nagging sense of guilt. Sabrina knew this was par for the course—that he never told new kids what he was at first. For one, if they were Lost, they wouldn’t take kindly to talk of a hunter disposing of misbehaving supernatural beings. But more importantly, if they were Otherworlders, telling them the truth tended to shut them up tight, like a clam. If he needed information about them, telling them the truth early on was not an option.

“You talk to her a lot?” Jughead asked, instead.

Sabrina gave him what she probably thought was well-deserved side-eye. “Social media. Video chatted a couple of times. She’s a good person, Jug. You don’t have to worry about slaying this one.”

He flinched. “That’s not how--”

Sabrina frowned. “Well, isn’t that why you’re asking all these questions? You need to find out if she’s psycho?”

“Most of them aren’t,” he said, which was a surprising thing for him to say about witches. He deliberately put out an attitude of “guilty until proven innocent.” He preferred to deter Otherworlders from even thinking of doing mischief so that he didn’t have to go after them. He’d never actually
voiced his actual sentiment, where he really thought they were mostly normal people, supernatural lives notwithstanding, mainly because he didn’t want to give the impression that he wasn’t a hardass Slayer.

He didn’t know why he said what he said to Sabrina.

She cocked her hip and leaned against the counter. “Aren’t you the softie?”

He glared at her.

“You know I gotta tell Betty, right?” she continued. “That the guy she thinks is being nice to her in school is actually investigating her.”

This is the part where he was supposed to scoff and say he didn’t care. That, yeah, it’s what he did—he investigated people, pretending to want to be their friend, so that he could figure out if A—they were Otherworlder, and B—they were capable of using their powers for mischief, or worse, evil. It was very the reason he was put on this earth.

This was where he should say, “Yeah, tell them Jughead Jones, slayer, is keeping an eye on them,” or “Save it, they’re Lost. They don’t want to know about us.”

And yet, he said, “Do me a favor and let me tell her.”

Sabrina’s eyebrow arched so high, Jughead swore it touched her hairline.

He cleared his throat. “She’s a nice kid. My friends like her and all…” it sounded lame, even to him, but he supposed it was less vulnerable than, “Well, I drove her home, offered to take her to school, gave her my number… I think I went a bit overkill on this one, so… I don’t want to come off as a complete and total dick.”

She scoffed. “You and your Breakfast club—secretly judging the entire school for their Lost-ness for about as long as I’ve known you guys.”

“We don’t judge people for being Lost, Sab,” he muttered as she grabbed the two glasses of tequila and got ready to go back to her boyfriend.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever helps you sleep at night, John Bender.”

He shook his head and sulked. So maybe him, Kevin, and Veronica did tend to make fun of the Lost sometimes, but it was mostly for objective stupidity, like how the Lost all got hooked on Tinder, which basically made it easier for Otherworlders to snag people to use or abuse for their own gains. It was like the Amazon Fresh for human beings. Jughead had a beast of a time putting the kibosh on all that activity. Nobody actually died during that year of hookups, but it took awhile for Jughead to figure out why so many kids walked around the school like they’d all gone on keggers the night before. The offenders were mostly transient: Lamias snacked on their life forces, witches took bio materials from them for their charms and potions, the fey extracted favors from them—all sorts of shenanigans.

Venting about the Lost to Kevin and Veronica during such times was all Jughead could do to keep his sanity. It was mostly frustration that the Lost absolutely cannot take care of themselves.

But that was neither here nor there.

Betty.
“You’re gonna hold off, aren’t you?” Jughead said. “About saying anything to Betty.”

She huffed. “Why should I?”

“You owe me for that time I sniffed that Alp out of your backyard and followed it into the sewer.”

“Isn’t that your job, like, in general?”

“What? No. I chased it out of your property and wanted to kill it, but you insisted that I catch it alive so you can process its parts for your potions. I don’t provide ingredients to witches, I’ll have you know. But you told me you’d make it worth my while and I was feeling magnanimous.”

Her lips pursed, probably remembering the conversation they had. “Fine. I won’t tell her. I’ll give you until tomorrow night.”

Jughead nodded. “Thanks. I can work with that.” He turned his attention back to the bar.

“You know,” she said behind him. “It’s okay to like her. Even badass Slayer, Jughead Jones has to get his jollies off every once in a while.”

He wanted to give Sabrina the finger. He didn’t, though.

She was at the other side of the room before he figured out what we even wanted to say to her, which was mostly something snarky, like, “My jollies are none of your business.”

Tall Boy wiped the counter with a rag. “New kid in town?”

“Yeah. Girl named Betty Cooper. Apparently, Sabrina’s cousin.”

Tall Boy paused. “Cooper… well, shit. That means Alice is back in town.”

“Alice?”

“Hilda and Zelda’s sister.”

“Right. You know anything about the Coopers?”

Tall Boy seemed to think about it. “Not much. I know she married Hal Cooper. Seemed like an upstanding guy. Certainly took her out of the Southside so they can live up Northside in a fancy house. They didn’t stick around in Riverdale long. Took his family away after their first kid was born. They were quiet. Didn’t cause trouble. I heard that the Blossoms wanted them in their service and I guess Hal and Alice didn’t want that. Betty Cooper isn’t that kid, is she?”

“Don’t think so. She’s got an older brother and probably an older sister.”

“What do you think of Betty?”

Jughead fidgeted uneasily on his seat. There were many things he thought about Betty, none of which he wanted to say out loud. “She’s okay. Sweet. Doesn’t want attention. She’s alright.”

“And a witch. I caught that from your conversation with Sabrina. Like we don’t have enough of those in town already.” Tall Boy sighed and shook his head.

“Right.” While Jughead wasn’t exactly one to trust witches first thing, the likes of Tall Boy did sincerely believe that witches were up to no good, no exceptions. Jughead liked to think he was more cautious than flat out antagonistic, because yes, they weren’t all bad. Most of the time they were just
regular folks come to town on business, often with the Blossoms. Every once in awhile they’d get a coven hosting a reunion or something as equally mundane, but Jughead learned that with the older Slayers, it was always best to go slow. Less likelihood of impulsive raids and hot headed confrontations.

Jughead wasn’t so worried about his crew--the younger crew. Sweet Pea and the others listened to him. They grudgingly agreed with him. It was the elders that Jughead had divergent philosophies with.

“Keep watching her,” Tall Boy said. “Then let your dad know. He may want to pay Alice a visit when he gets back.”

The way Tall Boy said that, it sounded different. Jughead arched an eyebrow. “They friendly?”

Tall Boy cocked a grin. “Friendly.”

Jughead sighed.

*Dad and his witches.*

As everyone always said, he was so much his father’s son, that it wasn’t funny. This was going to get interesting.

*****

By the time Jughead finished talking to Tall Boy, Sweet Pea was roosting by the exclusive pool tables with the other Serpents, casting glares across the room at Sabrina, who was very bad at pretending that her new boyfriend had her full attention.

“Jesus,” Jughead muttered as he approached his friends at a nearby standing table.

Kevin was there, his arm draped over Joaquin, and Veronica stood beside Toni, her eyebrow arched snootily at any guy who dared to look her way.

“Hiya, princess,” Jughead said, grinning at Veronica’s feigned distaste at being here. “How magnanimous of you to grace this fine establishment with your presence.”

“As if,” she said, huffily, exchanging grins with Toni.

Kevin nudged his shoulder. “Check out Sweet Pea and Sabrina over there eye fucking each other. God, the tension’s making me all hot and bothered.”

Veronic rolled her eyes. “If you can see what I see… they’re going to bang in the bathrooms at five, four, three….”

Sabrina crossed the room, making straight for the Whyte Wyrm restrooms. Sweet Pea unceremoniously abandoned his cue stick and followed without so much as a backward glance.

Joaquin rolled his eyes and shook his head. “Ay yai yai. Those two!”

“We can’t all have open, loving relationships like you and Kevin do,” Veronica said, pinching Kevin’s cheek affectionately. “The shimmer around you two makes me want to go *awww.*”

Kevin grinned, pecking a kiss on Joaquin’s lips. “That’s right. Be jealous. All of you.”

Jughead shook his head, waving a hand in the direction of the bathrooms. “You know what, V? If I
ever happen to get that worked up about someone, please don’t look at me. Just don’t, okay?”

Veronica chuckled. “It’s not bad to look at, actually. The colors of two people intensely attracted to one another is beautiful. Speaking of attraction, Jughead… I have information about Betty.”

Jughead shot her a deadly glare even as his face felt hot enough to explode right off his neck.

Kevin laughed and Joaquin and Toni were inevitably intrigued.

Veronica grinned, unapologetically. “We have a new witch in town.”

“I coulda told you that,” Jughead muttered grouchily. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

“My God, so cranky!”

“That’s because you outed him, sweetie,” Kevin said.

Jughead shot Kevin a disappointed frown. “Man, I thought you were my best friend. Why you gotta throw me under the bus like that?”


“You do not do it because you care,” Jughead said, emphatically. “You’re Seelie. You feed off the drama.”

“I am what I am. You know this, but you love me anyway.”

Jughead sighed. He wasn’t going to deny it, in any case. “V, I’m sorry I snapped at you. Is there anything else?”

“Her brother works for the Blossoms and her sister is continuing her university online. Cheryl said Polly, the sister, will probably move out in a few months to go back to Seattle. Lessee, I sussed out that Betty is both a blood witch and wood witch, like her brother, but her brother’s a better wood witch than he is a blood witch, and Polly’s all blood witch while their mother’s all wood witch—as expected, being the Spellman that she is.”

“How about their dad?”

“Deceased. Killed, even. Cheryl didn’t tell me how. I don’t think she knows. Although, I think there’s something else she’s not telling me. I figured I’d let you find that out, eh?” She waggled her eyebrows.

Jughead scowled.

Toni leaned over the table, stroking Veronica’s arm. “And how did you find all this out from Cheryl?”

Veronica chuckled, shrugging a shoulder. “I have my ways.”

“Oh, yes you do.”

*What the fuck’s in the air tonight? Is it a full moon?*

*Why, he asked himself, was everyone so fucking horny?*

“Listen,” Joaquin said, pointedly. “Do you guys think Sab and SP are in the girls bathroom or boys
bathroom? I really gotta go pee.”

“Girls bathroom,” Toni, Veronica, and Kevin said altogether.

Joaquin looked mystified by the certainty of their tones.

“You’ve seen the boys bathroom, honey,” Kevin said.

“Fine. I get it.” Joaquin was off.

“Got a ride home, lady?” Toni asked Veronica, winking.

Veronica chuckled. “Oh, dear, of course. I’d never dream of showing up here without my own ride. Smithers is outside.”

“Pity. It’s nice evening for a bike ride.”

“Don’t you wanna be chauffeured around, babe? It’s nice in the back of a limo,” Veronica cooed.

“I hate to break up your little flirt fest, but can I talk to you for a second, V?” Jughead said, reluctantly. “In private?”

Veronica rolled her eyes. “Fine.”

Jughead ushered them to the manager’s table in the corner of the bar and Jughead leaned against the wall, taking out a cigarette from inside his jacket and tucking it over his ear.

He took a moment to recall Betty entering the library, how she had gone straight to the bookshelves, collected an impossible amount of books, and piled it up on her table like a complete nerd. She had spread the books around her flat on their spines and did her homework vigorously, like it mattered, because she probably truly believed it did.

She was actually studying. Again, most witches didn’t bother with the Lost lessons. There was hardly any point when they could fix things and get what they wanted by using spells, charms, and potions. Beyond basic Lost math and history, witches probably didn’t need more than that. And forget science. The basic laws of physics and chemistry weren’t necessary. Their magic defied all that.

So seeing Betty Cooper do her homework made her look so earnest, so normal, that he didn’t know if he was alarmed, intrigued, or endeared.

He almost wanted to ask her what she was doing. Why was she working so hard to learn the mundane, when her supernatural self could so easily sail through the Lost construct of life?

“Did Cheryl say anything about Betty’s personality?” Jughead finally asked. “Is she really this—” he splayed his hand as he tried to figure out how to best describe her.

Veronica watched him grappling with words, amused that the wordsmith that was Jughead Jones couldn’t find the word he was looking for. “Sweet? Polite? Prim and uptight?”

For some reason, Jughead felt defensive. “I wouldn’t call her uptight.”

The giggle that escaped Veronica made him blush to his roots. “All Cheryl’s words. She doesn’t approve of how Betty projects. You know Cher. But you, Jug—oh, boy. You’ve taken a shining to her. I saw it at lunch. That impossibly pretty face and that cute blonde ponytail… I get it. And those legs that come up to that perky plump ass—”
“Enough,” Jughead said in a slightly rough tone. He didn’t know if he was embarrassed or turned on. “You and Kevin need to quit that thinking. It will get me in trouble and Archie—“

“Aw, you’re not letting Archie have her, are you? Because technically, you saw her first. If you like her, go for her. You know that Archie’s easily distracted.”

“Don’t meddle, V.”

She shrugged. “It’s fun.”

“You and Kevin. Are you sure you’re not half-Fey?”

Veronica cocked a grin, smoothly getting to her feet. “If it makes you feel any better, she didn’t respond much to Archie. She doesn’t like him that way.”

He swallowed, thickly. “Whatever. Did Cheryl tell you anything else? Like, how powerful she is?”

She scoffed mildly. “You know how Cheryl gets with witches. Those are her peeps. She talks all of them up. She says Betty is powerful, but who knows if that’s accurate. Honestly, we’ll find out one way or another. Did you talk to Sabrina yet?”

He nodded. “She wasn’t enthusiastic about sharing anything, but that’s expected. They’re cousins. So when you said that you feel like Cheryl isn’t telling you something—”

“Yes, I could see her aura. She’s hiding something, but damn if I know what it is. It’s definitely something about Betty, because her aura puts out this weird twitch when I ask about her. But like I said, witches show their hand sooner or later. We’ll know what it is. Now can I get back to relaxing with our friends?”

“Fine. Sorry. I’m just—” He felt his phone buzz.

“Join us when you’re over whatever this is,” Veronica said, making circles with her finger above him.

He shot her a sardonic glare before checking his phone.

What’s your opinion on Tarantino?

It was Betty, and he stared at his phone screen for several moments, thinking that he had done this to himself. That he had given this witch his phone number and now she was fucking asking him about Tarantino, only one of the most controversial pioneers of film, ever, and he was trying to convince himself not to reply.

She’s a witch. He’s a slayer. He was going to tell her the truth tomorrow and this was a completely pointless exercise if she chose never to speak to him again.

But really, what was it that his father always said? When you’ve got one foot in the past and one foot in the future, then you’re crapping on the present.

It was FP’s way of saying you had to live the moment, and the fact was, if Betty was going to stop speaking to him tomorrow, he might as well get the most out of texting with her now, right?

What are you even thinking, Jones?

He frowned.
This was stupid. He didn’t even know why he was having this conversation with himself. He liked talking about Tarantino and nobody else in this philistine town could be bothered to have intelligent discourse about trailblazing artists and their flaws.

Casually, he walked out of the bar to go outside. Once seated on his motorcycle, he stuck the cigarette between his lips and lit it before typing his response.

*I have many opinions about Tarantino, but let's talk about The Bride.*

********

Betty tried to keep a grim face at breakfast, mostly to match everyone else.

What once was an optimistic, bubbly family get together, had become a quiet, somber meal. Everyone leaned on the early morning doldrums for an excuse to pull back, sit in their own thoughts, and get the morning nourishment over with.

In the last few weeks since her father’s death, she had taken up this mood naturally. She welcomed the dark solace. She was glad she didn’t have to talk to anybody.

But that morning was different. That morning she felt the slightest bit uplifted. She wished, quietly, that she could turn to Polly and say, “So I met this really hot guy and we exchanged some flirty texts last night!” And she longed for Polly’s knowing grin and giggle. She wanted to clasp hands with her sister, as they used to, and pour over his texts and analyzed the meaning of every word.

But right now, the dark cloud persisted over Polly and Betty wouldn’t dare.

Alice, her mom, didn’t look much better, but she was at least talking about Aunt Hilda and Aunt Zelda, her sisters, about how it was nice to see them and that she had invited them over for dinner that Saturday.

Chic gave a grunt, telling her he had work that day.

Betty whined that he shouldn’t be working on Saturdays. He smiled and tugged her ponytail. “Just in the evening, bug. I’ll probably be able to join dinner for an hour or so.”

Her phone dinged and the muscles on her face hurt as she resisted the smile that fought its way to her lips.

*Have a ride to school, Sunshine?*

Why did he call her that? She didn’t quite exude that kind of enthusiasm that first day of school. And more importantly, why did she like it so, so much?

*Chic offered, but…*

*Be there in five?*

Those butterflies in her stomach went on a quiet frenzy.

*Sure, thanks.*
She put her phone away, glad that no one had really noticed her texting. She finished her breakfast and grabbed another piece of toast upon realizing that Alice was too distracted to notice. She buttered it briskly and ate it as quickly as she could while Alice talked about Saturday’s menu. She was just contemplating grabbing another piece when the rumble of a motorcycle popped through the air.

Betty wiped her face with a napkin and grabbed her things in a hurry. “My ride’s here! See you later everyone! Love you!”

She glanced quickly at the mirror by the door, saw that everything was in place and no crumbs littered her face and shirt, and left before any of them could ask any questions.

Alice, however, was not so easy to shake off.

Betty smiled shyly at Jughead even as the adrenaline of rushing away from her mother overcame her. “Good morning, Jughead! Thanks for picking me up!”

“H-Hey,” Jughead said, flipping his visor up to greet her with his devastating smirk and probably a bit taken aback by her extra-chipper greeting. “Um, I was hoping we--”

“We have to go,” Betty said, her smile plastered on her face. She was by Jughead’s side by the time Alice stepped over the threshold. Hurriedly, Betty slipped on the helmet that Jughead gave her. This one looked more her size.

“Okay,” Jughead said, mystified. “Why are we hurrying, again?”

She secured her backpack and swung her legs over the bike.

“Elizabeth Cooper!” Alice yelled from the door. “Is that thing safe?”

“Safe as can be, mom!” she cried back. She pressed as close to Jughead as she can to whisper. “Go, go!”

“You’re running away from your mother.”

“No! Go, now!”

He chuckled, but to Betty’s surprise, he waved at Alice. “Don’t worry, Mrs. Cooper! I’m a safe driver!” With that, he flipped his visor down and took off.

Betty grinned, holding tight and brushing off the sight of Archie’s face staring out of the window next door.

*************

Betty valiantly ignored Cheryl’s sneer as she walked through the school doors with Jughead.

Cheryl’s poisonous glare was so potent that she actually felt Cheryl throwing a charm at her. It was nothing debilitating, but she felt the rush of it go past her hair, swishing her ponytail. It was probably a poorly aimed cast.

Betty glared back. She’ll show Cheryl how it’s done. She dug her nails into her palm and threw the same charm right back, but hers was more accurately aimed. A not-so-gentle tug dragged Cheryl’s hair.

Cheryl yelped and then proceeded to have to explain to her friends what was wrong. Betty wasn’t afraid of Cheryl. She was Wicked. Not a lot of people could scare her.
Betty took no joy in this powerplay, but if Cheryl was going to be petty, Betty had to establish boundaries.

“Stop it,” said a voice behind her. It was a soft timbre, but it was firm. Probably even deadly.

Betty stopped in her tracks, startled. She turned and realized that it was Jason and he was glowering, invading her personal space. His anger was clear, but so was the respect—more than what Cheryl ever showed her.

Jughead stepped forward, almost enough to get between her and Jason. “Little space, Blossom?”

Betty found herself gripping Jughead’s arm to get his attention. Her eyes conveying that she could handle this. She turned her attention back to Jason, scowling. “At the risk of sounding like a six-year-old—she started it. I can’t let her push me around, Jason.”

“She can make your life miserable.”

She scoffed. There wasn’t a thing Cheryl could do to make her life worse. “She doesn’t scare me.”

“She should. You don’t mess around with Cheryl and get away with it,” Jason warned, and to his credit, Betty thought he actually sounded sincere.

“Leave her alone, Jason,” Jughead said, scowling. “I know it’s weird to you when someone doesn’t piss themselves at the mention of Cheryl, but grow a pair and get over it.”


Betty was too surprised to reply, and by the time she had processed it, Jason had stalked off towards his sister, probably reporting what just transpired.

“What did he mean by that?” she asked Jughead.

Jughead sighed as people started rushing to their classrooms. “You have study period?”

She nodded.

“I’ll tell you then. I’ll see you later, okay?”

She waved as he took off down the hall quickly. She hurried to her classroom as well, wondering what Jughead could possibly know about it.

*******

Honestly, he shouldn’t care whether Betty found out about him, one way or another. The fact is, he was a little surprised nobody had told her yet, considering the Coopers appeared to be connected on some level to the Blossoms, or the Spellmans, even. Sabrina had promised not to, but nobody was stopping Hilda or Zelda.

Then again, they didn’t know him and Betty were talking.

Ultimately, it was better if everyone knew who everyone was.

Overall, it was standard procedure for slayers. Without any overt indication that someone was an Otherworlder, everyone knew that a slayer couldn’t just outright ask someone what they were without causing suspicion, or worse, a commotion.
Jughead shouldn’t have to explain himself and that he felt he had to was disconcerting. He certainly didn’t hate witches for being witches, but he’d been raised with a certain sense of entitlement, that as a slayer, Otherworlders should expect him to do his job and not take it personally if they happened to be the subject of his investigation. Over the course of his young life, he’d done what he had to do in his assigned turf. He’d befriend new kids and determine what they were. When classified, Jughead told them who he was and that he’d be watching them.

As a child, his scope was confined to his school. As he grew older and he had access to more places, he was assigned the town of Riverdale.

Jughead had a network of resources, collecting friends who can help him do his job, while leading a team of Slayers—Toni, Sweet Pea, and Joaquin, his three most trusted among a larger group—who backed him up when necessary.

He knew how to do his job and he did it well enough that his father never questioned how he ran things in Riverdale. While his dad didn’t quite agree with the full-disclosure method, it seemed to be working, and that was good enough for FP.

Jughead was going to tell Betty everything at study period. It was a good time, too, as things seem to be heating up between Cheryl and Betty.

He was hoping Betty would understand.

Wherever she came from, things were run differently in Riverdale and he had always been assured a certain degree of authority.

That he didn’t feel that sense of authority with Betty was something completely unfamiliar.

Maybe he shouldn’t have taken up her texts last night?

But it was Tarantino.

Of course, he probably shouldn’t have given her his phone number in the first place. He didn’t know what possessed him, but seeing that split-second look in her eyes, like she was lost and hanging by a thread, he couldn’t help but reach out. They’d all had those moments of total vulnerability.

That, or he realized that her two choices of going to school was Cheryl and Archie, and that she chose her brother, which made him realize that she wasn’t thrilled by the idea of Archie at all, compounded by what Veronica said last night...

Shit.

He sighed, shutting his locker.

When he turned to go to study hall, he gasped when he found Betty standing right behind him. “Sunshine! Jesus, you scared me…”

She was not smiling. She looked uncomfortable, and after a moment of staring up at him with her soulful green eyes, she tore her gaze away, looking at her feet. “Is it true?”

He arched an eyebrow. “Is what true?”

“That you’re a slayer? And that you only befriended me because you needed to find out if I was a witch?”
His jaw dropped. He hadn’t expected this, that she would come right at him and demand answers. He looked up briefly and saw Cheryl lingering at her locker, her minions on either side of her. She was smirking triumphantly, for outing him, or perhaps something else entirely, he couldn’t tell.

He pursed his lips, shooting Cheryl a glare before taking a deep breath and looking back at Betty. “Y-Yeah. I mean, that I’m a slayer, and that I needed to find out if you were a witch--”

“You could’ve asked me that,” she said, quietly.

_Didn’t need to._

“You know I couldn’t,” he replied, finding that lying to her even more was beginning to leave a bitter taste in his mouth. “What if you weren’t? You would’ve thought I was--”

“You knew,” she interrupted, her voice gone of that easy lilt she’d had with him. “You saw--you watched me cast spells yesterday at class.”

She was speaking in a tone that was devoid of anger, but it was filled with tired resignation. Disappointment. He might have preferred her witchy rage.

He swallowed. “I still had to find out--”

“I thought you liked me,” she said, her cheeks blooming red. “I was so stupid.”

Something thunked in his stomach, weighing him down. “Betty, you’re not--”

She shook her head and stepped back, perhaps because his hand had come up to touch her shoulder. “It’s okay. I’m just--I thought we could be friends, but I should’ve known. I’m so, so stupid.”

The papers on the nearby bulletin board tore themselves from the pins holding them, exploding in a shower of sheets and stray thumbtacks. There were screams of surprise from passing students, then curses as the papers swirled in the air for a few seconds before floating down to the floor.

Something in his chest twisted. “Look, Betty, I was just doing my job--”

“Right. Of course,” she nodded vigorously, biting her lip. “That’s what I figured. And Kevin and Veronica? I’m only asking because I need to figure out if--you know what? That was a stupid question. Of course they were helping you.”

She’d called herself stupid three times now and he found that he was hating himself at that very moment.

“Did you send Archie to get me at the bleachers?”

“No,” he said, emphatically. “That was all him.”

The moment he said it, he wanted to take it back, or not take it back, but perhaps tell her that Archie would _always_ talk to a pretty girl who was alone. Then again, that would just make it sound like Archie didn’t think her anywhere near special.

“The irony…” she muttered. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I guess--I guess that’s it, then. You know what I am, I assume. And I--you don’t have to worry about me, Jughead. I won’t--I’ll try not to cause you any trouble.” She turned to leave.

“Betty--”
“It’s alright,” she said, jerking away from his touch. “I get it. It’s what you do. I’m not mad, I’m just--
-I feel foolish.” She might have tried to stretch her lips for a smile, but she never quite got the lift she seemed to be aiming for.

“I was,” he started, awkwardly. “I was going to tell you at study period.”

Her face turned even redder. “That might have been even more humiliating. God.”

“Listen, Sunshine--”

“Don’t call me that!” she hissed, shooting a glare at him.

His words died on his lips and the brief anger in her gaze melted into dejection.

“I’ll see you around, Jughead,” she whispered, turning around and walking away. He watched her go, and as he did, he told himself this was just par for the course, that he’d done his duty, and that things went exactly as expected.

He kept telling himself that, hoping that the weird feeling in the pit of his stomach, possibly regret and guilt, would eventually go away.

Chapter End Notes

Don’t hate me, okay?
Slayer’s Burden

Chapter Notes

A couple of things:
1. I’d like to direct you all to this amazing work by aunt-imogene, a beautiful gif set in the theme of Wicked. I can’t tell you how much it inspired me to finish this next chapter.
2. You may notice that Reggie is my go-to douchebag.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“If you really want to upset a witch, do her a favor which she has no means of repaying. The unfulfilled obligation will nag at her like a hangnail.”

— Terry Pratchett, Lords and Ladies

Betty had been fighting tears since she uttered the question, “Is it true?” and she saw his eyes flicker with doubt.

She didn’t know what she had expected. Perhaps she had hoped for a wave of confusion, a semblance of innocence, something that would indicate that Jughead Jones had known absolutely nothing about her, confirming that Cheryl had been lying when she said, “You do know that Jughead Jones is a slayer, don’t you? He’s the slayer of Riverdale. He probably already knows you’re a witch. He’d been scoping you out since yesterday, no doubt working things out with his minions, Veronica and Kevin. They’re Seer and half-Fey, respectively, by the way. They probably know what you are, too.”

Perhaps it was her desperate need for normalcy that made her think it was even possible that Cheryl was wrong. Maybe it was the look she thought she saw in Jughead’s eyes when he seemed curious, interested, friendly, and… More.

She blinked back the growing heat of tears, again, wishing she hadn’t been so trusting--so fucking naive. It was true what she told him. She felt foolish.

It was mostly her fault, perhaps. She had allowed herself to think that he liked her. Maybe if she had kept her head, never entertaining the idea of her attraction to him, she might have taken the news of his deceit with less hurt feelings.

It’s only been a day, she scolded herself.

It amazed her what 24 hours can do to her. Swallowing the lump in her throat, she dug into her purse for Chic’s Milk Thistle potion, found it, and quickly dove into the nearest girls’ bathroom. She sped past the gossiping girls and found a stall, shutting herself in and sitting carelessly on the covered rim.
Taking deep, calming breaths, she uncapped the vial and drank it down. It tasted faintly like vanilla strawberry cream, her heart swelling the tiniest bit for her brother’s love. He knew she liked vanilla strawberry milkshakes. That he would even bother to flavor his potion to her liking was the extra mile he so often went for her.

She looked forward to the soothing effects of the milk thistle. At the very least, it would get her through the day without her emotions getting the better of her.

She sat in that bathroom stall until all the voices outside faded. She stayed there until the bell rang. She could stay there for as long as she wanted and no one would come looking for her. Study period was a free hour for students, in general. She wouldn’t be missed in the least.

Elbows to her knees, she combed her fingers through her hair and sat there, trying to press calm through her scalp.

*How could he have been acting?*

The question came unbidden in her mind and she hated herself for it.

Jughead Jones was the slayer of Riverdale. He had probably been doing this schtick for years. He was good at that sort of thing, but could he really be that cruel? Would he lead on a new student, knowing she was a little lost, and let her think he liked her, just so he could figure out if she was a witch?

The gentle flirting, the well-aimed smirks, and that *nickname*. Was he so good at pretending that he just knew a sucker when he saw one?

She felt her face burn at how she had reacted to him, how she had flirted back, how she had kissed him and texted him, and *oh God*, he must have thought she was putty in his hands.

It was humiliating.

And Veronica and Kevin… were they just giggling to themselves? Laughing at her? Thinking about how stupid the new girl was falling for Jughead’s charms? Was it even true when he said he and Veronica weren’t dating? For all she knew, they were, and he had only said that to--

She took a deep breath. There was no use trying to dissect whether anything he said had been true. Their entire interaction had been based on deceit. Even if he had told her *some* truths, he had done so for his own gain.

*That--that jerk!* she thought, teeth grit.

She supposed she could just fall back on anger. Let that fuel her for the rest of the week so she could get through it in one piece. The fact that she could go full-on Carrie on them all should probably make her feel better.

She tried to channel that Cheryl Blossom arrogance. That certainty that she was Betty Fucking Cooper, Blossom and Spellman by blood, Wicked by nature, and the witch that witch parents told their witch children to scare them into behaving.

She breathed, trying to work herself into a raging lather.

But two minutes later, she was nowhere near as furious as she should be and all she could think of
was the time when she was five and a dog bit her hand, and her only thought had been how the dog had to be put to sleep because she couldn’t keep her goddamn hands to herself.

Halfway through the hour, she finally pushed herself out of the bathroom stall and out of the bathroom, wondering how in hell she would survive lunch period. She might have to hide out in the bleachers again.

Unless Archie finds her….

God, she thought forlornly, wondering if perhaps Archie was the only one in this school who actually wanted to befriend her.

She sighed and shook her head. Archie was Jughead’s friend, too. Maybe he was a werewolf or something. Who knew? Archie could be anything.

When the bell rang, she ducked through the quickly crowding halls, frantically making her way to the bleachers out at the football field.

She only realized when she was settled in her spot that her lunch was still in her locker.

She wasn’t hungry, anyway.

So she sat by herself, fighting back tears of frustration and defeat. This was going to be a long school year.

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For the next few days, Betty spoke to no one but her teachers and refused to make eye contact with anybody. Cheryl, probably giving up on her, threw her furious glances from a distance but didn’t approach her.

Archie, much to her frustration, kept trying to talk to her when he passed her in the halls. Once he even caught her on her way out the door of her house, offering to walk to her to school. She managed to talk her way out of it, telling him her brother was taking her just as Chic was heading out for work, knowing nothing about this plan of hers.

Chic took her to school, of course, a little confused, but never fussed for his little sister.

“You avoiding the boy next door?” Chic had asked, amused.

She didn’t smile. “Something like that.”

Several times, she felt Jughead’s eyes watching her, but she avoided him, cursing herself for undoubtedly looking panicked each time. One time, she might have heard him call her name, but she ran away, her humiliation still too raw.

For lunch, she had found an empty room, locked at first, but nothing she couldn’t handle. It was an old office, everything inside it covered in a thin layer of dust. A quick inspection of the room told her that this might have been where the defunct school paper used to be run, and it was called the Blue & Gold.

She might have liked to revive it, were she in a better emotional state, but right now, she was a
The only thing she was glad about was the fact that it was Friday. The end of the week. That meant in the next couple of days, she didn’t have to be walking down the halls of Riverdale High, avoiding everyone who had, so far, made her life even more miserable. She never thought that was possible, but here she was.

She would be meeting Sabrina later at Pop’s Chock’lit Shoppe and she hated how that dinner date, which had brought her so much joy at the beginning of the week, was now a fresh hell. She was afraid that it was going to turn out just as badly as her first week in school, because why not?

She looked at the tomato basil and mozzarella sandwich in her hand and realized that her fingers had sunk deep into the bread.

She sighed. The low fat cheese tasted like shit, anyway.

When the bell signalled the end of lunch, she gathered her things and headed straight for her locker. She kept her eyes firmly focused on her lock, keeping as little eye contact with anyone for as much as she can manage, so it was a little disconcerting when in her peripheral vision, she could feel someone standing expectantly beside her.

She was mystified to find two guys in a letterman jacket grinning at her from where they stood.

“Hey there, blondie,” said the guy with the dark hair and Euro-Asian features. He was tall, and broad shouldered. Probably in the football team. “You’re Betty Cooper, aren’t you?”

She didn’t reply, only stared at him, brows furrowed in mild disbelief.

“I’m Reggie Mantle,” the guy said, his shoulder pressed against the locker beside hers. “And this is Trev Brown.”

The guy standing behind him, tall, dark-skinned, with a pleasant face, waved. He had a kind smile and he seemed shy, unable to completely look her in the eyes.

“I haven’t seen you around since that first day at the cafeteria,” Reggie continued, leaning in that way that made Betty uncomfortable.

She leaned away. “Yes, well, the cafeteria’s a little too noisy for me.”

Reggie nodded, his eyes looking her up and down. “Yeah, it is. I can bring you someplace quieter, if you like. Just you and me. What do you think?”

She wondered if this was Reggie Mantle’s version of asking her out on a date, because it was really unbelievable. “I think the universe must be playing a joke on me,” she muttered, slamming her locker shut and walking away.

“What?” Reggie laughed, undeterred. “Too much? You’d want to give the Mantle a try, believe me. You won’t regret it.”

She hurried away. She would never go out with a guy who called himself The Mantle.

“Nice job, douchebag,” she heard Trev say. “When has that ever worked for you?”

At least one of them had a clue.

Reggie, incredibly, went after her. “Listen, Cooper. You looked lonely. I just want to show you a
good time!”

People were looking at them now and Betty had never felt so horrifically mortified.

“I’m not interested!” she hissed, desperately, as Reggie began to get into her personal space. She clenched her fist, feeling that pain spreading from her palms. She turned on Reggie, the heat from her glare radiating from her eyes. A little shove ought to deter him, maybe a little magic pinch on his larynx to take his breath away for a few seconds--these athlete types always freaked out at the slightest sign of physical incapacity, any indication that their bodies would fail them, but then there was suddenly a body between her and Reggie, leather clad and about as tall as he was.

“Back off, Mantle,” Jughead said. “Or I promise you, you’re going to regret it.”

“Oh, ho!” Reggie cried, laughing loudly. “Look at this weirdo cock-blocking me!”

For a moment, Betty felt a flutter in her stomach at seeing that beanie-clad head, standing between her and her harasser.

“It’s for your own good, man,” Jughead warned.

It was then that Betty realized that Jughead wasn’t protecting her, he was protecting Reggie. The flutter died and her shoulders sagged.

“C-Come on, dude,” Trev said, grabbing Reggie’s arm as he eyed Jughead warily--with real fear. “Let it go.”

“For this dude?” Reggie said. “Hell, no.” He made to shove Jughead aside, but the moment he laid a hand on Jughead, the slayer had the football player by the arm, twisting it to Reggie’s back and slamming him face-first against the lockers.

“What the fuck!” Reggie cried in surprise.

“G-Go easy on him, man,” Trev told Jughead in a placating voice. “He’s just Lost.”

Lost.

Betty looked right at Trev, scrutinizing his features. She looked into his eyes and watched his teeth. She saw the rings around his brown pupils, saw the slight prominence of his k-9s. She pursed her lips.

Werewolf.

Jughead shot him a glare and Trev backed away.

With Trev giving him space, Jughead leaned over so he can speak into Reggie’s ear.

“Leave her alone, or I will make sure that you’re on the injured list for your next game. You hear me, Mantle?”

“Fu--”

Jughead slammed him against the lockers again.

“Jesus, alright!” Reggie cried, grunting, no doubt, against the strength that Jughead naturally possessed, being the slayer he was. “Goddamn, dude! Why’d you never try out for the football team? We could use a guy like you.”
Jughead let him go roughly, pushing him away and sending him stumbling across the floor.

“Keep a leash on him,” Jughead told Trev.

Trev scowled. “That’s not funny.”

“Not meant to be,” Jughead replied.

Trev grabbed Reggie by the collar of his letterman jacket and dragged him away, scolding him for being a total idiot.

Betty, who had stood transfixed on the spot, finally let go of the breath she was holding. She could feel her own blood on her palm, so she shoved her hand into the pocket of her jeans.

Jughead finally looked at her, and she could swear there was concern in his eyes. “You good?”

His words shook her back to her senses. His question was open to so much interpretation. He could be asking if she was okay, but he could also be asking if she had things under control. She wondered if he was so attuned to witch behavior that he knew that Reggie had been in trouble.

“I’m good, Jughead,” she replied, mimicking his words, just to be on the safe side. “Thanks.” She turned to go.

“Betty,” he said, after her.

She pretended not to hear him and she kept walking. She heard him sigh dejectedly, and for a moment, she considered turning around, just to see how he looked, to see if there was any kind of regret or guilt, but then she told herself that she was making the same mistake again, of trusting that people won’t hurt her.

They could. They have. So she kept walking, hoping that she could avoid him the rest of the day.

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“I saw your feeble attempt at saving the damsel in distress,” Kevin told him in a tone dripping with so much sarcasm that Jughead could have choked on it. “Nice job there, Winchester.”

Jughead shot him a withering look. They were at gym class, sitting it out like they always did, having gotten Ethel to issue them excuse slips. “You know, those Winchesters never actually successfully saved any damsels. They all ended up fridged.”

“My point exactly,” Kevin replied. “The only damsel you managed to save was Reggie.”

“He was kind of a little bitch, wasn’t he?” Jughead said with a chuckle.

Kevin shook his head in deep disapproval.

Jughead rolled his eyes. “Look, I tried talking to her and she just didn’t want to, okay?”

“Well, of course she didn’t want to talk to you!” Kevin hissed. “You started off pretty good, I’ll give you that, then you went all ‘It’s for your own good!’ as if he needed protecting—”

Jughead sighed. “He did! Betty could level his ass if I let her.”

“And then you ask her ‘You good?’ like a fucking GI Joe. Where’s the compassion? The drama? All our lives, you were always the emo, dramatic one, then one look at Betty and some kind of macho
gene in you takes over.”

“I am many things but I am not macho.”

“Please,” Kevin sneered. “Two seconds before that, you were all like, ‘Reggie’s fucking leaning,’ and ‘Hold my drink, Imma whoop his ass.’”

Jughead scowled. “I did not say that last part.”

“Okay, you didn’t, but your eyes said it and you smelled like testosterone.”

“Ew.”

“You wanted to protect her and you reacted, and all you needed to do was ask her if she was alright. That scene in the hallway could’ve turned out differently.”

“Look,” Jughead said tiredly. “If she doesn’t want to speak to me again, I don’t blame her. She’s completely within her rights to decide to ignore me forever.”

“How hard is it to apologize?”

“I don’t have to apologize.”

“Of course you do! Because you like her, and she liked you before Cheryl Blossom messed everything up. You gotta take back control of the narrative, my friend.”

Jughead leaned back on the bleachers, watching their classmates on the gym floor playing dodgeball like the ruthless barracudas they were. “Kev, your Fey is showing. Seriously. Do I have to remind you that we don’t all have to be paired off?”

“It’s my nature, Jug. I can’t help it, but honestly, I’d have dropped this days ago if I didn’t know you liked her.”

Jughead frowned but couldn’t quite deny it. “Yeah, well…”

“I hate to say this, but take a page from Andrew’s playbook. That boy has been trying to walk her to school all week this week. Like a cute little puppy. I’m surprised she hasn’t given in.”

Jughead’s frown deepened so much it hurt his face. “Yeah, have you noticed that Archie’s been acting a little weird lately?”

“One could only hope,” Kevin huffed.

“I’m serious, Kev. He’s been quiet, lately, and not in the usual ‘I can’t keep up with the smart convo’ kind of way.”

“Or the ‘I’m thinking of sappy lyrics’ kind of reverie?”

Jughead and Kevin stifled their laughter, heads together like two kids at church.

“Stop,” Jughead said. “You’re being mean.”

“Shut up, you’re being mean.”

“Are you two homos ever going to be off the injured list?” Veronica asked as she left her spot at the dodgeball game to join them on the bleachers.
Jughead shook his head. “Not while Ethel’s giving us those passes, we ain’t.” He held his hand out to the side for Kevin, who, on cue, slapped it, skimmed it, and bumped fists with it.

“Gym is for losers,” Kevin added for effect.

“Yeah, losers,” Jughead agreed.

Veronica rolled her eyes. “I saw you both giggling. What mischief are you up to this time and why am I not in on it?”

Kevin shrugged. “No mischief. Jug surmises that Archie’s been acting weird lately.”

Veronica arched an eyebrow. “So it finally happened. He’s gotten possessed by a low level demon, hasn’t he?”

“Or it could be a high-level demon who cleverly seeks to use Archie’s usual blank stare to his advantage,” Kevin pointed out.

It was Veronica and Kevin’s turn to giggle, and Jughead shot them a chastising look as if he weren’t making fun of Archie five seconds ago.

“Guys, please. Just do me a favor and keep an eye on him, tell me what you think. I can’t have that kind of shit happening around here. This is my house.”

“My house, indeed,” Kevin grumbled. “You Slayers are just the jocks of the supernatural world.”

“I resent the implication that I am like these letterman wearing assholes.”

Kevin gave him a deadpan look. “Hate to break it to you, honey, but that snake on the back of your jacket is shaped like an S.”

Jughead glared at him. “That is totally different.”

“Totally not.”

“Face it, Jug,” Veronica said, taking a seat on the bleachers. “You enjoy this power you have over everyone just like any jock on the football team has power in this school. You can be every bit the asshole you think they are. Which reminds me, have you apologized to Betty yet?”

He groaned, throwing his head back in frustration. “All of you just please SHUT THE FUCK UP.”

“That poor girl thinks we all played her, no thanks to you, Forsythe. I don’t know about you, but I’m not comfortable with a witch thinking I played a part in your deception. You may be invulnerable to her magic, but the rest of us aren’t. If you won’t talk to her, I will, you goddamn coward.”

Jughead’s jaw dropped. “Coward!”

“Ding, ding, ding!” Kevin chimed.

“Lodge! What are you doing over there, breaking with those underachievers?” Coach Clayton cried from the gym floor.

“Be right there, coach!” Veronica called back sweetly, before turning back to Jughead. “Flowers go a long way, Jughead. Take it from me.” She skipped down the bleachers with amazing agility.

“I’m not a coward!” Jughead cried after her.
Kevin scoffed. “Werewolves, demons, and witches may not scare you Jones, but Betty Cooper scares the shit out of you.”

“You’re fucking enjoying all this.”

Kevin gave him a beatific smile. “Damn straight.”

Between Jughead and Kevin were a set of Magic cards that Kevin was enthusiastically distributing.

From the distance came the sound of able-bodied young men growling and grunting as they clashed their pads together aggressively. On the other side of the field were the Vixens, their athletic dances and spirited gymnastics peppering the air with vibrant exclamations and cheers.

The contrast between what was happening on the field and what was happening on the bleachers was stark and embarrassing.

“Kevin,” Jughead began. “I know I’m not exactly Mr. Personality, hanging out on the bleachers in a leather gang jacket while our friends live their best lives as football captains and cheerleaders, but really dude, *Magic: The Gathering*? If anyone finds out about this, we will never get laid again.”

“Oh, shush. You geek with me, I emo with you. We have an arrangement.”

Jughead sighed and picked up his cards.

“This is a game of strategy,” Kevin explains. “You pick what spells and creatures will work to your best advantage and your opponent, me, will do the same thing, and then we will battle.”

“God, I know. You’re such a fucking dork.”

“And you’re a goddamn thug. Now play the game.”

This was not the first time that Jughead had to play Magic cards with Kevin. Kevin had, for the better part of their youth, been collecting and forcing Jughead to play these card games with him, which Jughead had hoped Kevin would outgrow at around 16. At 18 it just seemed the obsession had gotten worse.

Some part of Jughead knew that it was the Fey in Kevin, the need to strategize and manipulate to make things happen, but because Kevin was half human, he didn’t translate that need into wreaking havoc in the lives of real people, at least not to catastrophic levels. Kevin tended to meddle in teenage gossip, high school romances, and the occasional political intrigue. For the most part, Kevin could direct his worse Fey impulse to a game that made him the geekiest Fey dude in Riverdale, and by default, Jughead as well.

Thirty minutes into the game, Veronica approached them, looking distastefully at the row of cards arranged between them.

“Don’t start,” Jughead warned her.

She gave him side-eye but didn’t say anything about the cards. “So Cheryl tells me that Betty’s meeting Sabrina at Pop’s later. I’m going over there to talk to her. Wanna come with, Jug?”

Jughead’s stomach tightened into knots. “I have rounds to do tonight, remember? I do it every Friday.”
“Fine, you’re excused, though I’m half certain you’re glad you had a real one.”

Archie started to climb the bleachers as well. “Hey, guys. What are you doing?”

“We’re swearing off sex,” Jughead said, laying down an attack.

Kevin scowled at him. “We are exercising our killer instincts, Arch. It will serve us well when it comes time for us to take up our corporate jobs.”

“Cool. Listen, did I hear Ronnie say you were going to Pop’s tonight?”

“Just me,” Veronica said. “Jug has some stuff to do for their family business and Kevin’s… doing this. Whatever this is. Anyway, I’m going to Pop’s to see Betty.”

“Betty?” Archie said, his eyes coming alive with interest. “Can I come with?”

“I’m afraid it’s just us girls, Archiekins. Maybe next time?”

“Oh,” he said, deflating a little, then his eyes lit up again. “Hey, you think she’ll need a ride home?”

“I have no idea, sweetie. I’m not staying there long, but I think she’s going to be there with her cousin, so I don’t know how late she’ll be.”

“That’s okay. I’ll probably just wait for her in the parking lot.”

Jughead’s eyebrow arched. So did Kevin’s.

“Are you serious?” Veronica asked.

Archie shrugged. “I got nothing else better to do. So long as you’re sure she’ll be there.”

“She’ll be there,” Veronica replied.

“Great!” Archie chirped, heading back down the bleachers. “If I don’t catch you all later, maybe we can plan something for tomorrow!”

“He’s joking, right?” Kevin said. “About waiting for Betty at the parking lot?”

“Yeah, he has to be,” Veronica replied.

Jughead’s brows furrowed, watching Archie in the distance rejoin his football team.

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Betty looked up again when Pop’s door gave a chime. It was ten minutes before Sabrina was supposed to meet up with her, and while Betty had no reason to assume that Sabrina would be ten minutes early, she hoped that some of that Spellman obsessiveness was not an exclusively Alice trait.

She was nervous about her first meeting with Sabrina, hoping that her bad luck all week wouldn’t extend outside of Riverdale High.

As far as meeting places went, Pop’s was actually quite nice. It’s 1950s vibe fit right with the town’s overall aesthetic, but the owner, Pop’s himself, was such a sweet, welcoming guy that Betty almost believed that Pop’s got to Riverdale first and the entire town built itself around it, because in Pop’s, that small town, old timey feel felt authentic, for some reason. Like Pop’s was the place where it all began.
The bell rung again and Betty looked up hopefully. Her hopes were shattered when she saw Veronica Lodge walk through the door, and her heart sank when Veronica looked around, spotted her, and began to head her way.

God, she thought, lowering her gaze to the phone in her hands. She resisted the urge to type Where the hell are you? to Sabrina. She prayed that Veronica was actually going to someone else, but when she saw those Christian Louboutin shoes standing at the edge of her peripheral vision, she knew that Veronica was there to see her.

She looked up reluctantly at Veronica’s smiling face.

“Hi, Betty! May I sit?” Veronica asked.

“I’m actually waiting for someone,” Betty said, firmly. “My cousin--”

“Sabrina? Oh, I’m good friends with her. I’m sure she won’t mind.” Veronica slid into the booth across from her before Betty could say anything else. “Have you taken a look at the menu? This place is great!”

She wanted Veronica to go away. “Actually, Veronica, I’d really rather--”

Veronica sighed, looking Betty straight in the eye. “Listen, I know you’ve been avoiding us at school.”

Betty could feel the hot flush of humiliation creeping up her face. Of all the things worse than being played was someone noticing that she was hiding because of it. “God, could this get any worse?”

Veronica put up a hand to placate her. “I don’t blame you. I get it. First day of school is tough enough, and when you think someone’s thrown you a lifeline, you cling to it for dear life, then you find out that the boat’s possibly full of jerks and assholes and you wonder if drowning isn’t the better option.”

Betty pursed her lips. “Is that your way of admitting that you’re one of those jerks and assholes?”

Veronica smirked. “I said possibly. I’m not one of those. I really wanted to be your friend, Betty.”

“Forgive me if I don’t believe you.”

“Jughead did it to me, too, you know.”

Somehow, that stung worse. “He pretended to like you so he can figure out if you were a witch?”

Veronica’s eyebrow arched and her smirk never left her lips. “He never pretended to like me. He just befriended me, told me I can join him and Kevin at the lunch room, and that was pretty much that. He asked me a couple of questions, and then when he probably figured out I was a Seer, he told me what he was and that if I still wanted to hang out with them, I was welcome. I thought they were cool so I kept hanging out… so, you think he likes you?”

Betty frowned. “Thought. Past tense. He laid it on pretty thick, Veronica. And then I find out… I mean, who does that in real life? I’m surprised he’s not in cahoots with Cheryl, the quintessential mean girl who makes a bet with the school heartthrob that he couldn’t get the dopey new girl to fall for him.”

“You think Jughead’s a heartthrob?”
This was just all sorts of mortifying. “That’s not the point!”

“Jughead may actually resent you for that, you know. He likes to think he’s the town oddball. You know, the weirdo who lurks around the corner because he sees everyone but nobody sees him.”

“Is he? The lurker?”

Veronica scoffed. “To the Lost, maybe. He tends to hang around Archie so that the Lost gets distracted by Archie’s ginger charms, but everyone in the Otherworld knows him.”

“Right. Of course. I assume that means he does this ‘investigation’ thing for everyone.”

“Everyone goes through Jughead Jones. Whomever you may be, whatever you may be, Jughead will need to know who you are. That’s how he keeps everyone safe. At night, when he isn’t doing his job at the library, he does his rounds around town, making sure trouble isn’t brewing in Riverdale and sometimes over at Greendale. When Otherworlders get cursed, attacked, robbed, mugged, or have gone missing, they don’t call the cops, they call Jughead.”

Betty arched an eyebrow. “Does he have his own bat signal?”

Veronica actually laughed. “Wow, you two are perfect for each other.”

Betty shifted uneasily on her seat.

Perhaps satisfied that she’d made Betty slightly uncomfortable, Veronica went on. “I think everyone has him on speed dial, in lieu of the bat signal, of course.”

The bell chimed and Betty looked up to see Sabrina walk through the door.

Veronica looked over her shoulder briefly. “I guess I have to go, but I just wanted you to know that I’d really like it if you hang out with us. I love Kev and Jughead, but I am in desperate need of a gal pal—balance out that whole bromance that Kev and Jug have going. Think about it?”

Betty liked Veronica, and she had to admit that having Veronica reach out to her separately, telling her she wanted to be friends, did make her feel slightly better. Still, it did not completely take away her distrust. “Maybe. I can’t promise you anything, Veronica.”

Veronica handed her a card as she slid out of the booth. “Totally fine. No pressure, but here’s my number. If you want to text, about anything, please do so. I promise you that I won’t tell Jughead if you don’t want me to.”

Betty threw her a lopsided look but took the card anyway.

“Toodles, B! Hiya, Sab! Just came from Sweet Pea’s, didn’t you?”

Sabrina’s mouth dropped open as she watched Veronica walk away, before pursing her lips and saying, “Quit watching my aura, Ronnie!”

Veronica waved over her shoulder without looking before heading out the door.

Betty watched her cousin in mild amusement. Whatever this Sweet Pea business was—a bakery? A Bath & Body Works type store? It was enough to get Sabrina’s full attention.

“Sabrina?” she asked, sliding out of the booth to finally meet her cousin.

The girl with the platinum bob turned to look at her and a broad smile spread across her freckled
Sabrina’s arms enveloped her in a hug and Betty couldn’t help but sink into its warmth. Her cousin smelled like lilacs with a hint of precious herbs. She exuded comfort and ease, and Betty found herself smiling serenely at the loving welcome.

God, she loved Wood Witches.

***************

Betty and Sabrina spent the entire evening at Pop’s sharing a plate of fries, milkshakes, and, because Sabrina was a vegetarian, mushroom burgers. They talked about everything from Betty’s home in Seattle, to Sabrina’s home with her aunts in the Southside.

Sabrina’s parents had been killed in an accident, and Betty somehow felt bonded to her cousin over this shared grief. Although Sabrina has had years to heal, she was sensitive to how raw Betty’s feelings were on the matter.

Betty discovered that Sabrina had a cat named Salem Saberhagen, whom she joked was actually a 500 year old witch who was sentenced to live as a cat for 100 years, and that so far, he’s served about 15 years of it. This made Betty shudder, remembering those frogs in science lab.

She also observed that Sabrina seemed a lot more carefree with her magic, throwing charms rather haphazardly, resulting in often hilarious mishaps.

“Aunt Zelda always insists I practice, and she’s right, but who has the time?”

Betty refrained from saying that she always made time, but that was her choice, and she wasn’t in the business of judging other witches for how they learned their craft.

Besides, as Polly said, everyone else actually had to prepare their charms ahead of time. Betty only needed to use her pain to throw a spell.

They eventually did talk about Jughead Jones, about how Sabrina texted her that evening to tell her that he was a slayer, which led to Betty telling Sabrina about some of what transpired that morning.

“You know him?” Betty asked, cautiously. “I mean, obviously, you do, but how much?”

Sabrina sighed. “Aunt Hilda and Aunt Zelda love him. It’s this whole… you know, thing where the Spellmans always help the Joneses with potions and wards, like for generations, I think, but it really ramped up when Gladys Jones left him and his dad, and took his sister with her. Jughead turned to both my aunts as dual mother figures of some sort— you know, with us being in the neighborhood. They never turn Jughead away when he comes to them for advice or just—you know, cookies and shit, when he and FP, his dad, are banged up, or at Thanksgiving. He and I are friendly enough, but when I see him at the house I never stick around too long, I mean, jeez—it’s Jughead. He’s like the relative I tolerate. And then he has that reputation of being the John Wick of the Otherworld. I mean, I know him and I’m not afraid of him, but ultimately, I’m glad the Spellmans are on his good side.”

Betty found it a bit fascinating how two people saw Jughead in completely different ways. While Veronica saw Jughead as the Otherworld’s dependable ol’ RA, Sabrina seemed to think of him as some skilled assassin baba yaga-type.

Which are you, Jughead Jones?

“Gladys Jones?” she asked, instead.
“His mom.”

“She left him and his father and took his sister?” Betty asked, somewhat horrified. “How old was Jughead when that happened?”

“Ten, I think?”

Betty’s jaw dropped. “Who does that to their kid?”

Sabrina rolled her eyes and made dismissive circles with her hands in the air. “Oh, there are differing opinions. Some think of Gladys as a Grade A Hag, others thought she was only doing what was right.”

Betty didn’t want to fall on judgement, but she couldn’t help it. Whatever Jughead was now, he was only 10 at the time, and the thought that his mother chose to leave him behind when she took his sister—that sounded fucked up. “How can people think that was right at all?”

“Because people have outdated ideas and find that living in fear is easier than putting your faith in love.”

Betty’s brows furrowed. “I’m not following.”

“Betty,” Sabrina said, leaning over the table to lower her voice. “Jughead’s mom and sister--they’re witches.”

*************

Jughead eyed Archie’s bedroom window briefly, seeing his friend’s shadow move against the dim lamplight. Whether Archie saw him or not was beside the point. He wasn’t here to watch Archie’s window on a Saturday night.

When Archie swung his bedroom window shut, Jughead removed his helmet and propped his bike on its stand.

The Cooper house was lit bright and lively, with shadows moving across windows and the occasional clink of pots, pans, or silverware penetrating through one of the open windows. He recognized one of the cars parked on the curb as belonging to the Spellmans. It made sense that the Coopers would have them over for dinner. They were family.

This, of course, was the perfect excuse for him not to bother Betty tonight.

Coward.

He frowned at Veronica’s and Kevin’s voice in his head. Those two. He didn’t know why he listened to them. They probably didn’t even really think that of him. They just said it to mess with him because they thought it was fun.

But regardless, that sort of talk festered. People hear about it. They remembered it, then they exploited it. He didn’t want to have that sort of bullshit floating around--

He sighed, rolling his eyes at his own toxic masculinity. He was here to explain. Possibly to apologize, and it irritated him that he had gone an entire week marinating in these feelings of guilt.

He tried to think back at the times he’d told Trevor, Ethel, Veronica and Josie that he was a slayer, and that he was investigating them. Veronica had eventually become one of his closest friends and
the others, while they didn’t quite become part of his inner circle, had merely gotten mildly annoyed, and maybe they’d thrown a crack or two his way about it, but he’d never felt weird about them after the reveal.

He also never sat in more than one of their classes, talked them up at the library, drove them home, picked them up to go to school, or gave them his number.

*I did this to myself.*

A text broke him out of his reverie.

*I know you’re lurking out there. Man up and ring the doorbell already, ya fucking creeper.*

It was from Sabrina.

*Witches.*

He was sorely tempted to write back and ask what they were summoning in there, just to be a jerk, but he wasn’t keen on going on an entire swath of text exchanges with Sabrina. He and Sabrina had always been uneasy family friends. While her aunts loved him, she had always looked at him like an untrustworthy older cousin, which he always considered an unfounded opinion. He’d never done anything to Sabrina to warrant her mistrust, but he’d chalked it up to the fact that they grew up in different schools, and that her exposure to slayers consisted of all the Serpents who went to Southside High. Those guys were a lot more boisterous in their enforcement than Jughead ever was.

He swung his legs off his bike and walked up the steps of the Cooper home, taking note of the telltale sign of avid gardening. The soil on their front lawn had been stirred and Jughead could see bulbs and nicely placed labels along the earth. Wood Witches never lost time setting up plots of plants. Pretty soon this front lawn would be flourishing. Their backyard, no doubt, would be similar.

As Jughead stood at the front steps, he heard voices filtering through, many of which he recognized, but one voice rang out, however soft its tone and words were. “Would you care for some tea, Aunt Hilda?”

He didn’t know what it was about Betty that made her seem so nonthreatening. Cognitively, he could tell she was a strong witch, but she did things that made him think that all she wanted to be was normal.

This was not a witchy trait in Jughead’s experience and he had no idea whether it was good or bad.

Taking a deep breath, he rang the doorbell.

“I’ll get it,” came the voice of the lone guy in the house.

When the door swung open, Betty’s brother at first looked surprised, then wary. His eyes roved to Jughead’s jacket, then back to his face.

“Who is it, Chic?” It was Betty’s mom who had asked.

Chic’s eyebrow arched, as if expecting him to say something.

“Um, Jughead Jones. I’m, uh--”

“Jughead!” Hilda cried from inside, coming to the door. “Zelda, Jughead’s here! How are you, dear? What brings you to the Coopers? Have you been properly introduced to them?”
“Jughead Jones?” asked Betty’s mom, her expression anything but welcoming. “Jones, as in--”

“FP Jones,” Zelda replied. “Yes, that one. He’s FP’s son.”

Betty’s mom fell quiet, but Hilda was waving him inside. “Come in, why don’t you?”

Jughead found his bearings before he could let the Spellmans bulldoze him into this family gathering. “I just came by to talk to Betty. I won’t be long. Is she--uh, available?”

“She’s right here!” Sabrina chimed, pointing to a wall. He couldn’t see Betty, which was pretty much how she’d been going about interacting with him, avoiding him to the point of invisibility.

There was a fierce whispering that he could barely make out, followed by Sabrina frowning and furiously dragging Betty out in plain sight. Her hair was up in a ponytail, as usual, and she looked a little more pastel and preppy than how she looked at school.

Betty shot him a glare.

He tried to smile, but all he could really do was press his lips together and tilt it to one side. He supposed he felt too apologetic to bust out anything more than that.

“Betty?” her mother asked.

“This won’t take long,” Betty replied, making her way to the door.

Her brother still hadn’t said a thing, and inside, there was another girl, not that much older than Betty, and she was looking at him like she was going to be sick, even if her aura was a very alluring burst of pink and purple.

This was turning out much worse than he thought.

Chic put a hand on Betty’s shoulder. “You okay, Bug?”

Betty nodded. “I’m fine, Chic. Go back inside. I’ll talk to Jughead out here.”

Chic cast him one last wary glance before turning to go back in. Zelda and Hilda waved at him and Sabrina gave him a salute before they all got swallowed back in by the house.

Betty stepped onto the front landing with him. Her arms were crossed in front of her and she wasn’t smiling at all. “What are you doing here?”

Her frosty hello was still jarring to him. He remembered that first day he sat beside her at class. Even though they didn’t know one another, her facial expression had been one of open curiosity. She tried to be aloof, but he supposed she couldn’t help herself. She wasn’t a naturally closed off person. He had found himself responding to that subtle openness, watching her for her cues, and finally speaking to her at the end of history class, then later getting her to sit with him at lab. Even if she remembered being aloof at lunch, she was so much friendlier when they talked in the library, by text, and the next day when he brought her to school.

She was sunshine, hiding behind dark clouds.

This time, however, she was seriously peeved.

Steeling himself against her mostly icy expression, he replied. “I just wanted to talk to you--have been wanting to, but you’ve avoided me in school all week. I figured I’d come to your house.”
Her frown deepened. “Well, I’m here. Say what you have to say.”

He took a deep breath. “I was going to tell you what I was, I swear—”

“I got that, Jughead,” she interrupted in a quiet tone. “Apparently, your status among the Otherworlders isn’t a big secret. And I understand that you had a job to do, but did you really have to—” She stopped, her cheeks blooming red. “Did you have to be so friendly? You absolutely deceived me.”

“It’s not like I follow a script, Betty.” He was feeling slightly frustrated at this need to explain. He never had to, before. “I just—” He put a hand on his head, as if to make sure that his beanie was on securely. “I started talking to you and I just went from there. I mean, it’s not like I told you to come to the library.” He winced inwardly at his own words.

By his own admission, he knew when his investigation had taken a turn in a different direction, a direction that was decidedly not standard procedure.

“Right,” she said. “So this extremely uncomfortable and awkward situation is my fault.”

He sighed. “That’s not what I meant. It was just—we had a conversation and it was easy—”

“To deceive me?”

“To talk to you!” he corrected. His face felt like lava. Probably looked like it, too. “Maybe I shouldn’t have offered to take you home, or given you my number, or answered your texts, but I did. Those things… just happened.”

Her brows were tightly knit, her eyes cast at the ground. “And did you expect me to take it any better if you had been the one to tell me everything?”

He swallowed. “No, but I probably would’ve confessed it better than how Cheryl told you. Witch or not, she’s a grade A--well, you know.”

“Yes. I know.”

He slipped his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “I just wanted to clear the air. Let you know I’m sorry that I made you feel—” He let out another deep breath. This was more difficult than he had anticipated. “Foolish. You’re not. You’re a nice person, Betty, and I don’t want you to think that I faked the whole thing. A lot of it was—” real, “--sincere. And Kevin and Veronica wants you to hang out with us, but I understand if you don’t. Just don’t--don’t take it out on them. Kevin’s my oldest friend and Veronica considers us her best friends, but that doesn’t mean they need to get caught up in the drama pie that I bring to the table.”

“Drama pie?”

“Yeah. The recipe’s a family secret.”

She sighed and her arms dropped to her sides. She wasn’t smiling, but at least her body language suggested that she didn’t hate him as badly as that first day. “I talked to Veronica yesterday and I went over all that with her already. I appreciate you coming over here and explaining your side with candor, so I’m going to return the favor and just say that maybe it’s for the best that you all just keep away from me. It’s probably for your own good, too.”

His disappointment was surprising, even to him. “Betty…”
“You probably don’t know this, Jughead, so I’ll spell it out for you. I’m a Blossom. Cheryl and Jason are my cousins. My dad and their dad were cousins. Our grandparents had a fight, long ago, and my great grandfather changed his name to Cooper. The reason why we’re here is that they’re family and they’ll protect us from… people who want to do us harm. Now maybe you’re just trying to be nice, but I’m guessing that the slayers won’t like it if you hang out with a Blossom witch.”

Jughead didn’t know what to say. His brain was stuck on her saying she was a Blossom. That she and Cheryl Blossom shared a bloodline. Given the Jones’s uneasy history with the Blossoms from centuries back, it should’ve been automatic. He should’ve turned around and left, never looking back, but he stayed glued to his spot, unable to reconcile what he knew of Betty with the vapid, often cruel, and vicious reputation of the Blossom Coven.

When he didn’t say anything for several heartbeats, she looked away and turned to the door. “I figured as--”

“I don’t care if you don’t,” he blurted in a rush.

She paused at the door, stunned. Even he didn’t know what to say after that.

Mercifully, the door swung open from the inside and there stood Zelda, her short blonde hair topping a tall, slender frame. Behind her was Betty’s mom, her beautiful face the more mature version of her daughter’s, except it was sharper, with her piercing green eyes, upturned nose, and tightly pressed lips. He couldn’t see her aura anymore, of course, but he remembered Betty’s mother as a shimmering light blue.

Zelda smiled, primly, but pleasantly. “Oh, good! You’re still here! Alice said we can invite Jughead inside for dinner. Jughead, this is Alice Cooper, my sister.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mrs. Cooper,” Jughead said, automatically. He shook her hand and found that her grip was firm. Almost challenging.

Alice looked him over from head to toe, and Jughead felt like she did not like what she saw. “Likewise, Jughead… I could’ve sworn FP had a son name Forsythe.”

Jughead pursed his lips to keep his grimace at bay. “Yeah, that’s me.”

“Then why do you call yourself Jug-head?”

“Mom,” Betty said, softly admonishing. “That’s not our business.”

“I’m just curious. You Southsiders and your nicknames. Well, come inside. Zelda’s already invited you.” She made it pretty clear that this was not her idea.

Jughead hesitated. “You know, I actually--”

“Oh, please,” Zelda said, taking Jughead by the arm and dragging him across the door’s threshold. She proceeded to take his jacket off and hang it off the coat rack. “When has a Jones ever turned down a hot meal? What do you have at your house right now? Ramen? Leftover pizza from yesterday? We have pork chops in creamy garlic white sauce, spinach tortellini soup, baked herb-potato wedges, fresh bread rolls, and a nice arugula salad on the side. You can’t possibly say no to a Wood Witch-made dinner. And Betty made lava cupcakes and pineapple upside-down cupcakes for dessert.”

Jughead’s mouth was decidedly watering at the descriptions and he could smell the wonderful scents wafting from the kitchen, so it was difficult to say no, but the wary glances of Betty’s sister and
brother were making him uncomfortable. He was about to try begging off again when Hilda, a rounder, cheekier version of her elder sister, sidled up to his other side.

“Jughead! We’ve missed you! You haven’t come by the house in ages.”

“Uh, yeah. I’ve been busy…”

“Hiya, sport,” Sabrina said from the living room sofa. She popped what looked like a few almonds in her mouth from a handful she had. “Dragged you into Tiger country, did they?”

He shot her a withering look.

“Set a place for our guest, Betty,” Alice said, her steps purposeful and pert.

Jughead watched Betty’s face, which was set at a neutral expression. It was a vast improvement from the look of despair and icy dislike from days ago, but it was hard to tell if she was just being polite for the sake of the Spellmans.

Zelda had not left his side. “Jughead, these are Chic and Polly Cooper, Betty’s brother and sister.”

Jughead shook Chic’s hand and waved at Polly awkwardly.

“Jughead, can you come help me in the kitchen?” Betty asked.

Jughead’s relief was overwhelming. She wasn’t leaving him with the elders and she was being kind enough to actually not mind his company.

“Sure thing.” He slipped out of the captive clutches of Zelda and Hilda and followed Betty into what he presumed was the kitchen. It smelled amazing, and everything seemed to be in beautiful pots and pans. The serving bowls were neatly laid out on the counter, just waiting to be filled.

“I’m sorry I got caught,” Jughead said immediately as soon as they were alone. “I tried to get away.”

“It’s fine, Jughead,” Betty muttered, taking a plate and some utensils from proper cupboards and drawers. This kitchen was amazingly organized and beautifully appointed with sculpted borders and muted colors. The island was a slab of quartz in light gray and the pendant lights were an artsy bronze. It was like they had lived in this house for years instead of a week.

“I actually felt sorry for you out there,” she continued, her face conveying the slightest hint of sympathy. “My family is weird and upset--you probably already know that we moved here because my dad died.”

Jughead nodded. “Yeah. I’m sorry to hear it.”

She shrugged, and he got the distinct feeling that she pretended it was nothing mostly for the benefit of others. “It’s actually better out here. Things don’t trigger memories. Left all that behind in Seattle. Of course now, I have to deal with my cousins and their dark powers here in Riverdale.”

Dark powers pretty much described the Blossom coven. They were unapologetically witchy in their business dealings, and while a lot of the spells and witchcraft they lived on would never fly in any Slayer’s handbook, they didn’t trade in their magic here in Riverdale. Whatever they did that made them a shit ton of money, it was outside of their town and therefore outside of Jughead’s jurisdiction. Not that there was an organized network of Slayers all over the country, but it was an unspoken rule that slayers were expected to watch over their own towns or cities. There were slayers that moved around to help, like supernatural consultants, and those that came from out of town because the trail
they were following led to other places, in which case they always had to team up with the local slayer, but it was all very old school.

Jughead had been watching the Blossoms for years. He was just waiting for them to try their shit on his turf. He’d had nothing but petty spells from them, and it didn’t give him much to go on, except to break their curses and get Cheryl or Jason’s rich kid privileges suspended. Penelope was, at least, dependable in that regard of disciplining her kids, and the fact that Cheryl and Jason actually got pissed about it was definitely something Jughead relished.

“Cheryl and Jason are vindictive creeps,” Jughead said, turning to one of the glass cupboards to pull out a bowl. He handed it to Betty. “And you’re a witch. They will bust out their best stuff for you. Watch your back.”

She huffed, stepping closer to him. “I’m not afraid of them.”

Her closeness wasn’t unwelcome and for a moment, he had an urge to go with it. To let her step even closer, but she pulled open a cupboard and said, “The extra glasses are higher up. Can you reach?”

Oh.

He did, handing one to her.

“Thanks,” she said, turning away in what seemed like a self-conscious effort.

“You should be.” He leaned back against the counter. “Afraid of them, I mean. They’ve got the Shining.”

Her eyebrow arched.

He grinned. “Twinsies. They have weirdly stronger magic because they’re creepy twins.”

She actually chuckled at that, but the laughter did not quite reach her eyes. “Yeah, well, they ain’t seen nothing from me, yet.”

And there was that strange dichotomy, of Betty wanting to blend into the background and yet fully confident of what powers she had.

He was tempted to ask her what she can do, but he had to remind himself that was a very slayery thing to ask. She was only just talking to him again. “If they give you any problems, let me know. I’ll take care of them.”

“You don’t seem to be afraid of them.”

He wasn’t afraid of a lot of things in this town. “I’m a slayer. Their spells won’t work on me.”

“Most spells won’t work on you. There are spells that can hurt a slayer, you know.”

He shrugged. “Ink charms protect me. Courtesy of your aunts.”

That eyebrow of hers arched again.

“And a few other witches across different cultures,” he added, belatedly.

Her eyebrow did not lower. She was really good at raising that strip of hair for various purposes—to intimidate, to judge, and, as in this case, to ask questions.
“Are all of your tattoos charmed?”

He smirked. “Most of them. Few of them I just wanted.”

“Wouldn’t you be—I don’t know—wasting real estate? It’s another piece of skin for a charmed tattoo that you won’t be able to use.”

“It’s not like 90% of my body is covered. They’re all mostly spread out, just that a lot of them are concentrated on my upper body. There’s plenty of Jughead to cover.”

“Did you just refer to yourself in the third person?”

He shot her a toothy grin and her only response was a deadpan stare. If he maintained eye contact for a bit longer, he could probably get her to laugh, but Sabrina barged in.

“You talking to him again?” Sabrina asked, propping herself up on a kitchen stool.

“You’re supposed to be taking care of the elders,” Jughead told her, not without a hint of real annoyance.

“This awkwardness of you and my cousin working through your issues is much more interesting,” Sabrina replied. “You all good here?”

“Subtlety is not one of Sabrina’s few virtues,” Jughead remarked for Betty’s benefit.

Sabrina waved his words away. “I have no filter with you because I don’t give a shit about your feelings.”

Betty flashed Sabrina a sweet smile, and it struck Jughead how she had smiled at him just like that when they were friendlier. He felt a small sense of regret that he had thrown that privilege away.

“What were they talking about when you left?” Betty asked.

Sabrina gave a loud sigh. “Oh, where do I begin? Betty this, Betty that, Betty’s going to college at Ivy League, Betty’s put on a few pounds—”

“Sab,” Jughead warned.

The smile was gone from Betty’s face. “Was it mom who said that last part?”

“God, I’m kidding, Betty. Your mom would never…. Oh.”

Betty’s furrowed brows and preoccupied look compelled Jughead to shoot Sabrina a scolding look.

“Nice work, Spellman,” he muttered. “Try not to sprain a wrist prying your foot out of your mouth.”

“At least she’s easing back to normal…” Betty grumbled, taking plates and utensils with her to go to the dining room.

Sabrina gathered the glasses and bowls to follow her. “Oh, don’t listen to your mom. Your ass is perfectly shaped and I would kill to have your boobs.”

Betty shot her side-eye and didn’t seem keen on vocalizing her thoughts on it. She just went about rearranging the dinner table to accommodate Jughead.

Jughead just rolled his eyes. He didn’t say anything, either, because really, all he had to say about
that was that he agreed with Sabrina on the level of how nice her proportions were, which would sound much creepier coming from him.

He managed to avoid getting cornered again when Alice started ordering Betty to put out the food, because then he and Sabrina rushed to help her, and however awkward this invite was, he was glad he got to sit down and eat the delicious food.

Dinner went about as expected, with Chic and Alice directing questions to him about being a slayer. At one point, Polly asked him if he’d killed any witches lately, to which Chic had groaned and said, “For God’s sake, Polly.”

Jughead deferred from saying that it was the question he got the most. He just said, “I haven’t killed a witch, period. I’ve defended myself against a few of them, but only ever handed them off to the Blossoms. I don’t know what they’ve done with most of them, but there are a few that are serving punishment throughout the town. I check on them every Friday to see if their wards are holding. I’m basically their warden. The Blossoms pay me for it.”

“That’s some job,” Polly muttered.

“Jughead also guards the Dark Grimoires at the Riverdale Public Library,” Hilda said, almost proudly. “The Otherworlders pay him for that, too. It’s to keep the Blossoms from getting their mitts on them.”

“That is not the official reason, Hilda.” Zelda cast her a disapproving frown. “No witch should be able to get past those wards. Jughead ensures that at its most vulnerable times, he’s holding down the fort.”

Betty looked thoughtful. “So when you’re there 5:30 to 9 pm…?”

Jughead smirked. “Yeah, well, that’s my actual job at the library, but there are times of the year that I have to stand guard between 12 midnight to 4 am. If dad’s here we alternate…”

Polly’s eyes widened. “Times of the year, like Candlemas and Beltane?”

Jughead nodded. “Beltane, Litha, Hallowmas... Zelda gives me the exact dates, yearly, but yeah, all the Sabbats. And sometimes when a cosmic event happens: Lunar eclipses, blood moons, comets, meteor showers… gotta stay alert.”

The time of the Sabbats, from 12 midnight to 4 in the morning, was when witch and demon magic grew strongest. In turn, it was when witches could collectively weaken any kind of wards erected against them, hence the necessity of a slayer guarding the storage facility.

Alice’s interest seemed piqued. “How long have you been standing guard?”

Jughead looked a bit sheepish. “On my own? Not very long. My dad only just trusted me to guard the Grimoires alone at 16, but I’ve been guarding with him since I was 13. We also alternate with two other existing slayers, Toni and Tall Boy, sometimes, but that’s rare. The wards work better with a Jones--my ancestors put up the wards.”

Alice chuckled. “Tall Boy… my God. Christian Reilly. I suppose I’ll have to pay him a visit, too.”

Hilda shook her head. “He hasn’t changed much. Still observant and quiet. He bartends at the Whyte Wyrm when FP’s out, gallivanting.”

_Gallivanting_. Jughead supposed that term could be used, but it wasn’t entirely accurate. It made his
father seemed like he was going on leisure trips, which he really wasn’t. FP was one of the most notable slayers in the east coast, probably in the United States. He frequently got called to other states for help with one problem or another and he was always happy to oblige. FP complained a lot about being away from home, but he loved his job more than anything.

Jughead didn’t like to think about it much.

“And your mother, Gladys?” Alice asked. “How is she doing?”

Jughead’s eyes darted up quickly. Shiftily. He figured he shouldn’t have expected that Hilda and Zelda would gossip about that. “I wouldn’t know.”

Zelda jumped in. “Would you like some more potatoes, Jughead?”

He nodded and took another spoonful of the wedges to plop onto his plate.

“Is this common around here?” Chic asked. “Otherworlders getting along? In Seattle, we would never break bread with a slayer. No offense…”

“Big cities are different,” Jughead replied. “You hardly know anyone there. Everybody’s a stranger. In Riverdale, many of us grew up together. It serves the greater good for all of us to tolerate each other and unite to protect us against outsiders who might want to disturb the peace. Although it might not be coincidental that Riverdale is the seat of coven power on this side of the east coast. The Blossoms are extremely powerful. You’re lucky they’re your family rather than your enemy.”

It was probably the nicest way for him to put it, which he thought was surprisingly tactful of him. If not for Betty, he might have said that the Blossoms were nasty and that no one dared cross them.

“Jug patrols much of Greendale and the Southside, too,” Sabrina said, eating her pile of vegetables and spinach tortellini soup. There wasn’t a single porkchop piece on her plate. Her vegetarianism was just another reason why she and Jughead barely got along.

“That sounds exhausting,” Betty said, quietly.

He tilted a smile at her. “It is.”

“But it’s because everyone can count on him,” Zelda gushed, which made Jughead feel a bit hot around the collar. “He is so good at this.” She pinched his cheek, which was even more embarrassing.

Sabrina rolled her eyes and he could’ve sworn a smirk was trying to worm its way out of Betty’s lips.

After fielding a few more questions, the conversation turned to Polly, who had a lot to say about attending university in Seattle. Jughead hoped this meant his turn at the table was over. Sabrina came next and then it was Chic, who cut his interrogation short because he had to go to work.

“You’re not the only one who has to work nights, Jones,” Chic said, his tone friendly.

Not long after Chic left, Betty started clearing the plates while Alice served dessert.

Jughead jumped up to help Betty put the dishes away.

Once they had most of the plates on the kitchen counter, he started to run water over them in the sink.
“Jughead, you don’t--”

“I am not going to sit at that dining room table at the mercy of the Spellmans,” he said, cleaning off a plate and handing it to her.

She sighed, pulling the dishwasher open. She started to arrange the plates in the dishwashing rack.

He gave her a contrite smirk. “Sorry. I know you shouldn’t have to put up with me because the Spellman sisters make it a point to embarrass me. I’ll be quiet.”

Rolling her eyes and shaking her head, she started to help him clean off the plates. “It’s not that, Jughead. I actually have found that I like talking to you, but I find it hard to trust you. I feel everything I say and do is being measured and weighed.”

“I’m sorry that’s how you feel, but if it makes you feel any better, I’m watching out for you, too. I’m doing it for everyone. And you know, it’s not like I’m totally horrible. Zelda and Hilda like me for some reason and I’m going to take that to mean that I’m not a complete asshole.”

She chuckled mildly, and Jughead thought that a good sign. “Sabrina’s not as impressed with you.”

“Yeah, well, Sabrina has been unimpressed with me since we were in diapers.”

Her eyebrow arched. “I thought Kevin was your oldest friend?”

“Friend being the operative word. Sabrina and I are not friends. We were raised like family, to be honest. Like cousins who didn’t really like each other but have to put up with one another.”

She nodded. “I don’t have much experience liking my relatives, either, but the Spellmans are promising, I must admit.”

He smirked as he handed her a plate. She actually smiled back, but probably remembering herself, she frowned and looked away. He chose to cling to the smile.

They worked in awkward silence for the rest of the plates, Jughead stealing glances at her face. She refused to look up this time, but at least she couldn’t exactly run away.

“Hey, uh, you got a ride to school on Monday?” he asked.

She looked at him in surprise. “Y-You don’t have to do me any favors, Jughead. I get it. You were just doing your job--”

“I’m not doing it as a favor to you, Betty,” he explained, feeling his face redden. “I’m just--I want to-..”

“Hey, you two!” Sabrina popped her head through the entrance and grinned. “You’re going to miss dessert.”

Jughead shot her a glare and Sabrina winked.

Betty took a paper towel and wiped her hands with it before shutting the dishwasher door and heading out towards the dining room.

“Was I interrupting something?” Sabrina whispered to Jughead aside.

“You’re always interrupting something,” Jughead whispered back, scowling.
Dessert was a lot more easy-going, and the aunts had settled for talking about their past mischief as sisters and how FP let them get away with a ton of things, mainly because they were harmless pranks.

When there was a pause in the conversation, Jughead started to excuse himself, which pretty much got the Spellmans to offer their goodbyes as well.

As they gathered at the door with their coats, Jughead took a brief moment to tell Betty in a low voice, “If you need anything, you have my number.”

She didn’t avert her eyes, this time, but it was a look of mixed mistrust and wonder.

Jughead couldn’t blame her, because as the saying went, trust was earned. He thanked Alice Cooper for dinner and stepped out the door with the Spellmans. He watched them make their goodbyes. There was a lot of hugging and cheek kissing. Hilda lit a bundle of sage, waved it around, and then left it at the flower cup by the door.

“Next time, I’ll introduce you to Harvey,” Sabrina told Betty. “He’s real sweet. Dumb, but sweet.”

Jughead rolled his eyes. He bit back his retort about Sabrina introducing Betty to Sweet Pea,

When the goodbyes were done and the Spellmans turned to walk down the path to their car, Jughead caught Betty’s eye one last time before Alice closed the door between them.

He stifled his sigh and went to his bike.

“I see you brought your death trap,” Zelda remarked wryly as he got on his motorcycle and put on his helmet.

Hilda shook her head. “It’s not so much a death trap as it is An Accident Waiting to Happen.”

Jughead just chuckled and shook his head. They knew a spill from his motorcycle won’t kill him. They were just being snarky.

“Please. It is the only cool thing about him. Let him have his damn Firebolt,” Sabrina said, walking towards him. “Give me a second, will you? I have something I have to tell Jug.”

The aunts piled into the car, with Hilda getting into the back seat so that Sabrina can ride shotgun.

Jughead arched a questioning eyebrow. “What did I do this time?”

“You made your peace with Betty?”

“Maybe. No thanks to you. Not that it’s any of your business.”

She shrugged. “Small talk. Listen, Archie’s acting weird, I think.”

Somehow, Jughead felt vindicated by that one sentence. “Yes! I knew I wasn’t imagining things. What did he do?”

“He showed up at the Pop’s parking lot yesterday, after Betty and I were done with dinner. He said he was just headed home, but I honestly did not see him at the diner. He offered to give Betty a ride back. I think Betty would’ve said yes--she was so conflicted, sweet thing--if I hadn’t said I would drive her home. I showed Betty around town after that, just to give Archie and her some distance. I know he lives next door, but yeesh! What was he doing there in the parking lot the entire time? Was he just waiting for her to come out?”
Jughead sighed. “Jesus Christ. He’s bespelled.”

Sabrina snorted. “It’s bad, I think. Betty certainly didn’t do it. She looked a little creeped out, but I don’t think she knows. She doesn’t know Archie like we do. She just thinks he’s being friendly.”

“Do you think it was a potion?”

“No way. He would’ve had to drink it while looking at her, so that would necessitate her giving it to him when she’s sure they’re alone. Nah. She wouldn’t do that shit. It’s a binding, Jones. She didn’t do it, but it’s easy enough if you’re skilled, powerful, and you’ve got a piece of her and him. She shares shower rooms with Cheryl at school. Blossom could’ve easily grabbed a few strands from Betty’s brush.”

“Or Cheryl could’ve had her minions yank Betty’s hair straight off her head.” He remembered that first day. How could he forget? When Ginger and Tina pulled at Betty’s hair like nobody’s business.

“You know, for this binding to work this well, he had to have liked her in the first place.”

“Yeah.” Jughead shot Archie’s window another glance. It was closed right now.

“You gotta nip this in the bud, dude. You know that if you don’t break this curse, he’s going to get stalkery. It can get dangerous for Betty and for Archie.”

Jughead nodded, feeling exhausted already.

“There are a couple of ways to break this,” Sabrina continued. “But I’ll let you talk to Aunt Zelda about it. She’s the expert curse breaker.”

“I’ll drop by tomorrow morning. Can you let her know? If she can’t meet with me, text me.”

“Sure thing, Jones.” She skipped off to the beetle and waved her hand out the window as her and her aunts drove off.

Jughead took his time, putting on the riding gloves that he didn’t usually wear, zipping his jacket closed, and steadying his bike as he kicked the stand. He was waiting, his eyes trained to Archie’s window.

Sabrina’s text came first. *Aunt Zelda’s going to be home all morning, tomorrow. Drop by whenever.*

Jughead typed his thanks, and just as he was about to kick his bike to life, he saw it. Archie’s window, slowly swinging open, the darkness cloaking his shadow.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your enthusiasm about this fic. It's really, really motivating.
Ever Mind the Rule of Three

Chapter Notes

I'm sorry that this took a while, but I had a SO MANY things I had to do the past week.

I hope you like this new chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“If there's something to be involved in, you can be sure that witches will always be lurking nearby.”

— Danielle Paige, The Wicked Will Rise

Hanging out at the Spellmans, any time of the day, always meant he would be fed. Whether it’s early or late afternoon, the Spellmans had some dish on standby or baked goods to heat up. Mornings with the Spellmans were no different. It meant a lot of waffles and bacon, lots of various jam preserves, herb butters, and rich maple syrup. It meant fresh fruit and cheese omelettes with red peppers and mushrooms. It was a feast and Jughead wasn’t going to say no to being invited to sit at their kitchen counter to eat all that homemade goodness.

Hilda and Zelda were enthusiastic to receive him, telling him how glad they were that he got along with their niece, Betty. He was less inclined to elaborate on how he ended up on the Coopers’ front door, but he didn’t think the reasons mattered all that much, anyway. All he knew was that it was the Spellman sisters who enabled him to stay for dinner at the Coopers last night and that worked out for him.

He was slicing through two layers of waffles when Sabrina lumbered in to the kitchen. Her short blonde hair was a fantastic mess on her head, but it was the knee length nightgown with the colorful toucans and palm leaves that had Jughead choking on his coffee.

She dealt him a glare as she poured herself some coffee. “Laugh it up, fuzzball.”

“Nice muumuu,” Jughead said.

Sabrina stuck her tongue out at him.

Hilda rolled her eyes. “You keep that up your face will freeze like that.”

Zelda tutted. “Oh, Hilda, don’t say such things. A witch’s word holds weight. You know that.”

Sabrina filled her coffee with milk and sugar. She always did. She hated the taste of coffee, apparently, but she needed the caffeine. It still surprised him how witches, with all their power and magic, weren’t exactly impenetrable and were, in fact, vulnerable to certain maladies. Disease could befall them, in the most human way possible. The difference with their Lost counterparts, of course,
was that witches had access to magic and potions that made healing more effective in most cases. The fact that caffeine, however, affected them in the same way that it did the Lost almost made Jughead laugh, until he remembered that a cranky witch that didn’t get her daily dose in the morning was more likely to curse someone.

Mental health was definitely a gap in the witching cabinet. They could make potions for forgetfulness or ease. They could manufacture happiness in elixirs and vials, too. But ultimately, they weren’t all that different from the Xanaxes and Zolofts of the Lost. It seemed that even for witches, mental health could not be magically treated. Everyone, as it turned out, needed a therapist.

“So, Jughead,” Zelda said, spearing a slice of honeydew and putting it on her plate. “Sabrina tells me that you’ve got a curse that needs breaking.”

Jughead nodded. “It’s Archie. He’s been bound.”

She winced. “To whom?”

He felt, somehow, apologetic for what he was about to say. “To Betty.”

Both aunts’ eyebrows arched slowly. They exchanged looks of surprise.

“Our Betty? Our niece?”

He nodded.

“Some things never change,” Zelda said, quietly. “This is a classic New Witch Girl prank.”

Helga made a sound of disgust. “What behavior has Archie been exhibiting so far?”

Jughead started counting things off with his fingers. “Watching her from his window, numerous chance encounters…”

“He’s following her?”

Jughead nodded.

“I think he’s been asking to walk her to school, like, every day,” Sabrina added. “She mentioned it briefly when we were at the diner last week.”

“So, stalking?” Zelda concluded.

“How long has it been, you think?”

Jughead shrugged. “Could have been as early as Monday night.”

“Let’s say going on day 7, then,” Zelda said, thoughtfully. “He probably liked her to begin with…”

“Yeah,” Jughead grumbled. “You know Archie. He’s extremely fond of pretty girls.”
Sabrina grinned. “And Betty is so pretty.” She winked at him.

Jughead shot her a glare.

“She’s absolutely lovely!” Hilda declared. “Alice was always the looker in the family and Hal was kind of a heartthrob. Those Cooper kids—”

“Look like Abercrombie models?” Sabrina supplied, nudging Jughead with her elbow.

Jughead scowled. He wished she would stop being so spastic. And no, he did not need the aunts interpreting Sabrina’s winking and nudging as something.

It was embarrassing and pointless.

“Archie’s a ladies man,” Jughead said before anyone got any more sidetracked. “And Betty’s attractive and his next door neighbor.”

Zelda gave a sage nod. “Does Betty like him back?”


Hilda cast him a side-eyed glance. “Because it determines her willingness to help break the curse.”

He frowned. Did he need her help for this?

Zelda put a hand on Hilda’s shoulder. “There are a few ways to break this curse. The first one being—find the poppet yourself and get one of the parties in the curse to break it with an Athame.”

“Practically an impossible solution,” Hilda added. “An experienced witch would have a couple of decoy poppets lying around to distract you from finding the real one. Even as decoys, though, the three poppets are connected to one another. If you destroy the wrong ones first, it will not be pleasant.”

Jughead sighed, picking up a strip of bacon and munching on it. “Great.”

“The good news is that the real one would have to be near the subject, so you can probably find all the poppets in Archie’s room, or school bag, or locker—sometimes together or separated—places he frequents by himself or on things he personally owns,” Zelda pointed out.

Jughead felt a little hopeful. “I can do that. Look through his stuff. What would a poppet for this type of thing look like?” There were different kinds of poppets, to Jughead’s knowledge, and what they were depended on what they were being used for.

“Small enough to go unnoticed,” Zelda replied. “A couple of inches, I’m thinking. Probably made of Poplar wood, possibly Lilac wood. It will be dressed in whatever the spellcaster used to invoke the binding—hair or a piece of their clothing. The worst is when you find a poppet with nothing on it, because that means bodily fluids were used.”

Jughead shuddered at the thought, and given that Archie was kind of a fuck boi…

“Clothing is the most common choice in lieu of hair,” Zelda continued. “The most closely worn to their skin, the better. The closest to their heart, the more effective it is, so while socks would be good, underwear is much better.”

“This is just getting more gross by the second,” Jughead muttered. He couldn’t stop thinking of Cheryl or one of her minions swiping Archie’s used underwear from his duffel bag. “So I find the
poppets—how many, you think?"

“Three, max. More than that dilutes the spell dramatically.”

“I find these poppets and I get Betty to destroy them.”

“Yes, but you must destroy the real one first.”

“How do we know which one is real?”

“Best guess. They usually all look identical. You can examine them closely—some forensic work: microscopes or DNA testing. Only the real one would actually have the DNA of both parties in the binding. The other two may have none, or can have just one, never both.”

Jughead shook his head. “DNA testing. Great.”

“Ironically, the Blossoms provide that service,” Hilda said, flatly. “Curse breaking rakes in as much money as Hexing.”

“What happens if I break the other two, first?”

“World of pain for both parties each time,” Zelda said. “It can go on for days. Think morphine withdrawal.”

“Well, that rules out that solution,” Jughead muttered. He was pretty sure he couldn’t just burn the things at all once. One of the first things you learn as a slayer is to never burn the implements of a curse. Burning makes the curse infinitely harder to break if not permanent. Usually, the only solution to that would be death.

Curses had to be broken with the proper tools and means, usually with the use of a ceremonial knife, like an Athame, and only then could the remains be burned.

“No burning,” Zelda said, as if sensing his thoughts. “You have to be sure the curse is broken first, before you do that. It’s like a receipt at the store—you need it to return unwanted items. You lose the receipt, then the thing is permanently yours.”

“Yes, yes. I know.” Jughead threw up his hands. “I guess I’ll have to find these poppets first? Then maybe find someone to do DNA testing? How much will that cost?”

“Couple a thousand dollars.”

“Fuck.”

“Language!” Zelda hissed.

“If I find the poppets, would taking them away from Archie’s proximity lessen the effects of the curse?”

Hilda shook her head. “Only if you did it right at the beginning. By your estimation, it’s been seven days. The curse is embedded in him.”

Jughead nodded, sighing. “What’s the other way to break the curse?”

“Find the person who invoked the curse and get them to break the poppets with an Athame. They can break any one of the three in any order and it would be fine, so technically, you’d just have to find one of the poppets and that ought to be enough to break the chain. Just make sure they’re
actually the person who invoked it.”

Jughead scoffed again, more softly this time. “Cheryl would never admit she did it. Let alone break it for us.”

Sabrina shrugged. “You don’t have to watch her break it. Just tell her ‘Cheryl, I don’t need to know if you did it or not. I’m just saying if you did, or if you know who did, can you please just get a ceremonial knife and stab that poppet dead? Or else I’ll tell your mother that you dated that vampire last summer and gave him some of your blood.”

Zelda frowned, shocked. “Did Cheryl Blossom give her blood to a vampire?”

“No,” Sabrina replied. “I just made that up, but Jonesey over here might have some kind of salacious dirt on her that he could use to blackmail her into doing the right thing.”

“How sure are you that Cheryl did this?” Hilda asked.

“Pretty sure,” Jughead said. “Cheryl and Betty have been butting heads since the Coopers got here.”

“Well, if you can get her to admit to it, that would be convenient,” Zelda said. “Just make sure it was really her. She could’ve made the poppets, but someone else could’ve invoked it. Basically anyone who has some form of magic could’ve invoked the binding, so it doesn’t have to be a witch.”

Honestly, Jughead couldn’t even think of anyone else who could do it.

Sabrina rolled her eyes. “Come on, Jones! You have a ton of dirt on Cheryl that you can use to wrangle shit from her!”

“Maybe,” he muttered, uncertain. He may have dirt on Cheryl, but he never doled out precious information easily. What he had on Cheryl was always pretty petty, anyway. Nothing that would put her in deep trouble. He needed little bits of info here or there to barter for Blossom Inc. services, in the instance that the Spellmans couldn’t help him. He might try to use something to help break this curse. He would have to think about it.

Although Jughead knew, deep down, that as inconvenient as this binding was, it was petty and breakable. Unless someone died, this sort of thing wasn’t going to put Cheryl away in the witchy clink. Even if it was, this was the sort of curse Cheryl could get away with and she wouldn’t be fussed about getting caught.

His guess was that Cheryl would play this out over the course of a few weeks until Betty couldn’t bear it anymore. Cheryl would then break it before it got really serious.

In the meantime, Archie would fall at the mercies of Betty, which wasn’t ideal. At some point, Archie’s obsession with her would get too weird to let him out in public.

“There’s a third way to break the curse,” Zelda said, folding her hands in front of her.

He had to resist the urge to roll his eyes. “Let me guess. I have to go to some cave and procure the tooth of a sleeping dragon.”

“Technically, dragons live in volcanoes, not caves,” Sabrina said, drinking her coffee.

He thought she was just full of helpful information.

Zelda chuckled. “If only it were that easy. The third way is for you to break the binding with
betrayal. You betray Archie and it’ll break the curse nicely, cleanly. It renders the poppet ineffective and he can never be bound to Betty again. Ever.”

“Betrayal? Like if I steal his precious guitar and smash him on the face with it?”


He fancied himself capable of puzzling out mysteries, but this answer was eluding him.

Sabrina gave a loud sigh. “Really? Nothing?”

“I can’t—“

“What’s the one thing Archie lives by?”

“Football?”

“Okay, not one thing. Two things.”

“Music?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake—the Bro Code, Jughead. He lives by the Bro Code! Bros before—“

“Sabrina!” Hilda gasped.

Jughead’s eyes widened with realization. “Oh… shit.”

***************

When Jughead texted Archie, he was out for the day, gone fishing with his father, which Jughead thought was the perfect time to break into Archie’s house and look for a poppet. Hopefully he’ll find more than one.

As he parked by Archie’s house, he glanced at the Cooper home. It looked like no one was home. It felt strange to think of witches on family outings, sometimes, even as he remembered his own mother trying that with him and Jellybean back when he was much younger. Those outings were rife with tension, with Jughead consciously trying to enjoy them and Jellybean oblivious to the struggle just beneath the surface. FP almost always suggested these trips and Gladys always went with it—Coney Island in New York, Long Branch beach in New Jersey, the Mansions at Rhode Island, the fishing town in Maine—but they always ended up being slaying expeditions. For a while, Jughead never understood why his mother was furious during these trips, but as he got older, he realized that FP, above all things, valued doing his job as a slayer and his family came second.

To this day, Jughead believed that if FP weren’t so hell-bent on his job, like if he had just been your run-off-the-mill difficult father and husband, Gladys might not have taken Jellybean with her when she ran off to Toledo, but he supposed taking your witch daughter with you because her brother and father were both slayers made a lot of sense…

Still. He would never hurt Jellybean. He would never hurt his mother. He didn’t think FP would, either.

Then again, he had seen his father go up against witches, creatures, and elementals. He had seen
FP’s ruthlessness. He had watched FP decapitate a vampire child—even if that child had been a child for 20 years.

“He’d been killing other children, son. He had to go.”

Jughead had nodded, even as he was throwing up in the bush.

Come to think of it, his distorted thoughts on family outings were his parents’ fault. The Coopers could be having a great time at the moment, just eating cotton candy on some boardwalk, or looking at some paintings in some museum in New York (Alice Cooper looked like the type who would force her daughters and son to look at paintings all day). Not everyone had a childhood like his.

As Jughead took the edges of Archie’s mattress in his hands, he braced himself for what he would find there, hoping that the worst of it would be girlie magazines.

He lifted. There were a couple of girlie mags and they looked a bit frayed at the edges. Probably Archie’s favorite two. Jughead tried not to look too closely. He definitely didn’t want to touch them. He hoped he didn’t have to.

To be perfectly fair, there were a couple of music magazines there, too, a notebook, and oddly enough, empty candy wrappers.

What is he, five?

Jughead scanned the bed platform for anything else out of place and didn’t see anything else. He turned his attention to the underside of the mattress and immediately noted a small rip, just around 2-3 inches in length. Taking a deep breath and praying there was nothing gross in there, he poked his fingers through the hole and gingerly felt around the soft foam.

He felt it immediately—a scratchy foreign object. Carefully, he pulled it out, and sure enough it was a poppet. The thing was made of wood, bent and twisted to look like a little stick figure. He could see what looked like golden hair threaded through the twisted pieces of drying vine, with a scrap of patterned cloth tied around it. If he looked closely enough, he could tell that the pattern was tiny red guitars.

Boxers.

Jughead’s lip twisted in a grimace. He was quite possibly touching Archie’s underwear, probably pilfered from the boys’ locker room after football practice. Definitely had to be unwashed.

Gross.

He pocketed the poppet and set the mattress down, righting the bed afterwards.

He looked around a bit more, hoping that the other two poppets would be there. Of course they weren’t. That would have been too easy.

He thought about other places that Archie liked to hang out. The Andrews garage was a good place to look. It’s where archie played his music and lifted his weights.

He poked around and didn’t find anything at first, but then his eyes fell on the acoustic guitar and its cavern in the center.

It took some doing—loosening the guitar strings (boy, Archie would be pissed about it), just so he can reach further inside. The poppet was taped to the inside. This was a smaller, flatter version.
Taped deep in the underside of the hole. Whoever did this had gotten access to Archie’s room and
guitar.

Jughead looked through the rest of the house but found nothing. The third poppet could still be in
there, but he had other places to look before he scoured every nook and cranny of the Andrews
home.

He could probably break into school and rifle through Archie’s lockers, but he actually had rounds to
make. With his father out of town, there was an added layer of responsibility that had been left to
him: the administration of the Whyte Wyrm, checking on his father’s brewery and the beers
fermenting and conditioning in the vats, and hopping from Riverdale to Greendale to look into the
Omens--basically specific locations or things to warn against supernatural events that may or may not
be dangerous. The Zoo was a primary place for Omens, because animals acting a certain way
collectively was cause for alarm. Graveyards had a lot of Omens in them--from the trees, the
tombstones, and sometimes the stirring of the earth. Tabloids, too, tended to report supernatural
phenomenon, whether the writers believed in it or not. There were many other smaller Omens placed
throughout the towns by witches, and Jughead checked them on occasion in the off chance that
witches themselves weren’t so forthcoming with the information.

Kevin usually accompanied him on these errands—he liked driving Jughead around town. It made
Kevin feel informed of things and Jughead always appreciated his company. It was also a good time
to catch up on each other.

He wondered briefly if he should text Betty to ask her if she was available to talk tomorrow at
school. Or perhaps he should just show up at her house in the morning.

_Don’t be weird_, Kevin would tell him.

He rolled his eyes at himself, putting his phone away before he did something he’d regret.

************

Betty rolled down the window of Chic’s car and took deep breaths of the cool air. It was Monday
and Chic was driving her to school. It was the only way she could think of to escape the little dramas
pervading her brain: the stress of avoiding Archie’s invitation to walk her to school, the stress of
typing and erasing a text to Jughead about his invitation to drive her to school, and the insecurities of
extending a tentative friendship with Veronica who had so candidly offered her a way into it.

She wanted to call Sabrina, too, just to listen to her cousin’s hilariously straightforward opinion on all
things Riverdale, but even that had made her feel like a needy little bitch.

The easy solution had been Chic and the quiet 1.5 mile ride.

She smiled a little to herself. Sunday had been a good day. Alice had gone to her sisters and Chic,
ever the big brother, invited his sisters to grab lunch and then watch a movie. Polly had, at first, flat
out refused to go, and Betty was too afraid that Polly would rebuke her pleas to join them, but Chic
had put his foot down. “You’re coming with us whether you like it or not, Polly. Stop sulking for
goodness sake.”

As stubborn as Polly was, she always caved when Chic got snappy.
Chic paid for lunch at Pop’s, and for the first time in weeks, Polly and Betty actually got to talking. Polly had sounded a bit nasty at first, asking Betty if she had been responsible for Jughead coming to dinner unannounced.

“Kind of,” she had replied, quietly, expecting Polly to rant about something, but then Polly had said, “He’s cute,” which threw Betty into a state of wild confusion.

She had stuttered and stammered, trying desperately to explain to Polly that he was a slayer and that he was just checking out the new witch family in town, but then Polly had laughed, telling her that her face was cherry red, and that she needed to relax.

“Oh, my God. Aunt Hilda bulldozed mom into inviting him. You should’ve seen the look on mom’s face. It was gold.”

After that, Betty relaxed a little more, and Chic pretended to scold his sisters about how boys were not to be trusted, no matter how cute they were. The conversation got a little easier, then, and towards the end of the meal, Polly was telling them about what she’d heard from her friends in Seattle, and about how her part time job at the local daycare was the highlight of her day, even if she had to wipe up drool, clean spit off her clothes, and had to let a bit of pee dry on her jeans because she basically had no choice.

She and Polly shared a box of popcorn at the movies, and afterwards, when Chic said he needed to buy a pair of socks at the local Bullseye, Polly took her by the hand to drag her to the women’s section, where they took turns holding up dresses and sweaters against each other.

It took all of Betty’s willpower not to throw her arms around her sister and tell her that she had missed this. Polly could be her own brand of closed off. If Betty said anything remotely vulnerable, it can drive Polly back into her own shell. She would let Polly take the lead and Betty could just let her sister take it at her own pace.

Now it was Monday, and while she did have her little dramas still, having her home life settling into a better place definitely helped ease her anxieties.

She had another bottle of Milk Thistle potion in her bag, just in case her medication wasn’t enough.

As Chic rolled into the drop off, Betty gave her brother a grateful kiss on the cheek. “Thanks, Chic. I appreciate it.”

“You know,” Chic said, leaning over the seat to look at her as she stepped out of the car. “I could just tell Archie to leave you alone. You don’t have to please everyone, Bug.”

Betty sighed. “I know that. Just—let me figure things out, okay?”

Chic shrugged. “Alright. See you later.”

When Betty stepped away from the curb, she watched Chic drive away.

She walked through the doors of the school and immediately went to her locker. Just as she was pulling out her first period text books, she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand at attention.

She turned to look, slightly alarmed, only to find out that Cheryl was standing there with her minions.

Her cousin was looking particularly vampiric today. Her short blood red dress, layered with a gorgeous plaid coat, showed off her spectacular cleavage. Her black, high heeled booties made her...
legs look incredible.

Betty scowled. “Don’t be such a creep, Cher.”

“I’m here to tell you that we have Vixen practice later.” She held out her hands to Ginger who handed over a small stack of folded clothes. “These are your Vixen implements. Shirt and shorts for practice, sweater and skirt for actual games.”

Betty stepped away, her back hitting the lockers. “I’m not going to be a Vixen. I don’t want to dance in front of an entire—”

“Oh, get over it, Sally,” Cheryl hissed, slamming the uniforms against Betty’s chest.

Betty had little choice but to take the uniforms in her arms.

Cheryl got in her face. “You be at practice later or I will shrivel every herb and vegetable you planted in that little garden you have at home. You’ll be low on potion for weeks.”

“I’d like to see you try that. You won’t be able to get through my wards.”

“Is that a challenge?”

Betty frowned, this time meeting Cheryl with a forward step of her own.

“Ladies,” came a sweet voice to the side of them.

Betty turned and saw Veronica lodge, her $5000 bag slung over her arm and her pearls gleaming under the fluorescent lighting.

Behind her stood Jughead and Kevin, watching all of it with barely veiled interest.

“Stay out of this, Lodge,” Cheryl hissed. “This is between me and my cousin, Betty.”

Veronica’s eyebrow arched. “Not when you two fine gentlewomen can level the school, it isn’t. Now leave Betty alone. She has a class to go to.”

Cheryl scoffed, shooting all of them a glare before directing her most vicious one at Betty. “You will get into those shorts and shake your ass on that field, Cooper. I won’t have the likes of us slinking into corners like dorks. We were not meant to hide.” She stalked off, visibly annoyed.

Betty watched her go, warily, for sure. There was nothing preventing Cheryl from turning around and throwing a quick spell.

“Are you alright, chica?” Veronica asked.

Betty took a deep breath and nodded. “Yes, but she aggravates the hell out of me.”

“Cheryl aggravates a lot of people.”

“Is she really your cousin?” Kevin looked thrilled by this news, even as he swiveled his gaze to Jughead accusingly. “Did you know about this?”

Jughead rolled his eyes. “Wasn’t my story to tell, Kev.”

“You are the worst best friend.”
Jughead threw up his hands in surrender.

“Do you have dinner parties together?” Kevin asked Betty.

She recalled having dinner at Thornhill and how terrifying that was. “One too many.”

“What about sleepovers? Surely Thornhill is as scary inside as it is outside.”

“Jeez, Kev,” Jughead sighed.

“Aunt Penelope offered, but my mom declined,” Betty replied, grumbling. “Cheryl and I are not close. She’s vapid and cruel and I just want her to leave me alone.” She began to walk to the nearest trash bin. She had no use for the uniforms.

“Oh, honey, no!” Veronica said, getting between her and the garbage can. “Don’t throw those away!”

“I’m not going to be a Vixen, Veronica.”

“Being a Vixen gives you power, Betty. Don’t you want power?”

Betty’s face deadpanned. “Not particularly.”

Veronica waved her words away. “Oh, pish. Everyone likes a bit here or there. Let me hold those for you. Like I said, there’s Cheryl and then there’s me. The captainship is up for grabs soon and people are tired of Cheryl’s dictatorship.”

“Soooo,” Jughead drawled. “You’re recruiting minions, basically.”

Kevin grinned. “I approve!”

“Thank you,” Veronica replied. “Stay to the left of me, hater. Betty, let me tell you about the merits of cheer.”

Betty arched an eyebrow, amusement besetting her in spite of herself. Veronica handed her things over to Jughead who rolled his eyes as he took them, purse and all, so she could loop her arm around Betty’s comfortably.

“Imagine hundreds of football fans gawking at your awesome ass and legs, drinking in your every move and thinking the sexiest thoughts,” Veronica gushed.

“I’m imagining that’s very creepy,” Betty remarked.

“It’s hella creepy,” Jughead concurred.

Veronica shook her head. “That’s adoration. That’s pure, unbridled need, and the best part is that they can’t have you unless you let them have you.”

“Are you sure you’re not fey, V? Because you sound like you’re fey,” said Kevin, laughing.

Betty bit her lip. “I-I don’t need the adoration of strangers.”

Veronica rolled her eyes. “Fine. You can put it in your college application. Diversify your extracurriculars. Colleges love that.”

Betty knew that was true, but again, she wasn’t in the best frame of mind to be on a pep squad right
now.

Veronica construed her silence as interest. “Ha! So that’s your kink, smart girl!”

Betty shook her head vigorously. “That’s not—“

Jughead was knocked roughly from behind as Archie first bumped into him then slung an arm around his shoulders. He gave Jughead a friendly shake before bursting between Betty and Veronica, successfully unlinking their arms.

“Hi, Betty!!” Archie cried, enthusiastically. “Figured you were already here! Did your brother drop you off? I didn’t see you leave with him.”

Taken slightly aback, she took a step away from him. “I—um, yeah, he dropped me off.”

Veronica scowled. “Don’t be rude, Archiekins. Betty and I were talking.”

Archie barely paid attention to her. “Do you need me to carry your things?”

Betty pulled her books closer into her arms. “I’m fine, really. These are so light.”

“I haven’t seen you in school all week! I wasn’t even sure if you were coming to school. If I hadn’t seen you at the diner, I almost believed you’d skipped town.”

“I was—“ she involuntarily shot Jughead a meaningful look. “Lying low.”

Jughead’s face did turn pink, which was decent of him.

“What, did she have her bedroom windows closed all week?” Kevin asked, teasing.

Archie frowned but didn’t answer amidst Veronica’s giggling. Jughead seemed a little concerned, his brows furrowing in thought.

“Jug, I legit thought you were over at Betty’s the other night,” Archie said, in an overly casual tone. “But there was a party of some sorts, so…”


“Oh, trapped, was he?” Veronica sneered.

“There was a lot of food, okay?” Jughead cried, his face getting even redder.

Betty, against her better judgement, started to feel warm in the face herself. It was an interesting night, that Saturday.

Kevin gave Jughead side-eye. “Oh, sure. Of course it was the food.”

Betty hated the flutters in her stomach right then. Why was she being such a ditz? Surely she couldn’t still be crushing on the boy who lied to get information from her, did she?

“Jughead could never resist a home cooked meal,” Archie added—oddly, in a tone that seemed like he was talking more to himself. “Betty, I saw Cheryl talking to you earlier and giving you uniforms. Are you joining the Vixens? Because you would look so awesome in those.”

Betty wasn’t terrible with compliments but this was so overwhelmingly direct that she was definitely
flustered, unable to form a proper response.

“Please, please join the cheer team,” Archie begged. “So I can see you at practice all the time…”

Oh, my God…

Jughead handed Veronica all of her things back in a hurry and sidled up to Betty. “Arch, I think your classroom is over there. Betty and I have first period together, so we’ll see you later, alright?”

“But I wanted to walk Betty—“

Jughead shot Kevin a meaningful look and Kevin immediately responded.

“Hey, Arch! The wrestling coach was wondering if you’d be interested in trying out this year.” He swung an arm around Archie’s shoulders and began to walk away with him.

Veronica walked with them. “Oh, Archiekins, you should totally try out for the wrestling team!”

Betty stared at the back of Archie’s head, wondering how she hadn’t noticed before. “Oh, God…”

“Yeah.”

She looked up at Jughead, an apologetic look on his face. Of course he knew about it. Of course.

“What—who—“

Jughead sighed. “You got some time today to talk about this?”

Mutely, she nodded. “Lunch? I’ll be at the Blue & Gold…”

He paused, perhaps wondering how she even had access to the room, but he didn’t ask and just nodded. “I’ll see you then. Are you okay?”

She was surprised by his concern. Or maybe surprise wasn’t the term. If she were being completely honest, she was taken by it. “I-I’m fine… it’s just, why would anyone…?” Her voice trailed, shaking her head. There were almost always just two reasons for a binding: love or revenge.

Jughead’s hand on her shoulder was warm and calming. “We’ll get this sorted out. I promise, alright?”

He had a reassuring smile on his lips and his tone was like honey. She began to realize why Otherworlders called on him for help. He looked like he really cared.

She nodded. “Alright.”

He gave her shoulder a light squeeze.

She saw that they were at her classroom door and she was startled at how he knew what class she was going to, then she remembered that this same time last week, he was scoping her out.

“This isn’t really your first period class on Monday, is it?” she asked, rhetorically.

He shook his head, a little sheepish. “History really is second period, though. I’ll see you in a bit.”

His blue eyes were still as striking to her as the first day she laid eyes on him, and the way he said they would see each other again made those cursed flutters in her stomach stir once again.
“Great!” she said, automatically, that Cooper-bred politeness taking over. It was so ingrained in her, like how you would acknowledge a server at the restaurant when they said, “I’ll have your order for you in a few minutes.”

And yet she felt like dying, turning on her heel and shuffling awkwardly into English class.

She didn’t dare turn around, too embarrassed by the underlying feelings that got inadvertently exposed by that rote response.

Surely he would recognize it was just some meaningless response to—

Anything, really.

As she took her seat, she risked a peek at the door. Jughead was gone, and only then did she breathe a sigh of relief.

**********

Betty had rid the Blue & Gold of most of its dust and grime. In her week of hiding out in this forgotten room, she had cleaned to distract from the misery she felt having to eat lunch by herself.

Cleaning was always therapeutic for her, so each time she hid at the Blue & Gold, she would sneak into the janitor’s closet, procure supplies, and then proceed to wipe every dusty surface in the room. Once the dust had been relocated and the floors swept, she began to polish surfaces to a nice sheen.

Now the office looked restored and ready for use, not that there was really anything--she wasn’t about to restart a defunct high school newspaper. She just needed the space right now.

As she looked around the office, waiting for Jughead to arrive, she found herself checking for any messes, as if she were expecting guests at her house and she had to make sure the place was presentable, which was kind of ridiculous.

The Blue & Gold office was not hers.

A knock at the door pushed her out of her reverie. She could make out a silhouette through the tiny window of fogged glass. It looked about the same height as Jughead, but she peeked out gingerly as she cracked the door open.

There he was in his dark shirt, hoodie, and those suspenders hanging off his waist.

She didn’t understand what those suspenders were for, but she found it almost aggravatingly appealing.

The moment he stepped through, she slammed the door shut behind him. She liked this place of solitude and didn’t want anyone else invading or worse, kicking her out.

Jughead took a moment to survey the place, then he sniffed audibly, directing a suspicious look at her. “You cleaned it.”

She may have overdone the use of wood polish and febreze air freshener. She pulled out a chair for him before taking one for herself. “I couldn’t stand the dust.”
He arched an eyebrow, withholding judgement, no doubt, before plopping a paper bag on the edge of a desk. He took the chair she offered him.

“So Archie’s a bit bespelled,” she began.

He pulled a clementine out of his paper bag and proceeded to peel it. “Yeah. Since last week, I think.”

Betty tried her very best not to be distracted by his fingers. “I should’ve noticed it. He seemed so normal at the bleachers…”

“I think he was normal at the bleachers. The bespelling had to have happened after that.”

She sighed, pressing a hand to her eyes. “This has to be Cheryl.”

“Probably,” Jughead said, wryly. “I’m pretty sure her minions could’ve easily gotten something off you.”

Betty scratched subconsciously at her scalp. That first day of school, she distinctly remembered Ginger and Tina snatching at her hair and how much it hurt. They probably got a few off her at the time.

He dug something out of his pocket. It was a folded envelope. When he spilled its contents on his hands she recognized the items immediately.

“You found the poppets,” she said, mystified by his initiative.

He nodded. “I’m still trying to find the last one, but if we can talk to Cheryl—“

“Talk to her?”

He chuckled. “Employ threats and intimidation?”

She pressed the heels of her palms to her eyes, folding over on her seat. So this was what it was like to go to highschool with other witches in it.

When she looked up, she found him watching her in amusement.

“I bet you deal with this sort of thing all the time,” Betty grumbled.

He shook his head. “This is my first binding. And shockingly, this is the first time Archie’s been bespelled.”

She arched an eyebrow. “Shockingly?”

He pressed his lips together, thoughtful. She got the impression that he was choosing his words well.

“Archie likes ladies and sometimes they overlap.”

“He cheats?”

“Technically, no, but he gets easily distracted. He’s decent enough to break things off if he gets interested in another girl while he’s with someone, but it doesn’t make it any easier for the one he broke up with. Sometimes it’s not another girl, but another thing. Like when he was dating Valerie Brown and their relationship rolled into summer, Archie went to music camp and suddenly, he had no time for Valerie.”
She wondered where she heard that name, Brown. “Is Valerie Brown related to Trev Brown?”

Jughead nodded. “Brother and sister.”

“But Trev’s--”

His eyebrow arched questioningly.

“A creature…”

Jughead chuckled. “Trev’s a werewolf, but Valerie isn’t. Trev’s family doesn’t know he’d been afflicted since freshman year. I help him out around the full moon. We lock him up in the dungeons of the Whyte Wyrm until the full moon passes.”

Betty’s jaw dropped. “Dungeons? You have dungeons?”

He seemed surprised by her surprise. “We’re slayers. Of course we have dungeons.”

She supposed she should’ve known. She hadn’t had many encounters with slayers. She’d only seen them from afar and she tried to stay under the radar because she didn’t want to be noticed. Jughead was the first slayer she’d ever talked to.

And had dinner with.

“So has Archie ever dated an Otherworlder?” she asked, pulling out her lunch container. She had a salad with a bit of roasted chicken, no cheese. It tasted bland, but it would get her through the day.

He had finished his clementine. His own food container held a slab of what looked like lasagna, probably given to him by the Spellman aunts. He shook his head. “God, no. Not even a slayer. There were a couple of close calls, but I managed to avert catastrophe. Archie will not survive a relationship with an Otherworlder, so I’m a bit annoyed that this has happened to him.”

She felt her face flaming. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s not your fault.” He tapped her arm lightly, probably to emphasize the point. “I’m still going to try to find the third poppet, but we can talk to Cheryl with the two.”

Her arm still felt like it was burning from his very light touch and she concentrated on her bland salad. “You keep saying that word-- talk. Will Cheryl even admit to this?”

He shrugged a shoulder. “Maybe with the right motivation… listen, I know she’s a huge bitch, but Cheryl isn’t evil. She’s not going to play this out to the end. She wouldn’t want anyone getting killed and she certainly wouldn’t want to deal with the magical blowback of an outcome like that. Anything bad happens to Archie and the effects to her could be devastating. She isn’t risking that.”

Ever mind the rule of three. What ye sends out comes back to thee.

It was a rhyme told to all witches from birth, and while the rule didn’t seem to apply to most of the smaller benign spells, it began to get dicey when the bigger spells were invoked, particularly if it involved direct death or suffering. Witches have been skirting around this rule for ages. You didn’t just hex a person to death, you had to use a much more benign wind spell to push him in front of a moving train, for instance.

Direct curses-- actual curses, required a lot of blood, pain, and suffering. It was why Wicked witches were so feared, valued, or revered. Wicked Witches paid for their powers, first, with the pain they
can give, and they didn’t have to pay anything back.

Bindings skirted the edges of a curse and a benign spell. It all depended on the outcome. If all Archie ended up doing was irritate the hell out of her and act like an idiot, then the spell was mostly harmless. If he started to hurt people for her, or do terrible things to get her attention, or even start to hurt her to keep her, then the Rule of Three might start to apply. Cheryl may end the curse then, but by then the karma would be imminent. She had to stop it before anything truly bad happened.

“If you find the third poppet,” she began. “How are you going to find out what the true poppet is?”

He shrugged. “DNA testing, I’m told, but that’ll cost thousands of dollars. If we’re lucky, we might be able to get someone to do that for free or for much cheaper, but right now I don’t know anyone who could. If we guess, you and Archie pay the cost of pain, which is not an option.”

Betty nodded. Pain didn’t scare her, but Archie didn’t deserve it.

“We can wait and hope that Cheryl doesn’t let it get out of hand,” Jughead continued. “But--”

“Never trust a witch to do the right thing,” she finished for him in a whisper.

He paused. “I was going to say that I never expect people to do what I want them to do.”

She pierced a cherry tomato with her fork. “Oh.”

He shifted on his seat and put his food aside. “I realize that what I am makes it hard for you to trust me.”

She looked up from her salad, startled at the direction their conversation has taken them.

He nodded to affirm his words. “I don’t blame you, and I get it. As a general rule, I don’t trust--”

“Witches?”

He smirked slightly. “People. People in general either surprise or disappoint. I’ve managed my expectations of people so I don’t get stymied when they stab me in the back. That’s not an exaggeration, by the way. I have literally been stabbed in the back by someone I trusted. Fortunately, he totally missed my heart.”

She didn’t quite know if this was a common enough experience with slayers, especially at his age. “Was it a witch?”

“Lamia,” he replied. “But I survived. I will survive most stabblings, gunshots, maimings, drops from high places, fire, water, you know, slayer constitution and all that.”

“Does it hurt? When you get stabbed and all that other stuff?”

“Of course it does, but you know--occupational hazard, but that’s beside the point....”

She nodded. “So you and I both have trust issues.”

“Yeah, we do, but you can trust me on this one. And if I can trust a lamia, I can sure as hell trust a witch. Our goals are aligned in this. You want Archie to leave you alone and I want to break the curse--and maybe find out who did this.”
She sighed, feeling exhausted all of a sudden. “I just want to live my life.”

He eyed her for longer than a heartbeat, like he was appraising her, and she felt slightly unnerved by his ice-blue gaze, but his eyes had that quality--like they were endlessly curious. Seeking.

She nonsensically wondered how it would feel to have those eyes bearing down on you in a very intense stare, whether in anger or the complete opposite of.

“If you just want to live your life—” he said. “I don’t know if Riverdale is the place for it.”

She picked a walnut from her salad and popped it into her mouth. “Well, I’m stuck here, so…”

“Aren’t we all, sunshine?”

That was an interesting thing for him to say. “I don’t know. I am, but are you?”

He cocked a smile. “More than I’d like to admit.”

Betty remembered all the things they talked about last Saturday at dinner. He had a lot of responsibilities. “What would happen if you just up and left?”

“Dad would probably hunt me down and drag my ass back here,” he replied. “But in the off chance that he doesn’t, he’ll probably settle back down in Riverdale and nag me to come back for the rest of my life.”

He had mentioned that his father traveled for work. Did he want to travel like his father?

“Riverdale too boring for you?” she asked. It sounded suspiciously like a tease.

“I like Riverdale just fine,” he replied, shrugging. He didn’t elaborate. “So we’ll talk to Cheryl later. See where that gets us.”

She nodded.

“Cool. I gotta go finish up with some reading. Are you going to stay here?”

“I like it here.”

“By yourself?”

This time, she didn’t answer immediately. Finally, she said, “It’s quiet.”

“It’s as good as a reason as any,” he replied, and she recognized that he was being kind for saying so. “I’ll see you later, Betty.”

She watched him go and found herself staring at the door long after he had shut it behind him.

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It was Veronica who brought Cheryl to them, alone, no minions in tow. Both ladies were in their practice uniforms, coming off the field.

Betty and Jughead watched them approach from within the shadows of the dugout, away from
Betty was glad for it because she didn’t think she could bear Archie seeing her right now. All afternoon, after lunch, Archie had sought her out, waiting for her at her locker, walking with her to class, bothering her at class, and telling her, at every opportunity, how beautiful she was.

It was completely unnerving, most especially because his eyes were taking on a dazed quality, like little by little, he was losing himself.

“Which one of you rejects had me summoned here?” Cheryl asked, her icy tone lancing through Betty’s otherwise calm demeanor.

“That would be me,” Jughead said.

Cheryl shot Veronica and Betty a sardonic glare. “My favorite one, of course.”

Jughead was not the least bit shaken by it. “You’re a real piece of work, aren’t you, Cheryl? We know what you did to Archie.”

Her eyebrow arched, but she was grinning. “What did I do to Archie?”

“Cut the crap, Cheryl,” Betty interjected. “You did a binding on him, with me. It needs to stop.”

Cheryl laughed. “You think I bound him to you? Please. It’s highly amusing, but if it were up to me, I’d go meaner. You know this, V.”

Veronica crossed her arms over her chest. “All too well. But you’d best start cooperating, Cher.”

“Or what?”

It was Jughead who replied. “Or I’ll tell your mother about that little affair you had with that collector last summer.”

Collectors were the foragers of the Otherworlder community. If you needed black market ingredients, like the hand of a murdered man, or the tooth of an infant, or the toe of a spinster, collectors were the ones who supplied it.

Nobody liked them, mostly because they often procured their ingredients through the worse means—scouring morgues, new graves, and war zones. It would be atrocious and scandalous if a Blossom were to be found sucking face with the most disreputable of Otherworlder society.

Cheryl scoffed, even as she paled visibly. “You have no proof, Jones.”

“What do you think this is, amateur night?” Jughead said, pulling out his phone and playing a video of Cheryl and a petite blonde girl making out on the couch of a night club.

Betty arched an eyebrow. Did Jughead Jones have a running file on everyone? Or maybe just Cheryl?


Cheryl’s face darkened, her eye taking on a menacing sheen. “Where did you get that?”

Jughead rolled his eyes. “Please. You and this girl were at that club every other night that summer. Someone was bound to videotape you because people are horny little shits. Also, the person who
sold this to me was an opportunistic genius.”

“You will give me every single copy of that, asshole, or I will find a way to make your life a living hell, I swear to God.”

“You break this binding for us and I’ll give you everything.”

Cheryl was breathing deeply now, and Betty wondered if she should be preparing to deflect a witchy attack.

Instead, Cheryl spoke calmly. “Even if I wanted to break the binding, I couldn’t. I didn’t invoke that spell.”

Jughead’s eyebrow arched so high it could’ve disappeared into his hairline.

Betty frowned. She didn’t know if she believed Cheryl. “You had Ginger and Tina take hair from me, Cheryl. Who else could it be?”

“You’ll be surprised,” Cheryl replied, shortly. “I’ll tell you that I created those poppets, but I didn’t invoke them.”

There was a brief silence, expecting Cheryl to continue. She didn’t.


Cheryl’s facial expression was menacing. “I can’t tell you that.”

Jughead waved his phone in Cheryl’s face. “I can still make you do it.”

“No deal. I’d rather mommy punish me for having sexual relations with a collector than have her find out that I disclosed a client’s name. A Blossom never reveals their client.”

“That’s very House Blossom of you,” he muttered. “You need to give us something, Cher, or I’m going to send this video anyway, just to piss you off.”

She gave it some thought. “I can try to convince my client to break it before it gets ugly. I’m assuming you have at least one poppet. If you give one to me, I’ll bring it to the client and—“

“Don’t insult me, Cheryl,” Jughead growled. “You can pry the poppets from my cold dead hands. When Archie starts going crazy, you’re going to tell me who this person is and we’re going to convince them to break the curse.”

Cheryl glared at them all. “I will never tell you who asked me to make the poppets. When the time comes, you will give me a poppet and I will take it to my client. I assure you, I’m well aware of the Rule of Three. Even if I didn’t invoke this curse, I know I’ll get some of the blowback, so no, I won’t just break your poppet for shits and giggles, however tempting. If I help you break this curse, you’ll give me all copies of the video, yes?”

Jughead scoffed. “Not if we break it ourselves, first.”

Cheryl’s jaw tightened before she turned her attention to Betty. “If you join the Vixens and vote for me as captain in the next election, I’ll tell you who my client is, Betty, and you can deal with it yourself. Mommy won’t be too mad if I tell another Blossom.”

Veronica’s jaw dropped. “How dare you?”
Betty swallowed. It was an offer she couldn’t refuse. Sure, it probably meant that Cheryl would own her, but what choice did she have? Archie’s sanity was on the line and she couldn’t just watch another human being subjected to magic that stripped him of his dignity.

She was about to give in when Jughead’s hand rested on her shoulder with gentle pressure.

“Don’t do it, Betts,” he said, softly. “It’s not worth it. You don’t want to become Cheryl’s minion. If you’re thinking about Archie, you don’t have to. There’s another way we can break the curse.”

His words were a relief, and Veronica jumped at the opportunity immediately.

“Scared I can vote you down, Cher?” she asked, grinning.

“The Lost as so easily persuaded,” Cheryl replied with icy calm as she turned to walk away. “Put that down as the House Blossom family motto, Jones.”

Cheryl pranced back onto the football field.

“God, she’s so overwhelming,” Betty breathed. She felt winded, like she’d done a fast sprint keeping up with Cheryl. Betty was no stranger to physical and mental faceoffs, but Cheryl was an emotional workout.

“How does that shit even work?” Veronica grunted. “I mean, that’s my cousin you’re talking about.”

“Used to be me, now it’s you. My turn to be the bitch, you know.”

Veronica shot him a look of disdain and Betty actually pursed her lips to prevent a giggle from escaping.

“Wouldn’t Betty have to be a Vixen first before she can vote for you, anyway?” he pointed out.

“I can convince Betty to be a Vixen, don’t you worry,” Veronica said as she began to walk backwards. “I gotta go back to practice and wrangle more votes. I’ll see you tomorrow!” She disappeared around the bend.

Betty pressed her folded hands to her lips. She closed her eyes and took deep breaths. “Obey the three-fold law you should, three times bad and three times good.” She whispered it like a prayer, or a mantra. Arguably, her Wicked abilities made her immune to the Rule of Three, but it still served as a kind of moral compass, a little reminder that visiting suffering upon her cousin was just a terrible thing to do in general.

“Is that what you tell yourself when you want to strangle Cheryl?”

She cracked an eye open and cocked a contrite smile. “I’m a good person, but sometimes…”

He chuckled.

She paused, biting her lip. She owed him a thanks. “Listen, Jug, thank you for stepping in when you did. I was going to tell Cheryl yes.”

He seemed mildly surprised by her admission, but he nodded. “I knew you were. I couldn’t let you, especially when I know we can break the curse ourselves.”

Betty thought back on her spell books and couldn’t quite remember what that third method was. “Remind me again--?”
Jughead looked at his watch. “I need to get to my shift at the library, but if you have time, you can come with me and we can talk about it, there. Kevin’s already there, waiting.”

“I’ve got time,” she replied, quietly. “Kevin…?”

“We’ll need his help,” Jughead said, a little wearily. “He’s got a better mind for this curse-break than I do.”

“Which is?”

“Betrayal.”

As the word sunk in and his meaning became clear, the butterflies in her stomach went into a wild and frantic frenzy.

Chapter End Notes

Any questions? You can throw them at me in the comments section or you can drop me an Ask on Tumblr.
“People said things like 'we had to make our own amusements in those days' as if this signified some kind of moral worth, and perhaps it did, but the last thing you wanted a witch to do was get bored and start making her own amusements, because witches sometimes had famously erratic ideas about what was amusing.”

— Terry Pratchett, Legends

Betty tried not to think about how much she spent the entire ride to the library scolding herself mentally for taking way too much note of how Jughead’s body felt against hers.

She scowled at how her arms and hands had been hyper-aware of how solid his abs and chest were, and how they moved when the bike shifted one way or another.

She grit her teeth at how her imagination was betraying her, thinking about that body without a shirt, but with his flannel on—she cursed those blasted buttons that were sometimes half-undone.

She pursed her own lips at how the turns they made forced her own body to press closer against his back, and how she had told herself, over and over, that he couldn’t possibly feel her boobs through his patched leather jacket.

“You look pissed,” Kevin said to her as they approached his table at the library. “What’d he do this time?”

She checked herself, trying to ease the tension from her face. Instead, she felt heat blossoming from her neck up and she couldn’t think of a proper response. “N-Nothing, I’m just—I’m preoccupied.”

“Yeah, things did not go as well as we hoped,” Jughead said, completely oblivious to her avalanche of hormonal thoughts. She was so relieved that slayers could not read minds.

“Are we surprised Cheryl didn’t come through?” Kevin said, gesturing to the seats across him.

“It’s worse than that,” Jughead said, pulling a chair out for her, which she took after a moment’s surprise.

He was such a contradiction in so many respects. He seemed like an effective enough Slayer, having the affection of Otherworlders while evoking fear when necessary. He seemed almost Machiavellian in his pursuits, and yet he didn’t hesitate to show kindness and remorse. He managed to deceive, and yet he could be very honest. He strutted around like a big, bad, biker, and yet he’s pulling chairs out for her to sit.

What makes this guy tick? she wondered.

He hooked a thumb over his shoulder. “I gotta go check in for a few minutes. I’m actually on the clock. Betty, think you can fill Kev in while I get some work done?”

Betty tried not to get so freaked out at being left alone with a person that she barely knew. Instead, she muttered. “Shouldn’t be hard.”.
“Great, thanks. Give me fifteen minutes.”

He was off and as Betty watched him disappear in the back, she tried to remind herself that this was the guy who pretended to befriend her and made her feel things, because it was getting harder and harder to keep her distance.

She scoffed, softly. “Slayers who pull up chairs for witches… this town is ass backwards.”

Kevin chuckled and it was only then Betty realized she had said that out loud.

Her face flamed. “I’m sorry, that was really rude. I didn’t mean—”

“I get it,” Kevin drawled. “You witches from the big city all think that Slayers are just thugs and hoodlums. In most cases, you’re not wrong, but around here, in Riverdale, Jughead Jones does things his own way. And you’re not the first to be caught off guard by that.”

“His own way,” she repeated, more to herself, eyeing the door Jughead disappeared into warily.

“It’s his home environment, likely,” Kevin continued. “His mom’s a witch, his sister’s one, too. He’s close with the Spellmans—and yet his father is the Nuclear Bomb of Slayers. He has a unique exposure to both sides of the coin. He’s been conditioned a certain way. I mean, he isn’t always a gentleman.” He grinned, broadly. “But when he is, you can be sure it’s because he likes you.”

Betty didn’t know what to say about that. She felt her face flushing even more.

Kevin’s eyebrow arched. “And by like, I mean—he does the same for Ronnie, and Zelda and Hilda. Not so much for Sabrina—those two tolerate one another. Never for Cheryl. Get my drift?”

She didn’t reply, processing this information.

“Just letting you know it’s not an act.”

It occurred to Betty that Kevin was explaining this to her because her mistrust of Jughead was probably radiating off her in waves. “I—I didn’t think he was faking that.”

Kevin gave a pert nod. “Contrary to popular belief, Jughead Jones doesn’t fake things. He’s one hell of a secret keeper, but he’ll never be able to lie to your face. Deception is not exactly in his DNA—everything he knows about that, he learned from me.”

Betty couldn’t help but wonder if Kevin was trying to tell her something.

“So enough about Jughead,” he said, waving a dismissive hand in Jughead’s general direction. “I want to know about you.”

She didn’t want to talk about herself. “We’re supposed to talk about Cheryl.”

“I swear, any other witch would’ve jumped at the chance to talk about themselves, but not you, Betty Cooper.”

Something gleamed in Kevin’s eyes and Betty took closer note of his features. That glint in his gaze was not the light hitting it. She was tempted to reach out and touch his arm. Some magic was coming off him. If that faint hint of it radiating off him was anything other than a glamour, she would hex herself. He was hiding his appearance, something he had in common with many creatures.

He was fey—or half, if she remembered what Sabrina told her correctly.
“What’s it like being half-fey in Riverdale?” she whispered.

Kevin stifled a giggle. “I wouldn’t ask me questions like that if I were you. If I give you an answer, you would be giving me a promise.”

There were only two beings that guarded questions about themselves with warnings: Fey and Demon. Both beings spent most of their lives duping human beings. The only difference between them was that demons needed souls to stay on this plane, from which they can be banished back to their dimensions for a thousand years. The Fey needed souls to live forever. Demons made contracts. The Fey held on to promises.

“So when you’re half-fey, does it mean your fey tendencies also get…. muted?” Even with a glamour--magic they used to hide the points of their ears and the slant of their eyes, the fey couldn’t hide their general tendencies from human beings. The fey dressed more lavishly--more creatively--than Kevin’s generally more low-key, however well-dressed, appearance.

“You’re not wrong,” he said. It was a measured confirmation. The fey--or at least full fey, rarely answered questions with straight yeses and nos. Qualifiers were necessary. They didn’t like to lie, but if they can keep things open ended, they would. Like if you asked them their name, they weren’t going to necessarily answer it with, “I’m Kevin.” They’d say, “You can call me Kevin,” because then, they could hide their true name and not lie about it.

“If I were full,” he continued, “I can’t possibly have healthy relationships. My purer counterparts tend to border on psycho when it comes to the humans they keep.”

“Are there full fey in Riverdale?”

Kevin smirked again but said nothing.

“Does every conversation with you mean risking my soul?”

Kevin chuckled. “As half-human, I tend to be… well, more human. I don’t entrap unwitting humans into my enchanted embrace--at least not on the regular. I only do it these days to help Juggy the Vampire Slayer.”

In spite of herself, Betty choked on a laugh. The idea that Jughead was a perky cheerleader with a Mr. Pointy was kind of delightful, then again, the reality was that vampires could be disposed of with a wooden stake through the heart.

Maybe it wasn’t so delightful.

“So tell me, Betty,” Kevin said, leaning over the table. “Do you not like Archie Andrews?”

God, these fey. Her face felt like lava. “Not that way. I mean, he seems nice, but he’s--I mean, you know--”

“Generic? Boring?”

God! “No. He is so painfully innocent of all this. I don’t think he could handle the Otherworld. He’d be completely lost.” It didn’t escape her that “lost” and Lost fit so perfectly in this context.

Kevin seemed amused by this. “You know he’s not entirely innocent. He’s girl-crazy--a Casanova. And he gets easily distracted by people or things. Even if he weren’t bespelled, he’d be on you like a moth to a flame, and he’ll probably stick around for a bit, and then when you’re in love with him, he’ll find something or someone else to occupy him.”
“I’ve been told,” she muttered.

“Oh, I’m sure Jones has filled you in.”

She fought the urge to ask what that was supposed to mean. “It doesn’t matter. We have to break the spell. This isn’t fair to him.”

Kevin nodded. “Cheryl didn’t admit to it, did she?”

Betty shook her head and filled Kevin in on their conversation with Cheryl at the practice field. Kevin listened intently with Betty recounting as many details as she could. Through the course of their discussion, she spied Jughead emerging from the offices and flitting about, working the counters and then leaving to provide help and services to other library goers.

She tried not to let him distract her. Jughead scurrying about with books in his hands or under his arm was powerfully attractive and she tried not to hate herself too much for it.

When she finished retelling events to Kevin, he nodded thoughtfully.

“Interesting,” he said. “Who could it have been? They’d have to have magic, to invoke it.”

Betty nodded. “And there’s no way to trace the magic, unless the witch leaves a signature—if it’s even a witch.”

It was then Jughead seemed to break away from his work and saunter up to their table. He took the seat alongside Betty’s, slumping a bit on his chair. He allowed himself some room, stretching his long legs.

“You have a situation in your hands, Jug,” Kevin said, grinning. “And Betty tells me you need an honest to goodness betrayal.”

Jughead nodded, throwing an apologetic look at Betty. “It’s why we’re telling you this, Kev. We need your direction.”

Kevin cracked his knuckles, an eager expression on his face. “Scheming and subterfuge. My specialty. We’re going to need a proper set up, some means of communication, and commitment.”

Betty fidgeted uneasily on her seat. “I mean, it doesn’t have to be too complicated, does it?”

“You leave everything to me, goldy,” Kevin said. “It’s going to be fine.”

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When Betty got home that night, she walked into a hallway full of blood red roses. There were dozens of them, some loosely arranged, others more elaborate. Betty could barely step around them and they were bleeding into the living room.

She stared, dumbfounded by the enormity of this gesture, frightened by the intensity of it. How the hell did Archie even pay for this? He probably maxed out his father’s credit card, or something as equally irresponsible.

Amidst the explosion of floral arrangements stood her mother, who was eyeing her with barely
veiled suspicion.

“Either you’ve caught the fancy of some moneyed older man or something supernatural is going on,” Alice said. “What the heck is this, Betty?”

“I don’t know!” she cried, reeling in her tendencies to blurt out the truth. She grabbed a card and read what was written on it. It said, To my beloved Betty. ~Your Secret Admirer. Every single one of them was signed that way, but the messages were different for each card. It was manic.

“I’m calling these florists,” Alice huffed, taking the cards.

“Please, mom, don’t! This is just some witchy, Blossom prank, I’m sure. Let me get to the bottom of this—”

“This is harassment! And for all I know, it’s predatory. I need to figure out—”

“The florists must be closed at this hour. And mom, if this is someone at school, especially if it’s the Blossoms, do we really want to call that kind of attention? Aren’t we supposed to be lying low around here?”

Alice scowled, then she took a deep, cleansing breath. Perhaps she was actually considering Betty’s words. “Where is the number of that Jones boy? If this is supernatural, this falls under his jurisdiction—”

“I’ll call him right now,” Betty said, hastily, pulling out her phone. “Just sit back and I’ll have him sort this out, okay? Maybe we can figure something out in the morning.”

Alice rolled her eyes but did turn to head up the stairs. “Fine. I checked the bouquets and none of them seem to be bespelled. They’re just plain flowers. Still, it’s so unnerving, Elizabeth. I swear to God, this town is as bonkers as it’s ever been.”

“That’s why you keep Jughead Jones on speed dial,” she said in an unnaturally perky tone.

As her mother’s steps rose higher and higher, Betty turned to her phone and called Jughead on facetime.

It took several rings, but he picked up, pushing up his helmet visor to look at her. “What’s up, Betty?”

“I’m sorry, were you driving?”

“I pulled over. Something wrong?”

“You need to see this,” she said, breathlessly. She turned the camera on her phone and started to pan across the bouquet of roses lining her home. She showed him how many there were, and when she had scanned across all of them, she turned the camera back on herself.

“Jesus, that escalated quickly,” Jughead gasped. “We need to get this done tomorrow, Betts. I don’t even know how bad it’ll get overnight. Are you okay with that?”

Her stomach turned somersaults. “Y-Yes. I’d have to be.”

He nodded. “I know it’s not ideal, but it’s the only way. I’m sorry.”

“D-Don’t be. I know you’re only trying to help.”
“I gotta go, but if Archie does anything tonight, call me. I’ll head over there, okay? It’s gonna be alright.”

“Okay.”

They ended their call and Betty sighed. The tension on her shoulders increasing. When she climbed the stairs, Polly stuck her head out of her room.


“Me?” Betty whispered back, fiercely. “I didn’t do a thing! How could this possibly be my fault?”

“Oh, are those flowers a bad thing, then?”

Betty pursed her lips. She didn’t know how she was going to explain it.

Polly arched an eyebrow. “Are they cursed? Did you piss off the wrong witch, or something, because Cheryl--”

“Cheryl already said she didn’t do it.”

“And you believe that harpy?”

“You know, Polly, the only other witch around here that seems to hate me is you. For all I know, you’re the one who sicced Archie on me!”

Polly’s eyes widened. “Sicced Archie on--what the hell are you talking about, Betty?”

Betty sighed in resignation. “Archie is bespelled. He’s--like, in love with me or something. Not for real, of course.”

“He’s cute, at least. I would swear he has a six pack.”

“Ugh, Pol, does it matter?”

“I guess not, but I take umbrage at your accusations. Give me some credit. If I wanted to torment you, I’d be TOTALLY direct about it. Like Witch Grade itching powder in your panties or I’d give you a dose of Bad Taste Buds potion so food will taste awful for you for days. Not bullshit love potions and--”

“It’s a binding, Polly.”

“Whatever. Anyway, I recognize that I haven’t been the nicest sister the last few weeks and for that I’m sorry, but I would never do something like this to you, Lizzie. Seriously.”

Betty didn’t even know why she said what she said. Its been some kind of a week. “I’m sorry, Pol. I didn’t mean to say that.”

“It’s okay. I’ve been horrible and I know it. I don’t blame you for thinking it could’ve been me.” She pushed her bedroom door wide open. “I bought a bunch of new beauty products this afternoon. Want to try them out with me? It’ll be good for your tired-looking eyes.”

Betty shot her a sardonic smirk. “Gee, thanks.”

Polly laughed, softly. “I’m kidding about the eyes, but come on, it will feel good to put on a mask and rejuvenate. You try the Peach Splash and I’ll try the Cucumber Mango Refresh.”
She supposed she could spend an hour or so trying to unwind with her sister. With cautious optimism, she stepped into Polly’s room and let Polly pull her to her coverlet amidst a pile of beauty products.

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Polly had volunteered to take Betty to school this time and Betty was happier for it. She had ended up sleeping in Polly’s room, sisters snuggling in the warmth of the bed covers while their facemasks dried and its essential ingredients firmed their skin.

Betty had awoken to Polly giggling at her orange face, and Betty had laughed at Polly’s green one. They chattered easily as they got ready in their shared bathroom together, and Betty almost forgot her troubles, that is until Polly remotely opened the garage door and almost ran Archie over.

“She had stepped hard on the breaks. She rolled down her window and cried, “What the hell, dude? I almost backed into you!”

“Is that you, Betty?” Archie cried, a hint of shrill in his tone.

Betty sank into the passenger seat. “Oh, my God.”

Before she could even consider pretending she wasn’t there, Archie had trespassed through the garage and to Polly's side of the car.

“Oh, hi, Betty’s sister!” he cried, enthusiastically. “Hey, there, Betty! I figured you were in this car.”

Polly shot Betty a wide-eyed glare, as if asking Betty what she should do.

Betty shrugged helplessly. “I’m going to school, Archie. Can we talk later?”

“I’m heading there, too! Can I hitch a ride?” He pulled the handle on the back. It was locked, but he kept pulling it.

“Jesus, okay!” Polly cried. “Don’t pull the handle off!” She undid the lock.

Archie spilled in immediately, scooching over to the middle so he could get closer to Betty. “Did you like the flowers I sent you?”

Betty leaned as far away from him as possible. “R-Really, Arch. They were totally unnecessary. I mean--”

“Anything for you, Betty. I got roses. The reddest ones I could find. It’s how I feel about you. You are so, so beautiful. I hope you know that.”

“Ugh,” Polly growled, starting the car and pulling out of the garage. “You need to get on this shit, Betty.”

“I’m working on it with Jughead,” she grumbled.

“Working on what with Jughead?” Archie asked, his tone taking on a slightly different timbre. “I thought I saw him drop you off last night.”
“I came from the library, so--”

“Yeah, that motorcycle’s dangerous. You should stop getting on it. I don’t know what Jughead was thinking letting you on that thing. He’s obviously not thinking about your safety.”

“Jughead’s a very good driver,” Betty said, loftily. If they were going to get on this betrayal business, she may as well begin to lay it on, thick. “He won’t let anything happen to me.”

“Yeah, he’s shady as fuck. I wouldn’t spend time with him if I were you.”

Betty pursed her lips. This was a symptom of the binding. Paranoia. It took the smallest thought and morphed it into a monster in someone’s head. Archie must have deeply buried feelings of suspicion for Jughead, and he probably never would’ve let it see the light of day if he weren’t so entangled in a binding spell.

Archie spent the whole trip on the same type of thread, telling her how wonderful she was and speaking an alarming commentary on how Jughead, Kevin, and Veronica always seemed to be hiding something.

When they got to the school, she exchanged cheek kisses with Polly.

“You going to be alright?” Polly asked, her eyes darting to Archie quickly.

Betty nodded, looking over her shoulder. “Kevin and Jughead are here. I think I can manage.”

“What are they doing out here?” Archie growled.

Betty had texted them as Archie went off on his growing obsession of her, so now they were headed towards the curb, fully expecting Archie to be with her.

“I’ll text you,” Betty promised Polly as Jughead pulled her car door open. Betty spilled out, hurrying to get away from Archie who was currently being delayed by Kevin.

“Wasn’t a great idea to have him hitch a ride with you,” Jughead grumbled quickly in her ear.

“He didn’t give us much of a choice,” Betty hissed back, hurrying up the steps of the school.

Archie, however, was quick and insistent, getting past Kevin as she walked through the doors. He slung his arm over her shoulders and began to walk with her.

“Arch!” she hissed, trying to pull away, feeling the eyes of everyone falling upon them.

A group of Bulldog-jacketed boys turned in their direction on one side, while Cheryl, surrounded by a group of girls with what looked like spotted cat ears on their heads, looked at them from the other.

Cheryl was smirking. A few of the other girls were, too, but one of them glared at Archie with clear despair, turning and leaving almost instantly.

“I’ll walk you to class,” Archie told her.

“You don’t need you to,” Betty replied. “I can walk there myself.”

Jughead swung an arm around Archie’s neck. “Hey, man, I need to talk to you about something. I was thinking of trying out for the basketball team this year. Is that still possible?”

“Later, dude. I don’t want Betty to be alone. Those guys are all looking at her.”
“I’m going to hex him now,” Betty hissed under her breath.

“Easy, lady,” Kevin murmured. “Follow me.”

Desperate, Betty did. As expected, Archie followed after her.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

Kevin led them to the administrative section of the school and straight to the nurse’s office. When they got there, Ethel and her mother, the school nurse, were waiting for them.

“Jughead Jones,” Nurse Muggs said. “What can we do for you?”

“Betts,” Jughead said. “Stun him.”

“What?” she asked, surprised.

“Any decent witch knows how to do a stunning spell.”

Betty looked uncertainly at Ethel and Nurse Muggs.

“What are we doing here?” Archie asked, impatiently.

When no one replied, Betty knew she was in full Otherworlder company. Stepping up to Archie, she placed her thumb on his forehead.

“Archie, I’m really sorry,” she whispered. Carefully, so that nobody sees her fingernails digging into her palms, she invoked the spell and knocked Archie out.

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Of course, stunning Archie was a temporary measure.

Betty was still astounded that Ethel Muggs was half mermaid and that her human mother was fully prepared to help out Jughead Jones, slayer.

Then again, if the heart-eyes Ethel was casting Jughead was any indication, Nurse Muggs was definitely more motivated to oblige her daughter.

With Archie currently sleeping off the stunning spell at the nurse’s office and the school nurse in cahoots with them, Archie’s absence, while missed, hadn’t been reported to his father and no one was the wiser.

He would likely stir awake towards the end of school and the plan was for Kevin and Veronica to be there for him when he did.

“So are you going to be able to get Fred out of the house tonight?” Kevin asked Veronica as they discussed the final plans at lunch.

She arched an eyebrow. “Easily. Daddy’s been meaning to talk to him about construction plans for the new condos downtown and I just needed to reminded him that the sooner he worked Fred up to wanting the contract, the better the price Fred will quote him.”
“Ah, the machinations of the little rich girl,” Kevin said, contentedly. “You’re playing point, right? Later?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

Betty sighed, anxiety making her stomach clench slightly.

Jughead nudged her. “Hey, it won’t be that bad.”

She felt her face grow unbearably hot. “I—I’m just worried. I’ve never done something like this before.”

“Just go with it, girl,” Veronica said, breezily. “I’ll make sure Jughead brushes his teeth thoroughly.”

Jughead gave her side-eye. “What would I do without you, Ronnie?”

“Screw everything up, that’s what.”

“Okay, so I managed to sneak out a bunch of surveillance equipment from the police station we can use,” Kevin said with an air of accomplishment.

Jughead shook his head with a heavy sigh. “The government is always watching.”

Kevin rolled his eyes with a soft groan. “Honestly, Jug. Is the irony of your conspiracy theories really lost on you? You are the freaking epitome of a secret parallel world. And by the way, the fact that I found the stuff gathering dust on shelves means the police aren’t using them.”

Jughead snorted. “You can’t tell me that the government isn’t using Otherworlder powers to their benefit. There’s no way they could miss all this.”

“My father’s the Sheriff of this town and he still has no idea that he impregnated a fey woman. You can’t tell me the government’s that smart.”

Betty wasn’t quite so surprised by Kevin’s declaration. History is rife with stories of Lost men being bamboozled by fey women their entire mortal lives. “Where’s your mom now, Kevin?”

“Oh, toppling governments, I’d imagine.”

“Kevin is convinced she works for the CIA black ops,” Jughead explained.

“Does she?” Betty asked.

Jughead shook his head. “She serves in the military.”

“That’s what she wants you to think,” Kevin interjected.

“And he calls me a conspiracy theorist.”

It was Veronica’s turn to roll her eyes. “And these two dingbats wonder why they’re best friends.”

“Hey!” said Kevin and Jughead in unison.

Betty couldn’t help the small giggle that escaped her.

“So we’ll keep Archie preoccupied until about 9,” Veronica said to distract. “Betty, you’ll be ready by then?”
Betty nodded, trying to hide her nervousness. “Yes. I can get Polly’s help to make sure both mom and Chic are put away for the night. We should be clear to do what we have to do.”

“Excellent,” Kevin said, clapping his hands and rubbing them together. “This is going to be great!” He nudged Jughead, whose face had gotten decidedly red.

“This better work,” he muttered.

“It’ll work. Trust me.”

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“Go, now!” came Kevin’s voice in Jughead’s earpiece.

Taking a deep breath and adjusting his leather jacket more securely over his shoulders, he sauntered up Elm street and made straight for Betty’s house.

As Jughead ascended the steps to the walkway, he surveyed the facade briefly before going to the side.

Most of the Cooper home was dark but for a few dim lights on the second floor. It was just a little past nine in the evening and Betty had said that the Coopers were big believers of going to bed pretty early. Also, Polly had made sure that she, Chic, and Alice shared a bottle of wine at dinner. Between the wine and the ambien her mother would take, Alice Cooper would be out cold by the time Jughead came around to do what he had to do. Chic wasn’t as concerned about what his sisters did after dinner, so he wasn’t likely to kick up a fuss, but it was best to relax him even more with wine.

“Betty said, the ladder’s in the back,” Kevin told him as he made his way to the back.

“Why am I using this ladder again?” Jughead whispered. “I mean, I could just go up the front door--”

“Shush. It’s for dramatic effect. Also, I’m the director of this production so shut the fuck up.”

“Alright, jeez.” He let his eyes adjust to the darkness and found the ladder, which was lying on its side along the backyard fence. Hoisting it, Jughead carefully maneuvered back to the side of the house and propped it quietly against the siding, just beneath Betty’s window.

“Now climb,” Kevin instructed. “Veronica’s going to call attention to you in a second. V, can you adjust the camera for a bit? Or maybe move. All I can see are your boobs. Thank you!”

Kevin’s set up was a little elaborate. They needed someone to run point on Archie, which was Veronica--tasked to make sure Archie saw everything while also making sure that Archie didn’t run raging out of his house, causing a scene. In the meantime, Kevin would be directing the entire thing, monitoring Archie from the screen of his laptop outside Archie’s room and feeding information into Jughead’s earpiece, taking their cues from Archie’s reactions. Hopefully it meant their set up would be more effective.

All Archie knew was that he, Kevin, and Veronica had just had dinner at Pop’s and now they were going to smoke weed in his bedroom.
Archie has been inhaling the stuff for a little over half an hour now. Veronica and Kevin were pretty sober, even with a whiff of second hand marijuana smoke.

“How’s Archie doing?” Jughead couldn’t help but ask as he started to climb the ladder.

“Very, very chill,” Kevin said. “Which is how we want him. I don’t think even Veronica and mine’s combined strength can stop his rippling, muscled, football player body.”

“Kevin…”

“So shoot me. He’s a hot piece of ass. Okay, now knock on Betty’s window. She’s expecting you. Archie’s watching you now. Put your gameface on.”

Jughead took a deep breath and tapped lightly on Betty’s window pane. He saw her shadow approaching the window and as she slid the window up, she peered out anxiously from her window seat.

She had brushed down her hair and it fell in golden waves down her shoulders. Her pink cami was layered with a white cardigan. Her short denim skirt rode a little up her leg. She hadn’t changed from her school clothes, but the lighting made her look different and incredibly pretty.

“Hi,” he said, softly.

“Hi,” she replied, biting her lower lip. “Is he watching us?”

He nodded. “Can I come in?” Even if she had agreed to this plan in advance, he still felt strange barging in without asking her first.

“Of course.” She stepped back to let him through.

Gingerly, he climbed further up, crouching through her window and carefully stepping over the upholstery of her window seat so as not to soil it with his shoes.

“Oh, Archie’s getting worked up already,” Kevin said. “Weed’s good, though. Veronica’s got a handle on him. Keep going. You’re in a good spot. Archie can see everything. Now pull her closer, and do it naturally.”

Sighing and trying not to roll his eyes, Jughead took Betty’s hands gently and pulled her closer to him.

“Jug?” Betty asked, fidgeting on her feet as she looked up at him briefly, before turning her gaze to their feet. Her face was flaming. She looked so uncomfortable.

“I’m sorry, Betts,” he said, meaning it. “I know this feels weird, but I’d rather deal with this awkwardness than risk your pain--yours and Archie’s pain and suffering.”

“Oh, I know,” she replied, her fingers flexing slightly within his. “It’s just--” she chuckled a little miserably. “I never thought I’d had to do anything like this and I’m feeling a little--well, pathetic, really.”

“Archie’s really wondering what you’re doing now,” Kevin’s said in his ear, a tiny thrill in his tone. “He could barely believe you’re doing this--like, you’re his bro, Jug. This is so going to work. Veronica’s talking him off a ledge. Get closer now and get to it already!”

“Kevin’s saying we gotta do this now,” Jughead said. “You ready?”
She nodded, wordlessly at first, then her arms shifted a bit awkwardly. “How should we--I mean--” Her cheeks reddened again and he wished, all of a sudden, that he could make this easier for her.

Softly, he took her face in his hands. She seemed a little surprised, but she let him.

“This okay?” he asked, his thumb inadvertently rubbing against the apple of her cheek.

“Y-Yes, that’s fine,” she said with a soft tremble in her voice.

They were so close that he could see the patterns on her irises, how the green in her eyes was like a burst of space clouds. The vulnerability in her gaze hit him, and for a moment, he wanted to call the whole thing off. If felt wrong, to pretend, when she was so willing to trust him with this.

“What are you waiting for, Jones?” came Kevin’s impatient prompt.

“Oh, hell no.

He began to move his lips and Betty--Betty--responded with a sigh.

That sigh shot a thrill through him, and when she opened her mouth, he swore he forgot himself when his tongue sought to caress hers. Heat spread through his body, especially when he felt her fingers combing through his hair.

His hands trailed down to her waist, wrapping his arms around her and pulling her closer in his embrace.

“That’s perfect, Jug!” Kevin gushed. “Now swing her around a little.”

Jughead was getting slightly incensed by Kevin’s direction and he pulled away, intending to tell Betty what he was going to do, but he was so mortified to find himself panting for breath that he scrambled to apologize. “B-Betts, I’m sor--”

“Don’t be,” she breathed, pressing her lips to his again. He found himself welcoming her advances, and maybe to his slight chagrin, he did swing her slightly around to position for a deeper kiss.

A small voice, increasingly getting smaller, nagged him to think about Archie--check in on him, but Jughead was crossing a point where he realized he just had to keep doing this.

“Believe it or not,” Kevin muttered, taking Jughead out of the zen he was slipping into with every caress of Betty’s tongue. “This doesn’t seem to be hitting Archie as hard as we thought. He is such a fuckboi, I swear! Take off your jacket.”

“What?” Jughead gasped, staring dumbly into Betty’s lidded eyes.

“Your jacket, Jones!” Kevin hissed.
“What?” Betty asked, hearing none of that conversation. All she knew was that Jughead had stopped kissing her.

“Kevin said to take off my jacket,” he replied, quickly.

“Okay,” she breathed, pushing his jacket off his shoulders.

They were kissing again, and Jughead was only mildly conscious of how his jacket went splat on her carpeted floor. Her hands were cupping his face now, and he was sucking on her tongue. A little moan escaped her throat and that sent a jolt of heat in his pants.

His hands sought the skin of her shoulders beneath her cardigan, and without prompting, she shoved her own cardigan off.

“Okay, wow!” Kevin gasped. “That was good and that definitely did something to Archie. Veronica’s giving me the thumbs up.”

“It’s working,” Jughead mumbled against her lips. “This is working.” He wasn’t sure if he meant their plan or how her fingers were skirting the edges of his shirt, how this makeout session was becoming increasingly hard for him to control himself. He didn’t even know if he wanted to control himself.

“Good,” she said, breathless. She pulled back and lifted the hem of her cami, peeling it off her body. He was effectively shocked, his good sense completely obliterated by the perfect mounds of her breasts, nicely held by a purple bra made of satin and lace. “Oh, shit.”

“It’s all pretend, right?” she rasped.

“Oh, hell yeah,” he growled, just as his lips were clamped down on her throat while his tongue tasted her skin. She wrapped her arms over his shoulders and pulled him towards her. They were falling on her bed and even then he could not stop kissing her shoulders.

Her legs wrapped around him and that was it. His dick went on full alert and he knew his hardness was evident between them, but it was like he wasn’t embarrassed about it in the least. Not anymore. A groan left his throat as he lavished her tongue with his, but then Kevin’s voice, which had gone silent for longer than he supposed was reasonable, began to filter through his senses.

“Jughead, quit it already! Can’t you fucking hear me?”

Jughead tore his lips from Betty’s, looking up from the bed and out her window. Both Kevin and Veronica were waving at them madly, and Jughead realized that his earpiece had fallen off and that Kevin’s voice was filtering through his misplaced earbud. He immediately put the earbud back on.

“Can you hear me now?” Kevin yelled.

Jughead cringed as the volume vibrated his eardrums. “Yes, jeez!”

“Okay, great! We’ve done it, Jug. The binding’s broken, but we need you to get over here right now.”

“Okay,” he said, pushing himself off the bed. He suddenly couldn’t look Betty in the eyes. “Kev said it’s done.” He ran his hand roughly through his hair. “It’s done.”
He was catching his breath and he was willing his erection to go away, which was difficult, considering he could still see Betty from the corner of his eye, catching her breath, her beautiful breasts heaving in their lavender lace trappings. He picked up her cami from the floor and gently handed it to her.

“Here,” he said, quietly. “We need to get over there.”

“Here?”

“To Archie’s house.”

“Oh…” Slowly, she pushed herself off her bed and took the cami from his hand. She slipped it back on with what looked, to him, like perfect poise, considering the circumstances. She picked up her cardigan, too, shrugging it on before righting her skirt, which had, of course, hiked up her thighs in their tussling.

He watched her walk over to her dresser, taking up her brush and running it through the soft strands of her golden hair.

“Tell Betty to bring over some potions for spell shock. I think that binding might have been a little too tight and Archie’s a little worse for wear,” Kevin said, breaking him out of his spell.

“Do you--do you have any potions for spell shock?” Jughead managed to croak out.

Betty turned from her dresser, staring at him for a few heartbeats, as if she were waiting for him to say something else, but she just nodded and said. “There’s some in our cupboard downstairs. Let me get some and I’ll follow, okay?”

He ran his tongue lightly over his lips. “Okay. I’ll just--”

“Yeah, you’d have to take the ladder. I can’t risk mom or Chic seeing you--”

“Right.” He turned, picking his jacket off the floor and trying not to think about how it got there. He shrugged his jacket on and made for the window.

“Jug?”

He whirled to face her so fast that he wondered if she didn’t see how expectant he actually felt. “Yes?”

Was she going to say something about what just happened? It wasn’t like they hadn’t agreed to do this before hand. This was all a set up. If it got a little too intense, it wasn’t as if it wasn’t pleasurable. Or maybe that was the problem? Did it even need talking about?

Her eyes flickered to his hair momentarily, and it was only a second later that he realized she was holding something up in her hand. “Your beanie.”

He touched his head. Of course it had come off. He took his beanie from her hand, their fingers brushing. “Um, thanks.”

“I’ll see you at Archie’s.”

“Yeah.” And as he turned, he felt a little like fleeing. He did, in a way, hurrying out of her window and down the ladder, letting the darkness cloak his turmoil.
It was Veronica who led her from Fred Andrews’ s front door up into Archie’s room.

Betty clutched the potions in her hand, knowing it was the best remedy to be had in Riverdale for spell shock. She had full faith in Chic’s potion making abilities and it would help Archie, whatever state he was in.

When Veronica let her through the door, Jughead was crouched over Archie, checking the pupils of his eyes. The color was gone from them. Completely. Like the browns in his iris had been erased.

Archie was also breathing rapidly, however unconscious he seemed to be. A film of sweat was already coating his skin. It looked frightening, not that much different from someone being possessed, but she was certain he’d be fine. Spell shock from binding was not going to kill him if they remedied his situation immediately.

“Open his mouth,” Betty said, coming up to the bed and sitting on the edge of it. She took one vial and uncapped it.

Jughead lifted Archie up and pried his mouth open.

Betty carefully poured in the contents of the vial, a glowing blue mixture that oozed sluggishly into his mouth. She ran her fingers down Archie’s throat, leaned over him, and blew a gentle breath through his lips. It was a cast for a very mild stimulation spell, and just like that, Archie began to swallow the potion.

She could feel Jughead’s eyes on her and she wondered if he thought she was going to kiss Archie.

With all the potion ingested, she sat back and waited for the potion to work.

The effects were immediate. His breathing began to normalize and the tension in his body eased. His eyelids flickered momentarily before settling, and it looked like his body had gone into a state of restful repose.

Jughead pried back Archie’s eyelid. The browns were back. “He’s better.”

Veronica sighed. “You guys, you did not see his aura like I did. He literally exploded light. It went so far. You wouldn’t believe it if I told you, but it traveled out as far as the eye could see.”

“What does that mean?” Kevin asked.

All eyes turned to Betty and Betty shrugged. “Not sure. Some say it’s because any spell affects everything around it, so when you break something, like a curse, you’re effectively breaking its effect on everything else, but that’s just a theory. Aunt Zelda and Aunt Hilda might have other ideas.”

Jughead nodded. “In the meantime…” He dug into the pockets of his jacket and brought out the poppets. In his hands sat three of them.

“You found the third poppet,” Betty pointed out nonsensically. “Where?”

“Shower room lockers,” Jughead replied, his gaze fixed on hers.

She tried not to let the intensity in his eyes affect her, but it was impossible. She had felt him.
lips, his tongue, and even his body. Goosebumps rippled down her back pleasantly and she could only hope the darkness cloaked the ones rising from the skin of her arms.

Betty took the poppets from him, holding them in her hand. “These can be destroyed safely now.”

Kevin chuckled, slapping Jughead’s shoulder. “Another day, another case concluded.”

Jughead sighed, deeply. “Not solved, though. We still don’t know who did this.”

“Does it matter?” Veronica asked.

“It does. I can’t have this sort of thing happening in my town.”

Something clenched in the pit of Betty’s stomach. *My town.*

There was something very authoritative and sexy about the way he took responsibility over everything.

*Not that it changes the fact that he deceived you!*

She shoved her hands into her jacket, clenching her fists.

“Well, what are you going to do about whoever it is if you find out?” Veronica asked.

“It depends on who it is,” Jughead said. “If it’s a witch, I tell the Blossoms. If it’s a creature…”

Betty held her breath.

“I bring the case to the Slayers.”

Kevin frowned. “No one got hurt, Jug.”

Jughead ran a hand down his face. “I know that, but you saw what we had to do with Archie this afternoon. Betty had to stun him and then we made him consume illegal substances--”

“It’s pot, not meth.”

“--and he was spell shocked,” Jughead finished. “There *has* to be some repercussions to this. Even if it’s just a warning right now, I have to lay it down.”

“Maybe I can talk to Cheryl again,” Betty said, quietly. “She might tell me more if I tell her the curse is broken.”

Veronica huffed. “And she’ll probably manipulate you into joining the Vixens.”

“I’ll be careful,” Betty said, leaving Archie’s bedside. “It’s getting late. I need to get back to the house.”

“Let me walk you to your door,” Jughead said, getting to his feet.

“Help me out V,” Kevin said, grabbing Archie’s foot to take off his shoes. “Make Archie a bit more comfortable. Poor guy’s been through an ordeal and, well--he’s seen things he can’t unsee. He will feel like shit in the morning.”

Betty felt her cheeks flaming at that, so she turned to the door before anyone noticed. She stepped out of Archie’s room, conscious of Jughead following behind her. She was feeling slightly anxious
and wondering whether her actions earlier can be explained away or was destined to mortify her forever.

She led the way out of Archie’s house and onto the sidewalk, before turning to head up the steps to her front door. All the while she wasn’t looking behind her, though she was totally aware of Jughead and his silence.

Finally, she got to her front door and she hazarded a glance at him.

“Well, I’ll see you tomorrow at school,” she said, hastily, praying that she wouldn’t fumble with her house keys, and while she couldn’t quite look him in the eyes, she knew that his gaze was unwavering. “Goodnight.” She turned and tried desperately to fit the right key into the lock.

“H-Hey, wait a second,” he said, gently.

Oh, Lord. She turned to him, hoping that this was not going to be as awkward as she thought it might be. “Hmm?”

“I, um…” He rubbed the back of his neck, shifting on his feet. “I wanted to thank you for helping us out with that binding. You know, breaking it…”

Oh. “It was my problem, too. But… you’re welcome.” She wanted to flee into her house, her embarrassment mounting.

“It got pretty intense up there.”

“Yes, well, we wanted it to be convincing,” she muttered. “And the thought of having to do it more than once gave me anxiety…”

His eyebrow arched and he seemed to pale the slightest bit.

Her eyes widened at her own awkwardness. “Not that it was--you know, terrible or anything! Not at all!” Damn it. “Just--you do that sort of thing, you’d prefer that it wasn’t fake and just for show.”

She wanted to self combust. She probably could. She was a pretty good fire maker. She can burn herself to ashes. It felt like she was melting already, anyway. Things were coming out of her mouth and each ramble felt like she was dying a little inside.

“No, it wasn’t terrible,” he said, the corner of his lip tilting the tiniest bit. “But yeah, it was a set up, so I just wanted to clear the air, you know?”

She nodded vigorously. “Totally. It was something we had to do.”

“Yeah, and just because it was really good, it doesn’t mean we should expect, you know, things.”

Really good? Things? “Things?” she squeaked, but then she immediately realized that she didn’t want to hear exactly what that meant. “Yes, things. Absolutely. We’re on the same page here.” Which was probably the biggest lie of the night. She had no idea what page they were on.

“We are,” he replied, shoving his hands into the pockets of his jeans.

“Okay. I guess I’ll, um, see you tomorrow, Jughead. Goodnight.”

“Goodnight.”

She shoved her key into the lock, hurried into her house, and then waved a cursory goodbye over her
shoulder at him before closing the door behind her.

She felt like a complete idiot.

Cursing herself, she looked through the peephole and saw Jughead still standing there, a vacant expression in his eyes, before a grin quirked his lips. He looked up at the house briefly before turning and making his way down the steps, turning in the direction of Archie’s house.

Seeing that smile both infuriated and thrilled her. What did that mean? Their whole conversation before that was confusing.

“What are you doing? Was someone at the door?” Chic, in his bathrobe, had what looked like a ham sandwich on a plate. He stepped up to the door and peered out of the peephole himself.

“N-No. I mean, well--”

Chic looked her over and saw her shoes. “Were you just outside?”

Betty pursed her lips. What’s with all the questions? “Is that a sandwich? After dinner, dessert, and wine? Mom will freak, Chic.”

He rolled his eyes. “Don’t tell her. I can do without the calorie counting, thanks.” He made his way back up the stairs. “Get to bed, bug. It’s late and you have school tomorrow.”

Only after she heard Chic’s bedroom door close did she head back up to her room. She peered through her window and saw that Jughead, Veronica, and Kevin were still there, with the latter two laughing about something.

Jughead didn’t appear to be as amused, but he turned in her direction and gave her wave.

She waved back one last time before swinging her windows closed.
I just want you all to know that I am grateful for the joy writing this story and posting it brings me. This would not be as fulfilling without readers like you.

“And fairies come in all shapes, colours, sizes and types, they don’t have to be fluffy. They can be demanding and furious if they like. They do, however, have to wear a tiara. That much is compulsory.”

— Dawn French, A Tiny Bit Marvellous

Jughead is used to waking up to a dead quiet house.

After he wakes up from the buzzing alarm of his phone and he clicks it shut, there is nothing and no one else but him around to generate sound.

He would get out of bed, the shifting of sheets whispering in the air, then his footsteps, muted by bare feet against carpet and wood floors, would sound a steady beat. There’s coffee making and sometimes Breakfast for One making. He’d stare at nothing and no one, drinking his coffee, getting ready for school, and grabbing his keys and helmet.

Sometimes, amidst the silence, he’d look at his phone and scroll through things—social media, the news, text messages, and occasionally it would elicit a laugh, snort, or groan.

Sometimes he wondered if he should get a dog.

Today was almost like that kind of day. Today it could’ve been a rinse and repeat, but over the last couple of weeks, things had shifted a little, and he had found himself, yet again, looking at his phone and wondering, again, if he should text.

Someone.

The same fucking message which he’d typed and erased countless times since the one time he was able to hit SEND.

Do you need a ride to school?

It felt more and more ridiculous each time she showed up in school anyway.

Obviously, she didn’t necessarily need a ride. She had two siblings with cars, two feet, maybe she had a bicycle—she didn’t need, need a ride, so his question felt like he needed her to need a ride.

And yet he had this conversation with himself nearly every morning.

This morning was even worse.
Last night he had made out with Betty Cooper. It was just for show, but his body was not entirely convinced that they were pretending.

Of course the part of him that was sensible kept trying to remind him that he should let that makeout session fade into the archives of his Slayer Experience Bank (“Best Way to Break a Binding, Ever”), it was getting drowned out by his sensibilities, which kept reminding him of how soft Betty’s lips felt, how velvety her tongue was, how her skin had been so warm, how the crook of her neck smelled like lilacs, and Jesus, those breasts. He didn’t even get to touch them.

If he could just get over himself and send this text.

He hit the little paper airplane icon before he could talk himself out of it yet again.

He stared at his screen, didn’t see the working dots, so he set his phone down on the counter to fix himself a bowl of cereal.

The ding came while he was pouring the milk and he almost dropped the plastic gallon container as he hurriedly picked up his phone.

_I could use a ride to school._

He pursed his lips, took a few seconds, and replied, as if he hadn’t been agonizing about it the last couple of weeks: _Cool. Pick you up at 7._

Seeing that he had less than 30 minutes left, he shoved the cereal into his mouth in record time and got dressed and ready to pick up Betty Cooper.

There were a few things going through Jughead’s mind as he pulled up in front of the Cooper house.

The first being that he had texted Archie, reminding him to read “The Crucible” for English class, because the report was due in two weeks.

Jughead did this with Archie sometimes, mainly because it gave Jughead anxiety that anyone within his circle would miss submitting _anything_ for school. It was silly to screw up your grades by failing homework, papers, and projects, things that were meant for students to do at their leisure. Unlike timed tests that you had to study for, homework, papers, and projects were graded pieces of work you can accomplish with the full resources of a library, words you had hours to write down, and your brains that you can access any time of the day.

Archie hadn’t replied, which Jughead expected. Archie was either still hungover from the spell they’d broken him out of or he was pissed at Jughead for making out with Betty. Either way, Archie was not likely to speak to him by text.

The second thing on his mind was Betty. Not that Archie was a better thought than she was—If he lived in a world where all he could think about were his favorite things, then it was more likely he was trapped in a fey’s Bewilderment, the worst enchantment the fey could use. When the fey had you Bewildered, you were basically done for unless the fey who inflicted the enchantment was killed or the implement for bewilderment was destroyed by fey of the same bloodline (very handy when fey toddlers started tossing the enchantment around. Fey parents could put the kibosh on it quick).
Betty was kind of bewildering, though not in the fey sense. He still wondered about her skittishness, particularly when they were staging the makeout last night. He had a brief thought of her never being kissed, which could’ve been a thing—he wasn’t judging, but when they got to it, she obviously knew how to do it.

He hated to think that it was all about her latent mistrust of him, but that was probably it. He couldn’t blame her. He just had to earn that trust back.

Her front door opened and Betty emerged onto the steps. Her golden hair was up in a perfect ponytail that Jughead thought left her pretty face unobstructed by errant locks. There was absolutely nothing to hide on that face, with her vibrant green eyes and those plump, almost pouty lips. Her chin came to a delicate point from a distinct jawline.

Her white polka-dot blouse was about a size too big for her, but she dressed it with a perfectly fitted dark blazer and dark skinny jeans, which emphasized rather than hid her long legs. Her chunky boots had a bit of heel which made her seem taller.

The polka dots were actually tiny unicorn heads and the lining of her blazer was a rose pink with flowers on them.

This lady slays him.

“Hi,” was all he could muster.

Her cheeks turned an endearing shade of pink. “Hi… why are you looking at me like that? Is there something on my face?”

So maybe he was staring, but it was hard not to. “Nothing at all, Sunshine. Just glad to see you.”

Honestly, he didn’t know how he could say lines like that without having gotten punched for it already.

She bit her lip, turning even redder. “So thanks for coming by to pick me up. Polly was cranky again this morning and I felt bad taking advantage of Chic’s inability to say no to me.”

He grinned, appreciating her candidness about her big brother basically being putty in her hands. “I’m sure he doesn’t mind, but—um, feel free to text me when you feel like giving him a break.” He handed her a helmet.

That tiny sunbeam of a smile began to break through her lips as she geared up for the ride.

With her helmet on and her backpack secured, he started his bike and she mounted it behind him.

When her arms came around him, her hands locking in front, he reminded her to hold tight.

She pressed closer, her arms tightening around him. He smirked.

He loved his motorcycle.

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When they arrived at school and removed their helmets, Betty stared at his hair in awed disbelief.
“What?” he asked.

Her hand actually came up to touch it and he was too surprised to move away.

Her fingers flipped a few locks delicately, but perhaps realizing what she was doing, she pulled her hand back with a jerk. “I’m sorry. I’m being inappropriate.”

He found that mildly laughable. He quirked his lips and pretended to give it some thought. “You had your hands all up in my hair last night so I think you’re good.”

The redness of her face took on a deep shade. “That doesn’t--”

He arched an eyebrow. His curiosity about what she was going to say overpowered any kind of distress those first two words might have invoked in him. “Doesn’t what?”

She paused. The embarrassment on her face gave way to mild amusement. She chuckled, softly, and he noticed the easing of her shoulders. “... mean I can touch your hair without permission.”

He crossed his arms in front of him. He knew what it was like when Betty Cooper were just a little less polite--given more range to take without asking. “If you touch it a bit more, you’ll feel it.”

“Feel what?”

He ran his fingers through his hair and felt the strands spring up. Something more than static crackled from his fingers. “You ever read Harry Potter?”

“Multiple times.”

He filed that delightful fun fact for future banter. “Harry’s hair was unruly because of magic. My witch heritage left me with a few magical traits here or there. I can’t control any of that magic, but it has little outlets. My hair’s one of them.”

She stared at the strands of his hair again, her hand coming up but pulling back. Instead, she said, “Beats volumizers.”

“Hair products are for losers. Don’t tell Kevin I said that.”

She shot him a mildly chastising look. “And it’s always like that?”

“Never stays put, henceforth—” He pulled his beanie from his backpack and shoved the hat over his head.

Her eyebrow arched in surprise. “And I thought that beanie was some kind of security blanket.”

“Nope. I need it to keep that weird hair on the down low,” he said, getting off his bike and hitching his backpack onto his shoulder.

“It doesn’t look weird.”

“I suppose I can just tell people I use Faberge Organics and Farrah Fawcett spray.”

Betty made a face. “Heck is that?”

Jughead chuckled in his surprise. “You’ve never seen Stranger Things on Netflix?”

“What’s a Netflix?”
His surprise had turned into shock, but when he observed that her eyes were shining, he cast a
sardonic smirk. “You almost got me there, Cooper.”

She grinned, climbing the school steps. “I have, however, never seen Stranger Things, so maybe I’ll
binge watch that next.”

He paused, wondering if that was some kind of window for him to ask her if she was down for some
Netflix at his house, or if she just really was intending to binge watch something on her own.

“You shouldn’t hide hair like that,” she said quickly, before he could think more on it.

He smirked and took the steps two at a time to catch up with her.

They walked through the doors together and Jughead was just about to ask her what her first period
class was when Kevin appeared beside him.

“Archie texted me and said he wasn’t coming to school because last night’s ‘herbs’ fucked him up,”
Kevin said, falling in step with them. “So I said, ‘Jug and I can come by later with some hangover
cure, and this is what he texts back.’”

Kevin handed Jughead his phone. The message bubble read:

I don’t feel like talking to Jughead right now.

Jughead sighed.

“I’m sorry, Jughead,” Betty said, quietly.

He stared into her upturned eyes and saw true remorse. She had nothing to be sorry for. He had
nothing to be sorry for. They had to stop apologizing to one another for things that were beyond their
control. “It’s not your fault.”

Kevin made a sound of impatience. “So Jug cock-blocked him this one time. Big deal. He’ll get over
it. I swear to God, if Archie’s biggest disappointments in life is his best friend getting the girl he likes,
then I should hate him, really. What a life.”

Jughead couldn’t help but grin. Kevin always knew how to put things in perspective.

Betty gave a pert nod. “Right. And he doesn’t get to decide who I make out with. I decide who I
make out with.”

Jughead looked at her in surprise, realizing in the next heartbeat that what she said pleased him.
Immensely.

“Um, hmm,” Kevin chimed, his elbow accidentally—not really accidentally, Jughead was willing to
bet—digging into Jughead’s side. “You do you, Betty.”

Her face reddened, but she laughed. Kevin seemed to have a knack for that with Betty. “You know
what I mean!”

“Girl.”

Betty stopped at her locker and Kevin casually mentioned that he was directing the school play,
Carrie, to which Betty immediately shut down the idea of playing Sue Snell and offered instead to
be in the production staff.
“Your beauty is wasted on you,” Kevin said, sighing. “You say no to cheerleading and then no to playing the star on my show—”

“Carrie is the star of your show. Maybe I’m more a Carrie than a Sue Snell.”

“If I give you the Carrie role, would you do it?”

Betty snorted. “Hell, no.”

Jughead found himself leaning against the locker next to hers, amused by her constant need to be on the background of things, even as she stood out like a beacon.

The books piled into her arms, weighing her down.

“Want me to help you carry those?” he asked, feeling a little like a silly school boy but hoping she would say yes.

She paused for a heartbeat and Jughead pretended he couldn’t see Kevin nodding approvingly behind her.

“Sure.”

He grabbed most of them and she gave him a small smile.

“I’m going to head to class,” Kevin said, already walking away. “I’ll see you both at lunch!” He was swallowed up by the crowd.

“Better get you to class, too,” Jughead said, letting her lead the way.

She tilted her gaze at him, as if she were trying to figure something out. Curiosity was a very specific look and she had it. He wondered what it was, since at this point, he almost had nothing to hide from her.

“What?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Nothing.” She turned to lead the way down the hall and he followed.

***************

No matter how many times Betty told herself that she was better off alone, she found herself drawn to the casual inclusion of Kevin, Veronica, and Jughead.

She let Kevin drag her into pairing up for study period. She had allowed Veronica to take her by the arm and get her to their lunch table. She was unable to ignore the goosebumps that rose up her arms when Jughead casually brushed it with his.

It amazed her that while she was able to pause her crush on Jughead after she found out what he’d been doing, she was powerless to stop it coming back in full force.

Her mental warnings to herself about him had begun to feel perfunctory. And when he slid into the seat next to hers at calculus, twirling his pen deftly as he problem solved, she wondered if she wasn’t just making herself miserable for the exquisite drama of it all.
“You alright?” he had asked, quietly so that the teacher wouldn’t hear.

She realized she had let out a deep sigh and that’s why he was asking. Her class work was only half done, and scrambling for a reason, she said, “I’m usually better at this. Today’s… I can’t focus.”

She realized that explanation really didn’t cover for her feelings, but really, anything she said could lead back to yesterday’s events.

His lip quirked and she almost wished he didn’t do that. He looked so good doing it. How dare he?

“Wanna switch?”

“Excuse me?”

He glanced briefly at the teacher up front before boldly switching their papers.

Betty gasped, shooting him a glare before she looked down and saw that instead of a slope and tangent, he had drawn a boat—a pretty good one—in choppy, foamy waters. She should’ve known those long fingers were pretty dexterous.

*Oh, God. Kill me now.*

He was scribbling on her paper, drawing the graph on her sheet.

She grit her teeth, stifling her giggle as she tried to grab her worksheet back. His arm came up to block hers and she considered using a spell to swipe her sheet right from under him, but she stopped herself, realizing that he may take it the wrong way.

“Eyes on your own work!” the teacher yelled, sternly.

Betty swiftly turned her eyes back to her own desk, and as she stared at his finely sketched boat, she saw that the angle of it against the water was deliberate, matching the derivative $f(x)$. She wondered if the teacher would see it, and if she didn’t, would he point it out to her afterwards, just to mess with her.

A moment later, Jughead had switched their sheets yet again. He gave the teacher another cursory glance and pressed his fingers to the graph. “Slope, tangent, arbitrary point.” His finger shifted accordingly.

She realized he was telling her this because it all had to be in her handwriting. “This is cheating!” she hissed, even as the corners of her lips threatened to turn up.

“It’s a cheat day. We’ll behave tomorrow.” He winked.

The implication of his words with that wink were not lost on her.

*Smug ass…*

“Smughead Jones…” she breathed.

“What?” he asked in whispered faux outrage. “What did you call me?”

“Smughead Jones,” she repeated more clearly, but softly, giggling under her breath.

His jaw dropped, but he was smiling.

“You two are this close to detention,” the teacher said from the front, holding her thumb and
forefinger an inch apart. “There’s no flirting in calculus.”

The class erupted in giggles, and Betty found herself sinking into her seat, while Jughead said, “Yes, Mrs. James.”

“I know you’re done Jones. Hand over your masterpiece and get out of here.”

_So maybe the teacher knew all about his mathematically correct drawings._

“I’ll see you outside in a bit,” he muttered aside just before sliding out of his seat and heading to the front with his worksheet.

He put his worksheet onto the teacher’s desk and waited for her to respond.

Mrs. James lowered her glasses to stare at his work, then she looked up. “Not your best work, Jones, but it’ll do.”

He grinned and sauntered out of class.

***************

They stood outside the locker rooms, waiting for Cheryl to arrive.

Jughead and Kevin were leaning against the wall, debating the finer points of a movie they watched and both liked but had differing opinions on.

“I have a hankering to ask Ethel what she thinks of this movie,” Kevin mused. “It’s basically the love story of her parents.”

“Nurse Muggs is not deaf.”

“I bet Ethel would love to talk to you about it.” Kevin grinned, elbowing Jughead. “Ethel has a humongous crush on Jug.”

“I noticed,” Betty said.

Jughead’s face reddened. “You didn’t.”

“I did,” she replied more pointedly. “God, her heart-eyes. They made _me_ melt.”

Kevin said. “Ethel’s been crazy for Jug since eighth grade.”

“Stop,” Jughead pleaded.

Betty quirked a smile. “She seemed sweet.”

“Not my type.”

Kevin grinned, nudging his shoulder. “What’s your type?”

Jughead glared at him.

“Blonde and sassy?”
“Shut. Up.”

Betty felt her face warming intensely, but she was saved from reacting when she saw Cheryl approaching them.

Cheryl was, of course, heading to the lockers. She wasn’t pleased to see them and she turned to Kevin, as if pointedly ignoring Betty and Jughead. “I thought I told Velma and Shaggy over here that I won’t tell them whodunnit.”

Betty frowned and crossed her arms over her chest. “If Archie gets worse, this will blow back to you, Cher.” She could feel Jughead’s and Kevin’s eyes on her. The lie had rolled off easy enough from her tongue and they weren’t going to out her.

Cheryl’s shoulders stiffened momentarily, even if her face remained impassive. “Where did you stash him? Dungeons of the Whyte Wyrm?”

“Where else?” Betty replied. “He’s getting worse by the minute. He’s graduated to screaming. Pretty soon, he’ll start hurting himself. I’m beginning to think you’re protecting this caster. It’s Jason, isn’t it? You made him cast it to get back at me, because you’re jealous of what I can do.”

“Leave him out of this, bitch. It’s not him,” Cheryl hissed. “Why do you think this is about you, anyway? Maybe if you can get your head out of your ass for a minute, you might have figured that out by yourself.” She stormed through the locker room doors, hair flying behind her until the doors swallowed her whole.

Betty could’ve followed her, but Cheryl’s words had struck her. She whirled to face Kevin and Jughead.

“Who hates Archie?” she asked.

Jughead’s eyes took on a fevered intensity. “Half the straight female population--”

“With magic,” Betty added. “Who among those girls have magic?”

Jughead shook his head. “None of them do. Remember? I made sure--”

“Who has Otherworlder connections?”

“Valerie,” Kevin muttered.

Betty thought she’d heard this name mentioned before.

“Her brother is Trev Brown,” Kevin added.

She remembered Trev Brown. He was a werewolf, and just like any creature, they had a hint of magic. The barest. Betty wasn’t sure she was convinced that a werewolf can invoke such a strong binding spell, but this was Riverdale, where unfettered magic seeped from the ground. Strange things happened, constantly.

Jughead’s scowl was so deep it could possibly take permanent residence there. “We go to Trev first.”

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Jughead saw them from afar, Trev with two other jacketed Bulldogs, as they walked the hallway going to the football field. The hallways were clear of students, most having left for home and the only remaining ones having gone to the field, or music room, or lab.

When Trev noticed Jughead approaching, it was like he knew Jughead wasn’t there to be chummy.

“Don’t run,” Jughead said, firmly.

Trev did not heed this warning. He took off explosively. Unfortunately for Trev, slayers like Jughead were built for encounters like this.

Jughead followed right after him, pushing aside Reggie and Moose who were powerless to block him.

Trev’s face was shoved up against the lockers in seconds, a fist full of his jacket in Jughead’s hand and his arm twisted behind him.

“Take it easy, Jones!” Trev cried. “I didn’t do anything!”

“Dammit, Trev!” Jughead grunted. “I told you not to run!”

“What the fuck, man?” Reggie cried, advancing aggressively towards them.

Moose’s shoulders tensed, poised to join the fray.

Jughead was bracing himself to fight them when their movements began to slow, grinding to a final halt. He stared at their abnormal state. Even Trev seemed fascinated by this phenomenon.

Betty came sauntering through the scene between them, Kevin following behind her, closely observing Moose in this frozen state.

“Damn, Cooper!” Kevin gasped. “I mean, oh my God.”

With her hands shoved into the pockets of her jeans, she walked up to Jughead and said, “That should hold them for a bit. You have about five minutes.”

Jughead could hardly believe his eyes. He had never seen that spell before, but whatever it was called, it was breathtaking.

“O-oh, hi Betty,” Trevor said in an unbelievably friendly tone, as if a slayer weren’t accosting him at this very minute.

“Um… hi Trev?” she replied, her expression scrunched with uncertainty.

“This doesn’t usually happen to me, just so you know. I’m kind of a model Otherworlder—“

Jughead tried to focus on the task at hand. He whirled Trev around, pushing him back forcefully against the lockers and grabbing him by the lapels of his jacket. “Really, Trev? I have a feeling you’re not taking this as seriously as you should.”

“I just don’t want Betty to get the wrong impres—“

*Great.* “Trev, I swear to God.”

“Alright! I mean—“ his eyes shifted to Betty.
Jughead was getting seriously annoyed. “Look at me, Brown.”

Trevor finally did.

“What’s going on with Valerie these days?”

Trevor frowned, struggling feebly to pry Jughead’s hands away. “What the fuck do you care?”

“I generally don’t give a shit, but what have you been doing for her lately?”

“The hell is this about Jones?”

“Why’d you run away?”

Trevor scowled. “Because you looked ready to kill me, you jerk! Whatever it is you think I did, I didn’t do it!”

Jughead wasn’t convinced. He stabbed a finger in the air, towards Trevor’s face. “Now, you know what’s going on, Trev. Don’t lie to me. I can leave your sorry werewolf ass out on a full moon and that’ll be the end of you. You’ll probably end up eating your family first—“

“Jesus Christ, stop! You know I don’t ever want that to be true!”

“Then help me out here. We want to know how Valerie got the binding spell.”

Trevor scoffed. “I don’t know what you’re—“

Jughead slammed him against the lockers again.

“Ow! Fuck, Jones! You know how strong you are, right? You can hurt—“

“The binding spell, Trev.”

He sighed, loudly. “Look, I didn’t—okay, I grew concerned when Archie started meeting up with Val again. I haven’t forgotten how he ghosted my sister the last time, man, so I’d much rather prefer that she not hook up with Archie again, but she has a mind of her own and I can’t tell her what to do. I’m gonna let her make her own mistakes, but when Josie came to me demanding why Val’s missing practice, I had to tell her! You do not mess with the fey, especially with the humans they keep under their care. You know that.”

Kevin laughed in the background. “Josie! Of, fucking, course!”

Josie. It seemed much more obvious now.

He let Trevor go, thinking the situation through.

“Who’s Josie?” Betty asked.

“Josie McCoy,” Trevor replied before any of them could. “She’s the lead for Josie and the Pussycats. You might have seen them in the hallways? They wear cat ears—“

Betty nodded and Trevor shifted uncomfortably closer.

“My sister’s in the group. They’re really good, but that’s mainly because Josie’s feyness kinda brings out their talents. I mean, Valerie was talented enough but Josie inspires them, somehow…” His arm was leaning up against the locker now, establishing some kind of perimeter around Betty, who
seemed only mildly surprised by the closeness, and Jughead was getting increasingly confused by Trevor’s *nerve*.

He was being interrogated, for God’s sake. Why does he think he can flirt while this is happening?

“Hey!” Jughead yelled, shoving Trevor on the chest, effectively backing Trevor away. “I’m not done with you yet! Did Josie tell you she was going to do this? You should’ve fucking reported it to me!”

Trevor put his hands up. “I swear, dude, I had no idea!”

“That better be true.”

Trevor crossed his heart. “On my mother’s life.”

Jughead turned to Kevin, arching his eyebrow questioningly. He wanted Kevin’s opinion.

“I believe him. And Josie doing this on her own makes total sense,” Kevin said, chuckling. “The only thing more jealous than a lover is Fey.”

Jughead nodded in agreement.

“Okay, great!” Trevor said. “I’m in the clear now, right? Betty, are Reggie and Moose...?”

Betty gave him a sweet smile. “They’ll be coming back in a bit. The spell only ever lasts a few minutes for the Lost.” And like a switch, Reggie and Moose began to start up again, slowly at first, then quickly regaining vitality. They stumbled, sprawling onto the floor and groaning as they struggled through their disorientation.

*Damn.*

“Where to now, Jug?” Kevin asked.

He knew exactly where they needed to go.

******************************

“Remember when I said the full fey bordered on psycho?” Kevin said while they sat in the bus on the way to town. “Josie is a primary example of that.”

Betty remembered these names now: Josie, Valerie, and Melody. There were posters of them all over school, the talented band who wore cat ears in their hair, the group of girls who watched her walk down the hallway with Archie hanging off her shoulders. “Would Josie do that for Valerie? Binding Archie to--what, get revenge for Archie breaking Valerie’s heart?”

Kevin shook his head. “No. None of that. And Josie is a little less motivated doing it for Valerie as she is doing it for herself. Valerie and Melody are her bandmates but they are also Josie’s *humans*, whether they know it or not. They sort of get taken cared of? Mostly insofar as Josie gets to keep them the way she wants them. It comes off as a little possessive.”

“So she had Archie bound to me?”

Jughead gave a knowing chuckle. “Sounds about the right level of—as Kevin calls it—*extra*.”
Kevin turned in his seat eagerly to face Betty. “It makes sense. Valerie starts to spend more time with Archie, Josie hates it. She wants to make it so that Valerie realizes the error of her own ways. Josie gets a binding spell to drive Archie away from Valerie, while subsequently breaking Valerie’s heart, hopefully forever so that it doesn’t happen again.”

Betty frowned. “Can’t she just sit Valerie down and tell her Archie’s a cad and will break her heart again?”

Kevin laughed. “Oh, I’m sure Josie’s had that conversation with her. But when have we ever listened to our betters when it comes to love? The Fey will only warn you once. After that, you’ll have no one to blame for their actions except yourself.”

Jughead gave a grunt of disapproval. “Quit defending her, Kev.”

“I’m just calling it like it is, Jones. We’re not evil--we act on our natures, and the fey jealously guard their humans, or at least their interests. We will do what it takes to protect it.”

“Well, regardless, Otherworlders can’t bind other people. This ain’t gonna fly.”

Kevin snorted. “Good luck with that.”

Betty settled back comfortably in her seat, shoulder to shoulder with Kevin and Jughead on each side. These two, she realized, always seemed to argue, but it was born from the certainty that there were no secrets between them, no phoniness or nonsense. They could be arguing about everything all day, but in the end, they were always together, hanging out, keeping each other company, and working together to solve supernatural crimes.

They arrived at the township and got off the bus at the third stop.

Betty looked around her at the small shops hosting both small and franchise businesses, and in spite of Riverdale being the seat of power for one of the most powerful covens of the east coast, the small town flavor remained, swimming in the magic that the land was known for.

As they passed flower shops with magnificent blooms and a bakery that had perfect bread at each and every rising, Betty saw shop owners waving goodbye to their leaving customers and greeting the ones arriving, by name.

If she were to think about Riverdale in its entirety, it seemed like quite the ideal place to live for both Lost and Otherworlder. The Lost shared the benefits of the magic surrounding them and Otherworlders were protected from each other by slayers like Jughead.

Arguably, there was a clear social hierarchy where the Blossoms were the reigning coven and the Lodges seemed to rule over the Lost, with a bustling middle class that kept the town going smoothly, but given that everyone seemed comfortable enough, it was no wonder Riverdale enjoyed a relative peace.

“What’s the Southside like?” Betty asked, suddenly. She hadn’t seen much of Riverdale beyond her usual haunts, so she felt she was missing out on that part of town where Jughead and Sabrina actually lived.

Jughead chuckled. “Not like this.”

“Oh, more Bohemian, I’d say,” Kevin said. “Edgier and more street. It’s where Riverdale started and it just kind of grew out of that part of town and moved on to this one.”
“It’s where the poorer folks live,” Jughead said. “With little pockets of the middle class staying put because they refused to get run out by the system.”

“Pockets like the Joneses, the Spellmans, and the Topazes,” Kevin pointed out with a grin.

Jughead nodded. “No argument.”

They walked further along the street, going past boutiques and specialty stores, until they arrived at the McCoy’s Recording Studios.

Betty was only now beginning to see the fabric that knit this town together, with Josie’s mother being the mayor and the Kellers running law enforcement.

The receptionist at the lobby looked up upon their entry and immediately plastered a smile on her face. Photographs of Josie’s father, Myles McCoy with various famous artists were all over the walls.

Jughead stepped up to the desk. “We’re here to see Josie McCoy.”

The receptionist’s smile widened. “Oh! Ms. McCoy said she was not to be disturbed, so if you like, you can leave a message and I’ll let her know you came by.”

Jughead didn’t even say anything back. He simply looked at Kevin who immediately approached the desk and leaned over the counter.

“What’s your name, honey?” Kevin asked, his tone gentle and syrup sweet.

She blinked, taken aback, it seemed, by something she saw in Kevin’s face. “Crystal…”

“Thank you for trusting me with it.”

*Uh oh.* Betty watched, fascinated, as Kevin turned on the fey. Quickly, Crystal was drawn into Kevin’s persuasion and not even two minutes into it, Kevin had Crystal leading them down the hallways to where Josie and the Pussycats were practicing.

When Crystal showed them the door to Josie’s booth, Kevin sent her away, which she did without question. He pulled back the door and Josie’s voice floated out like a siren song. Betty felt inexplicably drawn to it, until she realized that it was probably the fey in Josie that was ensnaring her.

The music in the background was flawless, and when Betty laid eyes on the Pussycats, she saw how they were all in perfect sync. It wasn’t just the sound but it was the look, as well. They weren’t dressed to perform, but they had on their cat ears and their outfits were artsy and hip. Josie looked like a queen, with a sequined red blazer, a cool graphic tee, a short black skirt, five inch heels, and legs to die for. Her rich black hair was braided down to her waist and it was slung over one shoulder.

Valerie and Melody were only slightly more low-key, but not by much. Valerie’s beautiful hair framed her face like a halo and Melody’s flowing, curly locks flirted playfully with her cheeks and shoulders. They were perfect and untouchable.

Betty could see why Josie would be upset about Valerie falling out of step.

Kevin waved at them through the glass wall and Josie immediately stopped singing. The music died down and Josie stared out at them with barely veiled annoyance.

Moments later, they all filed out of the studio, and as Valerie passed them, she refused to look Betty
in the eyes, but she said, firmly, “He’ll break your heart, too.”

Betty sighed, exchanging pained looks with Jughead as Valerie walked out of the studio with Melody.

It was Josie who shut the door behind them.

“To what do I owe the honor of your presence, slayer?” Josie asked.

“You know why I’m here. Somebody put a binding spell on Archie Andrews and all evidence points to you.”

Josie’s perfectly sculpted eyebrow arched. “I, of all people understand your need to protect your Lost friend, but what happened to him was probably his fault.”

In the background, Kevin sighed. “Josie--”

“And who, pray tell, pointed their finger at me?”

Betty marveled at the way Josie had kept on this conversation without actually admitting that she invoked the binding.

Jughead frowned. “That’s not really important.”

“It is, to me.” Josie flipped her braid behind her and crossed her arms over her chest, a stubborn set to her jaw.

“Why, so you can punish them?”

Josie said nothing, leaving that question hanging in the air.

Jughead rolled his eyes. “We know you did it and we know why you did it. So here’s what I’m going to do.” He stuck up one finger. “First, I’m going to go to your mother. I’m sure Mayor McCoy would be thrilled to find out that her daughter is engaging in questionable shenanigans that can land all of you in trouble with the Blossoms.”

Josie’s eyes narrowed. “She won’t believe you.”

“That’s a distinct possibility—if I just went to her with accusations, but I’ve got the three poppets, humongous flower shop bills, and a couple of witnesses to speak for me. I think it’s even possible your mother can detect the latent magic from the poppets because your magic is descended from hers.”

“How do I even know you have the poppets?” she hissed.

Betty was about to speak up and pull the poppets from her back pack when Kevin stopped her, gently, with a touch of his hand to her wrist.

Jughead tilted his head and eyed Josie pointedly. “How did you even get that one poppet into his bedroom?”

She paused for a moment, realizing that by pointing out one of the hiding spots, Jughead had at least one poppet in his possession, but she recovered quickly enough.

“Like it’s hard?” She gave him a sneer. “Archie Andrews will let any woman into his bedroom.”
"You're not wrong," Jughead admitted. "Did you--? You know what? I don’t need to know that part. Totally none of my business."

“I wouldn’t touch him to scratch him,” Josie quipped, her voice dripping with disdain.

“But ultimately, I don’t need Mayor McCoy to believe me, because more importantly--” Jughead stuck out a second finger. “When I lodge a complaint with the Greendale Unseelie Court, they will be more than happy to haul you in for judgement on circumstantial evidence.”

Josie began to breathe heavily at this point, her eyes blazing. It was generally the rule that when a Seelie fey did something, you brought them before the Unseelie Court and vise versa. The Seelie and Unseelie court were the ruling class for the fey, elves, dwarves, and sprites. The fey punished their own, and the Seelie and Unseelie Courts were only too glad to give each other a hard time.

“How dare you?” Josie’s fists were clenched tight, her back stiff with outrage. “You of all people should understand the inner workings of the Otherworlders. You can pretend all you want that you aren’t one of us, Jones, but you are a creature just like everyone else. Slayers come from a line of fey--”

“One of my many favorite theories,” Jughead interjected.

Josie ignored his sarcasm. “You cloak yourself in self-righteousness and believe that you have the right to prevent the rest of us from being ourselves--”

“That is literally what I was put on this earth to do,” Jughead interjected wearily. “I exist so that I can put the kibosh on Otherworlder hijinks. I am the killjoy of the paranormal world. I’m just doing my job, Josie.”

Betty watched this exchange with growing fascination. Part of the reason Jughead can get away with saying the things he does is because he was immune to most if not all enchantments and inflictions of Otherworlder kind. The fey cannot entrance him, werewolves can’t turn him, and witches could barely hex him. He was impenetrable and the Otherworlders knew it. But it was still captivating to watch Jughead wield this power. The slayers she’d heard about in the past came off as mindless thugs who swung around swords, sticks, and chains. Jughead had shown his physical strength a couple of times, but he’d more often shown a brainier approach to his duties.

She already knew he was smart, but it was different seeing him in action like this. It was impressive. It was also making her think things of him that she was sure was inappropriate.

Biting her lip, she tore her gaze from Jughead and waited for Josie to respond.

“If I break the binding,” she began. “Will you forego reporting this to the Unseelie Court?”

Jughead scoffed. “It’s already broken. We don’t need you to break anything.”

Josie looked at a loss for words.

He cocked a smile. “However, I’m willing to take promises.”

The tension from Josie’s shoulders loosened the tiniest bit. She lifted her chin, looked him straight in the eyes, and said, “Name your price.”

“I don’t know what it is, yet, but I promise you it’ll be within your means, nothing gross, and nothing crim--well, maybe a little criminal...”
Josie rolled her eyes. “And my mother? Are you going to tell on me with her?”

“That’s a different transaction and I’m collecting on that right now. You’re going to pay for that florist bill Archie hacked up. I don’t care how you do it. You’re going to send a check to Fred Andrews covering the cost of it. I’ll text you the exact amount—there were a lot so I haven’t taken the time to add them up, but as soon as I let you know how much it is, you better send that check—like, yesterday.”

Josie literally started to glow with rage. “Jones…”

“Either that or I tell Mayor McCoy. Besides, it’s not like you can’t afford it.”

“I’m a senior in high school,” Josie said through grit teeth. “Where exactly do you think I keep these riches you speak of?”

“Well, for one thing, your father’s a music producer and for another, your music career’s a heck of a lot more successful than Archie’s.”

Josie snorts. “He’s nothing without Valerie.”

Kevin smirked. “No argument there.”

“I’m sure you’ll find a way,” Jughead said, nodding at Betty and Kevin, signaling the end of the discussion. “I’ll see you around, Josie. And don’t forget—you owe me.”

Jughead held the door open for Betty and this time, she hardly hesitated walking through the door.

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Kevin nudged Jughead’s arm from across the bus aisle. “You working today?”

Jughead nodded. “Gotta save for a rainy day, you know.”

Kevin shot him a half-chastising, half-sympathetic look, knowing full well what he meant. Jughead didn’t exactly have to worry about where he would get the money to pay the bills. His father, however absent he was many days of the year, never forgot to send the money for his upkeep—the house, the food, and his daily needs, but Jughead was also never complacent. He knew what his father did, knew that at any moment, FP Jones could get killed in his line of work. Jughead felt he had to be ready for the day his father couldn’t provide. Besides, he was already eighteen. He really shouldn’t be relying on FP anymore.

That said, he was also hoping that the money he was saving up would be used for college.

“I’ll be dropping by Pop’s to meet Joaquin. Wanna come with, Betty?” Kevin looked past Jughead to catch Betty’s attention.

Betty shook her head. “I need to get home. I--um, have stuff I need to finish with my brother.”

Kevin shrugged. “Suit yourself. Joaquin and I are dropping by Archie’s later after dinner. If you want to join in on the fun—”

“May be best if I pass for now.”
“Your loss,” Kevin said, getting up from his seat. “My stop’s coming up. I’ll see you guys tomorrow at school.”

Kevin tapped Jughead’s shoulder along the way and Jughead gave him a nod goodbye.

Jughead watched him hurry down the aisle to the front of the bus where a line had formed to get off. When the doors opened, Kevin gave one final wave at them before alighting the bus.

“Kevin’s hilarious,” Betty said, looking out the window, presumably to give Kevin one final wave.

Jughead shrugged. “He’s alright.”

She gave him a sidelong glance, but she was smirking.

“Are you really doing something with your brother?” Jughead asked. He was fervently hoping that was just some excuse for her to avoid Pop’s so she could free up her time for something else.

She laughed. “Yes. Did you think I was lying to Kevin? I just told you I liked his company.”

He smirked and shrugged. “I dunno. Just thought we could hang out for a bit--I have another 45 minutes to kill before I head for the library.”

“Well.” She bit her lip for a moment. “I’ve got another 45 minutes to kill before Chic gets home.”

He couldn’t help but feel the slightest bit pleased that she didn’t just blow him off. “Why, Sunshine. Whatever are we going to do with all this time?”

The lopsided glare she threw him was half playful, half scolding. “How about we get the cards on all those flowers and call the florists about those receipts, yes?”

“That’s a very practical suggestion and will no doubt have a productive outcome,” he replied, flatly.

Her soft giggle tinkled through the air between them as she turned to watch the town roll past the window. Her soft features took on a soothing serenity when she was observing--when her attention wasn’t directed at anyone specific.

He didn’t want to disturb her quiet. He kind of liked seeing her so relaxed.

It was comfortable. He didn’t mind watching her watch other things and people.

***************

There appeared to be more flowers along the hall than he last remembered, but Betty swore no other flowers had gotten delivered.

“I counted 18 dozen,” Betty said.

“This has to be--I don’t know, at least $800,” he breathed. “Fred’s gonna kill him.”

Betty began plucking the florist cards from each bouquet. “Well, thanks to you, they at least don’t have to bear the financial burden. What you did back there with Josie--that was impressive.”
What he did hadn’t been out of the ordinary, but her approval gave him a pleasant tingle in his stomach. “Oh, I really should be reporting Josie to her mother and the Unseelie, but she was acting on instinct—I can’t entirely blame her. At any rate, this should teach her a lesson to take it easy with her fey. I’ll take my favors where I can get them. I need the resources to be effective at what I do. Creatures owing me things gets me equity.”

She shrugged. “I get it. You don’t have to explain.”

He appreciated her saying that. Maybe he had felt like he had to explain to her, in case it made her think differently of him.

When they collected all the cards, it became evident that Archie only contacted 3 flower shops. One in the northside and one in the southside of Riverdale, and one in Greendale. It didn’t take long for them to call all three and get the information they needed. Archie spent close to $900 in flowers, the amount of which Jughead texted to Josie immediately. He also sent her copies of the invoices, which were sent to Jughead’s email. The invoices would be sent through snail mail, as well. Jughead should have them at his house in three days.

Betty began to bustle around the kitchen, and he realized she was fixing them some tea. He offered to help but she told him to sit. She took out actual tea cups for them to use, set on beautifully crafted saucers, which he thought quaint and probably unsurprising.

“So you’re getting the receipts,” she said, pouring the hot water over the teaspoon of tea leaves she had at the bottom of each cup. “Do you need the poppets, too?”

“Keep them,” he said. “I know how you witches feel about having pieces of yourselves in someone else’s possession. If I need them, I’ll ask you for them.”

She nodded. “I won’t burn them just yet. I’ll keep them in a porcelain jar in my room.”

Jughead knew porcelain was the container of choice for witches. They were non-porous and non-corrosive, therefore the ingredients they contained did not absorb any foreign materials that were previously stored in them that could contaminate new ingredients. They also used porcelain for other potion-making materials, like bowls, spatulas, mixing spoons, mortars, pestles, and many more, again for their non-porous properties.

“Thanks… listen, you really came through for us with Cheryl, today. If you hadn’t gotten under her skin like that, we might’ve never figured out it was Josie.” He meant it. She had extracted that vital information from Cheryl cleverly.

Her ears reddened. “Oh, it was nothing. You would have figured it out eventually. I might have hindered your thought process a little, to be honest. Cheryl was right—I thought it was all about me.”

“It was still about you. She picked you, didn’t she? I doubt Josie would’ve cared who Archie was bound to. And Jesus, Archie’s—God, what a womanizer. I always knew that his ways would get him trouble with an Otherworlder, and lo and behold…”

She laughed softly. “Your instincts are sharp, Jughead. It’s no wonder people trust you.”

He wondered if that meant she was willing to trust him, too.

“Finish your tea,” she said. “I’ll read your leaves.”

He threw her a sardonic look. “No. You can’t be one of those. I never pegged you as a soothsayer!”
“I’m not!” she cried, giggling. “It’s just for fun. Come on. Are you scared I’ll give you bad news?”

He scoffed. “I don’t believe in any of that.”

“Drink your tea and prove it.”

“Fine.” He drank his tea. It was hot, but not overly so. It was a mild green tea with a nice, soothing flavor, and as he finished his cup, he could see the tea leaves sticking to the bottom.

She took his cup and stared at the leaves, swilling around the remaining liquid at the bottom. She gave a soft “hmm.”

Jughead grinned and tried to look over her shoulder. “I think I see something.”

“Shush!” she said, elbowing him. “Your negativity is affecting the reading. I need to concentrate.”

She did look serious, and he had to admire her keeping a straight face. Her nose scrunched slightly, and he pressed his lips together to keep from laughing.

“Your future is cloudy,” she said.

“Of course it is.”

“No, wait… I see something! You’re conflicted, facing an--an enemy… no, a friend! It’s not clear, but the conflict is whether you’ll fight it or embrace it. But in the end you’ll make the right choice because you’re Jughead effing Jones.”

He grinned, scooting a little closer. “Let me see that. How can you have possibly gotten all that from a few shrivelled tea leaves?”

She showed him the bottom of the cup. It looked like soggy potpourri with light green liquid pooling around it. “If you look at that tea leaf over there? That’s you. The pools go into two different directions there and there and it comes to a head right--”

“Oh, I totally see it,” he said in a gently teasing tone, leaning even closer.

“The tea leaves never lie!” she said in what was supposed to be a fortune-teller’s accent. Her eyes were shining with mischief, but she didn’t move away. “Do you want to read my tea leaves?”

His gaze trailed to her lips and he was remembering the feel of them brushing against his. He thought he might want to feel them again, and the memory of her tongue touching his sent a thrum of anticipation through his body. “I want to do something with you and it doesn’t involve tea leaves.”

She put down his cup abruptly and he slid his hand up her shoulder, but the sound of the front door opening had her pulling away and getting up to grab the cups with their respective saucers.

“Is that you, bug?” came the voice of Chic from the hallway. “Betty?”

“Um, in here!” she replied, her face and neck crimson to the roots of her hair.

Jughead stifled a loud, heavy sigh.

“Yeah, sorry I’m late. I totally forgot we were training to--” Chic appeared and arched an eyebrow in surprise. “Jughead Jones. What brings you here?”

“Betty and I had to work on some stuff from school,” Jughead replied, quickly.
Chic gave it a brief thought. “Like, homework?”

“Something like that.”

“Okay…” Chic looked at Betty. “We still on?”

Betty nodded vigorously. “Yes, absolutely, Chic.”

“Good. I’ll see you in the basement.”

“Yep.”

Chic didn’t move in the least, his gaze swerving pointedly at Jughead.

Jughead figured he was not going to win this staring contest. “I’m gonna go.”

“I’ll walk you to the door,” Betty said, already heading in that direction.

Jughead followed Betty and she opened the door for both of them to step out. As they stood at the threshold of the Cooper front porch, Chic banged around in the kitchen.

“So, um,” she began. She bit her lip, looking anxiously down the hall. “I gotta--”

“Train?” he asked, intrigued by this, if he were being completely honest.

She shifted awkwardly on her feet. “Chic’s a big believer of teaching his sisters self defense.”

“Nothing wrong with that.” He smirked. “I have to go to work, anyway. I’ll see you tomorrow at school?”

“Yes, of course.”

Throwing caution to the wind, he asked, “Need a ride?”

She paused, biting her lip in thought. “I don’t.”

“Oh.” He supposed he could’ve read the signals wrong. His stomach felt like it was going on free fall. “Um--I guess--”

“I’d like one, though.”

He sucked in a breath, momentarily wondering if he heard her right or if she’d take it back. Her cheeks grew pink, but she was smiling and he exhaled a relieved chuckle. “That’s even better.”

“Betty, have you been raiding my potions cabinet?” Chic cried from inside.

She sighed, smiling apologetically. “I gotta go, but… same time tomorrow?”

“7 AM, bright and early.”

“Okay. See you then!” She gave him one final smile before taking a step back into the house yelling, “I took--like two potions! Hardly what I’d call a raid!” The door shut and Jughead could still hear them talking through the door.

Jughead took a moment to wonder what would’ve happened if Chic hadn’t come home.

He smirked and walked the steps down to the sidewalk.
tbc
Some nights Betty had nightmares.

She would wake up in the middle of the night, not quite screaming, but her mouth would be wide open, her throat dry, her body coated in sweat.

Her eyes would fly open in the dark, painful from being forced out of sleep, and she would lie in bed, taking deep gulps of air as if she’d been choking on her own fear the last few hours.

She hardly remembered what the dream was about. All she could remember of it was being paralyzed, physically paralyzed, and a voice, so familiar, and yet not, telling her that her suffering would soon be over.

After that it was just rapid fire visions of blood, anguish, and grief. Unbelievable grief. That is the last she ever remembered of it. She knew there was more, but she would awaken and the rest of it would fade into the aether.

The same nightmare played that night, and as she lay in bed, terrified of getting pulled back to sleep, she willed herself to stay awake at 3 in the morning.

She told herself that she just had to wait 2 more hours before she could officially get up.

Sleep pulled her back in anyway, but mercifully, the nightmare didn’t return.

Her alarm woke her at 5, but like clockwork, she shambled to her closet and started her day. She pulled on her running clothes, slipped into her running shoes, and went out into the cold morning air, running 2.5 miles up and 2.5 miles down. She was a decent runner, so she managed it in 45 minutes.

Her run completed, she took a shower and got ready for school.

It was only at that point she remembered that she was riding into school with Jughead Jones. It made her both nervous and excited. And anxious, too.

There were things about her that Jughead Jones didn’t know and she wondered if she had an obligation to be honest with him with regard to what she was.
She bit her lip, looking at the door to the bathroom she shared with Polly. She went ahead and knocked on her sister’s door.

Polly let her in, getting ready for work, herself. “What’s up, Liz? Need a ride to school? I think I can take you today.”

Betty sat at the edge of Polly’s bed. “I’m good. I’ve got a ride.”

Polly smirked. “Wouldn’t happen to be on a motorcycle, is it?”

Betty grinned shyly. “Yeah.”

“Boys on motorcycles, I tell ya.”

She sighed. “I know… but—God, Pols, he doesn’t know I’m Wicked and—“

Polly scowled, going to her closet to pull out a sweater. “He doesn’t have to know everything about you.”

“I guess…” It felt odd, to be withholding important information like that. To a certain extent, Polly was right. She didn’t have to tell people everything about her, but she couldn’t help but feel anxiety at the thought that if she told Jughead the truth about her, things would be different. “And mom—if she finds out I’m hanging out with Jughead—“

“Have we not established that mom does not need to know about who we’re seeing and everything that we’re doing? If she wants to know, she’ll sniff it out, but we are not to make it easy for her. God knows. Do you need me to cover for you with this guy?”

Betty smirked. “Not yet, but thanks, Pol. Do you think I look alright? Not too casual but not trying too hard?”

“Let me look at you.”

Betty stood and put out her arms for Polly to give her the once over. She giggled as Polly eyed her critically and laughed when Polly made a nonsensical adjustment on her blouse.

“You’re good,” Polly concluded.

Betty grinned and was surprised when Polly put her hands on Betty’s shoulders. She fingered the gold necklace around Betty’s neck.

It was shaped like a wicked witch’s hat. “Dad gave you this, didn’t he?”

Betty nodded. “I miss him.”

“I—I do, too.” She dug into her shirt and pulled out her own necklace. Hers was a broomstick.

Betty blinked back tears.

“Don’t you dare,” Polly said, thickly. “We’re both wearing mascara.”

Betty managed to laugh her tears back and she nodded, stepping away. “I’ll see you downstairs. I only have fifteen minutes for breakfast before Jughead gets here.”

Polly grinned. “That motorcycle is so—“
“I know!”

“God, mom’s going to hate him if she finds out Jones is jonesing for you.”

“Ugh, Polly!”

Polly just laughed as Betty retreated back into her room.

*******

Arch thinks u’ve been low-key dating

Jughead stared at Kevin’s text.

What the heck does that even mean? Jughead asked.

He thinks u been on the down low bout this, lying th whole time & that makeout sesh in her rm wasn’t ur first go w her.

He legit thinks you and she are sexing. That one was from Joaquin, whom Jughead hadn’t expected at all. Had this always been a group chat?

How can three men, two of which are gay, be talking so much about one girl?

Why is Joaquin in this conversation? Jughead asked.

Coz, Kevin texted, u wudnt believ it if it wer just me. u’l say I’m just being dramatic. Joaquin is my witness. He was ther.

Kevin had a point.

But the more important point definitely being, Wait, Archie thinks Betty and I have done stuff?

Yea, he thinks u been boinking, Kevin replied.

Did you tell him we weren’t?!!

Wheres th fucking fun in that?!!

Unbelievable. Did you two buggers even consider what Betty would feel about this?

LMAO BUGGERS! Joaquin responded. He was definitely enjoying this, which Jughead found annoying. Course we tried to tell him, Jug, but he wouldn’t listen. Clearly he thinks you a horny little shit.

Jughead was growing seriously upset. Did Archie tell anyone else about this? Like his football buddies?

There were ellipses, and it was taking forever, which was driving Jughead crazy.

Finally, Kevin replied: Might have told Reg by txt. he askd w/c 1 of u 2 were seeing her, an if
neither of u were, can he ask her out?

HE TOLD REG? WAT WAS HIS EXAC TEX

Uh oh, Joaquin said. He’s abbreviating Kev. This is serious.

Kevin typed a winking emoji. Twas th all-caps that tipped me off, actually.

WAT DID HE SAY? HOW DID HE SAY IT?

Not sure exactly how, but something bout how ur “smashing each other’s brains out.”

OH MY GOD WTF

It’s gonna be fine. Kevin’s eyeroll emoji followed.

This is your fault

O calm the fuck down

You wanted this to happen. Your fey can’t help it!

Woa! I’m not the one who shoved my tongue down Betty’s throat!

BOYS! Joaquin interjected. Stop. This is unbecoming of you both. This is not your fault. This is the fault of the patriarchy.

Jughead scowled. Like, the patriarchy is the fault of men, so technically we are all at fault here.

Jughead makes a gr8 point, Veronica said.

Jughead couldn’t believe it. Was everyone on this chat? What the ever loving fuck? Who added V to this?

Kevin used the eye-roll emoji again, and it was then Jughead understood why his dad found it so infuriating when he did it. V wuz alwys aded 2 dis. 4 th lst tym, J, chk th goddamn list be4 chattin

You spelled every word wrong except “goddamn list”. You know that, don’t you?


You didn’t say a thing until now and you misspelled grammar.

Veronica sent a grinning emoji. I was aptly entertained, Maximus, and I misspelled grammar on purpose to drive you crazy.

Kev, you didn’t add Betty to this chat, did you?

Do u want me 2?

Please don’t. This shit i gotta tell her in person. God this is going to be awkward.

Oh, pls, Veronica said. Betty’s a modern woman and she would probably just let this roll right off her back.
“He what?”

Jughead flinched at her tone. Betty didn’t sound pleased and her face was a deep crimson. He couldn’t really blame her. “Archie told Reggie we’re intimate and so the whole football team probably thinks so, too.”

“So in short the whole school thinks we’re having sex.”

That was the logical conclusion.

They were standing in the parking lot and she was leaning against his bike, a thoughtful scowl on her face.

A few moments later she barked a laugh. “Oh, my God! I always wanted to have a normal high school life and guess what! Here it is!”

Jughead sighed. “I’m sorry, Betts.”

“No, no, this is kind of hilarious. Infuriating, but hilarious.”

“Look, we can correct this with Archie.”

“What’s the point? And honestly, it’s none of their business and I don’t have to explain myself to anyone.”

She had a stubborn look on her face, suddenly. The laughter was gone, replaced with a set jaw and her gorgeous green eyes piercing his.

If it had just been him in the rumor mill (and really, that didn’t happen often, he thought), he wouldn’t care. But Betty was new, and the football team has been known to treat women like shit.

Archie should’ve known better.

Jughead tilted his head in the direction of the building. They’ll just have to go about their lives and see. “Come on. We don’t wanna be late for class.”

She smiled and nodded. He couldn’t help but smile back even as he felt the stares and whispers being cast their way.

************************************************************************

It was only after Betty walked through the doors that she realized how this must look.

Just the other day, Archie Andrews had slung his arm over her shoulders and made it appear that he had every right to do so. Her mild resistance couldn’t have been enough to stop gossip from spreading like wildfire: “Andrews and the new girl are a thing.”
And now here she was, just two days later, rumored to be sleeping with Jughead Jones, Archie’s supposed best friend.

She must seem like a complete—

“Hello, slut.”

“Cheryl,” Jughead said in a warning tone. “Back o—“

“It’s okay, Jug,” Betty interjected, softly, but with a fine edged smile. “She’s just sore we played her.”

Cheryl’s lips pursed and her eyes narrowed to slits. “Josie called me, accusing me of outing her. Of course I told her I didn’t. Frankly, I’m impressed you broke the binding on your own. How did you betray him?”

Betty’s eyebrow arched. “I thought you would’ve figured that out by now. Honestly, I thought it was the reason you called me a slut.”

“I call everyone sluts…” Cheryl looked between her and Jughead, realization dawning on her face with a darkening scowl. “Did you really sleep with this slayer? Like for real? You. Are. A. Blossom! How can you—they’re thugs, Betty!”

Betty was just pissed off enough to cross her arms over her chest and say, “A: it’s none of your business who I sleep with; and b: Jughead is not a thug. He’s a perfect gentleman…” She glanced briefly at Jughead who’s eyebrow had arched in surprise, and while she did feel some heat on her cheeks, she went on with her train of thought. “... who does what it takes to get the job done. Now spare me the melodrama, Cher. I ought to hex you for using all of us—including Josie, to carry out your petty schemes.”

Cheryl lifted her chin. “I ought to tell mother you’re fraternizing with the help.”

Betty rolled her eyes. “I’d love to see what she’d do about it. Seriously.”

The glare Cheryl tossed her was so full of poison that if she had put any sort of magic behind it, it might have stopped Betty’s heart. Betty knew what that look was all about. Penelope Blossom was fully aware of what Betty could do—what her powers were. Cheryl didn’t have the slightest clue, but the fact that Betty didn’t tremble in her boots at the mere mention of the Blossom matriarch and head of the coven probably made Cheryl furious at being kept out of the loop with regard to Betty’s gifts.

“Betty,” Cheryl said in a softly vicious tone. “You and I… we don’t need to be fighting like this. We can own Riverdale—”

“Cher, you do realize you’re saying that in front of a slayer.”

Cheryl rolled her eyes in impatience. “I don’t mean to lay waste to this town. If I’m going to rule a kingdom, I’d like it to exist and I’d like it to be up to my standards.”

“Standards?”

“Gone of the riff-raff.”

Jughead chuckled. “Otherworld-trification. Just have all the witches move in and drive the Lost out.”

“Don’t you dream of a town where you don’t have to be worried about these pesky ordinaries,
“Killjoy?”

“The Lost provide a much needed balance, Cheryl.”

She snorted. “Slayer hogwash.” She turned to leave. “Good luck with your reputation, Betty. When you’re done putting up with the muggle nonsense, let me know. I’ll be here to help.”

“Or swoop in for the kill,” Jughead said in a low voice as they began to walk in the direction of the classrooms. “This is what I have to deal with on the daily—Cheryl barely keeping her magic in check.”

Betty gave a huff. “I can take her.”

He smirked. “I have no doubts, Sunshine.”

Loathe as she was to admit it, she really liked that nickname. “Why do you call me that? Sunshine? I wasn’t particularly ebullient that first day in school.”

He smiled like he had a secret, but all he did was shake his head and grin. “Maybe it was the way I saw you.”

Sometimes she wondered what Jughead Jones was hiding.

They passed a group of athletes and she saw them watching her as they spoke in hushed whispers. One of them winked and for a moment, she recoiled, feeling that deep-seated burn of misogyny—that this was her fault.

But before she could psych herself to fight that internalized shame, Jughead was between her and the athletes, his steely gaze sweeping over the jocks and landing on the one who winked—a tall, long limbed boy who had the body of a runner.

“I swear I’ll take that eye out, Streaky,” Jughead growled, stepping aggressively towards him.

The jocks stepped back, and it occurred to Betty that while the Lost didn’t know that Jughead was a Slayer, or even what a slayer was, he had a reputation. He walked around school in a scary leather jacket, heavy boots, probably sometimes armed with sharp objects, and he was reportedly strong. Really strong.

“Jug,” she said, softly, pressing a hand to his arm. “It’s okay.”

Jughead tore his intense gaze from the jocks and rested it on her. For a moment that intensity made her stomach do flips, but his gaze softened and she felt capable of breathing again.

He raised a finger and pointed it at Streaky. “You’re going on my shitlist, Shore. Watch yourself.”

Jughead looped an arm over her shoulders as they walked away, whispering in her ear as he did so. “They’re lunkheads, Betts. You tell me if they give you any trouble and I’ll—“

“Stop,” she interjected, gently, fighting the urge to twine her fingers with the ones he had on her shoulder. “I think I can handle them. I can hex them with boils. Have one pop up on them everytime they say my name.”

He choked on a laugh. “As a slayer I have a sworn obligation to tell you not to do that, but I can beat them up for you if you like.”

She shot him a sidelong glance. She knew he could beat them up. Probably with one hand tied
behind his back, even, but of course that was ridiculous, too. “Silly. My way’s less obvious.”

He smiled and she could feel his fingers fiddling with the material of her shirt. It rippled goosebumps down her arm. She wished he wouldn’t stop.

“Think you can get to lunch without cursing anyone?” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Maybe. How about you? You gonna count to ten before you think about beating anyone up?”

“Okay, fair. Let’s promise each other not to do anything rash.”

She leaned against the doorframe, thinking about exchanging promises with a slayer and how that seemed so intimate yet also, in their case, funny.

She also realized that his hand was pressed against the wall beside her, his body creating a space for them that almost felt protective.

“I promise not to do anything rash.” Her tone was breathier than she planned, and when she caught him looking at her lips, she instantly felt like breaking that promise right that second.

The bell rang and she had to go.

He began to pull away. “Be good. But not too good.” He winked and smirked before walking off.

She made a soft sound, like a moan.

Jughead Jones slayed her.

*****************

“Don’t do it, Jones,” Kevin warned.

Jughead fidgeted as he looked surreptitiously behind him at Archie, several lockers away.

They were in the men’s locker room, preparing for gym class, and he had been contemplating approaching Archie, not about making up, but about Archie telling Reggie that he and Betty were sleeping together.

“Why not?” Jughead said through grit teeth. “You should’ve seen the way the track team looked at Betty this morning. As if they had a fucking right, Kev. She felt uncomfortable. This is all Archie’s fault!”

Kevin sighed. “Okay, calm down, Prince Charming. You’re friends, remember? And while he was being a little idiot telling Reggie, I doubt Archie had any kind of malice attached to it. That boy doesn’t have a mean bone in his body.”

Jughead scowled. “You’re just saying that because he’s got abs and you like it.”

Kevin arched an eyebrow and stepped back. “Okay, that may be true but it’s not fair to bring that up. I’m trying to make peace here.”
Rolling his eyes, Jughead slammed his locker shut and made his way to Archie at the other end of the long row of lockers.

“God!” Kevin hissed. “There’s so much toxic masculinity going on right now! And yet you all have your shirts on. This isn’t even a proper boys locker room scene!”

“Shut up, Kev. This is between me and Archie.”

Archie turned before Jughead got to him and frowned. “What do you want?”

“What the hell, man?” Jughead cried, arms out. “You couldn’t shut the hell up about it to Reggie? That wasn’t any of his fucking business! That wasn’t your fucking business!”

To Archie’s credit, he looked a little shamefaced. He knew exactly what he’d done. “Look, I didn’t mean for it to come out like that. Believe it or not, I was trying to protect you two!”

Jughead gave a frustrated growl. This was why he thought Archie was a huge idiot. “By telling him we’re sleeping together?”

“Well, you are, aren’t you?” Archie cried. “I figured if Reggie knew that, he’d back off. The guy’s afraid of you for some reason, and—“

“It wasn’t your place to tell him that,” Jughead said hotly. “Betty’s in that story, too, and now she has to put up with a bunch of boneheads who think that gives them every fucking right to talk about her a certain way. You took that agency from her!”

“That what?”

“Word too big, Jones,” Kevin grumbled aside.

Jughead shot him a brief glare before transfering that look to Archie. “Read a goddamn book, Arch. I have no time to walk you through Women’s Studies 101, but what you did was attach Betty’s worth to me. You could’ve just told Reggie to leave her alone, full stop. But no, you were so pissed at the thought that I cock blocked you that you totally assigned her worth to her availability. You’re a fucking Neanderthal, Archie.”

Archie looked full-confused, if a little guilty. He turned his uncertain gaze at Kevin, who said, “Instead of telling Reggie that Betty’s an intelligent human being who may think he’s a douchebag, you made it seem like his chances are based solely on her fuckability, and that Jughead putting his dick in her decreased that chance. She doesn’t need penis to validate her humanity, Andrews. She’s a person, not a vagina.”

Archie’s eyes widened momentarily. “Shit.”

“Kev!” Jughead cried, incredulous.

“What? He gets it now!” Kevin argued.

“Shit,” Archie said again, sinking onto a bench. “You’re—you’re right. I wasn’t thinking.”

“That’s right, you weren’t,” Jughead said, his tone not easing in the least. “And now Reggie’s talking about it with all your buddies and that’s like multiplying the douchebaggery by ten.”

“I’m sorry, dude.”

“Don’t apologize to me. Apologize to Betty, whatever good that does her.”
Archie sighed, running his hand through his hair. “I don’t know what’s come over me the past week… dude, I sent Betty a bunch of flowers the other day--like hundreds of dollars worth! Did she tell you about that? My dad’s going to kill me!”

“Bummer! Yeah, you’re toast,” Kevin said.

Jughead tossed Kevin a glare while he said. “I’m sure it’ll work out, Arch.”

“I’m gonna talk to Betty--maybe try to make things right,” Archie said, thoughtfully. “I’m still a bit pissed with you, though. Why didn’t you just tell me you liked her instead of going behind my back like that? You knew I liked her, man. We could’ve talked it out.”

Jughead frowned. “As if Betty didn’t have an opinion on the matter?”

Archie’s brows knotted. “That’s not it at all. We just--”

“Betty likes Jughead,” Kevin interjected. “I don’t think any of this should’ve been up for discussion. This bro-code is stupid.”

“Easy for you to say! You and Jug will never like the same person!”

Jughead sighed, sitting beside Archie on the bench. “Look, Arch. I can’t apologize to you for what I did. It’s what I wanted to do and Betty reciprocated. The only thing I’m sorry for is that you saw it. Also, aren’t you seeing Valerie?”

Archie’s eyes widened. “How did you--”

“C’mon. Like people don’t talk.”

“We aren’t seeing each other exclusively. We’re just having fun--you know, for old time’s sake.”

Kevin sighed. “Oh, Archie…”

“What?” Archie cried in a tone that implied complete innocence.

Jughead shook his head in disapproval. “I don’t think Valerie thought it was just fun. Frankly, dude, I think none of the girls you went out with thought of it as just fun. You didn’t find them in Tinder. Was Betty supposed to be just fun for you?”

As Jughead said it, the words felt hollow coming from his lips. Was Betty supposed to be just fun for Archie? He found that thought deeply infuriating.

“N-No,” Archie replied. “Betty’s different. She’s--God, I could hardly think about kissing her.”

That was a completely foreign concept to Jughead. “What?”

“I mean, I wanted to kiss her! But not-- not the way you did. I mean, she’s so.... pure.”

“What?” Kevin and Jughead asked in unison.

Archie shrugged and turned red in the face. “She’s just--she seems so nice and wholesome. Like summer days and spring mornings and shit. I can’t explain it, but I guess I just got tired of the entire routine of dating the way I’ve been doing it that the idea of her, holding hands, making plans, probably kissing every once in a while--it was so appealing.”

Jughead’s mind was so blown that he couldn’t find the words to say.
“She looks like she makes the best cookies and she’ll make you chicken soup when you’re sick. Like she’ll kiss you goodnight and tuck you in after she gives you a nice warm bath…”

“Jesus Christ,” Kevin gasped. “Archie… Betty is not your mother.”

Archie paused, probably letting Kevin’s words sink in. “Holy shit.”

Jughead stood and threw up his hands. He’d had it with Archie and his revelations for the day, even if arguably, they ought to be rejoicing Archie’s enlightenment. “I can’t deal with this anymore. Archie, you need to get your shit together. Are you still pissed at me?”

Archie’s brows were still knitted, but it was probably from thinking too much. “Not sure…”

“Fine. Why don’t you figure that out. I’ll be at the bleachers if anyone needs me.” He left, storming out of the locker rooms. He didn’t know why he still got annoyed when Archie got to doing shit like this. Maybe it was just the thought that Archie could do all these things and think he could get away with them--hurting Valerie’s feelings, having a Madonna complex for Betty, and then turning around and throwing her into the pit of Riverdale gossip--and because of what? Because he fucking can. And how could he not think of kissing Betty that way? Ever since making out with her in her room, it’s all Jughead could think about.

“Hi, Juggie.”

Now he was hearing her voice in his thoughts.

“Juggie?”

He paused, realizing he hadn’t been imagining that. He turned and saw Betty and Veronica in their gym clothes. He blinked.

Veronica gave him a worried look. “You okay?”

“Um, yeah. I didn’t know you were in this class, Betty.”

Her face reddened. “I was… I just hadn’t been attending, that’s all.”

Rather than focus on why she had avoided this class before, he zeroed in on the fact that she was there now, willing to be amongst them, talking to them and talking to him.

“Wanna sit with me and Kevin on the bleachers? I can get you a pass,” he offered, smirking.

Veronica grabbed Betty’s arm. “Oh, no you don’t. I’ve already convinced her to play for my team. We’re doing volleyball today and Ginger Lopez’s team is going down.”

Betty giggled. “Why don’t you play this time, Jughead? You’re tall and you’ve got big hands…”

Really? he thought, watching her bat her eyelashes at him and liking it immensely. He was a little disgusted with himself--at his weakness of will. He took a deep, exasperated breath. “Fine.”

She clapped her hands and looped her arm around his, dragging him to the group of students surrounding the gym teacher. He went with her easily.

Veronica threw him a knowing look, her shit-eating grin promising a world of relentless teasing.
At lunch, Jughead sidled up to Betty, unsure of whether his need to put his arm around her was an honest, protective gesture or if it was just some excuse to touch her. Maybe it was both. Kevin had overheard the news: Jughead Jones and Archie Andrews had fought over Betty Cooper and were in the outs. Betty was the Yoko Ono to Jughead and Archie’s John Lennon and Paul McCarthy.

“People are fucking sexist,” Veronica had hissed. “They blame the demise of men on women, as if men couldn’t royally fuck themselves up on their own.”

After that particularly sharp quip, Veronica dragged Kevin to his feet. “Come on, Kev. Let’s give these three time to talk. We can stay at the Vixens table. They love you.”

“As much as I love the drama, please kiss and make up,” Kevin said, wearily. He left with Veronica to saunter over to the Vixens.

“We didn’t royally fuck ourselves up,” Archie grumbled, aside. “We just had a misunderstanding, that’s all. Anyway, I’m sitting here and we’re talking. That ought to help make those rumors go away.”

“Yeah, especially since you’re the reason they blew up,” Jughead muttered.

“I told you I was sorry about that.”

Jughead pursed his lips.

“But I haven’t apologized to Betty,” Archie added, reading the look on his face. “I’m sorry I said what I said to Reggie, Betty. It wasn’t my place.”

“It wasn’t,” Betty said, sighing. “And you don’t know a thing about it, Archie, but I appreciate your apology and you trying to make this right.”

Archie picked at his chips, his face turning crimson. “I’m also sorry I acted like a total stalker. I swear, I’m not usually like that, but I guess... I guess I got competitive.” He shot Jughead a sheepish look. “Not that I think you’re a prize to be won,” he added hastily. “Just that Jug and I never liked the same girl before... I guess I’m also trying to wrap my head around my behavior. I’m not sure what came over me.”

Jughead sighed and realized that he can’t tell Archie he and Betty weren’t together, not after he accused Archie of wanting to hook up with Betty for fun. It felt strange, anyway, to say that he and Betty were just friends when his own feelings were, he realized, more than friendly.

“Ever thought about asking me who I liked?” she asked.

Archie stared at her, speechless.

“Revolutionary, I know,” Betty added.

Jughead wanted to laugh, but it was a little too much at Archie’s expense. “Archie’s not used to girls looking away. He always gets them first.”

Betty turned on her seat to face him while her fingers danced lightly over the cuff of his flannel shirt. “That can’t always be true, Jones.”
He became laser focused on their contact, even as he sat transfixed by her gaze. He was beginning to think that she was going to let this charade play out—that she and he were dating, just to keep up appearances with Archie. For what reason, he wasn’t sure.

Maybe it made things less complicated. Maybe it was just easier to go with it because they did like each other and it was really nobody's business if they were actually dating or just starting to get along.

He grinned and caught her hand in his, lacing their fingers together on the lunch table and attempted to pull her closer. She wasn’t resistant at all.

She laughed softly and for a moment, Jughead forgot that Archie was sitting across them.

Jughead weighed the possibility of sneaking a kiss in. It wasn’t as if they were going to start making out in the middle of the lunch room. A tiny peck was all he was thinking. She looked so cute grinning at their shared secret, her ponytail swishing, that surely it was permissible.

Archie gave a soft groan. “Alright, guys. Take it easy. You know how Mrs. Beazley gets when students make out in her lunch room.”

Archie was right, but like Jughead cared. So Mrs. Beazley would complain to Weatherbee about students sucking face in her lunchroom and Weatherbee would make an announcement on the overhead speaker system about PDA in the school and safe sex. It was a little humiliating if everyone knew who Weatherbee was making the announcement for, which was often the case, but for a little kiss?

Worth it.

Betty’s eyes were shining, as if daring him to do it, and he was absolutely going to take her up on this dare, but a commotion had started at the Vixen table, and Kevin’s broad grin said it all.

Jughead rolled his eyes. “I can’t leave him alone for one second.”

Betty giggled and finally pulled away to watch what was going on.

Archie met his gaze across the table. “Are we good, dude?” He raised his fist.

“Yeah, we’re good.” Jughead bumped it.

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Betty thought she would be asleep in bed at this hour.

At the end of school, Veronica had invited them all to Pop’s to celebrate Archie and Jughead being friends again.

Personally, Betty thought it was a little awkward, considering that the reason they had a disagreement was her, even if the entire thing was technically the fault of Cheryl and Josie. So she was glad to have a real excuse to decline: Her mother would have none of it.

If there was anything Alice hated, it was bailing at the last minute. If the Cooper children wanted to bail on family mealtimes, they had had to give advance notice, which was not a couple of hours
before dinner.

Jughead declined, too, because he had a job and after that, he had things to do for the “family business”. Archie’s football game the next day meant he had to go to bed early. So almost no one could make it to this dinner.

Jughead did, however, offer to bring her home, which she accepted.

She would be lying if she said she didn’t hope to have a moment with him after he dropped her off, but when they arrived at her house, Alice was tending the front lawn, which basically meant they waved awkward goodbyes to one another as he left and she fled for her sanity amidst Alice’s questions about “that Jones boy.”

Now at 10 at night, she had just received a text from Sabrina, asking her if she wanted to hang out at a bar catering to Otherworlders.

She didn’t think she was allowed to go to one, but then again, Otherworlder bars didn’t exactly conform to the rules of the Lost.

Betty was just about to reply with a “Mom would never let me go out at this hour,” but her fingers froze over the keypad and she realized that her mother didn’t need to know.

She told Sabrina to come over but to be quiet about it, and that if she wanted to come into the house, she shouldn’t ring the doorbell.

Fifteen minutes later, she had managed to sneak out of the house and into Sabrina’s car.

Sabrina gave her the once over. “That cardigan better come off, Cooper.”

Betty blushed. “I-It does, but I wasn’t sure if this bar--”

“Take it off, honey. Show off those shoulders. Also, I’m glad you went with the short skirt. You’ve got the legs for it.”

Gingerly, Betty slid her cardigan off. Sabrina’s outfit was a skimpy one-piece black dress that hugged her curves. There were embroidered flowers accenting it, and with her gold high-heeled shoes, she looked stunning.

“Are you meeting someone there? You look great,” Betty said. She felt a little less sophisticated with her white spaghetti strap top, red and white gingham skirt, and red strappy shoes, but she was glad that she had dressed up a bit, even if she paled in comparison to Sabrina.

Sabrina grinned. “My boyfriend, Harvey. He’s bringing a friend with him. His name is Shinji Yagami--”

“Sabrina,” Betty interrupted sternly. “Are you trying to set me up?”

“He’s just a friend. You don’t have to like him. He’s a witch but that’s neither here nor there.”

“Sabrina!”

“I swear, he’s cute, he’s funny, and he’s absolutely non-threatening.”

“Great.”

“Try not to look too excited,” Sabrina drawled. “Listen, I know he doesn’t sound like he can live up
“Excuse me?” Betty cried. “What does Jughead have to do with this?”

Sabrina shrugged, flashing a lopsided smile. “Nothing. I know you kinda like him but you’ve got your issues about trusting him and shit, so I thought it would be good if you can meet other boys--you know, ones who wouldn’t start off by lying to you.”

Betty sighed. “Sabrina, Jughead and I--we’re kind of getting along now.”

“Getting along? Like--”

Betty fidgeted uneasily on her seat. “We’re hanging out. We have actual conversations…”

“Wow, sounds like the romance of the century.”

Betty threw Sabrina a sardonic look. “It’s been nice.”

The smirk that Sabrina threw back was one of pure amusement. “So you kind of forgive him for what he did?”

Her face felt indescribably warm, but she nodded. “I-It’s been gradual, but I think I’m more open to getting to know him, now.”

Sabrina shook her head. “I tell you. Jughead Jones can still surprise me. Well, it’s not like you’re exclusive dating, are you?”

“No!” Betty replied, hastily. “We aren’t dating or anything like that, at all. I mean, we made out--”

“Shut. Up! You made out? When?”

“Just to break a spell! There’s this guy who--”

“Archie, he got bound to you. I know. Jughead came over to our house last Sunday to ask Aunt Hilda and Aunt Zelda for advice about that. So, you guys went the betrayal route? How did you do it?”

Betty carefully told Sabrina about what transpired that night they broke the binding spell on Archie. She was careful to leave out details about how she got lost in the kissing for real, and how she got carried away and started to undress, and how, for several blessed seconds, she felt Jughead’s erection against her panties and it had felt amazing.

“And have you guys…” Sabrina grinned, her eyebrows moving up and down. “Ya know…”

“Whatever it is you’re thinking, probably not. It’s not like we just kept making out after that. We had an arrangement and we executed. When it was over… it was over.”

Sabrina shot her another look. “Over, huh?”

She could tell Sabrina was waiting for her to say something, but she didn’t. She didn’t want to get caught in a net of explanations. She was still trying to figure things out herself.

Mercifully, Sabrina didn’t ask any further, moving on to other mundane topics. Soon, they were rolling into the parking lot of a bar named The Whyte Wyrm. Motorcycles were parked everywhere and many of the people milling about wore leather jackets, the image of a snake patched onto their backs with the name Southside Serpents emblazoned on them.
The jackets looked incredibly similar to the one Jughead wore, except Jughead’s snake patch stood out in that it was shaped like an S. No one else’s looked like his.

Betty’s eyes widened as she took in the scene. “Are all of these guys slayers?”

Sabrina snorted. “They wish. Most of the Southside Serpents are just regular folk who like being in the motorcycle club, but all slayers and slayer adjacents here in Riverdale are Serpents, for sure. Come on. Harvey’s already inside.”

Betty stepped out of Sabrina’s car and she let her cousin drag her by the hand across the parking lot, up the steps, and finally through the doors.

The overhead music wasn’t overwhelmingly loud, but conversations were lively around them, the sound of clashing billiard balls struck the air, and drinks floated by constantly on trays aplenty.

Sabrina dragged her across the floor and through the tables, waving at a boy with dark hair and a wholesome smile. She called him Harvey, and Betty was immediately introduced. Beside Harvey was a boy of Asian descent. His hair was dyed a striking blue, which Betty had to admit fit him well. This was the Shinji Sabrina mentioned in the car. He was cute, and pleasant, even funny, but she found her mind wandering on occasion, her fingers playing with the straw in her soda, while Shinji talked the ear out of everyone at the table.

When he touched her shoulder, it felt warm and inviting, but she really wished the hand had been someone else’s.

“I need to go to the ladies’ room!” Sabrina declared. “C’mon Betty.”

Relieved for any kind of reprieve, she followed Sabrina around the table before getting dragged, yet again, by the hand. When they were out of earshot, Sabrina rounded on her.

“You could at least listen to him, B.”

Betty sighed. “I’m sorry. He’s really cute and I’m sure he’s interesting. I’m just preoccupied, that’s all.”

Sabrina’s eyes rolled. “Look, I get it. Harvey drives me crazy sometimes, he’s so regular, and Shinji’s mildly more dangerous in a Dyes His Hair Blue kind of way, but they’re both really milq toast.”

The assessment took Betty aback. “Sabrina… Harvey’s your boyfriend! If you think he’s so milq toast—”

“Not everything has to be exciting and unpredictable, Betty…”

As if the very words conjured up the demon of excitement and unpredictability, a tall, leather vested vision appeared behind her amidst the cigarette smoke and dark lighting.

“Sabrina.”

Betty had never seen anyone turn so pale and then so red so quickly. Sabrina swallowed, visibly rattled, then turned to look at this ruggedly good looking specimen who might never darken the threshold of any mother’s door.

“S-Sweet Pea,” she gasped.
Betty had heard that name before. She thought Sweet Pea was a bakery or a store selling beauty products. If *this* was Sweet Pea…

*Oh.*

“Sabrina, won’t you introduce me?” Betty asked, eyebrow arching and her lips quirking.

“Um, yeah. Sweet Pea, this is Betty Cooper, my cousin. Betty, Sweet Pea, my--uh, he’s with the Serpents--I mean, he works with Jug as a--”

“Slayer?”

“Yeah. But adjacent. He’s not a slayer, *slayer.* He’s a Seer.”

Betty extended a hand, and Sweet Pea, whose gaze had barely left Sabrina, finally looked at her and took it.

His hand was huge, and however callused his palm, his firm grip was warm and not too aggressive. “Nice to meet you, Betty. Been hearing your name all night.”

She didn’t expect *that.*

Sweet Pea tilted his head over his shoulder. “Been playing pool with Jughead and his Northside crew the last couple of hours.”

Her eyes widened in surprise as she peeked over Sweet Pea’s tall frame. Beyond the crowd of people bustling behind him appeared to be a sectioned off pool area where she could make out several people, amongst them Veronica and Kevin. Jughead swung into view with that swagger of his that she had come to find so irresistible. He was swilling a can of coke while holding up a cue stick, his attention on the table. He looked serious as he bent over to take his shot.

Betty pressed her lips together. “Did you know he was here, Sab?” She didn’t even need to mention who—she was so sure Sabrina would know whom she was referring to.

Sabrina scoffed. “Of course. He owns the place—well, his father does, but yeah!”

Betty didn’t even want to think about what Jughead thought of her, showing up here and spending the last half hour with Sabrina and two boys she had zero interest in. “Why didn’t you tell me? Jeez! I’ve been standing there with your Lost Beard and Mr. Dye Job--”

“Beard? Excuse me--”

“I need to talk to you for a few minutes, Sabrina.” Sweet Pea interjected, his gaze pinning Sabrina with every word.

Betty may not be vastly experienced when it came to sexual relations, but the tension was so thick between the two that she knew a booty call when she saw it. However conflicted she was about letting Sabrina leave her to fend for herself for God knew how long, she didn’t want to get in the way of a good time.

At least one of us is getting laid.

“Go,” Betty told her.

“I’m not leaving you alone in the Whyte Wyrm, Betty,” Sabrina said, testily.
Betty scoffed. “I’m a big girl. I can fend for myself. Go. It’s not like you’re going to take very long, right?”

“Betts—”

“Sabrina,” Sweet Pea said in a tone brooking no negotiation. “I need to talk to you now.”

That authoritative tone had Sabrina captivated. She distractedly told Betty to give her a few minutes while Sweet Pea dragged her away.

Betty didn’t even bother to find out where. She turned and made her way to the pool tables, and when she got to that section, someone stood and got in her way.

“Sorry, blondie. Private area.”

Betty was so surprised at first that she almost turned and left without a word, but Veronica’s voice cut through her uncertainty.

“Oh, my God, Fangs! Get a clue! This is Betty.”

Fangs paled. “Oh, shit. Sorry! Come on in.” He unhooked a velvet rope that Betty hadn’t even noticed was there.

Veronica took her by the arm immediately. “You pull off this sweet and sexy look to a perfect tee, lady. Those legs are as incredible as I thought they’d be.”

Betty felt her face go warm. “Um, thanks.”

“Look who decided to join us!” Veronica cried to the rest of the group.

A cheer arose from everyone surrounding them, except for Jughead, who was now leaning against the billiard table, his arms crossed over his chest. His eyebrow was arched and he was barely smiling.

“How’s your date going?” he asked, jerking his head in the direction of Harvey and Shinji. It did not sound like small talk. He sounded like he was pissed--like he was jealous.

She pursed her lips, desperate to keep a smirk from breaking out. “Not a date. Sabrina invited me to drinks and she didn’t tell me we were meeting anyone until we were in her car.”

“That’s Shinji Yagami,” Kevin supplied, chuckling. “Pretty powerful witch over at Greendale.”

Her eyebrow arched. “Oh? Never heard of him until tonight. So have you guys been gossiping about me the last half hour? Why didn’t you just call me over?”

“Didn’t want to bother you,” Jughead grumbled, turning to make a shot, which he missed horribly. He cursed under his breath.

Veronica giggled and began introducing her to everyone in the room. She was introduced to Toni and Joaquin, who both seemed nice and welcoming.

“You met Fangs over there. And I think you might have been introduced to Sweet Pea.”

“Oh, yeah, but he’s probably completely forgotten me by now.”
Toni laughed. “She knows what’s up.”

“How long’s that been going on?” Betty asked.

Kevin shook his head and rolled his eyes. “Forever. I don’t know why they don’t just come out and start dating exclusively. Maybe they like fucking in the bathroom. Who knows?”

“Kevin, don’t be indelicate,” Joaquin scolded.

“Whatever,” Kevin responded in mild disdain. “I don’t know what her hangups are. I mean I get that Sweet Pea isn’t exactly the kind of guy you enthusiastically introduce to your mother, but Hilda and Zelda know who Sweet Pea is. They like him. I don’t know what the fuck her problem is.”

“It’s the thrill of it,” Veronica said, taking up the cue stick. “Sabrina likes sneaking behind her boyfriend’s back, and she likes that Sweet Pea orders her around. Classic sub.”

Betty didn’t want to talk about her cousin’s sexual proclivities. “Well, whatever makes her happy. I just came out here to accompany her.”

“Your date’s looking for you, I think,” Jughead said, eyeing the billiard table again.

Betty did see that Shinji was looking around, but honestly, she didn’t care. “Again, he’s not my date. He could leave right now and I wouldn’t care. You’re not going to make that shot.”

A tiny smirk finally made its way to his lips. “What do you know, Sunshine?”

She came up beside him and bent over to see the shot from his angle. “Little more to your left.” She could feel him turning in her direction, his shoulder touching hers as he adjusted.

“That good?”

“Should do it.”

He took the shot and made it.

“Not bad,” he said, straightening.

She shrugged. “Geometry and physics.”

“I’m more of a calculus kind of guy.”

The memory of that calculus class warmed her, but it emboldened her instead of flustered.

“I’m thirsty.” She didn’t care how he interpreted it.

He gave his stick to Toni as he tilted his head in the direction of the bar. “Come on. I’ll get you something to drink.”

As they stepped away from the pool area and into the more crowded space, he took her by the hand. She grasped his fingers and let him lead her. When they got to the bar, he shouldered a space for her to stand, and then she was enclosed in his arms as he spoke to the guy behind the counter.

“Apple margarita for the lady,” Jughead said. “Whiskey sour for me.”

The bartender scoffed, fixing the ordered margarita in a flash but sliding a coke, not a whiskey sour, for Jughead.
“Every time,” Jughead said, sliding the margarita towards Betty and taking his soda. “Thanks but no thanks, Tall Boy.”

Tall Boy saluted before attending to another customer.

Betty stifled a giggle as Jughead ushered her towards a private table in the corner of the bar. She could feel Jughead’s hand on her lower back, warm and firm. She wanted to lean back against him, but she reluctantly took her seat across his on the table.

She was thrilled when he moved his seat closer to hers.

“Interesting place you have here, Jug,” she said, sipping at her margarita. It was strong and she tried not to seemed so surprised by it.

Jughead was not fooled. “We don’t water our drinks down around here. At least not when I order it for my guests.”

“You didn’t tell me you owned a bar.”

“I don’t. My father does.” He leaned over the table. “I’m surprised your mom let you out this late, even on a Friday.”

She shrugged. “She doesn’t know I’m out.”

“What a rebel. And Sabrina said she just wanted to go out for drinks?”

Betty nodded, biting her lip to keep from grinning.

“Never believe her again.”

She chuckled. “So, Sweet Pea’s her weakness, huh?” She found this hilarious, of course. Sabrina had been ribbing her about Jughead’s broody, moody, dangerous vibe, when all this time, Sabrina had her own dark delight.

Dark delight.

Was that what Jughead was?

God, she hoped so.

She didn’t know what it was with his leather and plaid, those army boots and his dark jeans. Was it just that biker vibe that had her so hot and bothered? Was it the slayer in him—that unobvious physicality and invulnerability—like she knew she couldn’t bespell or hex him, and any desire she might coax from him was pure attraction? Or was it just really that intellectually, he could keep up? Maybe it was all of that.

“You sure you want to ditch Shinji Yagami?” he asked as his eyes trailed over her neck and shoulder. “I heard he’s a big deal in Greendale.”

“Am I ditching him?” she countered, smirking.

“Well you’re here and he’s there. I can call him over here if you like. He’ll listen to me.”

His power play was not lost on her and she almost wanted to tell him that his jealousy was really doing it for her.
Two can play at that game. “Do you want me to call him here?” She played with the cuff of his jacket, in case she wasn’t clear enough.

He turned his palm up so that his fingers would be tangling with hers. “Do you want to get out of here?”

The butterflies in her stomach fluttered madly. “Yes.”

He stood, pulling her to her feet. He grabbed keys from a hook by the bar, told Tall Boy to tell Kevin he was loaning Kevin's car, and exited the Whyte Wyrm with Betty's hand clasped in his.
"I myself have seen this woman draw the stars from the sky; she diverts the course of a fast-flowing river with her incantations; her voice makes the earth gape, it lures the spirits from the tombs, send the bones tumbling from the dying pyre. At her behest, the sad clouds scatter; at her behest, snow falls from a summer's sky."

— Tibullus, The Works of Tibullus

What was it about Betty Cooper that had him so bewitched?

He was immune to the many enchantments of Otherworlders and it was so often mistaken for total invincibility. He was certainly mindful of the spells that *he wasn’t* immune to and have tried to guard himself against them with tattoos, charms, and even scarifications. He’d been inked, scarred, and ritualized by alchemists, priests, witches, and tribesmen, all for the purpose of surrounding him with permanent protections, just so he was even harder to kill.

So while this total inability to control his growing attraction to Betty was slightly unsettling, it was also mostly exhilarating. There were no charms he could wear to temper his feelings, no tattoo he could depend on to curb his desire, and no sigil, patterns of raised skin, or iron brands that could prevent him being completely whipped, and he was there for it.

When Betty walked through the doors of the Whyte Wyrm, he watched her push her beautiful golden hair off her shoulders, bare but for the two spaghetti straps holding up her fitted white top, as if time were slowing down. Her white and red gingham skirt was short enough to show off those fantastic legs that Veronica kept harping about and her red strappy shoes did wonderful things to those legs.

She was breathtaking. He followed her figure as she walked across the floor, Sabrina pulling her towards the tables where it looked like she was introducing Betty first to Harvey, and then to Greendale’s witchy teen-idol, Shinji Yagami.

Jughead felt that peace in him disintegrate, his thoughts slowly churning at the realization that Betty had just met up with a dude and Jughead was getting upset about it. He wondered if he even should be.

He had stopped staring, then, preoccupying himself with the pool tables and his can of soda. And of course, Kevin started talking about Betty schmoozing with this internet-famous warlock, and how blue was his favorite hair color so far.

Toni and Veronica giggled about how dreamy he looked, and Sweet Pea kept complaining about how boring Harvey was.

Jughead’s annoyance with the entire affair escalated, telling Sweet Pea that he should either stop this toxic relationship or go over there and lay waste to it. “Stop enabling her, man.”
Sweet Pea never liked being told what to do. He walked away telling Jughead to mind his own business, and everyone around them hooted and hollered about there being too much drama.

“But I’m with you, J. This is getting ridiculous,” Kevin said, taking a swill of his beer.

Toni draped an arm around Veronica’s shoulders. “Boys are so emotional.”

Veronica’s laughter echoed in his ears. He didn’t feel like being there at the moment.

He wished Tall Boy would cut him a fucking break and give him something alcoholic.

“Oh, my God, she’s heading over here!” Veronica cried, leaving Toni’s side.

And Betty was there, and he was still pissed, even as he thought, in his state of agitation, that she looked even better up close, and that he could see some of her cleavage, and Jesus Christ, she was so fucking beautiful.

He tried to be cold, but Betty was having none of it. She probably knew exactly why he was being cranky and it irked him that he couldn’t be cooler about this. He kept telling her that her date was looking for her, and she kept saying it wasn’t a date.

When she looked down his cue stick as he aimed for the ball, he could smell the shampoo from her hair and the perfume from her neck. He fought the urge to nose that spot behind her ear because goddamn…

She said “thirsty” like she meant more than just libations and his mood was suddenly much different. He was actually smirking, and he felt she was being perfectly clear about leaving her “date” behind. He took her with him to the bar, and as his arm and body caged her, her scent of lilacs and honey drove him even crazier. He sat her with him at the manager’s table, and he tried to talk sense, but the length of skin her outfit wasn’t hiding was distracting him.

He couldn’t focus with the noise around them, the dark, sensuous lighting, and her lips pressing over the rim of the margarita glass. He wanted, oddly, to have a proper conversation with her, one that didn’t involve this bar, his jealousy, and her cousin.

When he asked if she wanted to get out of here and she didn’t hesitate to say yes, he had a momentary image of her on the back of his bike, her smooth long legs straddling him from behind and her arms holding him close, but the thought that she would be freezing and uncomfortable by the time they got to where he wanted to take her shattered that fantasy.

He was taking Kevin’s car. Joaquin was there to give Kevin a ride home and Jughead could drop the car off at Kevin’s house in the morning.

The tiny white Honda hatchback was as far from Jughead’s personal aesthetic as flowers and unicorns, but Betty was comfortable, sighing happily at the warm air from the heater. Also, from the driver’s seat, he had the full view of her, which was great every which way.

It was only when he started pulling out of the parking lot that she asked where he was taking her.

He smirked, amused that she only started asking questions now, where theoretically, there was nothing she could do about it.

“Do you trust me?” The words were out of his mouth before he could second-guess himself, and for a second, he thought he had fucked this up, because hadn’t that been the entire point of their issues?
“I’m here, aren’t I?” was her reply.

Not quite an answer, but he’ll take it for the moment. She wanted this enough to give him some leeway.

“I heard,” he began, turning down main street, “that you dabble in witch history.”

Her eyes lit with anticipation and a smile threatened to break from her lips. “I might. Know someplace I might find a lot of that?”

“I work at the library, don’t I?”

“Is that where you’re taking me?” she asked, sounding the tiniest bit disappointed.

He chuckled. “Yes, but I’ve got access to places in it that a lot of people don’t.”

The interest returned, brighter this time, and she turned in her seat to face him. “Tell me, tell me that there’s a restricted section that even the Lost can’t get access to.”

Whether Betty wanted to admit it or not, she was a rule breaker by heart. “There’s a restricted section that the Lost can’t even see.”

She clasped her hands together. “I knew it! Take me to it now.”

He knew a book nerd when he saw one.

And I love a girl who reads.

She fiddled with the radio.

He let her choose the station, thinking that it might actually offer him a glimpse of what she was like. She paused at a station that was playing Short Skirt Long Jacket by Cake, which she grooved to briefly, as if to try it out, but she shrugged and kept flipping. Cantaloop (Flip Fantasia) by Us3 filtered through the speakers and she grinned, sitting back on her seat.

He definitely approved, but in all honesty, he wouldn’t have cared if she had played a Taylor Swift song.

He parked across the street from the library, and as he killed the car engine, he turned to her and asked, “No turning back. We’re breaking the rules here. The restricted section requires special permission from the Head Librarian, usually a week-long approval process.”

“Who is the Head Librarian?”

“Oh, an old Seer. Miss Haggly. She’s real nice, but she’s rabid about the restricted section, I’ll have you know.”

“Right.”

Grinning, he stepped out of the car and she followed shortly, crossing the street ahead of him. He led them to the side door where he had a key, and when they were inside, he took her by the hand and led them to the side door.

“The restricted section isn’t the Vault,” he explained. “The Vault’s where we keep the rare artifacts, grimoires, and all sorts of magical objects, but the restricted section’s pretty impressive, with its old history books and slayer weaponry.”
Her disbelief was evident in her eyes. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Nope.”

“You keep your weapons here?”

“Some of them, yeah. Toni and Tall Boy has stuff in here, too. But there are weapons here that aren’t owned by anyone in particular, so the Slayer over in Greendale, Farmer McGinty, can borrow them if he needs them. Slayers will always have a personal armory somewhere else. These are just the ones you grab in an emergency.”

She looked at him askance. “You have a personal armory?”

“You bet.”

She made a sound, and he couldn’t determine whether it meant curiosity or disgust, but she wasn’t running away, which at the very least meant she was neutral about it.

He flicked on a few lights as they made their way through the library, and he led them down the long row of heavy wooden shelves. He made a left at Anatomy where at the far wall was a heavy wooden door with an old fashioned keyhole.

She arched an eyebrow. “That is the easiest lock to pick.”

He smirked, fishing a chain from under his shirt and taking it off. The chain had a key, which fit perfectly into the lock. He turned it and a tiny window opened just above the door handle.

“What…?”

“It’s a blood lock,” he explained, sticking his thumb into the hole. There was a hissing sound just as he felt the swift pierce of a needle. “We don’t know who made the lock—it had to be a witch, but the only blood it accepts is Slayer blood. Anyone else gets their finger chopped off.” He kept his thumb on the pad, feeling his blood seeping from the tiny wound.

“What about the other restricted sections in the world that don’t have a Slayer handy?” she asked, mystified at the set up.

Jughead shrugged. “I don’t know how it is in other libraries, but this one was built by slayers, so many of the security measures are slayer-triggered. Other libraries may have different security measures. We’ve had a few visitors coming here to the restricted section—it’s not hallowed ground like the Vault. People are welcome to peruse these shelves, but like I said, you need a permit, which usually takes a week to approve. What that actually means is that the librarian needs to make sure there’s a Slayer on the premises at that time.”

“Well, then,” she said, tilting her head up to look at him. “Aren’t we lucky we have one right here?”

She was close enough that he was sorely tempted to kiss her, but the door behind her swung open, and she was instantly captivated by what was beyond it.

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When Betty was ushered into the room, it felt like a veil was lifted. All semblance of old fashioned wood paneling and paisley patterns faded into a modern, slick design. There was temperature control, custom made mounts, glass casings, airtight drawers, artillery, and a lot of shiny, sharp things.
It was an armory, and it was both stunning and terrifying. On the far wall was another large casing, also in glass, but she could see neatly arranged vials and tubes—potions and other liquid implements, no doubt.

She saw a set of sharp weapons mounted against the wall and as she went to it, she saw the inscriptions at the bottom of each: A tomahawk for Toni Topaz, a Celtic sword for Christian Riley, a lochaber ax for FP Jones II, a scythe for James McGinty, and a highland dirk for FP Jones III.

She looked at Jughead, her jaw dropped. “You know how to use a dirk? And what does FP stand for?”

He laughed and shrugged. “I had to earn that thing, so yeah, I know how to use a dirk, but these weapons are largely symbolic. Slayers come from all cultures, obviously, and my ancestors were Scottish so we had these in our arsenal. It would’ve been cool if I had a samurai sword, but I guess even slayers know about cultural appropriation.”

“And FP?”

“That’s my father’s name.”

His evasion was only making her more curious. “Yes, I know, but what does it stand for?”

He made a sound but didn’t reply. “Speaking of samurai sword, want to check out Toni’s? She has one here somewhere.”

She wondered how bad this name was that he would completely ignore her question. She let it go, this time. There were other ways to find out.

“So does anyone who wants to be in the restricted section have to go through your weapons room first?”

“Not really. There’s another door that goes directly to the books from the library proper, but I took you through here because I wanted to show this to you, first. There’s a lot of history here, too. Most of these weapons have been handed down through the generations of slayers. We didn’t get these on eSale or AllMart.”

The collection was fascinating, consisting of recognizable implements and some that were incredibly obscure.

She looked at one that appeared to be a hybrid of a machete and a spear. She couldn’t fathom how one could use it, exactly, but it looked deadly. Beside it were a set of other hybrid weapons, but at the very center of the cluster was a sword with kanji carved into its sheath.

“One of my old, pirate ancestors made it to ancient China and brought home a few things,” he explained. “If he used them, he never wrote that down in his journals. I’d consider these more as artifacts.”

She looked across the broad expanse of the room. “It really does look like a museum.” She moved across the open spaces to get what seemed like a more obscured section. When she rounded the corner, she was taken aback by the sight of guns.

“Oh,” she gasped, seeing rows of rifles, semi-automatics, and revolvers lining the walls. She hadn’t expected to see these types of weapons here, but she supposed it made a bit of sense.

“Many otherworlders aren’t invulnerable to bullets, unfortunately,” Jughead said. “Werewolves, in
particular, can be offed by silver bullets. Even vampires can be incapacitated by one of these…” He pulled open a drawer and picked up a slick looking black case. He lifted the lid and took out what seemed like a regular bullet, but when he held it closer for her examination, she saw that the bullet was very sharp at the tip. Jughead unscrewed the bottom and a tiny vial was nestled in the base of it. “There’s essence of garlic in there. The bullet’s designed to shatter once it enters the body and it releases the garlic. I can’t imagine the pain, but I’ve heard the screams. It won’t kill them, but it’ll make them suffer something fierce.”

Betty said nothing as she took another bullet and weighed it in her hand. It was surprisingly light. Whenever pain entered the conversation, she was reminded of what she was, how even among the anomalies, she was an anomaly. She put the bullet back in its casing.

“Guns can hurt witches, too,” she said.

He nodded, setting the bullets aside as his hand, gently, rested on her shoulder and rubbed her arm. “I’ve never been a big fan of the more modern implements. Come on. I’ll show you the blunt force weapons.”

He brought her to a section hosting all manner of things that were, essentially, used to hit people and things with.

She grinned. “Baseball bats?” The row of bats were arranged against the wall, each labeled with their names as well. Jughead chuckled. “Toni got them for us. As a joke, maybe, but they’re great for crowd control.”

Imagining Jughead with a bat swung over his shoulder was oddly compelling. Maybe she wasn’t completely immune to the athletic archetype.

She saw mallets, clubs, tonfas, bokkens, and other weapons for hitting. She looked around a bit more and found one of the simplest weapons in the arsenal: A bo staff.

She picked it up, weighed it in one hand before hefting it in both.

“Tall Boy had a fondness for that thing once,” Jughead said behind her.

“Don’t knock it.” Betty had a fondness for it herself. “Not all beings are invulnerable like Slayers.”

“Or werewolves. Or vampires.”

She shrugged. “Sure, it has its limitations, just like a dirk wouldn’t work as well with a werewolf.”

Jughead chuckled. “I would never bring a dirk to a werewolf fight.”

“Your dirk’s no good against a vampire, either,” she continued. “Whereas this bo staff, snapped to a point, can run through a vampire’s heart.”

“True, but I think Tall Boy would kill me first before he lets me snap that thing in half.”

“It’s a bo staff, not a thing.” She grinned.

He tried to take it from her but she spun it deftly out of his reach behind her, switching it to her other side with practiced ease. The bo staff sang softly against the still air.

His eyebrow raised in surprise. “You can handle a bo staff?”
She shrugged and put the bo staff back where she found it. “Parlor tricks.” She didn’t want to talk about what she could do, because that led to questions about how, and then why. The why was certainly something she was not ready to discuss. Ever.

She saw the curiosity in his eyes—the interest to know more. She didn’t want to answer any more questions.

“What’s your favorite weapon?” she asked.

He looked around him and shrugged. “I don’t have one. I use what I need to use.”

“There must be one you like using the most,” she insisted.

A smirk tilted his lips. He took her hand and pulled her through another set of doors.

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“If I had to choose a favorite?” he said, as he ushered her through the opening. “It would be the books. Not just here, but everywhere I have them. I can do what I do because I’ve learned how from books. I’m better at this because I read.”

Betty was hardly paying attention now, her eyes riveted to the shelves, her fingers sliding over the spines of volumes arranged in rows. The modern design of the armory was left behind and they were back in the traditional decor of dark oak, heavy prints, and carved brass.

She pulled her hand back, as if the leather bound books burned her. “Do I have to be wearing gloves, or something?”

He couldn’t help but take in the wonder that was on her face. The eagerness in her eyes was evident, the restlessness in her fingers clear. “You’re fine. The books are spelled in this room. You take them out and maybe you’ll hurt them. Here, they’re protected from decay.”

At that, she pulled a volume from a shelf and flipped to the title page. “Beast of War: Chronicles of the Uktena by Manaba Topaz,” she read out loud. She opened the book further and her eyes scanned the text quickly. “The wolf tribe, werewolves, the wyrm... this is fascinating, Jughead.”

She set the book down gently on the table at the center of the room then hurried to another shelf, pulling another volume out. “The Dales of the River, Volume 1, John Riley. These are journals. Are they all like this?”

Jughead nodded. “Most of them are. These are the chronicles of slayers, mostly. There’s also a fair amount of witch journaling, too. Some jurisprudence back over there, deeper in. And then you have a few creative works scattered throughout. I still consider all of it history. Tellings of tales and legends. Now, the spells and how-tos…”

“How tos?”

“How to kill a djinn... how to outsmart a goblin... how to counter a witch’s curse…”

“Ah.”

He smiled knowingly. “Those are kept somewhere else. The slayers’ personal collections, mostly.
Some are so sacred they’re kept in the Vault. You can find answers to certain how tos and other compelling questions here, too, but you’ll have to read through every single entry.”

She paused, her gaze thoughtful. “Topaz, Riley… these are from their ancestors.”

He nodded.

“Where’s the Jones section?”

Jughead quirked a smile as he approached the shelves containing his family’s ancient journals. He rested his hand on the seven foot shelf, filled from top to bottom with chronicles from his descendants’ stories. The Jones volumes occupied two and a half shelves. “It’s not always a history I could be proud of. Many of my ancestors had the same terrible deeds as everyone else--piracy, pillage, persecution of the innocent, genocide, racism--it’s all there, but I can at least say that the Joneses began turning over a new leaf around the mid-50s and 60s, becoming allies and fighting the good fight with those who stood against the worse things--and I’m not talking about vampires and werewolves. They became soldiers in World War 2, they stood shoulder to shoulder with proponents of the Civil Rights Movement here in America, they started supporting various social movements… so many of my ascendants tried to make up for hundreds of years of historical evil doings.”

She pressed her lips together and gave him a sideward glance. “I’m sure the Blossom family history isn’t that much different. I don’t think they’ve gotten to the point of reform, either. Maybe the Spellmans have a better record.” She went further, probably to look in B.

He came up behind her and chuckled when the Blossom row of books amounted to a little less than a dozen titles. “The Blossoms don’t make their journals public. You might have to go to Thornhill for those. Their eradication of the Uktena is probably their claim to fame. They wanted the land for what they told the Lost were Maple Trees, but we knew better. They wanted that plot because it’s where the ley lines intersected the most.”

Betty made a sound of disgust. “They were awful. I think they still are.”

“They’ve learned a thing or two about being shady and being less obvious about it.”

She turned to look at him, pressing her back against the shelves. “Are the Spellmans here?”

“Right beside the Topazes. They’re all mostly wood witches, so yeah, hermits in the forest, the occasional psycho luring children into candy houses, the mad wanderer here or there… but over the last few decades, they’ve mostly been beatniks, hippies, and new agers. The Spellmans are a kooky bunch.”

Her fingers skimmed over the front of his jacket. “I can spend hours here reading all these books.”

“They’ll be here,” he said, softly, his own fingers trailing gently over her forearm. The goosebumps he saw there sent a ripple of anticipation through his body.

“So your favorite weapon,” she said, “is knowledge.” She tried to keep a grin from breaking.

“Are you laughing at me, Cooper?”

She shook her head, biting her lip. “No. Never. Haven’t you realized it yet, Jones? I love a man who reads...”
In the Cooper household, slayers were never quite regarded as human beings. True to his Blossom blood, her father called them thugs and her mother didn’t say otherwise. Slayers hunted Otherworlders—that was it. You never wanted to offend them and speaking to them was courting pain or even death.

Jughead had completely blown her expectations of slayers out of the water. Not only was he learned and deliberate, he was witty and possessed a boyish charm. There was a softness in his eyes and a smirk on his lips that left her breathless.

Those cheekbones of his were no joke, either. How anyone would choose Archie over Jughead eluded her.

“This stuff’s riveting, you know,” he argued, however softly. Compelling as their closeness was, he was apparently going to defend his choice of “weapons” even if it meant disrupting the moment. “Handy when I’m trying to figure out what creature may be causing mayhem in my town. Usually mentions how to catch them, too.”

Fortunately, this was only serving to make her want him more. “Do you consider Riverdale yours?” she asked, coaxing him closer. That they were in possibly the most private place in town made her limbs thrum with barely contained energy.

“It’s my responsibility.” As he shifted, he left very little space between them. “Especially when my dad’s out of town, which is most of the time.”

She couldn’t imagine—both his mother and father leaving him to fend for himself. Both doing so by choice. That was how strong they both thought he was.

He certainly seemed strong, but he also surrounded himself with people he trusted, like Kevin and Veronica, Aunt Hilda and Zelda, probably even Toni and the rest of his Southside friends. He kept them near, possibly holding on to them to keep him afloat.

It was just that the first day of school, when he befriended her, there was a vulnerability that was impossible to fake. It’s what drew her to him—his kindness and his curiosity, like he had a willingness to really know her, as if he didn’t need to find out what she really was. It felt real.

She couldn’t explain it, but it was the reason she let him in, and it was also the reason she couldn’t look him in the eyes after Cheryl told her Jughead Jones just needed to know what kind of Otherworlder she was, if she even was one. She couldn’t believe that he faked all that. He couldn’t have, or else everything she knew in this world was wrong.

She gave into the impulse to grip the edges of his leather jacket. “Were you at any point faking it, Jughead? Liking me?”

His eyes did not leave hers when he shook his head. “I’m a hell of a secret keeper,” he murmured, moving close enough to make their noses brush lightly against each other. “But I’m a terrible liar.”

She nudge her chin up, just enough to make their lips touch lightly, hoping he would continue, but if she thought he was shy, she was wrong. It was like a flame to a flint.

Jughead did not need too much convincing. His mouth pressed hard against hers, his thumb rubbing the tender skin beneath her lower lip to coax her mouth open and let his tongue slide between her
lips. He tasted sweet like sugar and he felt velvety and warm against her tongue.

His other hand slid around her waist, pulling her closer until her body was flush against his. She could feel the hard planes of his chest against her breasts and the buckle of his belt against the sensitive skin above the waist of her skirt. She felt the pads of his fingers tracing that patch of skin peeking between her skirt and blouse, hoping, wanting him to touch some more.

They breathed into each other’s mouths, his lips moving against hers as he cupped her face. Her fingers raked through his hair and she could hear a faint groan emanating from his throat.

She could feel his hand molding to the curve of her waist, sliding to her lower back and inching so temptingly close to her ass while seeking more skin to touch. His beautiful long fingers slipped beneath the waist of her top, making circles along her spine and stoking the shivers that coursed through her.

Her knee lifted, seemingly of its own volition, and when he nestled deeper into the embrace of her thigh, she moaned softly.

“Oh, Betts,” he grumbled against her lips, one hand flat against her spine and the other on her raised thigh as he lifted her, causing her other thigh to wrap around his hips. Her butt rested slightly on a shelf, but he seemed to be carrying most of her weight.

Her name from his lips sent heat lancing to her core, and she knew for sure she was wet. The ache between her legs needed more friction, compelling her to cant her hips and rub her center against the front of his jeans. His hips pushed back and she could feel him hardening.

For a second, she was afraid they would topple a shelf, sending the entire collection crashing down, but these shelves were massive and heavy, probably made even sturdier by magic.

This kiss was real. This was not for show and nobody was watching them. It was just the two of them, grasping for one another, kissing for no one but themselves.

The thought both excited her and lanced anxiety through her. While having sex in a library figured into her fantasies, she wasn’t sure if she’d know how.

She’d never had sex anywhere. Wasn’t this stuff advanced and for experienced parties only?

The worry began to fade into the back of her mind at the massage of his tongue, intensifying as his hips pushed more deeply into the embrace of her body. The shelf dug into her back and while everything about him felt fantastic, that edge of shelf on her skin—

She gave a whimper.

He gasped and pulled away, easing the pressure of that edge against her spine. “Shit, did I hurt—“

“The shelf,” she whispered.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he whispered back, gently pulling her off the shelf and setting her back down on her feet.

Baby.

She could get used to that.

“I wasn’t thinking,” he said, softly in her ear. “It felt nice kissing you.”
She smiled, tugging lightly at his jacket to pull him to her, pressing her lips against his. He was more gentle this time, languid and intimate. The tangle of their tongues was slow, and she felt some teeth, tugging at her lower lip.

His hand slid up her back, smoothing over the area the shelf had dug into, as if to ease the pain. She melted at his care, wanting more of this.

When he pulled away, he rested his forehead against hers. Savoring the closeness, she kept her eyes closed, smiling to herself.

“Better?” he asked.

She made a contented sound, like a purr, and when she opened her eyes, she saw that his were dark with something other than the softness he was showing her with his hands and lips.

“Better,” she breathed back.

Something buzzed, jarringly. It vibrated between them in angry bursts.

Startled, she moved back slightly and saw a faint light coming from her pocket. It was her phone.

Hurriedly, she looked at it. It was her mother.

“Shit,” she hissed, staring at the screen in growing panic. She didn’t answer it, letting it go to voicemail, just as Polly’s and Chic’s texts came in simultaneously.

_Sis, mom’s on full-on panic mode. Where are you?_ Polly asked.

Chic texted, _Bug, where are you? I’m picking you up_

“Shit,” she hissed again, looking up at Jughead.

He was grinning.

“This is _not_ funny,” she told him with a scowl.

“It’s a _little_ funny.” He pushed some hair off her shoulder and rested his hand on it. His fingers began to work a gentle massage on them and for a moment she marveled at how his teasing was coupled with offered comfort. Was he always like this?

“You’re at the library. Tell them that and see how they’d react.”

She hadn’t thought about that. It was still slightly off to be _anywhere_ but at home at this hour, but it was better than _“I was at a biker bar with Sabrina.”_

She found that she was smirking, and as she hit Chic’s number, she tried to straighten her face and glared at Jughead, warning him to _not_ make her laugh.

Chic picked up at the first ring. “Bug, you can’t just skip out in the middle of the night. Where are you?”

“At the library.”

“Wait, what?”

“Did you think I would run off to some bar…?”
Jughead’s eyes twinkled at that and she had to bite her lip to keep from giggling.

“What are you doing there at this hour?” Chic asked.

She took a lock of Jughead’s hair between her fingers and twirled it. He smirked and grabbed her by the waist. She desperately tried to wiggle out of his grasp as soundlessly as possible.

“Doing some research. I needed some stuff from the restricted section for a paper due on Monday and permits usually take a week. A friend of mine hooked me up but it had to be at this time or he’d get in trouble for it.”

“A friend of yours?”

“Yup,” she breathed, as that _friend_ began to suck gently at the soft skin of her throat.

Chic sighed. “Are you all done then? Mom’s freaking out and I need her to stop screaming in that _voice._”

“Not really.” She tried to sound normal, but her eyes were closing out of their own volition, Jughead’s tongue on her neck stoking something in other parts of her body.

“That wasn’t actually a question.”

She masked a heavy sigh of pleasure by pretending it was reluctance. “Fine. I’ll pack up. I’ll have my friend drop me off--”

“I’m picking you up, bug. You better be at the library when I get there.”

“I’ll be here.” She pulled the mouthpiece away as she gasped when Jughead tugged the lobe of her ear with his teeth.

“I’m leaving right now, give or take, I’ll probably take ten. Are you okay? Did something just happen?”

“Dropped something,” she said, shortly. She wanted to end this conversation just so she can focus on what Jughead was doing to her.

“I need to calm mom down,” Chic grumbled. “Next time, leave a note to tell us where you’re going.”

He cut the line.

Sometimes Chic could be such a dad. In the worst way.

“We have five minutes,” Betty breathed, tilting his face up with her thumbs and capturing his mouth with hers.

They kissed slowly for several heartbeats, a low, barely audible growl rumbling from Jughead’s throat. She hummed in reply, loving the way his mouth and tongue melded with hers and enjoying the firm grasp of his big hands around her waist, teasing a journey down her body, tentative.

She moved his hand to her ass, giving him her full permission, and he squeezed firmly, softly moaning his approval.

They could’ve gone on, but her phone dinged, and that seemed to make him smile into their kiss. He began to pull away. She complained slightly but let him guide her away from the shelves.

“When can I see you again?” he asked, leaning against the heavy oak table at the center of the room.
She felt slightly giddy at the fact he’d foregone making out for making plans. He tugged her gently towards him and found herself between his legs, leaning against his thigh.

“I’m not as busy as you are.” She slipped her arm over his shoulders, her other hand playing with the collar of his grey and black flannel.

His blue eyes looked up at her, like he adored her, and she told herself that he couldn’t possibly. They hadn’t known each other long, but she realized that maybe she was looking at him the same way right now.

“I’ve got stuff to do in the morning,” he said. “But I’ll be done by noon.”

She realized that his hair was loose from its beanie. The hat was probably on the floor somewhere, discarded while they were making out. “Can I text you?”

“Anytime, babe. Just… the sooner, the better.”

She was embarrassingly thrilled by idea of him waiting eagerly for her text.

Her phone rang and it was Chic. “He’s probably outside.” She sounded as disappointed as she felt.

He stood and took her by the hand. “Let’s get you out of here.”

She texted Chic that she’d be out in a minute before letting Jughead lead her out through the other door, coming out to the library instead of the armory. When they got to the exit, Jughead cupped her face in his hands and gave her a lingering kiss goodbye.

“Goodnight,” he whispered against her lips when they parted.

“Goodnight,” she whispered back.

He held the door open for her, and giving him one last look, she hurried out the side of the library, rounding the corner to the front where Chic’s SUV was waiting.

When she hopped into Chic’s vehicle, he didn’t say anything about her outfit, even if his eyes told her that her cover story was losing credence.

“Found what you were looking for?” he asked in a neutral tone that only Chic could ever manage.

With a straight face schooled through years of practice, she replied, “Yes, thanks. It was everything I needed.”

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When Jughead got up the next morning, the memories of midnight came flooding back and a stupid grin broke out of his face.

Was there anything more exquisite than making out with Betty Cooper in the restricted section of the library? It has been so unbelievably sexy, vulnerable at times, mindful leading up to it, and so real.

They weren’t doing it for anyone but themselves.
He reached across his bed for his phone and saw that Kevin had already called him twice. He ignored the notification and opened his messages to read Betty’s last text.

She had responded to his text of *Sweet dreams, Sunshine.* with a properly spelled and punctuated *Goodnight, Jughead. Can’t wait to see you tomorrow.*

*Can’t wait to see you tomorrow.*

He can hardly wait, himself.

He was just about to text her when his phone started to ring and Kevin’s face flashed on his screen.

Sighing, Jughead picked up.

“Finally!” Kevin gushed. “It’s almost 8, Jones! How much sleep do you need? Where’s my car?”

Jughead rubbed the sleep from his eyes and pushed himself to a sitting position. “Let me get ready and I’ll swing by your place. You coming with me to make the rounds or are you gonna drive me back to the Wyrm for my bike?”

“Both. I’ll drive you to the Wyrm after the rounds.”

“Cool,” Jughead said, knowing full well what Kevin’s motives were. “Be there in 30.”

They said their goodbyes and Jughead took a quick shower. He wore clothes appropriate for a bike ride and skipped breakfast to head out to Kevin.

It was a five minute ride between their houses and Kevin was waiting at the curb with a small paper bag and two takeaway mugs.

Jughead grinned as Kevin hopped into the passenger side. “That coffee?”

“Yes, because I know your sorry ass probably hasn’t had any. Got a breakfast burrito for you, too.”

Kevin handed him one mug and the paper bag.

“You’re the best, dude,” Jughead said, taking a sip of the coffee before setting it aside and digging into the bag. The breakfast burrito was wrapped in foil and Jughead made quick work of peeling back the aluminum layers.

He took a big bite of the burrito and it was delicious. “This is awesome,” he grumbled through a mouth full of tortilla, scrambled eggs, and a spicy ground meat.

Kevin responded with a smug grin. “I know. There’s chorizo in that. So—“

“So?”

Kevin turned to face Jughead in his seat. “Where did you take Betty after you stole my car?”

“Yeah, sorry about that. What she was wearing wasn’t bike appropriate.”

“I don’t care about the car. Where’d you go?”

Jughead ate some more of the burrito just to drive Kevin crazy.

“Forsythe,” Kevin warned.
“I brought her to the library.”

Kevin arched an eyebrow in surprise. “Color me underwhelmed.”

Jughead chuckled. “Sorry to disappoint you.”

“Did you at least get some action from all that privacy?”

He was probably never going to answer that question directly. “I brought her to the restricted section and showed her the armory.”

“Now we’re talking!” Kevin gasped, brightening. “Did you show her your dirk? Did she make dirk jokes? Did you make dirk jokes?”

Jughead rolled his eyes. “Betty is above making dirk jokes, Kev.”

He huffed. “Missed opportunity if you ask me. What did she think of it? Your dirk, I mean. Was she properly impressed?”

Jughead shook his head even as he gave up a grin.

“What?” Kevin cried. “I’m not above dirk jokes.”

“She liked the armory,” Jughead said, determined to ignore Kevin’s teasing. “And she found the restricted section pretty fascinating.”

“A nerd after your own heart!”

Jughead was going to leave out the fact that no actual reading happened.

“So did you work things out with her? You were super jealous last night.”

He threw Kevin a sidelong glance. “I wasn’t super jealous.”

“You were so jealous. Come on, Jones. Tell me everything.”

“I’m not gonna tell you everything.”

“Tell me something. You took my car last night. Unlike you plebes, I don’t like getting on a motorcycle, especially not on the back of one.”

“Fine. We kissed and it was great.”

Kevin’s eyes gleamed. “Was it hot?”

“You saw us in Betty’s bedroom. What do you think?”

“But I was directing. Who knows if you can do that shit all by yourself?”

Jughead threw him a sardonic look. “I try, you know?”

“Well, that’s a relief. You seeing her again?”

“That’s the plan.” Jughead finished the last of his burrito and crumpled the empty foil. “That was a great breakfast. Thanks, man.” He threw the ball of foil into the paper bag and set it aside.

“I’ll buy you donuts if you give me more details,” Kevin finally said as Jughead started to drive.
“No deal.”

Jughead and Kevin always enjoyed making the Saturday rounds because it was a chance for them to catch up. Not that they didn’t get to see each other— they saw each other in school everyday, but there were almost always other people around them.

Time with just the two of them didn’t happen as often as before, when they were children and the cares of the town were less theirs and more their parents’.

“Is your dad coming home anytime soon?” Kevin asked, fiddling with the music in the car.

Jughead shrugged. “He never tells me when he’ll come back. Sometimes he calls. Sometimes I can call him, but most times I just email. He replies within three days.”

Kevin shook his head in clear disapproval but didn’t say anything else. He’d had this discussion with Jughead many times and he was as tired of it as Jughead was.

Saturdays were for Greendale and that’s where they were headed.

Greendale was a hotbed for charlatans and quacks, with fortune-tellers, mediums, and Collectors ready to pounce on the gullible, the grieving, and the dead, respectively.

Jughead did not go around taking these people into custody. His jurisdiction ends at the border of Riverdale, but he did often get useful information from them. They were just the next town over from Riverdale. If any kind of trouble was brewing, the fringe beings in Greendale so often picked up on them because no one thought they were listening.

Farmer McGinty, Greendale’s slayer, didn’t like it when Jughead fraternized with his troublemakers, but Jughead couldn’t help it if they liked him better than they liked Farmer McGinty.

Kevin loved these excursions. He loved getting information from people and the fortune-tellers, in particular, entertained him immeasurably, with their kooky costumes and their colorful parlor tricks. They were so often just Lost, sometimes a seer, sometimes a witch, but they had the confidence of half the townspeople. They knew the many dramas that circled the town, because people liked what they had to offer: emotional relief.

Mediums, too, fascinated both Kevin and Jughead. The very idea that these people communicated with the dead in every way was both amazing and terrifying. They were constantly haunted, it seemed, by lost souls. However seldom mediums cared about helping spirits move on, the tethered dead seemed to think mediums would go out of their way to cross them over.

The dead were not so lucky.

Collectors hung around the living to find out what their dead had to offer, and then they harvested the bodies when no one was looking. It seemed like an abhorrent trade, but it made them a good living. There were very few who had the stomach for collecting, but there was always a great demand for the ingredients they provided.

Madame Belle, a jolly lady who liked to wear costume makeup and spoke Spanish to her spirits, no
matter how non-Spanish they were, was smoking a cigarette outside her house when they arrived. She was a witch by birth and fortune-teller by trade. She was the fourth resource they’d visited in Greendale so far. The others hadn’t yielded anything useful, which was more often than not.

“Ah, it’s you two again!” she cried, coming down the steps of her porch to give Kevin a cheek kiss. She was Kevin’s favorite. With Jughead, she just shook hands. It was on principle she never got too friendly with slayers. “I’ve got some interesting things to share with you—that is, if you can help move a couch for me up to the second floor.”

She liked trading info for housework.

Jughead was fine with that. “Deal.”

Kevin shot him a scowl. “Can I at least know how heavy this couch is? We’re not all strong and invulnerable, you know.”

“It’ll be fine.”

“Easy for you to say,” Kevin grumbled.

“What do you have for us, Madame Belle?” Jughead asked, nudging Kevin’s shoulder to shut him up.

Madame Belle was eager to share. “So in this business, I have tons of clients coming to me with their dreams and asking me to interpret them. They believe that their dreams are glimpses into their futures and they often come to me hoping I tell them either they’re right or wrong, depending on how good or bad the dream is, but in the last week alone, I’ve had five clients tell me that they’ve dreamt of an old lover, a good friend, or an unrequited crush having sex with them. Five, some repeatedly. And these dreams are very graphic—they feel everything. They orgasm. They feel euphoric.”

Kevin laughed. “What’s Greendale drinking and can I have some of it?”

Jughead scoffed. “I’m not sure that means anything, Madame Belle. Don’t we all have sex dreams?”

“Not five different people in one week, slayer. How many times do you have sex dreams in a week? No, make it a month? How many?”

Come to think of it, he hadn’t had a sex dream in a couple of years.

“People are more likely to have repeating nightmares,” Madame Belle said. “I know it may not seem like much, but you know what they say—one’s dumb luck, two’s a coincidence, three’s an omen. I don’t know what five is, but that should be concerning.”

She was right. Jughead always looked to the numbers.

“Can you give us a list of clients that had these dreams?” he asked.

“Sure. I’ll write it up while you move my couch.”

Jughead looked to Kevin who rolled his eyes.

“Fine,” Kevin grumbled. “Let’s go.”

Kevin had bags. Several of them, and he had every intention of filling them with vegetables from the
bushels of Farmer McGinty’s crop.

“I swear to God, Kev. Can we at least pretend for five minutes that we’re here for slayer business?”

Jughead felt the hard-packed earth beneath his feet, overlaid with patches of wild grass, lush in some places and dried and flattened in some. The sound of cows peppered the calmness of the farm air and the bleat of goats was a soft, steady staccato interspersed with the bovine moans.

“Oh, relax. Farmer McGinty’s all about his vegetables and he likes it when I show enthusiasm for his crop. Granted, he’s creepy, but those bell peppers! So good. He expects me to raid his inventory. Now hurry up so I can get to that already.”

“Have you forgotten that he left me in a gas station at midnight when I was sixteen after he made me pay for the gas with my last $18?”

“Not in the least! Why do you think I keep taking his vegetables and not insisting on paying him for it?”

Farmer McGinty saw them coming from afar. He stopped piling hay and he watched them approach, holding his pitchfork. He was a tall figure, even from afar, and his farmer’s hat and overalls seemed typical in every way, but Jughead never let the stereotypical convince him to put his guard down.

Farmer McGinty was flinty. He was a quiet man whose ruthlessness ran deep. Farmer McGinty answered to no one, made decisions on his own, and he will do what it takes to do his duty. He was, to Jughead’s mind, a harder ass slayer than FP, which was saying something.

At some point, Farmer McGinty waved, and Kevin waved back. He elbowed Jughead as he did, so Jughead proceeded to wave as well.

“How are you, Farmer McG?” Kevin said, hurrying forward.

Jughead had to admit that Kevin was probably the only person in all of Riverdale, and probably of Greendale, that Farmer McGinty didn’t scowl at as much. In fact, right now, his eyes were crinkling, as if a smile were trying to break out of his face. It could have been the sun hitting his eyes, however.

“I been good,” Farmer McGinty replied in his impossibly baritone voice. “You boys on your weekend rounds?”

“Saturdays are for Greendale,” Jughead replied, feeling the sun pounding down on his back. He wondered, momentarily, if he could take a few minutes at home to freshen up before texting Betty about being free for the afternoon.

“You being here means you’ve finished speaking to the charlatans, conmen, and vultures.”

Jughead pursed his lips. Farmer McGinty wasn’t wrong, of course, but it was difficult to think of Madame Belle, for example, as a charlatan in the worse sense, considering that she provided what could be construed as cheap therapy. Granted, it probably wasn’t medically constructive to go to a self-proclaimed fortune-teller for comfort and self-improvement, but to have someone listen to your hopes and desires and have that same person tell you that your life is going to get better in the next couple of weeks for $20? That’s almost as good as getting a haircut and unloading on your stylist.

“We’ve heard interesting things,” Jughead said.

Farmer McGinty seemed surprised. “And you’ve come to share that information?”
“It’s happening in your jurisdiction, not mine. I’m just guarding the perimeter of my town, Farmer McGinty.”

The hand holding his pitchfork twitched. “Well, tell me, then. What do you think is happening?”

Jughead shrugged. “Not sure. I can only guess.” He pulled out the folded list that Madame Belle wrote for him—the names of her clients, all of them having torrid dreams in the last week. It occurred to him that it would be a little awkward telling Farmer McGinty about it. The man was a little on the conservative side. “These folks have been having--erm, graphic dreams this past week. All of them. Some of them more than once a day.”

Farmer McGinty took the list, scowling. “Who sleeps more than once a day?”

“Toddlers, mostly,” Kevin replied.

Jughead had to bite his lip to keep from laughing as Farmer McGinty shot Kevin a glare.

Farmer McGinty looked at the list. “They be having violent dreams or dirty dreams?”

Jughead flinched at the wording, but he knew what the farmer meant. “Dirty. Very, from what I’m told. They’re not complaining, mind you. Not yet.”

Understanding passed between the two slayers.

“It be week one,” Farmer McGinty grumbled. “They won’t start to feel it until next week, prob’ly.”

“It’s gonna start to hurt at week 3. We might start to see bodies, by then, too,” Jughead added.

“This be a consistent list.”

Jughead knew what he meant. The list consisted of men. “I suppose that’s the only good news--you know what form the demon’s taken. It’ll be a woman, and she’ll be doing in real life what she does in dreams.”

“Best visit these folk,” Farmer McGinty said. “Ask questions.”

“Best thing you can do right now,” Jughead said. “If you can let me know what comes of it, I would appreciate it. I’d like it if this Succubus doesn’t reach my borders, especially in the coming Beltane.”

“You’ll be hearing from me again, Jones.”

“By phone is fine.”

“I’ll drop in.”

“Great.” Jughead exchanged looks with Kevin, who stifled a laugh.

Farmer McGinty didn’t do phone calls. He showed up at your doorstep at odd hours and scared the shit out of you.

“I’ll have something in a week.”

“I’ll brace myself.”

Kevin nudged him and shot him a glare before flashing Farmer McGinty a bright smile. “Before we go, I was wondering if I can have a look at your market crop. I don’t mind paying of course—“
“Round the back. Get as much as you want.”

“Thank you!”

Kevin ran off and Jughead was about to follow him when Farmer McGinty stopped him.

“I’ve words for you.”

Jughead stifled a heavy sigh. “I’m all ears.”

“There be a new family of witches in Riverdale.”

“Yes, there be. I’ve met them, broken bread with them—” made out with the daughter “—they’re good.”

“The man in the family—”

“The eldest brother. Yeah, he works for the Blossoms, I know, but the man’s gotta earn a living.”

“That’s not who I meant. I was talking about the father.”

Jughead arched an eyebrow in surprise. “The father’s dead.”

“That, he is. I’ve heard disturbing things about the circumstances of his death, and it has to do with
the youngest. Heard she’s dangerous.”

Jughead was rooted to his spot, his hackles suddenly rising and his scowl deepening. “You heard wrong. There’s nothing dangerous about the youngest.”

“They be deceiving, those witches. They don’t show their hand until it’s too late.” Farmer McGinty’s
pitchfork switched hands and a look of determination crossed his face. “I be taking care of that if I
was you—”

Jughead came up to Farmer McGinty, standing up to him toe to toe. “I’ll be minding my own
business, that’s what. You stay away from the Coopers. They’re on my turf, they’re my
responsibility. You got that?”

Farmer McGinty’s gaze did not waver. “As a courtesy to you, of course. I’ll not cross that line.”

Jughead said nothing. He didn’t like the idea of there being tension between slayers, but he wasn’t
going to allow a slayer to go rogue, especially not if he was working under the rumor that Betty was
causing trouble.

The very idea of that sent his stomach roiling with worry. Farmer McGinty on the hunt was a
terrifying prospect.

“But you best look into that, boy. Rumors don’t just come from nowhere. If you father were here—”

“He isn’t.” It took everything in Jughead’s willpower not to go off on Farmer McGinty on how his
father was so absent that Riverdale wasn’t even his town anymore, about how Riverdale was
Jughead’s and has been for a long time now, so he didn’t take kindly to Farmer McGinty’s
insinuation that he wasn’t running things properly.

“Just because they pretty, don’t mean they can’t hurt you. When the Ghoulies are asking around for
the new witches in town, it don’t mean anything good.”
“Wait, the Ghoulies? What do the Ghoulies want to know?” Jughead demanded.

Farmer McGinty’s steely gaze was sharpened by amusement, the corner of his lips lifting. “They weren’t particular, and they weren’t asking me, mind you. Those hoodlums want nothing to do with slayers at all, but they be asking people I know, and they were asking about the witch family and the kids. They’re interested in the youngest. Don’t know what for. I’d find out, but Ghoulies are in your turf, as you say.”

Jughead could feel his stomach knotting. What could the Ghoulies possibly want with Betty? This could all be the ravings of a fanatical farmer, but while Farmer McGinty cast a frightening figure, he wasn’t crazy.

Jughead stepped away, done with this conversation. “Tell Kevin I’m waiting in the car.”

Farmer McGinty nodded. “As always... 'twas a pleasure, Jughead Jones.”

“Sure. A pleasure.” He walked away, crossing the expanse of dirt, kicking up dry soil as he went, crushing fresh grass where they prospered, and revving the car engine when he cranked the key to the Honda.

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When Jughead Jones arrived at her house at noon, Betty had been buzzing with excitement all morning. She felt, to a certain degree, mortified by her own loss of control, the palpitating rush of liking a boy who liked her back, but she couldn’t help but let herself, too.

It felt too good. She felt too pleased with herself. He was so unbearably attractive. So smart. So strong.

When she flung open her front door, a smile blossomed from his lips, his ice blue eyes melting with adoration. And there it was again, her stomach doing flips, her knees growing weak, her fingers crackling with the need to run them through his rich black hair.

“Hi,” she said, biting her lip to temper the smile that threatened to split her face to aching.

“Hey there, Sunshine,” he replied in a voice even softer than she had imagined.

His arms wrapped around her waist and she caught his face in her hands. His lips were soft against hers, slowly deepening as she held onto him.

And again, she had to remind herself this was real, that he liked her, for real, and that with bindings broken and friendships mended, things were finally, slowly, looking up.

tbc
Sabrina grudgingly forgave her for ditching Shinji Yagami, which was rich, considering Sabrina did something much worse—have sex with a guy who wasn’t her boyfriend while on a date with said boyfriend.

“Well, you didn’t ditch him, I’ll give you that,” Betty told her over the phone. “I suppose you went back to Harvey after Sweet Pea had his way with you in the bathroom.”

“Excuse me. I had my way with Sweet Pea!”

Betty rolled her eyes. “Please. That hot piece was totally in charge and you loved it.”

“Oh, get off your high horse! I wasn’t the only one getting some last night!”

“Sabrina? Who are you talking to?” came a background voice from Sabrina’s end.

“Just Betty, Aunt Hilda!”

Betty felt her own face flaming. “Jesus, Sab! Do you mind not letting Aunt Hilda hear? She’ll tell my mom!”

“Aunt Hilda will not tell Aunt Alice anything.”

“My lips are sealed!” Aunt Hilda cried. “But promise me you girls are protecting yourselves. Especially you, Betty. Slayers are immune to most of our spells so… unfortunately that means you actually have to use a condom in addition to our birth control potions. Their stuff’s potent as—“

“Oh, my God!” Betty cried. “Sab, make her stop!”

“I can’t!” Sabrina gasped like she was choking. “This is way too good to pass up!”

“I’m hanging up!”

“Don’t! Don’t. I swear I’m going someplace private where Aunt Hilda can’t listen in. I want to know all the details.”

That made Betty flush even more. “I’m not giving you details.”

“Oh, come on. It’s not like I’m gonna ask you how big he is. It’s Jughead, so I honestly don’t wanna
know, but give me the general. Was he good? Did he satisfy you? Does he really have tattoos on his you-know-what? Okay, so maybe I’m a little curious about deeper deets.”

Betty was feeling so hot under the collar that she could barely get her thoughts straight. “Tattoo on his—“ Good lord… “ M-Mom started blasting my phone before we can get very far, but it was really, really good when we were—caught up in it.”

“Finger or tongue?”

“What?”

“Did he use his fingers or his tongue to get you off?”

Betty’s jaw dropped. “Sabrina!”

“That’s a legitimate— wait. WAIT! SHUT. UP!”

“Okay, before you jump to conclusions—!”

“You’re a virgin? Oh, honey! My precious! My love!”

“Alright, Smeagol. I am not totally innocent, you know!”

“Oh, yeah? Have you touched a dick?”

Betty would’ve clutched her pearls if she had them. “As a matter of fact, I have! I have some experience!”

“Was it Jughead’s?”

“N-No, but—”

“Well, have you gotten one off?”

Betty was dying, lowering her voice. “Erm, does premature ejaculation count?”

Sabrina was screaming with laughter.

“We were both barely sixteen and I was probably the first ever girl to touch him!” Betty cried in a fierce whisper.

“Oh, oh!” Sabrina was probably rolling on the floor, she was giggling so hard.

Betty was beginning to feel slighted. “I’m feeling a little attacked right now.”

“Okay, let’s not get dramatic. Does Jughead know you’re a virgin?”

“What—was I supposed to just tell him?”

“Well, yeah! It’ll be better for both of you that way.”

The thought of telling Jughead that she was an inexperienced little Sally made her feel incredibly mortified. She thought she had put on a rather confident face when it came to the more intimate facets of their interactions. Even when she had been a nervous wreck that night they made out for Archie, she seemed to have done pretty well when they were actually kissing, and even her awkward post-mortem at her doorstep had gotten relegated to a hilarious memory once the events of the next
couple of days allowed her to re-establish her dignity, however embattled it became with high-school rumors.

And honestly, when they were making out, both times, she didn’t have to do a lot of thinking. Doing seemed to come so naturally, whether for show or for real.

So to tell him, directly, that she had never actually slept with anyone? She couldn’t possibly…

“Do you think he’s super experienced?” Betty wondered out loud, eyes widening at her own questions.

“Never thought about it,” was Sabrina’s frank reply. “But yeah. He’s probably experienced. I don’t know how it is in Riverdale High, but girls at Southside High and in the Serpents go bananas over him. Probably gets a lot. I don’t know if he’s dated much, though. I only know of Toni—“

A rock thumped in Betty’s stomach. “Toni? Toni Topaz? He used to date her? Oh—oh my God.”

“What? What’s wrong?”

“She’s—she’s so gorgeous and sexy, Sab. I mean, she’s so interesting to look at, too. Oh, my God. How long did they date for?”

“Couple of months, maybe… Betty, quit spiralling. Jughead and Toni hadn’t been dating for a couple of years now and Toni’s been mostly going out with girls. Just calm down—“

“I’m calm. I’m so calm. Just—sh*t, did you see her outfit last night? She rocked it so hard and—“

“Stop,” Sabrina interjected firmly. “Stop, stop, stop. Jughead Jones ran out of that bar with you. He only had eyes for you.”

Betty did stop and she did take deep breaths, letting Sabrina’s words soothe her. She needed to take a chill pill. Literally. Chic’s Milk Thistle would help.

She worked herself into certain states, sometimes, making herself impossibly nervous and many times, insecure.

“He likes you, Betty. I don’t think you have to worry about being yourself,” Sabrina added, more gently. “He seems like a good enough guy and our aunts love him, so he’s probably pretty decent. And if he hurts you I will reach down his throat with my bare hands and pull out his insides.”

Wow.

Sabrina had a fascinating dark streak. Maybe it was a Spellman trait? “Um, thanks, Sab.”

“You’re welcome!”

“You know, you should really break up with Harvey and just be with Sweet Pea exclusively. I think Sweet Pea suits you better, honestly.”

“I’ve been doing this with Sweet Pea for a little over a year now. If he wanted something more, he would’ve said something already.”

“How do you know he isn’t assuming the same thing about you?”

Sabrina didn’t reply. She merely grumbled that she had to go, but as a parting shot she said, “If you need sex advice, give me a call. I got plenty to say.”
After they disconnected, Betty stared at her phone a bit more before texting Jughead a simple hi and good morning.

He texted back immediately with a *Morning, gorgeous*

This, of course, made her stomach do summersaults. Why’d he have to be this way? Why was he so…?

She typed and retyped, ending up with *What time do you finish your rounds?*

*In about an hour. Just running by the farmer’s market for Kev.*

It still amused Betty that these two boys were so unexpectedly perfect for one another. Like brothers who unapologetically brought their uncensored selves to the table knowing full well that one and the other didn’t mind it in the least. That’s how they got along so very well—neither of them had to pretend they were anyone else and they let each other exist that way, with total acceptance.

*Got any plans for the afternoon?* she asked.

There was a slight pause, then the ellipses started. *Just you, Sunshine.*

She bit her lip, smiling. She almost typed that she was glad, because she missed him, which she immediately mentally scolded herself for. She just saw him last night and she thought it was a little psycho for her to be missing him so soon. Too clingy. So instead she said, *Can’t wait. 1pm?*

*See you then.*

It was already noon, so she jumped up and pranced to the bathroom to get ready.

***************

Kissing Jughead Jones always ignited a fire in her belly. It was like all the insecurities she had expressed with Sabrina shrunk to obscurity when his lips were upon hers and she felt incredible and capable of anything.

His hands, with his long fingers and firm grip, held her in what could be argued were fairly chaste places, but feeling them on her waist, her back, the skin of her arms, up her neck, and around her face, sent jolts of electricity through her body.

His lips and his tongue on her so instantly turned her on that she did briefly wonder if she weren’t so easy.

When they separated, his arms kept her close and she peppered his lips with her kisses. He smiled, please, no doubt, by her clear reluctance to stop.

“Ready to go?” he asked, noses brushing.

“Where are you taking me?”

“Thought we’d go to town. I don’t think anyone’s really shown you around.”
She blushed, knowing that much of her isolation had been self-imposed. “I’d like that.”

“Great. Come on.”

They got on his motorcycle, and honestly, she loved the thing. It allowed her to keep her arms around him while being lost in her own thoughts.

At stop lights, he pointed out various landmarks, and she tried not to giggle at his very earnest efforts to play tour guide, because it was endearing, and she didn’t want him to think she was laughing at him.

Jughead Jones was a thinking man. He did things after careful thought. Even when he was being aggressive, she had a feeling he’d mulled things over at some point.

She liked that they could talk—like real people who had things to discuss, and she knew this because moments alone with him, when they weren’t making out, felt comfortable.

They got into town, the same one they’d gone to when they confronted Josie, and he parked at the street, conscientiously slotting coins in the meter.

“No Otherworlders at the DMV?” she joked. He seemed so well connected around Riverdale. One would think he never had to pay for parking.

Jughead grinned. “I couldn’t crack the DMV. They have too much power.”

He showed her around the shops lining the sidewalks, introducing her to the owners of various restaurants and other food-related stores. Jughead liked his food. He always managed to get samples for them because, it seemed, the chefs delighted in his enthusiasm to taste new things.

He brought her to the bookstore, too, where he was good friends with the owner. He was an elderly man who used to write children’s books and now just sold them and read books for storytime. He was an Earth Angel.

The kids called him Stan, short for Astanphaeus. He cut a slim figure, his dark skin ethereal in its delicacy even with the graying hair on his head and face.

He wore nonthreatening khakis, a plain white blouse, and a sweater vest. His smile was soothing and his voice both calming and authoritative.

Jughead whispered that he was at least three hundred years old.

She shook Astanphaeus’s hand when they were introduced and she marveled at the quiet glow that surrounded him. She’d never seen an Earth Angel before and she wondered, like she always did, what their purpose was because they never clearly said.

The only theory was that they were sent by some entity to experience mortality. They still lived longer than most beings, but they aged, and apparently they died eventually—or their bodies did. It wasn’t certain. At any rate, they usually led harmless, often enriching lives. Getting too much attention was forbidden, so while they did join great humanitarian causes, their roles were never to lead, only to help. They joined wars to ease pain and suffering, not to cause it. They went to devastated areas to lend a hand, but they came and went, often unidentified.

“Betty Cooper, you said?” Astanphaeus asked, mildly. “Are you related to Polly Cooper?”

She was so ridiculously pleased by his recognition. “She’s my sister!”
Astanphaeus chuckled, going behind his checkout counter and seemingly gathering something from the lower shelves. “Oh, the children from the local pre-school could not stop talking about her. Her story times are legendary, it seems. I’m feeling the competition.”

Betty grinned. It sounded so much like Polly. Her sister could be a complete grouch at home, but when it came to kids, Polly was nothing but wonderful. She loved children and children loved her. “Yes, she works part time there as a teacher’s aid. She’s still in school, but she loves kids.”

Astanphaeus brought out a handful of children’s books, with beautifully illustrated covers. “You give this to her, then. Storytelling is a precious, precious art. I need her to continue. Will you tell her for me?”

“Oh of course!”

Astanphaeus packed the books in a bag and passed the paper bag over to Betty.

“I’ll get those for you,” Jughead said, once she had them. “You might want to do a reading with him and want your hands to be free for that.”

She arched an eyebrow and her skepticism was no match for Jughead’s smile of amusement. She was likely to do anything for him if he always smiled that way at her.

“This isn’t tea leaves,” he added.

She blushed slightly at the memory.

Astanphaeus put his hand out across the counter. “May I?”

She hesitated briefly. Her palms had been punctured many, many times, and were it not for her Wickedness, her palms would be pockmarked and maybe even disfigured. The magic had healed her time and time again, but if one looked really closely, you could see the scars existing just beneath the healed skin, which she had to admit could be mistaken for the natural folds on her palms.

“Only if you want to,” Jughead said, sensing her hesitation. “You don’t have to. It’s just fun, that’s all.”

She didn’t want to be a wet blanket. Stepping up, she laid her hand in Astanphaeus’s. He cradled her hand in both of his, looking at her palm intently. She fought the urge to curl her hands into fists.

If he noticed the scars, he didn’t comment. “You want to be a journalist, I see, so you’ve applied to universities in New York. I wish you all the luck in your application to Columbia and NYU, though in all the years I’ve lived, I’m quite sure you’ll get in.”

She looked at him hopefully. She had never presumed. She did what she could, but top tier schools were unpredictable in their admissions. There was no knowing until the acceptance letter came in the mail.

A soft laugh lit Astanphaeus’s face. “‘The moment you doubt whether you can fly, you cease for ever to be able to do it.’”

Heat creeped up her neck and face. “J.M. Barrie, in Peter Pan.”

He seemed vastly pleased. “That’s right. I knew you would get the reference. You’re a reader--of course, I would expect nothing less of the quality of Mr. Jones’s friends.”
His face grew red, but he didn’t miss a beat. “I applied to NYU, too. Would be kinda nice to know someone there if we both get in.”

The heat in her own face intensified. It was, of course, perfectly normal for him to say that, whether or not they were together in whatever way, but it was nice to think that he could casually see them as long-term friends, if nothing else.

“You came from Seattle, yes?” Astanphaeus asked.

She nodded. “Stayed there a few years.”

“You liked it there.”

It wasn’t a question. It was a statement and she cast him a wistful look. “I did.”

For a few blessed years, she thought she could live a relatively normal life. Casting spells were confined to Chic’s training regimen. The rest of the hours of the day were spent just being her teenage self, going to school, crushing on boys, dating them, running the school paper, being on dance committees, and arranging fundraisers for various causes. It had been so astoundingly normal.

Until it wasn’t.

A compassionate look rippled on Astanphaeus’s face. “I’m sorry about your father.”

She appreciated his sympathy. “Me, too.”

“What a frightful way to go.” He placed a hand over her palm, as if to comfort her.

She wondered then if Astanphaeus could see things she can’t remember. “I can hardly recall details.”

“I think--” He flinched, as if caught off guard. His mouth dropped open and his hands tightened around hers. When he looked up, his eyes were suddenly liquid with tears.

Betty leaned back in surprise. She had expected nothing like this. She was devastated about her father’s passing, and violent deaths were shocking on any account, but Astanphaeus’s expression did not convey shock in the least--he was over three hundred years old. She imagined that very little could shock him.

What he was showing was a deep, radiating sadness, and even in his mask of tragedy, he was searching, like he was looking for answers.

“Oh, child,” he whispered. “Oh, my dear… do you not--but of course, you don’t. They wouldn’t let you.”


The nightmare. She was in the nightmare. Awake as she was, she could feel the paralysis, could smell the blood, and the overwhelming, agonizing--

When the bell by the door rang, Betty snatched her hand away and stepped back, eyes wide with confusion and fear.

Jughead stepped between them, his hands cupping her shoulders as he looked over at Astanphaeus in shock. “What the hell did you do?”

“I looked,” Astanphaeus breathed. “And I saw. I’m so, so sorry.”
She wasn’t mad. He had nothing to apologize for, but she had questions. She had so many of them, and she wasn’t sure if she wanted to know, but she pushed past Jughead anyway. “What did you mean by that? That they wouldn’t let me know? Who’s they?”

Astanphaeus looked away, dabbing his eyes with a folded handkerchief that he kept in his pocket. He smiled at the new arrivals briefly, and replying, as he passed her, “It’s not my place to say.”

She stared at him in disbelief, wondering if she should demand answers, but when she motioned to insist, he looked back at her and shook his head, turning his back on her as he attended to his customers—two lovely kids, a boy and a girl, flinging themselves at him in unadulterated delight.

“Let’s go,” Jughead whispered, taking her by the shoulders again and gently ushering her out through the bookstore doors.

She let him, feeling mildly defeated. As they stood outside the store, she felt like she had seen something she shouldn’t have and she had no idea what it meant.

“Are you okay?” Jughead asked, his face etched with concern.

“I—I’m not sure.”

“I’m sorry, Betts, if I had known—”

“You couldn’t have,” she interrupted, gently. “And I don’t even know what that was all about, but…”

God, why can’t anything ever be normal in Riverdale?

“There’s a coffee shop at the end of the block,” he said, catching her distracted gaze. “Do you want to just sit there for a bit?”

Equilibrium. She needed it back.

Slowly, she nodded, and when the weight of his arm draped over her shoulders, she felt immediately steadied. She leaned into him, slipping her arm around his waist.

She marveled momentarily at her willingness to get this close to him, when they weren’t making out and physically lost in each other. This was comfort and perhaps even friendship, however quickly established.

But was that so strange?

What was it that people said?

When it’s right, you know.

She craned her neck to look at him as they walked, wondering how this boy so quickly and successfully found his way back into her good graces, and he returned her gaze with curiosity.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she whispered back, tiptoeing to press a kiss to his lips.

She had intended it to be a quick peck. In the middle of the sidewalk, she was well aware that everyone can see, but when he instantly responded and chased after her lips, she found herself in a slow, languid kiss.
The tips of their tongues touched, but perhaps even he didn’t want to make a show of this—the intimacy. He pulled away slowly and smiled.

He didn’t ask why she kissed him and she liked that, too. Maybe he already understood or maybe he just liked that she was kissing him. Either way, it made her feel comfortable and accepted.

And this was all so new. She was exploring, just like he was and she didn’t have to spell out her reasons all the time, especially when she wasn’t sure of them herself.

At the coffee shop, the folks behind the counter greeted Jughead cheerfully. She ordered a flavored hot tea, and the second they gave her the cup, the sweet smell of passionfruit wafted up in tendrils. Jughead didn’t have to say his order out loud—they knew what he wanted.

They took their drinks to the tables outside, and as Betty sipped her drink, she wondered about Astanphaeus’s words. She didn’t even realize she was frowning until Jughead pressed a comforting hand on her forearm.

“Hey, don’t worry about what Astanphaeus said.”

She was glad he was perceptive enough that she didn’t have to explain. “Shouldn’t I be, though? He’s an Earth Angel. He’s been around a while.”

“Astanphaeus has always been cryptic. I guess that’s what happens when you’ve been around longer than most people. He often says things that only he can fathom and—” Jughead paused. “I don’t know if any of us are ever really ready to understand it.”

“I guess.” She sighed and cupped her hands around her tea. The warmth became scalding and she loosened her hands around the cup.

It had felt like that, having Astanphaeus’s hand holding hers, like it became too much for her to bear, so she had to pull away. She wondered briefly if Astanphaeus had seen the faint trace of scars on her palm. She wondered if that’s what sent Astanphaeus reeling—finding out that she was Wicked, because he would know that by now, right? Did he also know she could use the pain of others for her magic? Maybe she could ask him if there had been others like her.

“Betty.”

She blinked, realizing that he had been calling her name for a while now. “Sorry, I was just trying to get back in my headspace. But I think I’m good now. I promise you have my full attention.”

His eyebrow arched in mild amusement.

“What?” she asked, shyly.

“You’re unfailingly polite.”

She thought she was the opposite of unfailing, especially these last two weeks. “What do you mean? I’ve been terribly inappropriate at times.”

He laughed this time. “That. Right there. And I wouldn’t say you were terrible. I’ve liked what you consider inappropriate.”

He said this while his eyes fell upon her lips and she had to take a deep breath to control the need that roiled in the pit of her stomach.
“You do things that maybe cross boundaries,” he explained. “Like when you touched my hair, or when you speak your mind, and then you apologize for it. You shouldn’t. I like it when you’re that way.”

This man had a knack for making her unbearably red in the face. “Mom and dad—they told me to keep my head down, to never offend, to stay unnoticed.”

“Why, though?”

“For safety,” she replied breezily. “So that what happened to dad won’t happen to me, I suppose.”

He seemed surprised. “Were you always in danger in Seattle?”

“No Coven, no protection.” She looked down at her tea. She couldn’t tell him everything, but she could tell him enough. “So we try not to attract attention.”

His hand settled on her arm. “You’re safer in Riverdale.”

She looked up and was astonished by the softness in his eyes. Jughead Jones had layers.

“We’ll see,” she replied with a resigned smile. It took her years to feel at home is Seattle, and for a while, the normality had been real, but as was for most like her, trouble was never too far behind.

Riverdale claimed to be different, with the looming protection of the Blossoms and the Slayers who enforce peace, but only time will tell.

Jughead seemed unsettled by her doubts, as if no one had ever questioned the order of things in Riverdale, and maybe he had a right to think that way. Chic had said Riverdale had been incident-free for decades.

They’d never had a Wicked witch in town.

She slipped her hand into his. He had been talking about her apologizing for everything and she found that one had been poised on her lips now. She refrained from saying it.

“If you’re ever in trouble, you can call me. You know that,” he said.

At this, she grinned. Her brilliant smile may have something to do with wanting to get past this topic. “Oh, yeah? As far as I’ve experienced, whenever I get in trouble lately, it has to do with you and your friends!”

“Now wait a minute,” he drawled. “It was none of my friends who made you sneak out of your house to to the Wyrm and meet some dude.”

She leaned a little closer, giggling. Was he still jealous about that?

“Oh, some dude. You mean the cute guy with the blue hair?”

His eyebrow arched, scoffing.

“I could barely remember a single thing he said.” She played with the collar of his flannel, tracing a tattoo that was peeking out at the base of his neck. As much as she delighted in his attraction to her, she didn’t play games like that. Jughead should never have to be jealous of some dude. “Someone else was occupying my thoughts last night even before I knew he was there.”

Sometimes she wondered why she had no middle ground. She was either prim and polite or utterly
without filter in her wants and desires. There was no midi, where she was coy and teasing. She supposed she wasn’t built for halves and he seemed to like that. A lot.

His eyes darkened slightly, the corner of his lip lifting. “The Wyrm’s my turf. You breathe in it, I know about it. Maybe my inherited witchy magic was all up on your business when you walked into the Wyrm.”

Her lips parted, shocked at her own excitement. She shouldn’t have been surprised that he was at least a little territorial. He claimed responsibility for this town, the bar, and now maybe her? He doesn’t own her, but by her admission, she was thinking about him the entire time Shinji was talking to her.

Jughead was a tiny bit possessive. Just a smidge.

It was making her hot.

She tugged on his collar. “Like you were projecting?”

His finger was under her chin, coaxing her lips to meet his. “What’s-his-face didn’t stand a chance.”

His lips pressed hard against hers, teeth clacking slightly as their tongues met. This was a highly inappropriate way of kissing in public, cafe front and all, but she didn’t care. By the way his hand cupped the back of her head neither did he.

For several blissful seconds, Betty felt herself unburdened by the worries of her life. Caught in the languid sensation of Jughead’s tongue massaging hers.

She heard a soft moan and realized in the next heartbeat that it was hers.

Someone cleared their throat gently, and as they separated, they exchanged sheepish looks before Jughead looked up, smirking.

“Freshly warmed croissants?” the server said, placing the order on their table.

Betty stifled a laugh. It was interesting to see Jughead, leather clad, flannel wearing, boot stomping, motorcycle riding, having a croissant so regularly that the coffee shop knew to bring him a couple without him ordering it outright.

He shrugged, recognizing the laughter in her eyes. “I like flaky and buttery pastries.”

“Nothing wrong with that. I love a properly made one, myself.”

“Great! Because they gave us two. You get one and I’ll take the other.”

Betty did tend to avoid croissants. They were a vortex of carbs and fat, which Alice had raised her to be terrified of, but the buttery sweet smell was so hard to resist. Maybe she could just work it off in her next run?

He gave her a pointed look. “Come on. Tell me you’re not counting calories.”

She bit her lip, her cheeks glowing. “I would love to have one.” And she meant it.

_Screw it. Mom doesn’t have to know._

And she realized that there were a lot of things that Alice didn’t have to be privy to, especially when it came to her and Jughead Jones.
Betty had to be home by six, and to a certain degree, Jughead wished he hadn’t wasted the first hour they spent at his house actually watching Stranger Things.

Just that sometimes, his enthusiasm for movies and great TV shows actually distracted him from being a typical horny 18 year old.

In fairness, Betty had shown an eagerness to watch the show. She shushed him 15 minutes into the first episode because she appeared to have gotten hooked.

It was only after the first episode that he realized that the beauty of Netflix was that they can watch all these episodes again.

After mentally hating himself for being the weirdo with a gorgeous girl on his couch and basically doing nothing but cuddle with her, he reminded himself that this thing—whatever it was called—was new, and that maybe they were both figuring this out and taking their time.

While the idea of having a purely physical relationship with Betty was titillating, he didn’t think that was what he wanted. There was an intensity between them that he couldn’t deny, but he liked it, too, that they could talk, and joke, and cuddle, even if he couldn’t keep his hands off her in a public setting.

He didn’t know what came over him at the cafe.

He had never been quite the type who indulged in public displays of affection. For one thing, his friends tended to promise hours of teasing if he so much as held Betty’s hand for them to see. Hell, Veronica still texts him about staring at Betty’s ass at gym class during volleyball. So clearly, he didn’t even have to touch her to get mercilessly reminded of it.

Another deterrent for PDA was just the overall vulnerability it presented in so many ways. It gave the impression of humanity, something his father said a Slayer should never appear to fall back on so easily. It also marked the person you were with.

He ran his fingers through Betty’s soft blonde tresses and she hummed softly at the sensations. He had questions about her, and to a certain extent, he was concerned about her safety, and her past, and what it was she dealt with in her head, and he was also a little suspicious about what Betty Cooper can and can’t handle.

Apparently, her brother took an active role in teaching his sisters to defend themselves. He supposed that could mean something as basic as karate lessons, or something, but he couldn’t forget the way she had hefted that bo staff and twirled it deftly in her hand. What kind of training, exactly, did Chic put his sisters through?

There were other questions, like Farmer McGinty’s ominous warnings and even Astanphaeus’s extremely weird reaction to her this afternoon. He didn’t want to think about how he might have to start asking questions about Betty. She was only just starting to trust him again. They were past the stage of him finding things out about her.

He didn’t want to take ten steps back, because what they were building right now felt good. It felt right. And it made him want to kiss her on the sidewalk without a care.

His fingers had stopped and she looked up at him questioningly. Her eyes held such vulnerability, almost as if she were completely innocent. There was no way that this woman was a witch the likes of Cheryl, Jason, or Penelope. There was no way.
He shifted her gently in his arms, bringing her closer. He just wanted to make her more comfortable, but she leaned up and started to kiss him, and who was he to argue?

He ran his hand up her back, grazing the back of her neck and then digging his fingers into her hair. Her tongue ran gently against his lips and he let his tongue rub against hers.

Sitting up slightly, he pulled Betty on his lap as their lips and tongues moved lazily against one another. He could feel her fingers in his hair, pushing his beanie off his head. He loved it when she did that.

He could go on like this for hours.

His hand ran along her outer thigh, grazing her ass lightly. She had let him touch her there last night and he wanted to find out if he could do it again. When she didn’t flinch at his touch, he cupped her ass more firmly and she made a sound of approval that went straight to the desire pooling in his stomach.

_God, Betty._

She didn’t even try to be sexy. She just was. At least to him. He couldn’t get over how Archie didn’t see her this way.

She shifted on his lap and he gasped when he realized she was straddling him. All thoughts of Archie dissipated and all the blood in his body rushed to his dick. He thrust his hips up against her, groaning.

She took his hand and put it on her breast, and Jesus, it felt so perfect against his palm.

He squeezed, gently. “God, Betts, are you trying to kill me?” His lips traveled to her throat, tasting her skin, which smelled like honeydew and peaches.

“Oh that—” She breathed into his mouth, sucking on his lower lip. “—your hands are so perfect.”

Of all things.

But he was _so_ not going to argue.

He squeezed and pinched, while he kissed and licked, barely believing that they still had all their clothes on.

Her hips rocked against him and he pushed back.

He wondered, blissfully, about how far they were going to go, even as he told himself that he would settle for this—fully clothed and grinding. It made him a little uneasy, anyway—going too fast. He wasn’t sure yet what he wanted from Betty, necessarily, but he was sure he didn’t want to risk losing something better than having a purely sexual relationship with her.

His fingers trailed to the hem of her shirt, teasing the skin beneath it, but his fingers moved up, not down, and she didn’t guide his hands down her pants, which seemed to indicate that she wasn’t ready for _that_ quite yet.

His fingers grazed up her ribs and then the soft curve of her breast, trapped as they were in what was no doubt a delightful, lacy bra. He cupped it in his hand, his thumb grazing the skin above the lace and pushing tentatively towards her nipple. He wanted so desperately to touch.
She sighed into his mouth, not resisting in the least, but he asked, anyway.

“Is this okay?”

She nodded. “God, yes.”

So he pushed the lace back, feeling the contours of her breast unhampered, and if he had been his fifteen year old self, he might have creamed himself right then.

The grinding of her hips intensified for a moment, their tongues tangling a little more rapidly. He was desperate to feel her against his dick, but he wanted her to lead. He didn’t know how far she was willing to go.

She pulled away and gasped, a panicked look blossoming in her gaze.

Even in his state of heightened sexual arousal, he grew concerned. “Babe, what’s wrong? Do you want to stop? We can stop…”

*Please God, don’t make her want to stop…*

“No,” she moaned, kissing him but pulling back again to look him in the eyes. “I don’t want to. It feels so good, but I also think we’re going too fast. It’s stupid, I know…”

It felt that way. It felt like they were going fast, and a part of him told him he didn’t want to careen into full sex, either, so he was willing to slow things down. He didn’t want her to feel uncomfortable.

“It’s not stupid.” He was catching his breath as he said this, and both of his hands were flush against the skin under her shirt. “We don’t have to go all the way. We can just keep doing this.”

That seemed to be enough for her.

“Okay,” she whispered, tilting his face up so she could kiss him.

His mind was scattering at the insanely pleasurable pressure her hips were making on his cock and he told himself this was enough, because he could make her feel everything, even through her clothing.

He lifted her, lowering her back on the couch and settling his body between her legs. He thrust his hips into hers, the pressure and the friction wasn’t everything he wanted, but it was enough to make her moan, which was firing his desire. He wanted to get her there.

He nursed her mouth with his as he pushed his hips into her. She pushed back, her ankles crossing behind him. She was gasping as he moved and he wanted to hear the sounds she was making, so he pressed his kisses on her throat to keep her mouth free, laving the sensitive skin of her neck with his tongue.

“J-Jug,” she gasped, moaning and thrusting her hips back against his. “Don’t stop.”

He thrust harder as his lips sought hers again, their tongues tangling torridly as he moved to a steady rhythm.

When she cried out, her neck arching and her head thrown back on the couch, he watched her come, fascinated by the way she looked, the way she moved beneath him, the way her fingers tightened around the strands of his hair.

She was so incredibly hot.
He was probably going to jerk off to that image of her later.

As she caught her breath, he couldn’t stop looking at her.

“Oh, babe,” he breathed. “You’re so beautiful.”

A blush spread from her neck up, but she wasn’t looking away. She was looking him straight in the eyes.

“Your turn,” she said in a determined voice that sent him spiralling.

This wasn’t exactly part of the plan, and he didn’t think he could get off with his pants on, but he realized that they didn’t need to have that discussion when she reached down and unbuttoned his jeans.

“B-Betts, you don’t have to—”

“I want to,” she whispered back. “Tell me how, okay?”

“Oh, Betts.” He was weak. He couldn’t insist that she didn’t have to, and when she slipped her hand under his boxers, the fight was lost.

Her fingers trailed down his length, tentatively rubbing and then delving deeper to cup him at the base. He groaned, his lips falling upon hers gratefully.

When they separated, her hand began to stroke him again.

“Is that good?” she asked, the curiosity and eagerness in her eyes extremely arousing. He could feel his dick twitch in her soft grip.

He nodded, his senses flitting in and out. “Hold me harder.”

Her hand tightened slightly around him, stroking as she did. When her thumb caressed his tip, he could feel the slickness of his precum and he groaned, thrusting himself into her hand.

He moved, matching the pace her hand set, and as she pleasured him, she never removed her gaze from his face. He was gasping and the movement of her hand never waivered.

Seeing her beneath him this way, his body between her thighs and her hair fanned against the couch, sent bolts of desire coursing through his body and pooling in his center. He licked his lips and bit them as he moaned and moved to the amazing sensations of her hands around his cock.

He took her in with is eyes again and this time he noted how her shirt was was in complete disarray--he had done that. The memory of her coming so sensually, he had done that, too. That burgeoning sense of sexual accomplishment pushed him over the edge.

He spilled into his boxers, probably on her hand, too. He groaned into the crook of her neck as he orgasmed, gasping her name.

When the waves in his body waned and his sense of reason began to return, he looked up at her face and saw her smiling.

He was still catching his breath when he said, “You seem awfully pleased with yourself, Cooper.”

“Do I have a reason not to be?” Her eyebrow arched, eyes shining with mischief.
“God, no,” he breathed, pressing his lips onto hers and relishing the waning embers of heat. The warmth would linger a while longer and they knew it was only a matter of time before the fires were rekindled again.

She smiled into their kiss and he couldn’t help but smile back.

She was wondrous and fascinating, filled with mystery and a complicated past that he wasn’t certain he could understand.

He needed to know more.

He needed to know her, because even in this weird and peppy town, she was the most interesting and amazing thing to happen to him in a long, long time.

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Dropping Betty off at her house at 6 on a Saturday meant that the only goodbye he could give her was a chaste kiss on the cheek and an awkward wave, because of course Chic had opened the door for her and of course Chic had just stood there, waiting for his sister to step into the house.

To Chic’s credit, he did invite Jughead inside.

“I would, but I have something I have to do,” Jughead had said. Fortunately for him, Chic was just being polite, so he didn’t insist.

But even in the momentary touch of Jughead’s lips on her cheek, he felt the electricity between them.

Her smile was everything.

He’d had the best time with her, first in town and then later at his house. He wanted so much to see her again.

As soon as he got home, he wasted no time in texting with her, and for a while, that was all he did, grinning like a fool at their quippy exchanges about Stranger Things and how, in spite of everything, they still weren’t sure if aliens existed.

It was going to be a quiet Saturday night and he relished the peace and tranquility this time of the week sometimes gave him.

When they finally ended their texting, he decided to crack open a novel he had neglected reading. He was reading it in the kitchen and eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich when Kevin texted, asking how his date went.

Jughead took a moment to appreciate just how well everything had turned out, but after a moment of grinning stupidly to himself, he finally replied to Kevin, telling him it hadn’t exactly been a date—that they just spent the day together in town, then hung out at his house to watch Netflix.

_God, did you smash already?_ Kevin asked.

Jughead did not have to honor that with a response, but if he didn’t say anything, Kevin would assume and might blab about it to Veronica, Joaquin, and Archie.

_We didn’t, not that it’s any of your business. Just for future reference, I’m not going to talk about it if it happens._
Kevin didn’t answer for several minutes and Jughead thought that was that, until Kevin texted, *I’m coming over.*

Jughead sighed. Of course Kevin would.

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The thing about Kevin was that when he got this way, he never really asked questions all in one go. Kevin was all about the long game when it came to these things, so Jughead wasn’t the least surprised when his best friend showed up with an overnight bag and a bottle of tequila.

They spent the entire evening playing magic cards whilst consuming alcohol. With Jughead’s slayer constitution, it took him much longer to get drunk than most people, so as Kevin shoved shots in his direction, Kevin paced himself. In Jughead’s slow but steady climb to inebriation, Kevin was eventually able to extract a reasonable amount of information.

So of course by the time they settled in to watch a movie on the living room couch, Jughead was pretty much drunkenly giggling at how Kevin was seated at the very spot that he and Betty got down to business.

Kevin’s look of fury was priceless and he spent about ten minutes ruffling through the Jones’s sad and heterosexually cis male linen closet. He eventually found an AllMart-brand blanket, which he laid out beneath him.

They managed to get through half a horror movie before Kevin got fed up with Jughead’s snarky commentary.

“You created this monster!” Jughead cried after Kevin as he stormed off.

Kevin retreated to FP’s room, which was hardly ever occupied, and Jughead retired to his, where he fell half-drunk on his bed and asleep 30 seconds later.

So it was impossibly annoying when early Sunday morning, a text from an unidentified number woke him from his deep, restful sleep.

*Got information for you. The Ghoulies are astir.*

It couldn’t be from anyone except Wyome, a shapeshifter and the Serpent slayers’ Ghoulie plant. She only contacted him when it was serious and it was never good news. She was likely using a burner phone, too.

Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he asked her what time and where she wanted to meet.

*I’ll come by the Wyrm at around 11 in the morning. That cool?*

The bar was closed at that hour, and so near high noon, the Ghoulie vampires and werewolves were usually deep asleep. It was a good time for him, too. When he confirmed the time and place, she bid him goodbye quickly.

He thought about Kevin who was sleeping in his father’s room. He did not need to drag Kevin into this. Also, Wyome did not appreciate group meetings.

As was often the case when Kevin stayed over, breakfast was always better because he actually cooked things. Of course, it also came with a side of “how do you live this way, Jones? I was barely able to scrabble anything from your refrigerator. The onions were practically germinating in your
refrigerator drawer. If I hadn’t given you some of Farmer McGinty’s bell peppers, none of this would be possible….”

Jughead tuned him out as he shoved the very delicious omelette that Kevin had made into his face. There were pancakes, too, astoundingly. Kevin said he had packed a box of ready-made mix in his overnight, which was very thoughtful of him.

It was around ten thirty when Kevin said he would be heading out, which worked out great for Jughead who needed to get ready to meet Wyome at the Whyte Wyrm.

*****************

During the day, the Whyte Wyrm was silent and empty. No cars or motorcycles littered the parking lot and the sounds came from its surroundings, not from within.

Often, the only persons at the Wyrm at this hour was the club manager and Tall Boy. They were paid to run the place together, but Jughead, in his infinite sense of responsibility born from FP’s constant absence, has had to come in early on weekends just to check in. Tall Boy was always good about clueing him in, knowing that the son could, at any moment, inherit the place sooner rather than later.

Jughead checked his phone for the time. It was just five minutes before 11, and true enough, when he sauntered into the Wyrm, Tall Boy—who was working behind the bar, nodded in the direction of Wyome.

She was already seated at the manager’s table. Her long dark hair fell straight down her back and her bright green eyes were almost luminescent in the dim lighting.

Wyome was dressed like a Ghoulie, her leather overpowered by the excessive amounts of velvet and flair. She was tall—almost as tall as Jughead, and her olive skin was the envy of many. When Jughead saw her among the Ghoulies, she always had fangs. This time, however, she was her more normal self, and in spite of the outfit, she had shed her vampy and wolfy demeanor. She was a shapeshifter. No moon controlled her, no sun repelled her. She transformed at will, as taught by her ancestors in the Uktenu.

Wyome stood to welcome him and Jughead grinned, giving her a warm embrace.

“How are you holding up, Wyome?” he asked, patting her back before letting her go and taking a seat.

Wyome rolled her eyes. “As well as could be expected hanging out with the Douche-ies.”

She managed to keep up a healthy aversion to the Ghoulies’ pretentions—all the elegant lace and gothic sheen that was the Ghoulies’ aesthetic was like kryptonite to most Serpents, but Wyome was good at her job. She could very convincingly pretend to like it well enough to blend with them, but she never fell into its seductive clutches. She easily went from Ghoulie to Serpent in a heartbeat.

“Did you get something to drink at the bar?” Jughead asked.

She shot him a chastising look, the topaz stud on her nose glinting in spite of the darkness around them. “Jones, please. At 11 in the morning?”

“We have juice, you know. Or a Bloody Mary. Whatever you non-vampire Ghoulies do over there this time of day.”
“Run errands for the vampires, mostly, but that’s neither here nor there. I’ve got stuff to report.”

Jughead nodded. “On a Sunday, too.”

“Nothing like doing God’s work on a Sunday. The Ghoulies are out and about, making inquiries. They’ve got someone who’s getting intel for them, someone deep in, and they’re paying a lot of money for it. They’re tight-lipped about the whole thing, but from what I’ve gathered, they’re trying to know more about the new witch family in town.”

Jughead forgot to breathe for a moment. He pursed his lips, his fist inadvertently clenching on the table. “Got a name for this family?”

“Cooper is what I heard. Met them yet?”

He nodded. “Of course.”

“Start asking questions, then. The Ghoulies didn’t care about this family a couple of weeks ago, but something triggered their info gathering, something about ‘how they’re so special.’ Just look into it. I feel like it’s big.”

Jughead sighed and bent over on his seat, elbows to knees and rubbing the bridge of his nose between his fingers.

Why did his life have to be this complicated? Why did he always have to deal with shit like this?

And just when he and Betty were headed in a good direction, when he was just now rebuilding the trust he had broken, this had to come up.

Was this why his father was so ruthless in what he did? Was this why his mother left them? Was there no room for human emotion in this business?

Taking a deep breath, he sat back up and looked at Wyome miserably. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” His gut twisted. “I’ll look into it.”

tbc

Chapter End Notes

Just an FYI to my dear readers. I hope you enjoyed that last chapter, because...

The next week and the week after that will be incredibly busy for me, work wise. I’ll be in travelling for a week for work in the first week of April so I’m not sure how I’ll fare update wise in the next couple of weeks. I will try, of course--this is not a chore for me. It is probably my favorite form of relaxation, but my schedule won’t be my own in the coming weeks.
What Sets Those of Us Free

Chapter Notes

Put on your thinking caps and I promise to break the boredom with a good amount of bughead.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“There are some secrets darker than witchcraft.”

— April Aasheim, The Witches of Dark Root

When Jughead watched Betty descend the front steps of her house on Monday morning, he thought to himself that he hadn’t seen her for 37 hours.

When she kissed him good morning before getting on his bike, he realized that counting the hours since last seeing her was a level of whipped that he hadn’t quite expected of himself.

When she grinned and asked him if he got her text that morning about their history assignment, he realized he hadn’t replied because he had wanted, inexplicably, to text I miss you, but he wallowed over whether he should or shouldn’t over the rest of his cereal breakfast, thereby completely foregoing any text back whatsoever in his indecision.

Betty had been in his thoughts all weekend for many, many reasons, good and bad, and the question remained, how was he going to handle it?

He had let her carefree laughter take him as they rode his bike to school after he had cracked a stupid joke about her third period lab.

And at the parking lot, his somewhat initial hesitation of putting his arm over her shoulder as they walked into school was put to rest when she took his hand and draped his arm over herself.

He pressed a kiss on her forehead for being the sweetheart that she was and she followed it up with a quick kiss on his cheek.

Hallway rules said no making out, so here they were, exchanging these chaste kisses that he probably wouldn’t give up for the world.

Veronica and Kevin met them at their lockers.

Veronica’s eyes were shining when she hooked her arm around Betty’s, once again making her pitch for cheer squad.

He exchanged eyerolls with Kevin, who said, “Any chance you can convince her to be Sue Snell in my play?”
A retort formed on his lips—*I’m her boyfriend, not her manager,* and it occurred to him that *labels* were an interesting artifact of a physical relationship, and that it needed discussing because people slapped that shit on, whether or not it made a difference for them or anybody else.

“I’m dating her, Kev, not managing her,” he said, instead.

“Maybe she’s managing you,” Kevin remarked, winking.

Jughead felt he had very little ground to stand on denying it.

Archie sauntered into their group minutes later, and Veronica asked him sweetly how his ribs were doing. She was, officially, their friendrepresentative when it came to Archie’s football games on the road, because neither Jughead, nor Kevin, had a burning need to watch football on weekends, even if Archie was playing, and being a Vixen, Veronica was obligated to go whether she liked it or not.

“Sore,” Archie said with a wince. “Like really sore.”

Betty leaned closer to Jughead. “I can give him a potion for his pain—clear that right up.”

Woodwitches.

He chuckled and shook his head. “We don’t give the Lost potions unless it’s an emergency.”

She nodded, but she looked pensive, which Jughead thought might mean this wasn’t the last discussion about it they’d have.

At lunch, she pulled him into the Blue & Gold office where they made out on the couch for several hot minutes.

What was it about those damn sweaters of hers? High neckline or low, embellished or plain, her look drove him insane with a deep sense of longing to touch, to ruffle that impeccable ponytail, to get his supposedly perfect hands under that buttoned up, tucked in blouse.

He was just about to gather up the courage to ask her if he could touch her lower when his stomach betrayed him, rumbling loudly, and reducing her to giggles.

“Great.” He wished his stomach weren’t always so demanding.

“Well, it’s lunchtime,” she said, grabbing their lunch bags from the coffee table and distributing it between them.

His lunch was the remnants of Aunt Hilda’s tray of eggplant and meat lasagna. Still delicious. He stuck it in the microwave while Betty had her fancy looking pinwheels, hummus, and celery sticks. She also had some apple slices and a tiny container of what looked like peanut butter.

“Looks healthy,” he quipped.

She sighed. “Mom made these. They’re egg whites, low-fat feta and arugula pinwheels. She teased that there might be turkey in there, but...” She sighed, sticking one in her mouth unenthusiastically. There were four in her plastic bento, and they were only slightly bigger than sushi rolls. “At least she let me have peanut butter. Reduced-fat’s still pretty good,” she grumbled.

That was just sad. And what the hell did low-fat feta and reduced-fat peanut butter taste like? “Want some of my lunch?”

This was certainly a milestone. He never split his meals.
“I’ll probably inhale all of it, so no thank you.”

That was a complex relationship with food if he ever saw one. “That’s it. I’m taking you to Pop’s later.”

She smirked sheepishly but didn’t say anything.

The microwave dinged and he took out his lunch, plopping beside her on the couch. “So was that smile a yes or a no?”

She bit her lip. “Chic will be expecting me at home.”

“Oh, right. Mondays are for training.”

She nodded.

He poked his lunch with a plastic fork, letting it cool a little from its nuclear zapping. “What exactly does Chic teach you, if you don’t mind me asking?”

She shrugged. “Stuff. Spellcasting during a fight, some physical defense now and then, sometimes he’ll give us weapons… stuff.”

“Stuff” sounded so vague that Jughead immediately wondered what she was hiding, followed by the unpleasant twisting of his stomach at that thought. He didn’t want to be wondering about her like he used to. “Betty, why does Chic feel the need to teach you and your sister these things?”

She hesitated, a shadow of suspicion darkening her gaze. “Why are you asking? Because you need to know as a slayer?”

He hated that it suddenly felt like they hadn’t been heavily making out with each other the last few days. He slid his hand across the back of the couch and touched her arm. “Because I don’t want to go behind your back to find the answers.”

He did need to know because he was a slayer. He was who he was, but he wanted to be transparent with her. He didn’t want to lose the gains in trust, however minute.

She sighed and looked down at her neatly arranged bento box. “When you’re a witch and live places where covens won’t protect you, people come for you—established covens, creature hives, maybe even a witch or two. Before Seattle, my family had to move almost every year. Everytime we got attacked, we moved. We managed to keep a low profile in Seattle so for a while, we lived in relative peace, but as you know, my father was killed so mom caved and finally sought the protection of the Blossoms—here.”

Jughead wasn’t going to pretend that he knew all about witches and the territory they kept, but he understood that witches didn’t want other powerful witches in their vicinity if they weren’t going to be affiliated with the local coven. When witches refused to join the coven, they were the enemy. But what would creature hives like the Ghoulies and rogue witches want with her family? What would they want with her?

“Betty,” he began, shifting closer on the couch. “You need to help me understand. Why are they coming after you like that?”

“Because we refuse to join their covens,” she said. “Here, we can claim protection as family, and Chic has all but promised our allegiance by working for the Blossoms, so I assume we’re safer. You said I’m safer.”
He touched her face, his brows knitting with mild worry. “I’ll keep you safe, but you have to tell me the truth, Betts. When I did my rounds over the weekend, the Greendale slayer told me the local creature hive, the Ghoulies—they’re asking about your family. I was reluctant to look into it. I wasn’t sure it meant anything. New witches tend to stir the pot around here and everyone makes it their business to scope out the new kids in town. It’s pretty standard, and Farmer McGinty tends to be kind of paranoid about these things, too, so I’m careful about following any leads he gives me, but yesterday…”

He could see the anxiety settling on her face. She was swallowing nervously and her brow was crinkling as she looked at him. For a moment, he thought he should stop, tell her not to worry about it, and go on being them—two kids who like to hold hands, kiss, and talk about eating at the local diner.

But this was important. He said he’d keep her safe. This was how he was going to do it. “Yesterday I met up with one of my sources and the Ghoulies are going all out to learn things about you and your family. They’re paying lots of money for it. What information are they trying to find?”

Her lips pursed, and for a moment, it looked like she wasn’t going to reply, then she looked up and said. “It’s me. They’re after me. It’s always me. Jug, I’m—I’m sorry.”

He wanted to remind her to stop apologizing, but that wasn’t the point. “Why are they after you?”

“It’s because of what I am,” she whispered, as if someone might hear. “I-I don’t want to tell you what I am.”

“You’re a witch, Betty. Both blood and wood witch, am I right? And I’m here. You don’t have to worry about me—“

“I’m Wicked, Jug. I’m Wicked and I’m really good at it.”

FP Jones raised his son to be a Slayer. Jughead had that Slayer constitution and it was strong in him. Hardly anything of his witch heritage had manifested, and when it did, Jughead had no control over it, like having unruly hair and being able to spot witches by sight.

Other than those exhalations of magic, and the occasional literal explosion of anger (shattered cups, televisions, or one time, a bowl of chili), Jughead was a slayer through and through. He got his first tattoo when he was twelve—a protection ward against dream demons. He received a few more shortly after that. His Serpent tattoo, however, he got when he turned sixteen: Otherworlder Age of Consent.

Needless to say, Jughead was very well versed in the ways of the slayer by that time, and he’d also been trained to be endlessly wary of all Otherworlders, especially those witches.

“They’re crafty,” FP had told him, shortly after his mother took his sister with her and left her husband and son to go to Toledo. “They will make you think you’re they’re friend, then they will hit you where it hurts the most.”

FP may have been drunk at the time, but Jughead never forgot to look out for anything.
Jughead liked to check things out, make sure they were copacetic, and only then did he begin to trust. That’s how it was with Kevin and every friend he had thereafter, whatever they were.

FP didn’t sway him from having friends, but he did form that habit of finding things out about everyone, first, even if whatever drunken rant FP was on at the time was never repeated, sober.

Except when it came to the Wicked.

The Wicked were a different breed of witches. They were rare, but they existed. There were Wood Witches, Blood Witches, and then there were Wicked. They used pain to do magic, and they were the witches other witches used to scare their children.

And why not? Anything with unlimited power, unhampered by the norms of the Rule of Three, should scare everybody. Their only limit was their own threshold for pain, and given humanity’s propensity for paying costs beyond initial expectations, there was no telling what a Wicked witch would be willing to bear to get what they wanted.

There were rumors, too, of how the Wicked eventually lost their minds, which was why even when Covens wanted them in their ranks, there would always be a team dedicated to taming or destroying a Wicked witch on standby, should she or he ever lose control of their faculties.

As FP put it flatly, “Boy, you see a Wicked witch, you run, then you figure out how to kill them later.”

FP hadn’t provided qualifiers.

So when Betty told him at lunch that she was Wicked, he didn’t know what to say.

Frankly, he didn’t want to believe it, but when she showed him her hands, made him look closer, he saw them: the scars.

They weren’t pock-marked or raised, they were little crescent shaped markings, just beneath her skin. They were barely noticeable against the light colored tone of her palms, but upon closer inspection, they went against the grain of her palm lines.

He had looked up at her, his eyes no doubt conveying shock, maybe dismay, definitely worry, and amongst his thoughts of, she can’t be or there has to be a mistake, there was an underlying realization: They’re going to kill her.

The bell rang before he could say anything, and perhaps thinking the look in his eyes meant rejection, Betty rushed out of the Blue and Gold, leaving everything behind. Leaving him.

It took him a couple of seconds before he snapped back to his senses and went after her.

“Betty!” he cried as he swung out of the office doors, but she was nowhere to be seen. She wasn’t at her locker, she wasn’t under the bleachers, and she didn’t come to class.

He texted her. Several times.

Where are you?

Are you okay?

Betty, please talk to me.
Please don’t run away.

And finally, in a fit of desperation, and remembering another witch who left him, long ago, taking his sister with her for fear that they were unsafe, he texted, *I swear I won’t hurt you.*

When Kevin saw him, the first thing Kevin said was, “Something’s wrong. Tell me what’s wrong.”

Jughead couldn’t tell Kevin the whole story, not without risking Betty’s safety, but he needed Kevin’s support. “Betty and I… we had a—miscommunication. I think—I think I hurt her feelings. She ran off and I couldn’t find her. She didn’t come to class. She’s not answering my texts. It’s like she just disappeared.”

Kevin looked slightly confused. “Just give her space. I’m sure it wasn’t *that* big of a fight, was it?”

It wasn’t a fight, he wanted to say. It felt worse than that. He was afraid she was scared of him.

“No,” Jughead said. “I mean, it could be? I just—“ he sighed, giving Kevin a pointed look, exasperated that he had to say it out loud. Wasn’t Kevin supposed to know these things? “It was going good. I don’t want it to be over.”

The lines on Kevin’s face smoothened, and for a moment, Jughead wondered if Kevin would try to make him laugh with some prithy nugget of wisdom, but Kevin just clapped him on the shoulder and said, “Text Sabrina. She might know where Betty is. It’s gonna be alright.”

Jughead took that advice, asking Sabrina if she knew where Betty was.

*She’s @ my house. I cut class for her, ya dumb idiot. Watd u do? I swear it jones i will hex your balls off if u hurt her…*

It became clear to Jughead that Sabrina didn’t know about anything. He wondered who else knew she was Wicked aside from her immediate family.

That trust they were building, it was fragile enough, and he was going to fail the first test unless he made it right.

*I’m coming over,* he told Sabrina, cutting his last period class to make the trip over to the Spellmans.

When he got there, Betty was expecting him, which he thought was a positive sign. At least she was willing to talk to him.

She was seated in the living room couch, casting him a doleful stare. He was about to speak when Sabrina floated into his line of vision.

She shot him a glare that could have slayed the proverbial Dark Army, and without breaking eye contact with Jughead, she told Betty, “Scream if you need me. I’ll just be upstairs.” She didn’t wait for Betty’s reply as she climbed the steps, her gaze only leaving Jughead’s when she was too high up the stairs.

Jughead couldn’t tell if she was kidding or if Betty had actually expressed fear of him.

His deep seated insecurities about his mother and sister reared its worse. Hadn’t his mother left them because she was afraid their duties as slayers would come before protecting her and his sister?

“Betty, I’m not going to hurt you,” he said, softly, as soon as he heard Sabrina’s bedroom door shut.
Betty’s eyebrow shot up before she tore her gaze away to stare at her hands. “That’s not why I ran away.”

He supposed that was kind of a good thing. Hesitantly, he indicated the space on the couch beside her. “May I?”

She nodded wordlessly.

When he sat, she inched away, and he resisted the urge to take her hand to keep her from moving any further. He wasn’t ever going to force her to do anything.

“Why did you run away?” he asked, as gently as he could.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. When she opened them again, she looked determined. “Because you looked at me the way others have looked at me before. Like I’m a freak.”

It felt like a punch to the gut, that she would ever think that he would view her that way, but who was he to tell her that he hadn’t looked like anyone in her past who had just found out she was Wicked?

“I’m sorry,” he said, quickly. “I’m sorry I looked at you that way, but that wasn’t what I was thinking. I was surprised, yeah, and maybe I couldn’t believe it. I’m a slayer, Betts. I was raised a certain way…”

This only seemed to make her sadder and he realized he sounded like he was making excuses when what he was trying to do was paint a bigger picture. He needed her to understand. He needed her to see, he realized, so that next time there would be no doubt between them.

He carried on, his goal clear in his mind’s eye. “My father raised me to believe that the Wicked are the most dangerous witch there is, that the Wicked have unlimited powers and that they ruthlessly use it.” He paused to look at her because he was gauging her reaction. “You are not the picture my father painted of the Wicked.”

She scowled, her eyes daring him. “We’re not all of us toothless hags.”

For a brief moment, he did smirk. “I wasn’t thinking about the physical. I was thinking about how kind you are, and how power isn’t your drug, and how maybe you just want to be normal—how you’re just an Otherworlder like the rest of us. I’m sorry I took a little too long to get my thoughts straightened out, but my father conditioned me to rank the Wicked higher than vamps and equal to demons when it comes to caution and cunning.”

Her jaw dropped. “I’m the same level as demons?”

He didn’t take it back. “That’s how my father sold the Wicked to me, but what I’ve been told all my life and what I know of you don’t line up. At all. Because I know better than that. I know you.”

She sighed, wringing her hands. “Do you, really, though? You and I have known one another just a few weeks and—”

“Betty,” he interrupted, gently. “I don’t think I’ve ever wanted to get to know someone as deeply intriguing as you. I’ve been taking in everything I can about you in every way and you can’t tell me I’m wrong to like you and respect you. You can’t, Betts. Unless you tell me I’m delusional and I’m just a good time to you—”

“N-No!” she interjected, her eyes filling with mild urgency. “I mean, you’re not delusional, and you
aren’t just. We’ve been intense, Jug. I’ve never felt this way for someone before.”

He nodded, a part of him feeling excited for what she just said, but he tempered it because talking, this conversation, was more important than his need to kiss her.

“But you’re a slayer and I’m Wicked,” she continued, her brows knotting and her hands wringing. “You’ll need to tell the other slayers about me, don’t you? I’m going to cause you trouble, Jug. I don’t want that, so maybe it’s better for you if we don’t—“

Her knuckles stuck out sharp and hard and he pressed the tips of his fingers lightly on them to keep them still, hopefully to ease the tension from them and to stop her from saying what he thought she was going to say. Her hands froze.

“It’s not better if we don’t,” he simply said. “It’s my responsibility to be a slayer, but I want to protect the people who matter to me, not push them away.”

The tension from her knuckles loosened and he tentatively took her hands in his. She bit her lip and he wanted nothing more than to kiss that worry away, but everything about this conversation was important.

He continued. “I assume that people attack your family because of your Wickedness. They want to take you or take your power from you.”

She nodded. “I’ve had covens try to ‘recruit’ me forcibly. I’ve had other witches try to take what I have and that means--well, you probably know what it means.”

So far as he knew, taking a witch’s powers required killing the witch in a kind of sacrificial ritual. There was a huge price to pay for such a ritual but to some, it was worth the price to be able to cast spells without limit. “Has a--has a slayer ever tried to kill you?”

She shook her head. “We avoided slayers at all costs and for the most part, if we stayed out of trouble, the slayers didn’t bother us...” She looked up, her brows knotted. “I promise we won’t be a bother to you. We Coopers know how to stay beneath the radar. You won’t see us, I swear. You don’t even have to see me...”

His grip tightened gently around hers, and he realized that she was speaking as if they were two entities that were on different sides now, and the thought of it created a dull ache in his chest.

“Betty, you’re not a bother,” he said, softly. “You’re not listening. You matter to me. I want to protect you. And I want us to... keep doing what we’re doing. Getting to know each other, trusting each other.”

Her green eyes widened with what he could only figure was hope and surprise, which he thought was beneath her. She shouldn’t have to be grateful for his acceptance. She was Betty Cooper. She was amazing and beautiful, and probably so far out of his league that his Serpent crew wouldn’t have believed she would look his way if she hadn’t run out with him that evening at the Whyte Wyrm.

“But the other slayers... your father...”

He shook his head. “Let me worry about them. You shouldn’t have to. And I want you to be safe, so we’ll keep this between us and anyone else will be on a need to know basis, alright?”

“And Kevin...”

That she worries for him was making his heart wrench.
“C’mere,” he whispered, pulling her gently by her hands.

Her hesitation took but a heartbeat. She did let him pull her close and he tucked her under his arm, where she sighed and finally relaxed into his embrace.

“I’m tired of running away for what I am,” she said. “I’m tired of telling covens no, and then someone among their ranks thinking that if I won’t give them what they want, they’re going to take it.”

Holding her tighter, he felt an overwhelming sense of worry. “Who else knows about you?”

“In Riverdale? I think only Penelope Blossom--Aunt Penelope, I should call her, but it feels weird.”

“In Riverdale?”

She nodded. “We’ve ran away from places where they discovered me, and many of them… didn’t survive our altercations. Chic might’ve even--” she pursed her lips and closed her eyes. “Chic might have even gone after the ones who got away. I don’t know for sure--he wouldn’t tell me, but my mother explained to me that we’ve had to employ measures, mostly memory wiping, to contain the situation. I hope that’s all it is, because I don’t want a trail of bodies behind me, Jug. But given all that, I’m half sure someone out there knows, still. It seems impossible that we got them all.”

It was logical and he would be a fool to think that anybody could be so thorough about the cover up. He might have to talk to Chic about this, but for now, he just had to figure out why things were in motion and he had to start with the Ghoulies.

“I’m going to figure this out and it’s going to be okay,” he promised, rubbing her shoulder and kissing the top of her head.

She sat up, suddenly, her hands resting gently on his thigh. “You’re going to figure this out? On your own?”

He cocked his head to look at her, almost fondly. “It’s what I do.”

She shook her head. “You don’t have to do it by yourself. This is my problem, too.”

He realized then what she was saying. He shook his head, laughing. “No. No way. You can’t investigate with me. We’re trying to figure out why they’re asking about you and it’s completely the opposite of keeping you safe—“

“Jughead.” Her tone was firm and it had him staring at her in mild wonder. “I’m Wicked. There isn’t anything out there scarier than me.”

***************

When Jughead walked into Pop’s with Betty, Kevin and Veronica were there to wave them over.

They slid into the booth, with Kevin grinning and saying, “I’m glad to see you two here.”

Jughead shot him a mildly warning glance as one of the servers came over immediately to ask them what they wanted to drink. Jughead gave his standard reply of “the usual” and Betty asked for water. The server left, promising to return.
“I mean, I know you got work, Jughead,” Kevin added.

“Still do. It’ll be an hour yet. I got time to have a burger at Pop’s.”

Their drinks arrived and Jughead stirred his coffee to cool it a little.

“Just one burger?” Veronica asked.

Jughead grinned. “You paying?”

“I’ve had the veggie burger here,” Betty remarked as she looked at the menu. “It was good.”

Jughead couldn’t believe she ordered a veggie burger at Pop’s. “Do I have to order for you, Sunshine? A veggie burger?”

She cocked a shoulder and smirked. “I was with Sabrina.”

“That girl is nothing but trouble. You absolutely have to get a proper burger this time.”

Kevin sighed. “We’re not all Medieval, Jug. There’s a seared ahi tuna salad in here, Betty, if that’s what you’d prefer.”

Heathens. He was surrounded by heathens.

Veronica laughed at the expression on his face. “If you could see yourself right now.”

“What’s a mushroom steak burger?” Betty asked, her face buried in the menu.

“Contrary to its name, there is no meat whatsoever in that burger,” Jughead grumbled.

She peeked over the menu and he could tell her eyes were shining with mirth. “Mushroom is an excellent meat substitute.”

“I give up,” Jughead said.

She giggled and folded her menu atop the table, leaning over to kiss the pout from his lips. He grinned and draped an arm around her, pulling her close for another quick kiss.

“Honestly, you two,” Veronica said, staring at them with a wistful expression on her face. “Your colors are amazing.”

“Stop looking at my aura, V. I told you a million times,” Jughead said, picking up his coffee mug and blowing the surface lightly. He took a careful sip.

“Your colors are so different now that you’re boyfriend and girlfriend.”

Jughead almost choked on his coffee, thinking that even Veronica shouldn’t be allowed to go from zero to sixty in a diner. He wished his damn throat hadn’t caught like a fool.

Betty was pounding on his back. “Are you okay?”

“This stuff,” he rasped. “Went down wrong.”

Kevin rolled his eyes, but mercifully said nothing. “So are you getting a salad or a burger, Betty?”

“I’m going with the burger. I don’t want to offend Jughead’s delicate sensibilities,” she said, giggling.
He supposed he was just glad she hadn’t called him out for choking on labels. He should be so lucky to be her boyfriend, but they hadn’t talked about that. Between figuring out how they would navigate the fact that she was Wicked and he was a slayer, they hadn’t quite hopped on to the more mundane “Am I your boyfriend now?” conversation.

The server took their orders, and Jughead welcomed the distraction of it.

Kevin, as usual, came to the rescue managing Veronica, who had probably smelled blood and was more than likely to bring up the boyfriend-girlfriend thing again, just to be a little shit. Kevin brought up his play, which predictably got Veronica going with the Vixens.

Jughead tried his very best not to think about Betty in those cheerleading uniforms, because surely he would burst a blood vessel, and he certainly didn’t want anyone to find out that his brooding, rebel-in-leather aesthetic was a front for what he actually was—a horny eighteen year old who would probably pass out if he saw his girl in those insanely provocative bloomers.

There was enough time to enjoy her company for a bit and eat his early dinner, but he did have to duck out for work soon. Betty had opted to text Chic that she would be skipping training this time, and while Chic did object slightly, he was, apparently, the only person in Riverdale who was more whipped than Jughead.

“How are you getting home, babe?” he asked her.

She smiled up at him and pressed a kiss on his lips. “You are the sweetest, thinking about me, but I’ll be fine.”

“Seriously, Jug,” Veronica grumbled. “Betty can get around Riverdale without you.”

He flashed a mildly embarrassed grin, feeling heat rising from his neck. “That’s not what I—“

“Archie will be here in a bit,” Kevin said. “Betty can hitch a ride with him.”

Jughead hadn’t realized just how protective he was of Betty until Kevin said that. He wondered first if Betty was okay with that, then he wondered if Archie had come to his senses and completely gotten over his crush on her, then he actually thought that if Archie tried anything, Jughead would likely punch him on the throat.

Not that Betty couldn’t handle him, but a punch to the throat was probably easier to explain than any kind of hex she could inflict on him.

“Why are your wheels turning, Jones?” Kevin asked, eyebrow quirked suspiciously after a pause that was a second too long.

He felt the heat rise up around his neck again. “Nothing. I—Betts, if there’s anything at all, just call me.”

“Okay,” she replied, biting her lip. He wasn’t fooling her for a second.

He left for the library shortly after, keeping his phone where he could catch every call or text that came in.
The librarian always left before 8:30, which had always been the case since Jughead remembered. There was hardly a reason for anyone but Jughead to stay.

The library’s official hours indicated that the library closed at 8. Ms. Haggly stayed until 8:30 to put everything in order for the next day, and Jughead stayed until 9 to make sure the wards would hold the next 48-50 hours.

To do so, he had to go down to the basement, where the vault could be accessed. The vault was encased in thick iron walls and locked with a spell proof bolt, and to check the integrity of the wards, Jughead had to get on his hands and knees to look closely at the line of salt and iron filaments mixture drawn between the landing at the bottom of the steps and the magical sigil cut into the flooring to guard the vault door, and blow.

If a single grain of salt or a single iron filament blew out of place, the wards needed rekindling, which was accomplished by, of all things, blood witchery.

Jughead had to poke the tip of his finger, usually with an Athame, and press his blood to the sigil. That most certainly did the trick, and the wards would hold strong for the next couple of days.

It didn’t have to be Jughead. It could be any slayer, but it had to be blood given willingly.

There was probably a way to break the wards. It was a witch’s spell that created it, but Jughead has not heard of a successful attempt.

With the wards secured and the library in order, he turned off the lights, locked up, and headed home.

He spent a brief moment wondering if he could go over to Betty’s house, climb that ladder he passive-aggressively complained about, and actually knock on her window, Romeo and Juliet style, but he thought he could save that little stunt for another day. Maybe on a weekend where staying up too late wouldn’t amount to a lack of sleep.

He tried not to think too much about the things he would like to do with Betty Cooper when they weren’t sleeping.

He texted her, instead, some joke about closing her window because Archie liked to play his guitar at odd hours.

They’d been texting all evening, with her asking him to look things up in the library by calling him Joogle. She was also watching some interior design show about a couple who fixed up ugly houses and her commentary was fascinatingly hilarious.

If there was one thing about the Wicked that wasn’t in the books, it was how funny they could be.

Betty replied that Archie wasn’t terrible at it. He just liked angsty, pining-after-the-girl songs.

Jughead tried not to think about Archie singing those songs and thinking about Betty (as one among half a dozen girls).

When he got home, he made himself something to eat—a thick ham and cheese sandwich. He also put a pot of coffee up to brew. He was just slathering the mayonnaise on his bread when he felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up.
On instinct, he grabbed the nearby kitchen knife with one hand and swung around to face his intruder, swiping out his switchblade with the other.

Farmer McGinty stepped out of the shadows, scowling.

“God dammit!” Jughead gasped, his shoulders sagging with relief. “You really need to stop doing that! Like, you are literally breaking and entering into my house on a constant basis!”

“Less likelihood that our enemies know that we be meeting,” Farmer McGinty explained.

“Who would be watching us?”

“Boy, you getting soft? Everyone be watching slayers. Someone always knows what we’re doing. For instance—“ his scowl deepened, a glare emanating from the tiny slits of his eyes. “I know you been cozy with that new witch in town.”

_Jesus._ “Farmer McGinty, didn’t we agree we would mind our own business?”

“Didn’t your father teach you to look out for the charms of them witches? Does she have you bespelled, boy?”

Jughead was getting incensed, his worry and annoyance coagulating in his gut. “Is this the only reason you came here? To harass me about the relationships I keep? Because I have every right to kick you out of my house.”

“I am not your keeper, so no, but maybe I should make it my concern. The good people of Riverdale rely on you to protect them from the scourge of the witchfolk. How can they when you fraternize with—“

Jughead could feel his annoyance turning to anger as the heat began to rise up in his neck. He could feel the magic in his hair crackling and the pot of coffee bubbling with unnatural vehemence. He took a deep breath, if only to save his coffee pot from exploding.

“Why are you here, Farmer McGinty?” His teeth were grit. If the farmer didn’t get to the point in the next minute, things were going to get ugly.

Perhaps realizing that Jughead was at the end of his patience, Farmer McGinty expelled a breath before saying, “I interviewed the victims of the succubus and found the connection, however tenuous the link. It is how the succubus bridges through subconsciousness. I plotted the victims’ homes on a map.” He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a map of Greendale, unfolding it to lay it out on the kitchen counter.

Jughead saw the red x-marks, observing that they seem to follow a path. He ran his finger along a perimeter area. “This be where Greendale ends.”

It was also where Riverdale began. “She’s crossing the border. This is methodical. She isn’t picking random victims.”

Farmer McGinty nodded. “She is seeking a way into the people of your town.”

Jughead looked up at Farmer McGinty, eyebrow arched. “Did you identify the succubus?”

“Probably.” He took out another piece of paper from his coat pocket, this one a news article about a woman named Jennifer Gibson. Her picture was a mugshot. She had a thin but pretty face, her straight long hair going down in perfect waves over her shoulder. It was a really good mugshot. “In
Greendale, she goes by the name Geraldine Grundy.”

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Farmer McGinty wasn’t clear about why he hadn’t “disposed” of this succubus, other than saying, “She’s your problem now.”

This was, to say the least, highly unusual. The Farmer was never one to let a good slaying pass, and arguably, given the number of victims in this succubus’s past, he should’ve already banished this demon back to Abbadon, where she would be unable to return for another thousand years.

Of course, it could also be argued that demons, specifically dream ones, were difficult to banish, and Farmer McGinty just knew when and where to expend his energies—at the end of the day, he was a very practical man.

Demons required a whole lot of effort to get rid of. First you had to identify who their Regan was (a handy term born from The Exorcist novel to describe the possessed), and then when you knew that, you had to trap that Regan in a Devil’s snare. Depending on how smart they were, that generally wasn’t an easy task.

Contrary to popular belief, Regans were more often willing vessels. Any demon clever enough to get out of Abaddon should be clever enough to want a vessel with power or at the very least, a clever set of skills. Unwilling vessels tended to be weak of will in the first place, and often resulted in the writhing, gnarly mess that was the stuff of possession movies.

A Regan trapped in a Devil’s Snare could be disposed of with a properly recited exorcism. The hitch, of course, was that you had to know the demon’s real name.

That was even harder than trapping a demon.

Jughead needed to do some research and he spent his downtime at the library doing just that for a couple of days.

Between keeping tabs on the Ghoulies and figuring out how to get rid of Geraldine Grundy, he had spent time in between watching Betty’s back. It was time spent with her, so he relished the morning ride, lunchtime, the occasional shared class, and giving her a ride home.

But it wasn’t beyond the realm of possibility that Betty might have caught on to the fact that he was making sure she was getting from one place to another safely.

He was leaning back on his seat behind the library checkout counter, booted feet up on the table (a habit that Ms. Haggly hates), as he turned page after page on infamous succubi throughout history, when Betty’s face appeared over the counter.

She smiled sweetly. “Hi, Jug.”

It was a pleasant surprise, but it was dark out, so without thinking, he said, “Hey, gorgeous. What are you doing out here this late? How’d you get here?”

She shot him a mildly chastising glare. “I jogged. Like I always do by myself when you’re not around to escort me.”
He got up and leaned over the counter to kiss her. “I don’t know what you’re talking about. But don’t forget to jog in busy places and to always be aware of your surroundings.”

She dodged his lips. “Jug.”

“You’re lucky I don’t stake out your bedroom window,” he grumbled.

She glared at him. “Don’t you dare.”

“I won’t without telling you.” He chased her lips and managed to land a kiss.

She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “What are you reading?”

He showed her the front of the book. Succubus & Incubus Through the Ages: How Sex Demons Have Affected History.

She blinked. “Not quite prescribed reading at Hogwarts.”

He smirked. “I have a succubus problem.”

A horrified expression came over her face. “Are you being visited?”

He laughed. “Not me, silly. They can’t if they tried. That’s one of the first wards you get as a slayer, but a bunch of people have. I need to find out this demon’s real name, or at least get enough names to guess when I banish it back to Abaddon.”

Her eyes lit. “Can I help? I’m not bad at research. Take another crack at that restricted section.”

He smirked. “You like that, huh?”

The blush that spread across her face was everything. “Among other things. So what do you say? I’ve got some time.”

Jughead looked over his shoulder at Ms. Haggly. The librarian probably won’t give him much trouble if he let Betty into the restricted section, but it was better if they kept a low profile.

He jerked his head in the direction of the restricted section door. “Come on.”

He led the way and as inconspicuously as possible made their way into the restricted section. He carried with him the file of Geraldine Grundy, which he figured Betty would find useful.

As soon as he plopped the file at the center of the table, she quickly slid the folder closer to her and began to unfold the information stored in it.

He watched as her eyes lit with the information and he grinned. “For a second I actually thought this was a ploy to get me alone.”

She looked up and smirked. “Not everything is about you, Jones.”

When she got this way, he had a burning need to distract her and keep her attention, if only for a couple of minutes.

“I don’t think I’ve actually showed you the entirety of this restricted section.” He sank into the seat next to her with the full intention of nudging himself into her space.

She obviously didn’t mind so much as she turned to look at him, the file momentarily abandoned.
“Oh, what would that guided tour be like? ‘Over here, we have books. Over there we have more books? Want to search by topic? We have a Dewey Decimal System curated by us awesome slayers throughout the ages!’”

He bit his lip, barely able to contain his delight when she got brassy. “I ought to file you under topics that start with the letter S.”

“Sexy Little Witch?”

“Sassy Little Shit.”

Her eyebrow quirked at the implied word challenge. “Right next to Sarcastic Scowling Slayer.”

He laughed and wrapped his hands around her waist, pulling her closer as he did so and pressing his lips on the skin just beneath her ear. “I don’t scowl.”

“You constantly scowl,” she breathed, sighing. “A little knot crinkles between your eyebrows…”

He grinned, even as he silenced her with his kiss. He coaxed her lips apart with his tongue, just for good measure and when her fingers combed through his hair, he knew he had at least a couple more minutes to enjoy this.

He loved the way their mouths moved together and the warm softness of her body against him. She fit right in his arms and he liked the differences between them, too, like how his height made her arch her neck, where he could turn a certain way and kiss down the column of her neck, or when they were standing and she had to tiptoe, while he helped her along by either looping his arms around her waist or clapping his hands right on her ass (a liberty she had allowed him and he had relished).

He liked that she liked his hair, her fingers taking every opportunity to touch them. He delighted in her odd fixation with his hands. He couldn’t wait to show her what he could do with them and her body.

He loved the shape of her breasts and how she lets him touch them. With those, he doesn’t quite presume. He’s always tentative, waiting for her permission, but he likes that, that idea that she’s holding something back from him. It excites him. It makes him want to toss her over this table and touch her in the most intimate way.

“God, what is it with this goddamn library?” she gasped.

He loved it when she swore, too. He could probably make her swear worse. In the best way.

He hummed softly. “It’s not the library. It’s you. I want to do things to you.”

An insistent but rather pleasant ding came from above and Betty pulled away in surprise. “What the hell—?”

He sighed, taking deep breaths to calm the hormones that were coursing madly through him. “Work. Ms. Haggly noticed I was missing. That’s sort of the library’s summoning system. If you’re looking for someone, you ding in code. That’s mine.”

“Eh. Owls would’ve been better.”

“We need to talk about how you’re a huge Potterhead,” he said, rubbing her arm as he stood to leave.
“We’re going to talk about how it should’ve been called Hermione Granger and How She Saved Harry 7 Times.”

There was that roiling delight in his chest again, at how she grumbled about editorial criticisms of possibly one of the best literary works of their time, how her witchiness hadn’t prevented her from being a thinking human being, how her Wickedness was so far from everything he’s ever been told about them, and how utterly, phenomenally real she was.

“Okay,” he said, biting his lip to temper the grin that could very well split his face.

He left, because work was a real thing, too.

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Betty learned that Jennifer Gibson had left behind an abusive husband and started her lurid career in statutory rape, corruption of minors, indecent public acts, and the occasional sexual harassment charge at work, all in the last four years.

She changed her name each time.

Geraldine Grundy was her latest identity, and she had stolen it from an old lady who lived and died somewhere in Boston.

But that hardly mattered in the context of Betty’s research. They already knew she was a succubus. It was no surprise that sex crimes would be following her around.

What Betty needed was in the background, so often unreported.

Betty noted the alleged Regans that this demon had assumed. There were a few handful that were suspected—a list Jughead had pulled together based on his findings from police reports, written down and in pictures. Each time Geraldine Grundy had gotten arrested for something, forensic data and courtroom evidence gleaned a little more of her obscure past.

Betty saw that many of the pictures and documents had circles drawn on them in red, usually when there were consistencies.

Demons could live on this plane for an unknown number of years—decades, centuries, a millenia. Jughead was only able to trace Grundy as far back as the 60s. There was evidence of vintage pieces of things, knick knacks that she carried with her beyond arrests. Demons were clever, but they needed to carry things with them to root them to this plane. Apart from draining souls, they anchored themselves with objects, so that other demons couldn’t just snatch them back into the gates of Abaddon.

Betty took in these past lives and her current one and recognized the pattern: Music and medicine. She had a wide range of musical talents. She knew multiple instruments well enough to teach them. She sang. She hung around bands in Woodstock. She surrounded herself with musicians. She taught young, impressionable boys to play the piano and guitar. She peddled copious amounts of drugs and had a history of being an ER nurse.

There were a handful of succubus who used music, but the medicine part was distinct.

Demons who managed to get on this plane were hardly ever first timers. They were often here before, banished perhaps, but they were almost always the ones most likely to return. They get immortalized in historical documents, sometimes unwittingly, and they very often got found out this way.
Betty spent most of the evening confirming what she suspected, and while her theory was still a guess, she had strong basis for it.

She was thorough, so apart from her main theory, she listed several other possible names, all related to either just music or just medicine.

When she was satisfied with what she had, she put all the books back into their respective shelves, gathered the files into the folder, and took it, with her notepad, out of the restricted section.

It was late, and Jughead wasn’t at the counter, but she could hear him wheeling around, putting books away, probably listening to music as he did.

She followed the sound of his work, weaving through the shelves, her body thrumming with anticipation.

She felt free to like him. Felt free to want him. She hadn’t told him everything about her, but he’d told her more than she’d ever told anyone else. He knew she was Wicked and he accepted that truth well enough that he still brought her to and from school, still held her hand when they walked down the school halls, still draped his arm over her shoulders when they were together, and still always kissed and caressed her when they had privacy.

It was like he wanted to be her boyfriend, an unspoken label that excited her each time she thought about it.

She found him in the Mystery fiction section, transferring books from his cart to the shelf. She watched him look at each spine, his long fingers splayed against the book covers, and his eyes serious with work. His headphones were large enough to go over his beanie, and they were obviously noise cancelling. She could probably scream from the top of her lungs and he wouldn’t hear her.

She walked up to him and he didn’t notice until he turned to get a book and saw her approach.

His smile was immediate and she felt a pleasant twist in her chest. He always looked so glad to see her that she wanted to kiss him just for that.

He pushed back his earphones. “Hey, I’m just about done. Things got real busy and I couldn’t get away.”

She smiled and shook her head. “It’s okay, Jug. I think I got it, anyway.” She gave him her notepad.

He looked surprised. “Already?”

Betty beamed, proud of her efficiency. “Your files were amazing. You’re not a bad researcher yourself.”

He cast her a grin, somewhat self-deprecating if she wasn’t mistaken. Jughead Jones took his compliments with what he considered a healthy dose of scepticism. He glanced at the pad and read her notations out loud. “Isheth Zenannim. Fallen angel, ruled Sathariel as princess of the Qliphoth. Also known as Eisheth Zenannim in the Kabbalah, also known as Qodeshah.”

Betty nodded. “Your files showed an extensive history in music and medicine. Before she became a demon, she was the patron angel for those. She fell from grace when she mated with a human, got pregnant, and—” she gulped, “—ate her children.”

He made a face. “Right. Of course. What are these other names?”
She shrugged. “I could still be wrong. If that name doesn’t work out, call out those other names. One of them is bound to be right. Unless this is her first time here, she’d been around making or breaking history. At the very least, she’ll get sent back to Abaddon and she’d have a bitch of a time resetting herself on our plane.”

Banishing a demon with an incorrect name meant they couldn’t be prevented from coming back to Earth, but it did put a demon off their game, and it did usually take a few years before they could get out of Abaddon again. It wasn’t a thousand years, but at this point, Jughead would probably settle for a couple of decades.

He quirked an eyebrow. “You’re kind of amazing, you know that?”

“Kind of?”

He tilted his head, his eyes full of affection. He slid his arms around her waist and she smiled happily, feeling instantly rewarded for her efforts.

“You are undoubtedly amazing,” he said, planting kisses on her lips.

She ran her hands against the front if his plaid, her fingers itching to work on the buttons of it, but again a bit of insecurity played with her confidence. She didn’t know if between the shelves of a library was an appropriate first-time setting.

He was, however, more restrained in his thoughts than she was. He pulled away and said, “Give me fifteen minutes and I’ll take you home, okay?”

She nodded, reluctantly making her way back to the main floor and making herself comfortable on one of the sofa chairs. She had a book in her bag that she wanted to get through and she opened that: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved.*

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When Jughead dropped her off at her house, it was quiet in the Cooper household. Dark, even, because Polly seemed to have gone to bed early and her mom was probably out on wine and Ambien. Chic, she knew, wouldn’t be back from work until 3.

As Jughead kissed her at her doorstep, this fact, this truth that no one cared or knew that they were even there, hung heavy between them.

Their kiss deepened and their hands moved urgently over each other’s bodies. Betty was both excited and nervous, but she wanted him so badly that she pulled him across the threshold of the front door.

“What do you want to come up?” she breathed through their torrid kisses.

“God, yes,” he gasped, pulling her closer so that her body was completely flush against his. “More than anything.”

She took his hand and pulled him up the stairs, careful not to make too much noise. She led him down the hall and through her bedroom door. As soon as they were in her room, he wrapped his arms around her from behind and sucked open mouthed kisses along her neck.
She sighed and reached behind her to run her fingers through his hair. The beanie fell at their feet, but she didn’t care. The ache blossomed between her legs and she guided his mouth back to hers.

Anticipation flooded through her. She wasn’t even sure if she was prepared for this.

She knew Polly had potions squirreled tucked in the back of a stuffed teddy bear, of all things—their little secret, obviously, because there was no way they would ask Chic to make his sisters a batch of Contraceptive potions. Polly had given her condoms, too. She had those tucked away in her stuffed toy cat, Caramel. One could never be too careful with Alice lurking.

Betty was “ready” with the implements, but she wasn’t so sure about the actual act. She was afraid she wasn’t going to measure up. She was afraid that it would hurt. She was also wondering if her first time should be a bigger deal. Should it be on a special occasion?

Maybe she was overthinking this. People had sex all the time. One’s first time could be on any random day, really. And one could always do a do-over if things didn’t go as well as one would hope.

A bunch of people’s first times were awful, she heard, but then it only ever got better, right?

“Betty,” Jughead breathed. “Are you okay?”

She realized that he was asking because she had gone still in his arms. Heat crept up her neck and face.

“I’m—I’m totally fine.” She leaned over to kiss him again and he let her, but his kiss was softer this time.

“We don’t have to,” he said, gently. “You know that, right?”

“I—I want to,” she insisted, and she winced at the bit of whine in her voice. She wanted him so badly, but she had so many thoughts. “I want you, but this is kind of sudden.”

He shook his head. “You don’t have to explain—“

“No, I,” she paused, turning to face him and look him in the eyes. He was still breathing heavily, and his eyes were still blown black, but he was listening, and some of her embarrassment melted away.

“I’ve never done this before.”

His eyebrows lifted slowly in surprise, his lips parting, and for a moment, dread suffused her, but before it could take hold of her, his expression changed from surprise to pure affection and understanding.

“Babe,” he said, pulling her close and rubbing his thumb against her cheek. “You should’ve told me sooner. We could’ve—could’ve gone much slower than this.”

Her heart gave a jump, and she was overwhelmed by his care and concern. “Jughead, if we had gone any slower, I would’ve been a bigger ball of nerves and crippling insecurity. I’ve felt nothing but wanted every time we’ve done this…” She tiptoed and pressed a kiss on his lips, which he returned, gently. “I’m honestly—I’m unsure, and I don’t quite know what to do, so I understand if you want to go.”

“I want to stay.”

“But—“
“We don’t need to do *that* tonight. I just want to be with you. Is that okay?”

She took a deep breath to steady the sudden tremble in her voice. His request was so simple and so pure. Her anxiety eased. “Yes, that’s so okay, Jug.”

He smiled and pushed her hair back from her face. “Good. No matter what happens, I’ll take care of you, I promise.”

She wondered if it was stupid to fall in love with someone so quickly. Maybe it was just the hormones, or maybe she was just being cynical.

She reached up, cupped his face in her hands, and kissed him.

tbc

Chapter End Notes

I’m off to travel Sunday morning. Will still try to write.
The Thin Line Between Pleasure and Pain

Chapter Notes

Great to be back home and writing again! Wow, what a week it's been.

Hope you're ready for this next chapter, because it's gonna be steamy.

Also, I've had the pleasure of being gifted with the creative works of srainebuggie (who made this wonderful aesthetic), buggghead (creator of this aesthetic), and ibelieveinbughead (who put together this inspired moodboard).

Ladies, you are incredibly talented and I am honored that Wicked inspired you.

“\textit{You have corrupted my imagination and inflamed my blood...}”

\textit{— Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Venus in Furs}

If Jughead was going to stay, she wanted him to be comfortable, and she quickly decided that she would sneak a pair of pajamas from Chic’s closet and grab a fresh toothbrush from the basket of supplies they kept, filled as it were with wrapped complementary toothbrushes Alice hoarded from hotel rooms in past business trips.

She was sure Chic would be pissed if he found out she had taken his clothes for Jughead’s use—probably madder than finding out his sister had snuck a boy in her room to stay with her all night, but she was confident he would never know.

She changed into her sleep clothes, too. It was a comfortable pair of pajamas and a cami top, which only made her slightly self-conscious, but she told herself that it would be silly to wear a bra going to bed.

Most of her self-consciousness waned when, after they were comfortably clothed and under her covers, he just wanted to talk.

They talked about mundane and extraordinary things.

He asked her what it was like—being Wicked, and at first she was afraid that she would sound like the monster the Wicked had a reputation for being, but his cheek was pressed comfortably against one of her pillows and he looked so settled that she found the words.

“You never get used to the pain,” she whispered. “It always hurts, because it has to, or else there would be no power to draw. After the pain comes the magic, and I feel it like tiny sparks of electricity. I feel it in my hands first—wherever the pain starts, and then I feel it in my eyes, and my
lips, and my fingertips. I can move it around at that point. I can cast my spells. My mind becomes focused on the magic, and I always have to remind myself not to go down that tunnel. I have to stay on the outside, because I don’t know if I’d find my way back if I got lost in it.”

He looked a little worried as his fingers first slid up her arm and then rested lightly against her hand. His thumb rubbed slow circled on her palm and a different sort of electricity began to generate.

“So the bigger the spells…”

“The more pain I need.”

“What do you—“ he sighed, closing his eyes. “Nevermind. I don’t need to know right now. I’m just worried. About how far you have to push.”

She was worried that if he saw what she could do, she would scare him then.

So she asked him—what’s the one thing in his slayer life that he never wanted to see ever again?

“Vampire child,” he said without a second thought. “They are the worst. When children get turned, they have no willpower. They go berserk and start killing people for blood and they can only get worse. If they manage to avoid being slain, and they live the next couple of decades, they are way smarter than any adult-made vampire, but the thing that gets me is how they are just impossible to kill because they are children. I could never. My dad had to do it for me.”

She perched her fingers lightly against his cheek, tracing his jawline. “I couldn’t imagine. I’m sorry you had to do that.”

“There are many things I wished I didn’t have to do as a slayer.”

She nodded, understanding. She had lived all her life protecting the use of her magic. She felt that couldn’t let other people get their hands on it, whether by coven or by her death. She felt responsible, but she only had to worry about herself and her family. Jughead had to worry about everyone.

“Sometimes…” she whispered, softer still. “I wish my powers could be taken away. I want to live, but I want to be ordinary. No magic. Just be… Lost. Sometimes.”

He said nothing, just stared at her as his hands rubbed the curve of her waist and hip.

She liked how he hadn’t jumped to tell her that her magic was a part of who she was. That was true, for sure, but she really liked the idea that if she were to lose her powers, she could still be her best self. She didn’t want to be dissuaded from that.

“Would you still like me?” she teased, mildly.

He nodded, serious. “I would still think you amazing, Betty Cooper.”

“I would probably be a cheerleader,” she mused, grinning. “And I’d be running the Blue & Gold.” This was fun. “What would you be like if you weren’t a slayer?”

He said nothing for a couple of seconds. “My mind is stuck on you in a cheerleading uniform, I confess.”

She giggled quietly. “Come on. Tell me. Or use your imagination.”

“My imagination, eh? Well, then, I’d be a weirdo, writing a novel at Pop’s everyday.”
“A novel,” she repeated.

He nodded. “A fictional account of something that happened for real, like… I don’t know—the murder of Jason Blossom, or something.”

“Tell me how you really feel about the Blossoms, Jug.”

He cast her a lopsided grin. “Do you want to hear this world I’ve constructed or not?”

“I do! Keep going. I’ll shut up.”

Seemingly satisfied with her promise, he went on. “I’d have one friend—Kevin, probably, or Archie. I don’t know which one. I’d be living in the janitor’s closet at school, or the film booth at the drive in. I’d be pining for the blonde cheerleader, and her good friend Veronica Lodge wouldn’t give me a second glance. The one time the blonde cheerleader smiles at me, Reggie wouldn’t like it and he’d bully me everyday for it. The entire time I’d be making plans to leave Riverdale behind.”

This was taking a maudlin turn. “Why would you be homeless?”

He shrugged. “Just using my imagination.”

Her mind and instinct churned, and she reached out to trace the S on the front of his shirt. “Where would your dad be in all this?”

“Drunk. Leader of the local gang. A bunch of lowlife thugs. He might even be in jail.”

This was not a happy fantasy. This was the story of a man who wondered whether certain things would be just as crappy in a different world. “Jug, when was the last time your dad was home?”

A small smile tilted his lip. “I can’t remember, honestly. Couple of months? Three?”

Her brows knotted, remembering how it was around the time she lost her father. She wondered how long ago he’d lost his.

“I was dad’s favorite,” she confessed. “He brought me everywhere he went, and as I got older, he gave me things to amuse me and keep me by his side. He taught me how to fix cars and I helped him restore them. He bought me anything I asked for and he always said that if he could take my Wickedness away from me, he would. I’m—” she let out a breath. “I’m really sad he’s dead.”

She felt his hand take hers.

“I’m really sorry, Betty,” he whispered.

She nodded, squeezing his hand. “I’m sorry, too, for you, I mean. I don’t know what’s worse. My dad getting killed or your dad convincing himself that you don’t need him.”

He swallowed. “Definitely your dad getting killed.”

She wasn’t as sure as he was. She closed the space between them, burrowing against his chest, her entire body flush against his. “Your situation’s still pretty shitty.”

“It’s not ideal,” he murmured against her head. “But it could be worse.”

His finger ran lightly through her hair. “If I had never been a slayer and you were never a witch, would we have met?”
She nodded. “We never would have left Riverdale in the first place if we were all Lost, so likely?”

She could feel him smiling against her forehead. “Mayor McCoy might not have rezoned and my house would still be on the Southside. I’d have gone to Southside High and I’d have been in a gang.”

“You’d see me at games. I’m a cheerleader, remember?”

“Oh, I remember.”

She laughed, softly.

“I never would’ve seen you at the games. I don’t watch sports. I might have seen you at Pop’s, though. And I think I would’ve… thought you way out of my league.”

She looked up, craning her neck to meet his eyes. “Stop. You would’ve been a badass. You would’ve done what you wanted.”

“Grab your ass and kiss you?”

“Not that. You would never do that, Juggie. You’re a complete gentleman. You would’ve gone up to me and asked me out. I would’ve said yes, because you look amazing in leather and the thought of you and that bike excites me.”

He grinned, no doubt pleased by her admission of how attractive she thought he was, or perhaps just the gentleman part. Jughead had layers.

“I’d probably notice the ponytail first,” he said.

“Really?”

“Well, after I finished staring at your ass and legs.”

She smiled. She knew he admired her smarts, but she was fond of the idea that her body captivated him, too.

He went on. “But that ponytail… that ponytail of yours drives me crazy.”

She quirked a questioning eyebrow. “In a good or bad way?”

“Both. Some days it’s so ineffably you. Not a single strand hiding your beautiful face.”

She felt a little like melting.

“But some days,” he continued, his voice lowering. “I just want to tug that ponytail loose and do wild things with you.”

His words shot straight to the pit of her stomach. Her center ached instantly and it occured to her that the ponytail was good when it was good, but when it was bad, it was great.

She decided then that they could talk some other time. She crumpled the front of his shirt and craned her neck to kiss him. He instantly captured his lips with hers, his tongue meeting hers and igniting an immediate blaze inside her.

Her leg draped over his hips and his hand was quick to slide along her thigh, clamping behind her knee. He tugged her hips towards his, hooking her leg around him more firmly.
She felt his dick twitch against her center and she wanted desperately to push her pajamas off so she could feel more of him.

She moaned softly, his velvety tongue tangling with hers.

Her fingers were in his hair and her hips were rocking against him, seeking friction from his body.

He thrust back, rock hard against her softness. She needed his skin touching hers, and for a brief moment, she wanted to tell him yes, take all of me.

But her courage came and went.

His lips traveled down her neck and his hand ran up her arm, squeezing firmly.

She knew his cues by now, and this one was a wordless request to touch her breasts. She guided his hand, nudging it gently to settle on the swell over her top. The gentle squeeze of his hand made her sigh, and when his thumb ran along the skin above her nipple, she pushed her own cami top off to give him full access.

His groan reverberated from her chest to her center. It only got better when his mouth covered a peak, his tongue swirling slowly around her nipple, sucking gently before pulling away to clamp his mouth over hers again.

The cami popped back on, but his hand was sliding beneath her top for her other breast, eager to give it just as much attention as the first.

She was feeling lightheaded by then, the massage of his tongue over hers making her hand dive right into his pajamas to seek his length.

She could feel the shape of him against her palm, and he was so hard that she contemplated going down and sucking him, even if she wasn’t sure if she knew how to do it, but even as he gave a throaty groan at her touch, he pulled her hand away from him and draped it back over his shoulder.

“You first,” he whispered.

She didn’t know exactly what he meant, but the gentle nip of his teeth to tug her earlobe distracted her from her confusion.

His finger trailed down her stomach and began to trace the skin above the waist of her pajamas.

“I want to touch you,” he murmured. “May I? I want to make you feel good.”

She wanted him to so badly. She needed him to satisfy that ache. She nodded, clutching at his hair and kissing him.

His hands wasted no time. She was first aware of the one hand that had cupped her face, and then she felt the other slip beneath her pajamas, gliding over her panties. His fingers pressed circles on the fabric over her center, and she was sure he could feel her dampness through her underwear.

She felt mild embarrassment, an inkling of some bygone moral nonsense about how ladies should never be so wanton, but it felt so good that her body unfolded on its own, her thighs parting to give him more access and her breath coming in heavy waves.

His fingers moved away from her center, and she almost complained at the loss, but then his fingers were slipping beneath her panties and touching her clit, sliding between her folds at intervals, and the
only thing that kept her cries from ringing throughout the room were his lips, clamped over hers as they were.

She had never been touched there by another man before, and it was so surprisingly different than touching one’s self, which she had done on numerous occasions.

Oh, she was so right about those fingers.

“Juggie, omigod,” she gasped against his mouth as his fingers made circles around her extremely sensitive bundle of nerves.

“Tell me if this is okay,” he whispered, a finger sliding inside her slowly.

A moan escaped her, eyes closing at the insanely pleasurable sensation spreading through her body. “Yes,” she breathed.

He bent over to kiss her. “And this…”

A second finger joined the one and by now, the slow cadence was gaining a faster tempo. His thumb was now massaging her clit and she was whimpering uncontrollably.

He hushed her, almost as if he knew she couldn’t stop herself if she tried. His darkened eyes never left hers and the sheer desire in them was overwhelming.

She was coming and she was going to come hard.

“Juggie, oh! Oh my God!” she gasped, knowing she would be loud and perhaps hoping Jughead would know what to do.

He did. His mouth covered hers just as her orgasm came over her in a blinding wave. Her muffled cries were perhaps still too loud, but it hardly mattered at that point.

She was coming and it was incredible, emptying her thoughts of everything but him and how he was blowing her mind.

As she came down from the high, she found herself staring into the intensity of his gaze.

He was still breathing heavily when he said, “I will never get tired of watching you come.”

Heat suffused her face, even as she felt beautiful and desirable on his gaze alone. She kissed him and started to push him on to his back, sliding her legs around him until she was straddling him.

As their tongues tangled, she could feel his hands slide down her back to cup her ass.

She sat up, pushing her hands against his chest to look at him. “I want you to feel good, too.”

He reached up and stroked her face. “I’m good, babe. That was just for you.”

It was such a dichotomy, this idea that slayers were vicious thugs who had no care about whether or not a witch was a good person and this man who was considerate, caring, and wouldn’t lay a single hand on her if it wasn’t to make her feel pleasure and affection.

She leaned over and kissed him, slowly, sliding to his side to give herself an easier angle. “Tell me how. Just like last time.”

This was a little different than last time. The last time they did this, he had some control. This time,
she had absolute control, and it made her a little nervous, a little excited. She pushed back his pajamas and boxers so she could grasp his length. She remembered how much pressure he liked.

She kissed him and he groaned into her mouth, one hand fisting her hair while the other joined her hand on his dick to show her a rhythm.

She felt a pleasurable flush as she stroked him, knowing by the sounds he was making that he was enjoying this.

Both his hands were now cupping her face and she was moving her hand steadily over his cock. His hips were thrusting slightly, but mostly he let her do most of the moving, and he was whispering how good it felt, how she was doing it so right, and when her thumb circled the head of his dick, his hips bucked slightly.

She wondered what would happen if she bent over and sucked him. Would that be more than she could handle? She wasn’t sure if she would gag or screw it up. What if she did something wrong and he ended up laughing?

When he whispered, “Baby, I’m close,” in her ear, his hot breath warming her entire body, she felt totally emboldened. She slid lower down his body and for a moment, their eyes met, and she saw his confusion.

It was that moment she realized that right now, she could do no wrong. She winked and took his dick in her mouth.

“Oh, fuck!” he gasped, probably a bit too loudly.

As she pulled back, she dragged her tongue along his length and the groan that left him was deep and incredibly encouraging.

Nevertheless, she remembered how he always asked her first. She wanted to be just as courteous. “Is this okay?”

“Don’t stop,” he gasped.

She smiled and took him in again. His long moan was absolutely satisfying. Her hand cupped the base of him, and as she pulled her lips up, sucking, he gasped that he was going to come. She took him in one more time before he came in her mouth.

She figured, rather practically, that since she was there, she might as well swallow, so she did, and while she did, she continued to suck and move her hand to that same rhythm he liked, because it seemed to make sense that was how he would like to get off.

He groaned and cursed and called her name, his hand running through her hair as he spilled into her mouth.

“Betty, baby, oh my God,” he moaned, gasping and throwing his head back on his pillow.

When he was done, she leaned back and wiped the corner of her lip with her thumb. He was staring up at the ceiling, like he couldn’t believe what just happened, before looking at her with those blown pupils and a gaze that made him look so utterly, and completely gone on her.

“I was not prepared for that,” he breathed.

“Sorry?” she grinned.
“Never, never apologize to me for something like that. Oh, my God, Betts. You—you didn’t have to.”

“I wanted to,” she said, simply, slinking to his side and righting his clothing. She pecked a kiss on his cheek and snuggled into his embrace.

He seemed unable to find the words, and she realized that there were a couple of sides to this. On the one hand, this could just be another blow job to him—who knows how much action he got, being as hot and attractive as he was—on the other hand, this was, to her, an intimacy she’d only read about ever reaching, and maybe he understood that.

It’s what made her feel closer to him. It’s what made her trust him—his ability to understand.

Their eyes met and he pushed the hair off her face tenderly. She gave him a small smile.

He sighed and rolled to his side so he could gather her into his arms. “You are so amazing.”

She felt cherished, and she wondered why she kept questioning herself around him, still. With him, she really shouldn’t have anything to be afraid of. “You’re staying tonight, right? Like, you won’t leave at midnight?”

“You do realize that if Chic comes home at 3 and I’m still here, he will see my motorcycle outside, right?”

Betty sighed. She could probably glamour Jughead’s motorcycle from the window, making it so that it goes unnoticed by everyone, but she tries not to use magic for frivolous reasons, and while Jughead is important to her, making it so that Jughead doesn’t get caught sleeping over might be a little on the wasteful side.

“I’ll stay until 2,” Jughead said, kissing the top of her head. “Then I’ll pick you up at 7. That’s just five hours, babe. And you’ll probably be asleep most of the time.”

She looked up at him. Of course he was right. She was just being silly, but she still wished he didn’t have to leave.

Her feelings for him were growing more intense each day. She didn’t know how he would feel if she told him that being with him made her feel like she could deal with anything and everything, so long as he was there with her.

It sounded a little like love, but she wasn’t going to say that out loud yet, because she didn’t want to freak him out. She was happy to have him just like this, and she was fairly certain he was enjoying this closeness as well.

“Okay,” was all she said, holding a million things back as she did. She bit her lip as she stared at him, wondering how much more she could say to express some of her pent up feelings.

He touched her face as he looked right back at her. “Is it weird if I tell you I’ll miss you those five hours?”

She kissed him, lips soft against his, though they held still, the earlier burning flames settled to embers. They separated slowly. “No, it’s not weird at all. I’ll miss you, too.”

He took a deep breath, his fingers tracing the apple of her cheek and the line of her jaw. He looked like he wanted to say more, but instead he said, “Get some rest. I won’t leave without saying goodbye.”
She drew herself even closer in his arms, their legs tangling, their arms slipping between the groves of each others dips and limbs, like they were knitting themselves together into a beautiful pattern.

She closed her eyes, breathing him in.

*************

He left at a little after two, nudging her gently, waking her just enough to crack her eyes open and feel his kiss on her lips.

Even in her solemnant state, she managed to kiss him back. His chuckle traveled through her body, like a feather’s caress, but she was sleepy enough that she couldn’t quite get up the energy to pull him back to bed.

“I have to go,” he whispered. “But I’ll see you soon. Go back to sleep.”

She moaned, softly, but he tucked the covers over her and she must have drifted off instantly, because she didn’t even recall him leaving her room when she woke up 3 hours later.

*************

When Betty’s alarm woke her at 5, her body rebelled against her daily routine.

She could, arguably, just stay in bed for another hour and no one would be the wiser, but she was afraid of getting used to this luxury. She needed the endorphins to keep her mind stable, to fortify herself, if only against the fear, that her Wickedness would take over her and she would become uncontrollably psycho.

Then again, if endorphins were what she needed, she was quite surely filled with them at the moment.

*Those hands.*

*Those fingers.*

Having them on her and inside her was as fantastic as she expected. Everything and more.

She had gone down on Jughead last night and she had been successful.

Granted, she had cheated a bit, having already worked him up to a certain state with a handjob and then shocking him when she went down, but she was still proud of her accomplishment. Proud that she didn’t let her insecurities and general inexperience dissuade her from making him feel good.

She wanted Jughead to be her first time, because she was sure he would be a wonderful and considerate lover and because she was fast falling for him.

There were so many things going on in the background of her life: her grief for her father, their move to Riverdale, the Blossoms and the pressure they seem to constantly put on the Coopers to give themselves to the coven, her family’s neurotic obsession with health and safety, the Spellmans, school… it seemed almost frivolous to get so caught up on a boy.

And yet Jughead wasn’t an ordinary boy. He was a slayer, and he did things that both rescued her and fascinated her. She was floored by his quick wit and impressed by his command for his job and responsibilities, she was impressed by how he lets her be an active participant in the resolution of situations, like Archie’s binding and the Ghoulies stalking her in the perimeter, and how, when she
confessed she was Wicked, he didn’t run away.

*He didn’t run away.*

In spite of everything he’d been told and all the stories he’d heard, he went after her, talked about it, then told her he wanted to be with her, promising to keep her safe.

How could she *not* fall for him?

Smiling and finally awake, she got up, got into her workout clothes, and stepped out of her room.

She was surprised when she saw Chic in the kitchen. “Chic! You’re up early. Didn’t you come in at-

“Three, yeah.” He certainly looked like he hadn’t had much sleep. “Had two full hours but I just have this colossal headache--woke me up. Thought I might take something for it and go back to bed.”

“You should,” she said, shrugging on her hoodie. “You look like shit.”

“Thanks.”

She grinned, in too good a mood to let his grumpiness affect her. “I’m going out to jog. Be back in 45 minutes. Get some rest.”

Chic nodded, his eyes half-lidded with pain. “Yeah. See you in a few hours, bug.”

She waved as she stepped out of the house and into the cool morning air.

***************

Jughead woke up at a little past five in the morning to the sound of his phone ringing. He looked at the number and found it to be unknown. He picked it up immediately.

“What?” he moaned, knowing it was Wyome.

“I may have a bit more information for you about the Ghoulies and the person they hired to find things out about the Coopers.”

“Wyome,” he groused, rubbing at his eyes. “I appreciate you calling me as soon as possible at all times, but 5 in the morning?”

“I told you, I have windows in time. I’d let you have your beauty sleep but this is important.”

“Sure. Of course. Tell me what you know. Did they hire a private eye? Anyone we know?”

“Sort of a private eye,” Wyome said. “She’s a demon. A succubus, actually, and she invades people in their dreams to find out information *and* get her jollies.”

Jughead lay still at this new piece of information.

*Great. Just great.*

“Jones? You there?”

“I’m here. Got a name for the succubus?”
“Just her Regan name. Geraldine—“

“Grundy. Yeah, I figured. Like, who else? Succubi don’t exactly travel in packs.”

Wyome chuckled. “Did I ever tell you you’re good at this job? Really impressive.”

“Yeah, I’m fucking world class,” he grumbled. “Any idea why they want this information?”

“I’m still working on that. It could just be run-off-the-mill discovery, but the fact that they hired someone to find things out tells me they need to know immediately. How about you? Got anything on the Coopers?”

Jughead had plenty, of course. More than he knew what to do with, but nobody needed to know. Betty would be in too much danger if any of it got out.

“Nope. They’re just witches, Wyome.” It was a little surprising--the ease of lying when it meant protecting her.

“Huh. Word is you and the daughter—“ She paused, and Jughead could feel the hesitation across the waves.

“The suspense is killing me, Wyome.”

She chuckled. “People are bored and they gossip, Jones. You were spotted ‘canoodling’ on the sidewalk of one chi-chi cafe that serves properly made croissants.”

Jughead pursed his lips, reminding himself that Wyome was just delivering the news and not likely perpetuating it. “Canoodling, eh? I never understood what that meant.”

“You falling back on your TMZ? Canoodling could mean from holding hands as you walk to making out with tongues in public.”

He supposed they ran the full gamut on that one. “Yeah, well, just tell anyone who mentions it that I’m not going to let anything happen to her. We clear on that?”

“Crystal.”

“Is that all? Anything else?”

“That’s mostly it, but Jones, you need to understand that the Ghoulies don’t exactly respond intelligently to warnings.”

Jughead realized that probably the worst person who could possibly feed his paranoia would be a Serpent spy. “I swear if they breathe in her general direction—”

“I’ll try to make them come to their senses, but I make no promises. We good?”

His grunted response was enough to prompt Wyome to say goodbye and drop the line.

He looked at the time again and immediately, he thought that at this moment, Betty was jogging.

In the dark.

Sighing, he pulled a pillow over his head. He really needed to get a grip. For all of Betty’s kindness and generally sweet demeanor, he had to remind himself that other than the knowledge that she was Wicked, he had seen her demonstrate some of her powers, twice impressively, and in both instances,
she was apparently holding back—when she saved Dilton Doiley’s face that first day and when she froze Reggie and Moose, mid-attack. She clearly had no fear of the Blossom twins and whatever Chic’s training was, it was born from their need to survive, so Jughead had to assume that both her and Polly knew a thing or two about fending off attacks.

Deep down, even before he had all of these facts, he already knew she was a powerful witch. When he suspected that she was merely a blood witch, he already had an inkling that she was strong and capable. Why was he so paranoid about her safety now?

She hadn’t changed.

But he had.

His feelings for her have evolved.

And with that thought firmly repeating in his mind, it was impossible to go back to sleep.

Pushing himself out of bed, he grabbed his laptop from his desk to bring it to the kitchen, where he put a pot of coffee on to brew.

As he waited, he powered his laptop and opened his email. A quick glance at his inbox showed that he had about 50 messages, 80% of which were from retailers and 10% of which were from political parties, mostly scaring him into donating to their various causes. The rest of them were from things he had a mild interest in—school events, newsletters from the colleges he applied to, and most interestingly, an email from his dad.

The email was simple:

*How are things? Just finishing up with some easy cases here in Oregon after some heavy duty stuff in Seattle. You’ll let me know if you need anything, right? If you need me to be there, just say the word and I’ll rush home. Otherwise, take care.*

*Love,*

*Dad*

It wasn’t the best email, but it certainly wasn’t the worst. Jughead wondered why everything had to be urgent for his dad. Why can’t he just come home for no particular reason? Did Jughead have to have an emergency to get him hurrying home? Wasn’t Jughead enough of a reason?

Jughead started off with:

*What is wrong with you?*

But he erased it and just said:
Things are fine here, thanks.

Jug

Not the warmest email response, he realized, but Jughead was done caring. He had other people who appreciated his affections and concern. There were other people worth caring for.

He went to the basement door, turning the lock clockwise and counterclockwise, following the combination that he knew by heart. At the last crank of the dial, he swung the heavy metal door open. The suction around the opening loosened with a hiss, and after he stepped inside, he swung the door closed behind him. He flipped the lights open as he descended, the cool, temperature controlled air rippling gooseflesh up his arms.

At basement level, he saw the array of weapons against the wall, knew there were more in locked cases, and even more mounted on shelves. He went past the weapons and went straight for the cabinet further back. He threw open the cabinet and saw the row of leather bound journals. To the side were a stack of small drawers and he pulled open the drawer marked Q-R-S. He flipped to Succubus, which said, “See Incubus.”

In Incubus, he saw Jones, Gareth (1672) and Kenan-Jones, Dierdra (1754).

Jughead found both volumes and pulled them out, setting them on the center table.

Closing the cabinet, he headed over to where they kept the potions and ceremonial implements. He pulled with him a folded stepper and set it up along the farthest shelf. He climbed it sure footedly and felt around the top shelf with his hand.

He found what he was looking for and hooked his fingers around the box handle. He dragged the box along the wooden surface until there was enough for him to take the box off the shelf. It was sturdy, made of burnished wood, and with the casing carved and intricate. It was old and musty smelling, but it was a valuable heirloom that was so seldom used, it was covered in a thin film of dust.

It was heavy, too, and as Jughead carried it down the steps, he could feel the power emanating from within, the remnants of history and magic.

He laid the box on the table and opened it.

There were booklets, old and worn, but filled with words in various languages and faiths meant to banish demons back to Abaddon. Ideally, the exorcist would be practicing their own religion, but for Jughead, someone who didn’t have a particular one, he shuffled through the booklets to find a text more ancient than most. Written in the celestial alphabet, Jughead pulled out the old Enochian text that has, for so many generation of Joneses, served as one of only two magical incantations they ever spoke.

Jughead hadn’t spoken it in years, and in the past, it was only to learn it by heart, not invoke it. He opened the text to the section on exorcism, and he read the words quietly beneath his breath. “Ge ha… ex ar pe… lo nu do he…”

He trailed the pads of his fingers against the rest of the words. It was long and ceremonial, but this was just to draw the sigils and pentagram. The Devil’s Trap.

He pulled out a second booklet, this one in Latin.
The words to remove the demon, the actual exorcism, wasn’t in Enochian, but in Latin. When banishing demons, Latin was necessary. Demons could not be compelled by Enochian words because, as the saying went, it was once the language of their creator, Lilith, who once was an angel before she was cursed to become the monstrosity she was. The language of angels thus became the language of demons, as well. Latin was the language learned by the humans from the divine, pure and unchanged. It moved the forces that governed the realms, including portals, demons, and angels.

The incantation was long, and it had to be recited without pause or hesitation, but Jughead was certain he would remember how, because he’d been taught the words as well.

“Regna terrae, cantata Deo, psallite Cernunnos,

Regna terrae, cantata Dea psallite Aradia.

Caeli Deus, Deus terrae,

Humiliter majestati gloriae tuae supplicamus…”

He breathed and paused. There was a lot more where that came from but he wasn’t thinking about studying it now. He would get to it when he figured out how to drag Grundy into the Devil’s Trap.

Within the box was a pouch of ritual chalk, lined with salt and various minerals. He would still be using actual salt to reinforce the sigil, but with the markings and salt in the chalk, the trap would hold by itself.

There were candles, a ritual athame, and of all things, holy water, crosses, and rosaries. There had certainly been devout Catholics and Christians in the Jones lineage—they were of Scottish descent and these were symbols of their faith. There were gems in there, as well, bottles of dried herbs and animal body parts—those from the pagans, one magical gene shy of the Wiccans. They helped focus the conviction of exorcists. Jughead did not have a specific faith, but he did believe in words. Words were enough to serve as his focus.

He took the Enochian and Latin text before resealing the box and sliding it into a lower shelf. Gathering the volumes and the booklet, he made his way back out of the basement to get ready for school.

*****************

When Jughead picked Betty up that morning, they spent several minutes just kissing on his motorcycle. The only reason they stopped at all was the general concern of being watched and the time they had before their first class.

At her locker, he leaned in close, whispering how he ought to break all the rules for her, and her stomach fluttered with excitement at the mere prospect of their lips touching the slightest bit in those restrictive hallways, as if they hadn’t been kissing quite thoroughly ten minutes before.

The amount of longing Jughead can generate in her was considerable enough that she wanted it to be lunch period just so she could be with him at the Blue & Gold, so when she got the text between classes that Kevin would be joining them at the office, Betty had to admit that she felt a twinge of disappointment.
Betty had hoped that Kevin would cancel and she could have Jughead all to herself. Unfortunately, or fortunately in most cases, Kevin wasn’t a flake.

In anticipation of Kevin, she had set up the biggest desk at the Blue & Gold office. She told herself that Kevin was Jughead’s best friend, and that her disappointment was incredibly rude. She knew it was. She had taken the master class for recognizing rudeness under Alice.

“Girl, did you clean this place?” Kevin asked as he walked into the office, looking around and running his fingers against the clean surface of a desktop computer.

“I did,” Betty replied, taking her seat behind her desk and opening her lunch bag. It contained yet another healthy meal. “Do you not smell the Windex?”

Jughead grinned and took one of the seats across Betty’s. “Don’t you just scourgify things with your wand?”

“Now who’s the Potterhead?”

“You’re both Potterheads,” Kevin said, taking a seat and digging into his lunch bag.

“The fact that you know what Potterhead means is a clear indication that you’re one of us,” Betty pointed out, opening her bento box and seeing some conchiglie, or shell-shaped pasta, green from chopped broccoli and (fingers crossed) a creamy pesto sauce. There were also seedless grapes on one side and cubes of cheese in the other, probably low-fat. It looked delicious, and it was probably one of the richer meals her mother had ever packed her, but the smallish portions had her swallowing in dismay. She looked into her bag, hoping there was something extra in there that she had missed. No such luck.

Stifling her sigh, she pierced a pasta shell with her packed fork and stuck it in her mouth. Maybe if she ate it slowly, it would feel like a lot.

She looked up and saw Kevin handing Jughead a foil-wrapped sandwich, which turned out to be a considerably sized Italian sub. Kevin had the same, and they clicked their huge sandwiches together before biting into their lunches.

She wished that for once, her mother would pack her a lunch that didn’t care about calorie counts, but as she watched Jughead appreciate his sandwich, it occurred to her that Kevin had brought Jughead’s lunch because Jughead didn’t have any food left to pack from his fridge, so Kevin, in his infinite love for Jughead, had remembered to pack a sandwich for his best friend.

She immediately felt like shit for complaining about her mother’s ultra-healthy lunch.

They finished their lunch quickly, Jughead and Kevin through sheer youth and exuberance and Betty, through her mother’s aggressive portion control.

“So my problem is this,” Jughead said, mouth half-full from his last bite. “I’ve got a succubus on the loose and I’ve got to catch her in a Devil’s Trap.”

Kevin made a face, his shoulders slumping. “Ugh, really? This is the challenge you have for me? A female sex demon?”

“We’re in a bit of a bind,” Jughead continued. “We have a better chance of trapping her if she came into any one of our dreams, but she can’t come into mine, she won’t for the ladies, and she probably wouldn’t care to step into yours. We aren’t left with that many options.”
“We need a straight guy we can trust,” Betty said. “Someone who wouldn’t mind being bait.”

“Or someone who didn’t know he was bait,” Kevin said, simply. “Archie would be perfect.”

Jughead frowned. “I was so afraid but so sure you would say that.”

“Why not? If he only has to be visited once, he’d be alright. He can thank us later.”

“He’s not wrong,” Betty said.

Jughead sighed and pulled out an ancient looking book from his bag. “I got this from the basement this morning.”

Her eyebrow arched questioningly and he gave her a grin, like a wordless promise to explain later.

He plopped it on the table and opened it to a page he marked with metal clip. The heading read Succuvus/Incuvus. The page was filled with horrifying but intricate hand drawn pictures, with text in swirly handwriting. The English was archaic and difficult to decipher at first glance, but familiar words began to jump at her from the yellowing pages.

It was beautiful.

She ran her fingertips along the top of the page, the smell of old parchment and leather binding wafting slowly from where it lay. “Is this from your personal collection? This looks nothing like the journals from the restricted section.”

Jughead nodded. “This isn’t for public consumption. There are slayers and then there are The Slayers—the best in the history of the Jones family. Slayers tend to be diligent chroniclers of their methods, fortunately, so we will always have records of their legacy.”

“Do you keep one? A chronicle, I mean,” she asked.

“I do,” he replied. “I have. I’m on my second volume.” There was a hint of pride in his tone and she desperately wanted to see what he had written and drawn. What little she had seen of his artwork promised endless pages of vivid imagery.

“Can’t wait to see it.”

Based on the entry, written by Dierdra Kenan-Jones, some witchcraft was necessary to lessen the risk on the visited. It was recommended that there be two slayers at the helm and at least one Seer keeping watch.

“I suppose you need me to get this production set up,” Kevin quipped, with a quirk of his eyebrow.

Jughead smirked. “Always. You’re my point man. And really, how hard is it to get Archie laid? Like, seriously--I’m surprised the demon hasn’t gotten to him already.”

“Wait, do we know that it hasn’t?”

“Pretty sure.”

“Like how sure?”

Jughead hesitated. “I mean, he doesn’t look like he’s being visited…”

“This is ridiculous. We’re talking about Archie here and it’s so easy to find out,” Kevin said, swiping
out his phone. He started typing and speaking the words as he went. “Hey, Archie… can I tell you something embarrassing--red face… I had this sex dream about Liam Hemsworth… like, it was awesome--eggplant, eggplant, squirt… now I can’t look Joaquin in the eyes--sad face… have you ever been in this situation? Aaaaand, send. Now we wait.”

Betty’s jaw dropped. “Eggplant?”

Kevin’s eyebrow arched. “What?”

Jughead stifled his laugh. “Squirt?”

“Hey, if you have a sex dream with Liam Hemsworth, you eggplant, eggplant, squirt!”

Betty didn’t know why she was blushing so fiercely.

Kevin’s phone dinged. “Ah! Fuckboi replies. Let’s see….” He looked at his phone and started reading it out loud. “It’s just a dream… yadda, yadda… no need to feel guilty, especially if it’s someone you don’t know… ah, here we go--he says he’s been having sex dreams about Veronica… well, no surprise there, honestly. I think the eagle has landed, guys.”

“You think?” Betty asked, doubtful. “Like, how long has he been having them?”

Kevin typed and moments later, Archie replied. “He says he has them all the time… sometimes it alternates between Cheryl and Josie and Valerie… wow, this boy’s a hoe--”

“We’re allowed to have dreams, okay?” Betty pointed out, fairly. “Don’t look at me like that, Juggie.”

He threw up his hands, laughing. “I’m just wondering, babe…”

“I’m just saying,” Betty said, pointedly. “It sounds like Archie doesn’t need much help from a succubus. If he’s been having sex dreams that many times, he should really be pretty sick by now. He seems upbeat to me.”

“We’ll keep an eye on him.”

Kevin threw up his hands. “Fine. I’ll be on standby, but I’m making plans already.” He looked at his phone to check the time. “I’ve got to go. You guys sticking around?”

Jughead nodded. “See you in class.”

Kevin tapped Jughead’s shoulder before he stood to go.

When he was gone, Betty sighed. “I really don’t think Archie’s getting visited. I think he’s just being his horny self.”

Jughead chuckled. “You’re probably right, and honestly, if the succubus were visiting him, she isn’t going to get much.”

She quirked her eyebrow, confused. “What do you mean?”

He snatched his beanie off his head and ran his hand through his thick hair. “Got a call from my mole this morning, about the Ghoulies. She said the private eye they hired to get information about your family--it’s Grundy. It’s the succubus.”

Betty didn’t know what to say. “So Archie--”
“If she visited Archie, she’d have moved on from him already. The question, of course, is how far she’s gotten. The succubus can’t visit him if he and her Regan hadn’t met in the first place. We need to find out if he’s had contact with Geraldine Grundy.”

Betty’s gears turned. “He might know her by a different name.”

He nodded. “We show him the picture.”

“I have a class with him later. I can work it into our conversation.”

Jughead pulled out Grundy’s file and gave her a photograph. She tucked it into her notebook.

“So… you gonna tell me what dreams you’re having?” he asked, smirking.

She tilted her gaze at him, smiling briefly before she lowered her eyes. “My dreams haven’t been the good kind.”

His smirk faded and he reached out to rub her shoulder gently. “I’m sorry. You wanna talk about it?”

She shook her head. “I just want them to stop. I didn’t dream last night, though. I had a really good night’s rest.”

He smiled. “So did I.”

She felt quite sure that the reason he slept well was the same reason she did.

The bell rang and they exchanged apologetic looks. They stole another kiss before they left the Blue & Gold, then they walked out of the office, hand in hand.

When Betty saw Archie at class, she managed to get a conversation started on music teachers, then she mentioned how there was one in Greendale. Somehow she got Archie to look at Grundy’s picture, and while Archie said she was hot, he said he’d never met her.

Betty texted Jughead her findings as her stomach roiled with anxiety.

When Jughead texted back, *It's gonna be okay. We'll get her. No matter what, we'll get her. I promise*, she felt so much better.

***************

When Betty got back from school, she found a package on her front door with a gift tag that said, “To Betty Cooper.”

It was a small box, small enough to hold a trinket, and Betty did wonder momentarily if this was some surprise from Jughead. Only, it was strange that he would leave it instead of give it—he had only just dropped her off. This couldn’t have been from him.

For a brief moment, she wondered if this was from Archie, who might have ordered something from Glamazon some time before the binding was broken. She decided then that should this turn out to be an expensive knick knack, she would return it.

She took the box with her into the house where she was surprised to find Alice bright-eyed and
brimming with excitement.

“I received a text from your aunt this afternoon,” Alice said, excitedly. She was smiling, and it was perhaps the most genuine smile Betty has ever seen on her mother’s face.

It was rather nice, to see her so happy, so Betty couldn’t help but stop and listen. “What was it about? It sounds like it’s wonderful news.”

“Zelda’s throwing her annual party for the Beltane Eve festival and she invited me to help organize!”

That explained it. Nothing made her mother happier than being given control.

“Help being the operative word, mother. They didn’t tell you that you would be running this thing,” Betty pointed out.

“They’ll come to their senses,” Alice said, waving a dismissive hand. “I started writing down my ideas the moment I got the text, but it’s a little difficult considering the venue is part their backyard and part the woodland beyond it. We need to go further in—there’s a clearing, but I have to go over there and make sure there isn’t poison ivy all over. Maybe I’ll have it sprayed for ticks, too. We don’t want Lyme disease getting a foothold.”

*Ho boy.*

Betty immediately decided to make a run for it while she can.

“Betty!” Alice cried after her just as she was rushing up the stairs.

*Too late.*

“I want you to call your Aunt Zelda and tell her you want to help as well! It will be good to have two of us there so we can make my ideas come to fruition.”

Between her mother, Veronica, and Cheryl, one would think she was the most influential person in Riverdale, with all of them wanting her endorsement. That, or she made an apt minion.

She was guessing it was the latter.

“Sure, mom. I’ll call her later,” she muttered, escaping to the second floor and hurrying into her bedroom.

When she was sure her mother wouldn’t follow, she sat in front of her dresser and proceeded to remove her shoes. She remembered that she had the package and began to unspool the twine.

When she opened it, she found what looked like a charm. It was shaped like a skull and it was made from amber.

Amber itself had very positive properties. Most of the magic it was associated with had to do with life, longevity, fertility, and beauty. It did, however, also signify change, and change was often associated with death.

It was pretty, but Betty knew better than to accept strange gifts from unknown recipients. There wasn’t a note to explain, just the gift tag and the skull nestled in some nondescript foam.

At this instance, Betty began to check the entire box for spells, curses, and charms.

There was nothing. It was just a box with a skull.
She picked it up and admired it for a minute before putting it back down. It was probably harmless, spell-wise, but whoever sent it might get the wrong message if she wore it. She didn’t want anybody thinking she was interested in exploring other relationships.

She had Jughead.

She smiled to herself, excited to see him again.

Looking at her calendar, she realized that Beltane wasn’t that far away. She always liked the festival. Back in Seattle, the traditional huge Beltane bonfires was substituted by a pretty and proper rooftop firepit for their family. The Coopers would first decorate all openings of their vertical city home with flowers and herbs, and when the portals were fragrant with the season, they would set the fire pit ablaze and surround it, throwing in various offerings (“No plastic, for goodness sake!”), often symbolizing the gains of the past year (the harvest), while invoking good wishes for the coming year.

Alice had often tried to get them to sing while they held hands and walked around, but as they got older, that practice grew less and less adorable and more awkward by the year, mostly because they became more sullen and jaded as they got older.

After the rituals, they ate, and in fairness, Alice often busted out a hefty menu, half healthy and half decadent.

Betty still enjoyed the practice, that feeling of community knowing that others like their family were celebrating the same thing, and perhaps with her aunts and cousin presiding, they’ll have something fresh and festive.

She would love to invite Jughead to Beltane eve.

A thrill feathered down her spine, thinking about the other implication of the Beltane fires. It was that time of the year when many young witches officially crossed over to adulthood—meaning, witches who celebrated their 16th birthday the past year would choose Beltane to either begin a romance, mark it with a first kiss, or—most popularly, have sex.

Of course, two Beltanes have come and gone and Betty still hadn’t quite taken advantage of the festivities.

This year, she decided, the Beltane fires would be hers.

tbc
I apologize that this took so long. This chapter was a little complicated for me. There were many times that I revealed something, only to pull it back upon realizing that it was too soon. I was also putting unnecessary pressure on myself to get to certain things, but I also realized that I didn't have to write *everything* in this chapter.

SO, this might actually be a rather unsatisfying chapter for some of you, but this needs to be here. ^_^ I promise more in the next one.

― Nichole McElhaney, *A Sisterhood of Smoke and Ash*

Betty dreamed that she was standing from the balcony of Thornhill, overlooking Riverdale and wondering what dark secrets it kept. She dreamt about her Blossom cousins and her mother, father, and siblings. She dreamt about Slayers--not just Jughead--as she passed them by on the street, each of them looking at her with suspicion and wonder. She dreamt about unfamiliar libraries filled with leatherbound books and artifacts with strange magic. She dreamt about stepping outside of her own body and seeing herself, unsure of what was to come. And finally, she dreamt of Cheryl, standing by the fireplace in a pretty white dress, holding a candelabra, the fires from each wick roaring even before it hit the ground and set the room in flames.

When Betty woke, she was in her bed and the sun had just peeked out of the horizon.

She felt rested in spite of her strange dreams and she sat up in bed, rubbing the sleep from her eyes. She told herself that it was Friday, and that the weekend was upon her. If anything, that meant she could sleep in on Saturday morning.

As she got ready for school, she turned her thoughts to Beltane, which lightened her mood considerably.

By the time she was ready to head downstairs for breakfast, she was smiling at her reflection in the mirror and tightening her ponytail.

She saw the opened package on her dresser and grabbed it, box and all, to show to her family.

Bounding down the stairs, she can hear casual discussion from Alice, which basically meant her passive-aggressively telling Polly that she might want to cut back on the butter and pancakes.

Betty considered hanging back just so she didn’t have to deal with that but decided that she could probably divert attention from herself by bringing up the mystery of the trinket and who might have
given it to her.

“I got a package,” Betty said as she walked into breakfast. “At the door yesterday. Didn’t say from whom.”

She put the box down on the breakfast table, right between the pancakes and the plate of cut fruit. Polly, Chic, and Alice all stared at it in silent horror.

Betty scowled, mildly insulted. “I scanned it for curses and charms. It’s just a trinket. I wouldn’t have plopped it in the middle of breakfast if I hadn’t.”

The horror was replaced with uncertainty as her siblings and mother exchanged wary glances. Finally, Alice took the box and opened it. “It’s amber.”

Polly’s eyebrows rose, brightening her expression to one of optimism. “That’s good, right?”

Alice picked it out of the box to examine it more closely. “It’s shaped like a skull.”

“Not so good,” Chic said in a nasally voice.

Betty frowned. They symbolism of skulls were hyped by horror movies as something that was tied to the paranormal and evil magic, when in fact, it was nothing but the dried remains of a human being. Its significance to witchcraft was about the same as having a Mr. Skeleton hanging around a science lab. But when she turned to Chic to point this out, she instead grimaced. Her brother looked terrible. His eyes were bloodshot and his nose was red to the tip. “Are you okay? You look awful.”

Chic shot her a glare. “I am aware, bug.”

Alice looked pointedly at her son. “Elizabeth’s right. You look ill. Are you sure you should go to work?”

“I’m fine. It’s just a cold.”

Alice examined the skull a bit more. “It does seem harmless, if a little strange. And there was no note or explanation that came with this?”

Betty shook her head. “It just said it was for me. What do you think? Should I be worried?”

Polly held her hand out for it and Alice gave it to her to examine. “Just because it seems harmless, it doesn’t mean that it isn’t. I know half a dozen spells that could mask other spells.”

“You’re free to examine it a bit more,” Betty offered, taking her seat and one of the yogurt cups. It had cranberries, walnuts, and honey in it. It tasted enough like a treat without her mother’s judgement sprinkling it.

Polly huffed lightly. “Not today. Maybe tomorrow. Go show it to Jughead. He might know what the skull means, if anything.”

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with that boy,” Alice said, holding the box out for Polly to put the skull back in the box. “Is that wise?”

Betty thought that a funny turn of phrase. “Wise?”

Alice shrugged. “He’s a slayer. He hangs around those lowlifes at that bar.”

“Mom!” Betty cried as Polly rolled her eyes.
Chic’s eyes rolled, too. It came off more as exhausted than exasperated, however. “His father owns that bar, mom. He kind of has no choice, but that said, I’m sure Betty is responsible enough to know that hanging out at slayer central while Wicked can land her in trouble.”

“Not like they know,” Betty said, avoiding eye contact with her brother.

“Speaking of his father,” Alice said, eyebrow arching. “Any word on when he might come back?”

“No clue,” Betty said with conviction. “I don’t think anyone knows. I’m going to get some coffee.” She stood and went to the kitchen, eager to get away.

Unfortunately, Chic decided to follow her, and as the kitchen door swung closed behind them, he wasted no time. “Bug, look at me.”

Betty felt a little trapped, but she turned around to face him. “What?”

“Does Jughead know you’re Wicked?”

She pursed her lips, deciding whether she should lie or tell Chic the truth.

She didn’t need to decide. Chic saw right through her.

“Bug!” he whispered, fiercely. “And you’re still hanging out with him?”

She felt a fierce protectiveness well up in her. If there was one thing she knew Jughead took to heart, it was the misconception that he would ever lay a hand on her. “He won’t hurt me, Chic! And he isn’t going to tell anyone!”

“Who told him? Was it his father?”

She recoiled in confusion. “How would his father—“

“Did you tell him?”

“Well, I—yeah, I did!”

“Why, bug? Why would you risk something like that?”

She felt flustered, being interrogated by Chic about this. “I had to, Chic! I just—I didn’t want to keep something like that from him!”

“Why not? He didn’t have to know!”

“Yes, he did! I just—we’re getting along and—and—“

Chic’s jaw dropped, perhaps reading the look on her face. “Are you and him—“

“Yes,” she said, almost defiantly. “He’s my boyfriend.”

“Betty!” Chic gasped. “He’s a slayer.”

Her stomach dropped in dismay. “You sounded just like Cheryl when you said that.”

He frowned, deeply. “This is not a class thing. He kills witches, Betty. It’s what he was born to do.”

“Jughead isn’t like that. He watches out for everyone. He watches out for me, you—everyone, Witch, Lost, or Creature. Do you know that right now there’s a succubus loose in Riverdale? He’s
planning to banish it some time soon. He just has to figure out how.”

Chic stepped back, slack jawed. “A succubus?”

“That’s right. We need bait—"

“We?”

She realized too late what she had said and she began to wring her hands. “I’m sort of… helping
him? He needs help from a witch and—“

Chic shook his head, his facial expression hardening. “I ought to ground you.”

She glowered at him. “You’re not my dad, Chic.”

“I can tell mom.”

“You wouldn’t!” she gasped. “I thought we agreed to have each other’s back when it came to mom.”

Chic’s resolve immediately withered, his shoulders slumping. “Bug, you know we have to keep a
low profile.”

“This is Riverdale, where slayers, witches, and creatures get along and break bread, where the
Blossoms protect us, where I can help a slayer put away demons…” She realized that this sounded
like she was drinking the Kool-Aid, but the prospect of Chic going to their mom to prevent her from
seeing Jughead was frankly making her panic.

She could, of course, choose to ignore whatever prohibitions Alice lays down, but she preferred to
keep her relationships as Shakespearean-tragedy-free as possible.

“You are playing with fire and I don’t appreciate it,” Chic said, his tone growing hard and
unfamiliar. “You don’t know half the things I’ve had to do to protect you, bug. You don’t, and then
you squander it away by trusting the one person in Riverdale you probably shouldn’t! Are you
sleeping with him?”

Betty stepped back, stunned. “That is none of your business.”

This was beyond shocking. Chic had always been kind and careful with her. He had never spoken to
her this way. Never looked at her this way—with anger and resentment.

“It’s my business when I have to compromise pieces of myself looking out for you,” he said, a harsh
rasp in his voice.

Her jaw dropped and as she moved away, she knocked over her mug and it fell off the edge of the
counter. It hit the floor with a resounding crash, and Alice called out from the dining room, asking if
everything was okay.

The rumble of Jughead’s motorcycle filtered through the ringing of Betty’s ears and she rushed out
of the kitchen, pushing past Chic to the dining room.

She grabbed her school bag, the skull, and its packaging, and started to head for the front door. She
jammed the package in her bag before turning to leave. “I gotta go, mom. I’ll see you later, Polly.”

Betty rushed out the front door without a second glance, flying down the staircase, and jamming on
her helmet.
“Whoa, where’s the fire?” Jughead joked, mildly.

Betty tried to look neutral. She even tried to smile, but she wasn’t fooling him.

He grew serious. “Are you okay?”

“I’ll tell you later. Just drive, please?” She hopped on behind him and drew herself close, giving his body a squeeze that helped her feel better, more than anything else.

His hand clasped hers for a moment. “Okay. Let’s go.”

When he started his bike and sped away, she looked up and saw Chic stepping out of their front door. She tore her gaze from him, wishing she could forget what happened this morning.

***************

Betty told Jughead that she got into a fight with Chic. She didn’t give him many details because she didn’t want there to be tension between Chic and Jughead, but she did say that Chic tried to ground her, as if he had a right.

“He’s not dad. He can’t order me around.”

Jughead rubbed her shoulder, the gentle pressure of his hand a warm comfort to her frayed feelings. “Maybe he just feels like he has a responsibility to step into the role. You know, with your dad gone?”

She leaned against Jughead’s shoulder, her heart softening at Jughead’s pure intentions—trying to help her see Chic’s side so that she wouldn’t be too angry with him. And Jughead was a big brother, too. He knew how close she was with Chic and that a rift between them hurts her, but the things Chic said this morning—they were intensely personal, like he was harboring resentment for her, and that really lanced through her, deep.

The bell rang and Betty realized she had to go as her classroom was further down.

“I’ll talk to you later, okay? And oh, I told Chic you were my boyfriend.” She began to leave.

He grinned, making a grab for her hand to stop her. “You did?”

“Is that okay?” She let him delay her, shuffling in place at the sudden sense of shyness that came over her.

He caught her face in his hands and kissed her, hallway rules be damned.

They both began to grin into the kiss.

“Absolutely okay, Betts.”

She placed her hands over his. “Yeah?”

“Yeah.”

The hallway cleared and suddenly the classes didn’t matter. All that mattered was her and Jughead,
kissing as the sound of the school bell waned.

Jughead always started Fridays in a state of mental exhaustion. He attributed it to the fact that he knew he would be having a long day—working at the library then making his weekend rounds, so his Thank-God-It’s-Friday feelings often came late in the day, but that Friday he felt a lightness in his step, because Betty Cooper had called him her boyfriend.

It was corny as hell, he acknowledged, to be so smitten by this label, but he was clearly brimming with this new thing because Kevin noticed without being told.

“What’s up with you today? I saw you grinning at the teacher’s stupid joke this morning. Did you get laid last night or something?”

Jughead rolled his eyes. “Of course that’s the only reason anybody would be happy, right?”

Kevin’s jaw dropped, his look of shock exaggerated. “What in the world? Happy, you said? You actually used the word happy!”

The heat rising up Jughead’s collar was unbearable. “It’s just—I didn’t get laid or anything like that, okay? But it’s about Betty and things are good. They’re great, actually. Why are you looking at me like that?”

Kevin clapped his hands together, beaming. “Look at you! My babies are all grown up. So are you going steady?”

Jughead couldn’t help but laugh. “What are we, in the 50s? I gave her a promise ring, sure.”

“You didn’t!”

“I didn’t. Jeez, Kev—”

Kevin scowled. “You too cool for a promise ring?”

“I’d sooner have her name tattooed on my arm.”

Kevin’s eyes glowed with delight. “We’re talking tattoos! This is how I know it’s big. Betty Cooper is your girlfriend, like officially, isn’t she?”

Jughead wasn’t fond of the word “official.” It sounded like something you had to file at the registrar, but he wasn’t opposed to the idea of marking a day for a milestone. “She told her brother I was her boyfriend, so…”

“Oh, my God! It’s true! And she’s so out of your league it’s not even funny.”

“Hey!”

“I’m kidding. So are you two going to celebrate?” Kevin’s eyebrows waggled.

“Hadn’t thought about that, actually. Is that a thing?”
Kevin shrugged. “Maybe? Any reason to go out and do something special, right? And please don’t bring her to the library again.”

Jughead grinned, draping an arm around Kevin’s shoulders. “That library does things for Betty and me, dude. Good things.”

“Save it for some other time. Go bring her someplace special. There’s a new Indian place up at Greendale, I heard. Food reviews are okay, but I’m told their desserts are tantric.”

Jughead hushed him. “Keep it down, Kev.”

“Oh, seriously, nobody cares.”

The PA system crackled to life. “A friendly reminder that this is a learning facility and that all public displays of affection must be confined to holding hands. Please do not make out in the hallways. Again, this is a learning facility. Kissing for prolonged periods is inappropriate and severely frowned upon.”

Jughead felt heat climbing up his neck and Kevin noticed him turning beet red.

“It wasn’t that prolonged.”

Kevin laughed. “I take it back. People are going to be up on your shit the whole day. Veronica will have a field day.”

Jughead did get shit for it the whole day, but at least the teasing was mostly directed at him, because God knows, he’s the guy in the relationship and so he was hornier by default.

However, it wasn’t so bad. It was just a kiss. It wasn’t like they’d gotten caught in flagrante delicto at the Blue & Gold office.

Also, Veronica did not have a field day. She had, apparently, been contending with Cheryl’s terrible mood all morning and it seemed to have broken Veronica’s usually tough spine.

“She’s Satan. I can’t deal with it. Her mood is drying my pores. Congrats on this whole Betty thing, Jug, but I honestly cannot expend my energies on your love life at his time. I have enough to deal with.”

It hardly mattered, anyway. He was too caught up in Betty and what Kevin liked to call their “mutual heart eyes”, whatever that meant.

When school let out and he dropped her off at her house, she invited him to the Spellman annual Beltane Eve festivities.

It was a party he had attended every year, dragging with him Kevin, Toni, Sweet Pea, and Veronica. It was also the only Sabbath of the year that Tall Boy guarded the vault in his stead, because Tall Boy didn’t believe in celebrating with witches and (Jughead suspected) nobody invited him.

The Spellmans always promised a wholesome good time and a discrete amount of Grade A weed for those who ventured to stay late. Kevin, kindly, did not report their herbal celebrations to his father. The food was always fantastic and it was a good time to appreciate Irish ditties sung around a fire.

It felt different, somehow, getting an invitation from Betty.

He understood the significance of Beltane to witches. His mother had celebrated it when she had
been around, but perhaps because of his father, she treated it more like a 4th of July barbecue rather than something closer to a Seder.

The Spellmans were more reverent about it, he found out later, running the full gamut of stringing flowers and herbs over doors and windows, singing around the fire, and throwing offerings into the flames. They made crowns of dried flowers and herbs, too, for all their guests.

He attended most years, because he was grateful that the Spellmans were inviting him at all, but there were years he skipped the ceremonies, arriving late and catching the tail end, which was mostly the consumption of food and drink.

Of course his excuses were always genuine—he had to do a ton of slayer things on Beltane. It was a Sabbath—but he wasn’t fooling the Spellmans. He would skip the witchy stuff if he could.

It was clear to him that Betty’s invitation carried with it the expectation that he would be there for all of it.

“Starts at seven, right?” he asked.

“Six,” she said, slipping her arms around his waist, his jacket swallowing part of her. “Help us decorate the portals.”

He tilted a smile. “Aren’t you supposed to be a witch for that?”

“Says who? If that’s true, some witch still counts as witch on Beltane, then,” Her fingertips brushed against his jaw. He was about to tell her that he wasn’t witchy enough for his own mother, but she added, “When a witch touches your life, for better or worse, you have, inexorably, been bewitched. Some part of you becomes one of us. Beltane is the time to celebrate it, because the rites and practices don’t require magic. Just an appreciation of life.”

He pulled her even closer, their noses touching. “I appreciate you. Does that count?”

She smiled, noticing a distinct twinkle in her eyes. “Oh, you’re going to appreciate this Beltane, Jughead Jones.”

“Oh, yeah? What’s so special about it?”

Her eyebrow quirked, as if he should’ve known why. Maybe he should’ve. “Think really hard,” she whispered, her lips capturing his in a knee-buckling kiss.

He didn’t get to thinking much then, but later that evening, as he sat behind the library checkout desk working his way through a mystery thriller, it dawned on him what she meant, and now he could barely think of anything else.

Betty was spending Friday night at the Spellmans.

Jughead had texted her earlier, telling her he was looking forward to Beltane Eve. Rather than text back, she had called him, saying that she and Polly were spending the evening with her aunts and cousin, mostly to kick off the Beltane Eve preparations.
She tentatively invited him over, knowing that her aunts wouldn’t mind, but Sabrina had filled her in on how Jughead was kind of a reluctant participant in the ceremonies of Beltane, probably as a result of his mother’s abandonment of them.

This was, of course, armchair psychology, which Zelda was quick to point out but wasn’t adverse to using, herself. “I still blame his mother for it, you understand, but he attended the ceremonies when he could, just not consistently. It’s not top of mind with him, and it’s because Gladys didn’t exactly bring him into the witchy fold. It’s clear his Slayer blood is dominant, but he’s still part witch. Gladys should’ve nurtured that sense of community in him.”

Hilda rolled her eyes. “As you can see, Zelda is not a Gladys fan.”

“She abandoned him and took his sister when he was nine, Hilda. Don’t act like you didn’t have several choice words about Gladys yourself.”

So while Betty knew Jughead seemed easily amenable to attending Beltane when she invited him earlier, she was hesitant to immerse him any further.

“I know it’s not your thing,” she said, lightly, over the phone.

He had gasped. “Preparing and setting up for Beltane Eve is \textit{totally} on my bucket list.”

She chuckled. “It’s okay if you can’t. I know you’re busy.”

“I’ll drop in for a bit. Say hello. I can’t stay long, though. Gotta do my rounds.”

“I’d be happy to see you even if it’s just for a while.”

“Me too.”

He said it so softly. She loved it when his voice got that way, and she always tried to find ways to elicit it. Usually, it was when she expressed wanting to be with him, which was easy for her, because it was true.

She was grinning when they finally said their goodbyes and she dropped the call. It was how Sabrina saw her when her cousin walked into the living room.

“Well, aren’t you love sick?” Sabrina said.

Betty just smiled shyly. She had very strong feelings about Jughead Jones and she wasn’t going to deny it. “He’s coming over for a bit, just to say hi.”

“Precious. Aunt Zelda! Jug’s coming by!”

“Oh, wonderful! I made him a bunch of enchiladas he could pop into his fridge and heat up for the rest of the week!”

“Got some pie, too,” Hilda added.

Polly, who was in the kitchen, wondered out loud about the copious amounts of food they always seemed to give him.

“That boy would eat instant Ramen and cereal everyday for a month if no one gave him real food to eat,” Zelda explained.

Betty sighed, knowing in her heart that Jughead would \textit{hate} it if she ever felt sorry for him, but she
didn’t like the idea of him being neglected, even if he was eighteen and technically an adult. From what she’s heard from Sabrina, he’d been dealing with this since his mother left.

Polly snorted. “Maybe you should sneak us some of those carbs, Aunt Zelda. Mom makes us vegetarian pinwheels and tells us there’s turkey in there somewhere. It’s almost always a lie.”

“Polly,” Betty said in a softly chastising tone. “Mom makes the effort, you know.”

“Oh, please. Don’t tell me you never wished for more of the miniscule serving of pasta she treats you with every once in a while.”

“It’s healthy.” Betty’s voice fell flat at that weak defense.

Hilda rolled her eyes and threw her hands up. “Same old Alice. Let me get you girls something sweet that has zero nutritional value.” She dove into the refrigerator and took out some cherry pie. “Let’s heat this up and pile ice cream on it.”

“But we haven’t had dinner yet!” Betty cried.

“Oh, be quiet, Betty,” Polly said, grinning. “Seize the moment!”

Betty was a little affronted by Polly implying that she never did. She’d done nothing but take moments as they came the last few weeks.

It did, however, occur to her that those moments were usually prompted by either Sabrina or Jughead.

Sabrina nudged Betty’s shoulder. “We’re having Upside Down Dinner—dessert first.”

_EMPTY calories first._

Sabrina eyed her suspiciously “You’re thinking about what your mom would say, aren’t you?”

Betty scowled. She was doing just that, of course, but she weakly denied it. She could tell Sabrina didn’t believe her.

When Aunt Hilda served pie and Betty had managed to shove all the delicious things in her mouth, the front doorbell rang. Betty knew it was Jughead but Sabrina had jumped to get the door.

He sauntered into the kitchen moments later, grinning at the promise of pie and slotting himself beside Betty on the kitchen counter.

Sabrina planted her hands on her hips. “That’s my spot!”

“It’s my spot now,” Jughead replied, pressing a kiss to Betty’s temple. She beamed and leaned into his side as he explained that he wasn’t really sticking around long. “I literally just dropped in to see Betty for five minutes before I go out to do my rounds.”

“Wow, not all of us? Just Betty?” Sabrina shot back, making Polly laugh.

“Yup. Just Betty.”

She noted how Aunt Zelda and Aunt Hilda’s eyebrows raised at the same time. She also noticed them exchanging looks and grinning slightly. They liked this development.

Betty appreciated her aunts and wished she’d known them earlier in her life.
Aunt Zelda plopped a heaping plate of pie in front of Jughead. “Well, I’m sure we can make you stay for a few minutes more.”

He smirked and immediately began to devour it.

Conversation continued, swaying into Beltane decorations and crowns, songs and robes, food and drink. Sabrina tried to rope Jughead into the ceremonies around the fire but Jughead just shot her a glare.

When the aunts started to invite him to stay for dinner, Jughead reluctantly said he really had to go, which prompted a protest from everyone, even Sabrina, who tended to show nonchalance about Jughead more often than not.

“It’s not like you to turn down free food,” Sabrina remarked.

Betty shot Sabrina a glare before giving him a pleading look, which he softly laughed at.

“I need to go do my rounds,” he said. “Duty and all that.”

Aunt Zelda shoved bags filled with food into his hands before she sent him off.

Betty walked him to his motorcycle, which was parked at the curb. She realized he was leaving because he had to do Slayer things and that in reality, that work could be dangerous. She watched him secure his parcels to the back of his bike.

When he was done, she said to him. “Be careful.”

He smiled reassuringly. “I always am. Can I see you tomorrow?”

She stepped closer, slipping her arms beneath his jacket to wrap them around him. “You don’t have to ask, Juggie. Just text me when you’re free and we’ll make plans.”

He cupped her face in his hands and pressed a gentle kiss on her lips. “Okay.”

They stayed close for a few more minutes, sharing lingering kisses and whispering words that made Betty giggle and blush, but they also made her melt in his embrace and wish he didn’t have to go.

But he did have to go, and as he left, she watched him ride away and zoom around a corner, away from her sight. She turned to go back into the house and was surprised to see Aunt Zelda hovering at the threshold of the front door.

The kind smile Aunt Zelda offered made Betty feel at ease. “I swear I wasn’t eavesdropping. I just checked on you and saw that sweet goodbye, just before he drove off.”

Betty sighed and closed the door behind her. “Mom thinks I’m hanging out with him too much. I don’t think she’s thrilled by the idea.”

Aunt Zelda laughed lightly. “Alice always had very specific ideas about what her children were going to be like.”

“I know.”
Her aunt leaned against the beam leading into the living room. “I’d imagine Jughead’s type would ruffle her feathers.”

“He ruffled Chic’s feathers,” Betty grumbled.

Aunt Zelda’s eyebrow arched. “Don’t let them tell you what to do. Jughead is a good egg, as problematic as his relations are. It isn’t his fault that his mother and father are neglectful. They don’t deserve a kid as good and brilliant as Jughead Jones.”

Betty did relish the fact that her aunts are Jughead’s staunchest defenders. “And it’s not like we have the best relations, either, right? The Blossoms aren’t exactly shining examples of kindness and goodwill.”

Aunt Zelda made a face. “Don’t even get me started.”

“Of course to mom’s mind, she’s sticking around because we need them, and she’s not wrong…”

The sympathetic look that came over Aunt Zelda’s face made Betty’s heart ache.

“Has mom—did she talk to you about what happened? With dad?”

Aunt Zelda paused a moment then let her percolating thoughts go with a sigh. “Not really, sweetie. She refuses to talk about the details, and she even told me not to bring it up with you girls. It’s not my place to gainsay her, but…”

“We never talk about it at home,” Betty said, quietly, as if Alice might hear. In truth, she didn’t want Polly hearing, either. It had felt like her sister had been in on it, too. “I’ve tried but none of them have been receptive, unless the subject has to do with good memories. Aunt Zelda, I blacked out that night. Did they tell you that?”

Aunt Zelda’s brows knotted as she shook her head.

“I did. I couldn’t remember half of what happened, but I think that sometimes I dream memories of it and in those dreams it always feels like the end of the world.”

Aunt Zelda squeezed her arm, her eyes filling with worry. “Sometimes our minds try to help us cope by locking in the worst stuff and feeding it to you in little pieces.”

Betty suspected that her aunts had no idea that she’d been dosed with propofol that night. They had no idea that one of its side effects on her was mild amnesia. Being the Woodwitches that they were, they would probably be furious about it, and Alice knew that.

She recalled Astanphaeus and what he could’ve seen. She wondered if she wanted to know.

Be careful what you wish for.

*****************

Jughead went straight to the Whyte Wyrm after his rounds and sure enough, his friends were all there.

Kevin and Joaquin were playing pool together while Veronica and Toni were huddled in the nearby
table, whispering animatedly.

Jughead came up behind them and caught the tail-end of Veronica’s words.

“... don’t know, but she’s fucking impossible lately!”

Toni sighed “She isn’t telling me what, but I know there’s something going on—“

Veronica saw him and nudged Toni who instantly clamped her mouth shut, transitioning into a tight smile. He tried not to seem like he had overheard something he shouldn’t have. Ordinarily, he would’ve guessed out loud that Veronica was talking about Cheryl, but Toni’s response was a little odd.

Were Toni and Cheryl talking?

“Hey, you!” Veronica said cheerfully. “No Betty?”

“We’re not connected at the hip, you know.”

Toni grinned. “So Kevin told us you two are official.”

Jughead shot Kevin a glare, who caught his eye, probably knew he was in trouble, but didn’t really care. Kevin shrugged and Jughead shook his head. Kevin kept on playing.

Gotta love him.

Jughead also wasn’t blind to the fact that these two ladies were conspiring to distract him from what they were talking about earlier, but unlike Kevin, he did not have a burning need to get in everyone’s business.

He joined them at the table. “The Spellmans are planning their yearly Beltane Feast. You guys coming this year?”

“Hells, yeah!” Toni said. “Wouldn’t miss it for the world. Might bring a guest, actually.”

Veronica’s eyebrow arched and Toni’s arched back with a tiny smile.

Jughead tried to figure out what was happening with these two girls, but his phone rang and when he looked at it, he was momentarily shocked to see that it was FP.

He cursed then hastily answered the phone, immediately getting up to go somewhere quieter. “Dad?”

He ignored the surprised looks on everyone’s faces as he left them, rushing out the back door to the alleyway where the sounds of the bar were muted.

“Jug?” came FP’s voice. “You hear me, kid?”

“Yeah, dad. I hear you. This is unexpected.”

There was a shuffling from the other side of the line, and FP sounded like he was on speaker. “I guess it's been weeks.”

“Months?” Jughead’s jaw dropped, the inklings of anger bubbling to the surface. “Try months, dad. Where the hell have you been? Are you even coming back?”

“Of course I’m coming back. I always do. I’ve gotten caught up in things, that’s all. How you
holding up, kid?”

He was unbelievable. How was he holding up? Was that all FP had to say? Normally, Jughead would just answer, resigned to the fact that his father just assumed that he was doing fine, but this was the longest FP had been away and Jughead felt his resentment solidifying.

“How am I holding up? I’ll tell you how I’m holding up. Like I always have! Like a fucking champ!”

“Boy, that mouth—“

“Dad, I’ve been taking care of myself for the last nine years. I think I’ve earned the right to say fuck whenever the hell I want.”

FP gave a long sigh. “Kid, what are you so angry about?”

Jughead threw his hand up. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe it’s that for some reason, you think that just because I’m responsible enough to take care of your shit, you think you can disappear months at a time now. I really don’t appreciate that, dad. I should really just say fuck it and let everything fall apart.”

Incredibly, FP chuckled. “Like you could.”

Of course FP was right. Jughead would never just let things go to hell, but he resented FP for taking that for granted. “Do you know what I’d be doing right now if I didn’t have to deal with your shit? I’d be with my girlfriend, and we’d probably be having dinner somewhere, or I’d be reading a book I really like, or—hell, playing a video game. Normal shit. Shit that a guy like me, with plans of college, would do—“

“You have a girlfriend?”

Jughead felt himself getting madder. “Don’t change the subject, dad. Did you even pay attention to what I’m trying to tell you? Come home. There are things going on here that you should be helping me handle.”

“Like what things?”

“I’ll tell you when you roll into Riverdale.”

“Jug—“

“Call me when you see ‘The Town With Pep!’ Because I’m this close to being fucking done.” He pressed end, and he didn’t even realize he was breathing harshly until the silence of the alley wrapped around him.

His phone started to buzz again but Jughead refused to answer this time.

He turned around to go back into the bar when he saw Kevin standing in the alley with him.

“He makes me so mad,” Jughead simply said, having no doubt that Kevin heard everything.

Kevin nodded. “I know, and I don’t blame you. Did he say when he was coming back?”

“I didn’t wait for him to say. He better. I mean, what’s wrong with him?”

Kevin sighed. “I don’t know. Probably running away from his problems.”
“But he left me behind, too.”

Kevin cast him a contrite look. “Sorry. He’s a jerk. You deserve better.”

Sometime Jughead thought he had better. He had friends who cared for him. People actually did look out for him, and if he ever disappeared, there would be at least half a dozen people who would join the search party, but at the end of the day, his entire family was still alive and he bitterly thought that he gave them no reason to abandon him this way.

What, really, did he do to deserve this?

He shook his head and started to walk to the parking lot. “I think I’ll just head home, Kev. Tall Boy isn’t going to give me a drink to help and I’m really tired anyway.”

“Want company? I’ll bring us burgers if you like.”

“Nah, I’m good. Spellmans gave me a bunch of things to eat. You stay with Joaquin. You don’t have to get dragged into my mood.”

Kevin scoffed. “You know I don’t mind, Jug.”

“I know, but I’d feel crappier if you cut your date short. I’ll be fine. Tell V and Toni I had to go home, will you? Don’t feel like explaining.”

“I got it.”

Jughead nodded his thanks before heading out to ride away his anger and disappointment.

******************

The darkness of the house was a stark reminder of how his father didn’t really care enough to stick around long enough for Jughead to feel like he had a parent he could rely on.

It pissed him off all over again, and as he pulled into their small driveway, he was still fuming from his earlier phone conversation with FP.

As he dismounted, he began to untie his food parcel from the back of his bike. It was only then he noticed Chic’s truck parked at the curb across the street from his house. He slung his bag over his shoulder and cradled his parcel, approaching the truck and wondering if anyone was inside it.

As he neared, the window started to roll down and for a brief moment, Jughead hoped that it was Betty at the wheel. When he saw Chic’s paled visage, he was unable to keep his disappointment from his tone when he said. “If you’re looking for Betty, she’s not here. She’s probably still at her aunts’ house.”

“I know where she is,” Chic replied. “She is not who I came here for. That said, I apologize for dropping in unexpectedly.”

Jughead’s interest was piqued by the way he apologized. Clear and concise. The same way Betty did her apologies.

“I didn’t want to intrude on your work,” Chic continued. “So I opted to wait for you here at your house.”

Jughead slung his bag’s strap across his chest and eyed Chic briefly. The man didn’t sound well and he looked like he could use a day off. He was wearing a thick coat in what was otherwise mild
weather. “You could’ve called or texted me. That would’ve been totally fine and you wouldn’t have had to wait for me out here.”

“This is not a matter that should be discussed over the phone or over text,” Chic explained. “Can I have a moment of your time?”

Jughead thought that Chic was acting really strange and if he weren’t Betty’s big brother, whom she seemed to love with great affection, fights notwithstanding, Jughead would’ve probably told him to save it for tomorrow, but given that Betty did look up to her brother and Chic seemed intent on keeping Betty happy and safe, Jughead found himself inviting Chic into the house.

Chic was agreeable, stepping out of his car and following Jughead into his home where they got settled in the kitchen.

Jughead wondered once or twice if he should be turning his back on Chic as he put his food away in the refrigerator. He and Chic should be at odds with one another, with Chic working as an enforcer with the Blossoms and Jughead being the town slayer, but Jughead supposed there was almost nothing Chic could do to hurt him. He was immune to most witch spells and he packed a punch that could fell a werewolf. He was going to be fine.

“So, what’s this about, Chic?” Jughead asked. “Kinda late for a house call.”

Chic nodded. “Again, I apologize. Your father isn’t here, is he? When is he returning?”

Jughead was sure Chic didn’t mean anything with his first question. It did set up the second, probably more relevant one. Nevertheless, the phrasing was triggering: Your father isn’t here. There was no truer statement.

“Nobody ever knows when he’s returning,” Jughead grumbled. “He just saunters back into town whenever he wants and he’s here.”

If Chic noticed the grumbling, he didn’t comment on it. “And you take care of things while he’s gone?”

“Somebody has to.”

Chic seemed to ponder this piece of information for a minute.

Jughead didn’t say anything. Whatever prompted this meeting, it wasn’t good. He wondered if it had to do with Betty telling Chic he was her boyfriend. Was he going to get the talk? Chic certainly looked like the kind of guy who would quietly threaten his sister’s boyfriend with bodily harm if he hurt her.

“Listen,” Jughead began. “I know Betty told you she and I are together. Is this about that?”

Chic’s turned to regard him, briefly, eyebrow arched. He shifted on his bar stool but he still looked quite relaxed. “We had a fight.”

Jughead blinked, the two things only now connecting in this brain. “About me and Betty?”

“You’re a slayer and she’s a witch, and she told you she was Wicked. Can you blame me? Your kind haven’t exactly been reasonable about her kind. She’s being reckless.”

Jughead frowned. “I would never hurt Betty and I would protect that secret with my life.”
“She said that. She seems to trust you a lot.”

For a moment, Jughead fought the smile that tried to lift the corner of his lip. He had worked for that trust. It felt great to hear that he had earned it back.

“There is nothing I can do about it now,” Chic continued. “She told you everything and now I’ll just have to hope you don’t tell anyone else.”

“I won’t even tell my dad.” Jughead refrained from mentioning that he’d sooner tell Kevin than FP. Toni might be the only other slayer he could trust this information with if he needed to tell anyone else, but the elders? Forget that. Tall Boy would go bananas and Farmer McGinty would be champing at the bit for a witch hunt.

Chic’s lips tightened to a line but he didn’t respond. A couple more minutes passed in complete silence.

“This thing you have with Betty—that’s not why I’m here, but I appreciate you bringing that up with me. I feel… less agitated about it now.”

Jughead tempered the scowl the word “agitated” elicited. “Glad we got that out of the way.”

Chic nodded. “Me too. And I’m sure you know—you hurt her, you better run.”

“Are you gonna kick my ass?”

Chic scoffed. “Me? I am the least of your problems. You hurt Betty and you will get it from Polly, my mother, her sisters, and Sabrina. You will be a dead man walking, Forsythe.”

Jughead supposed he kind of knew that, deep down.

“I need your help on something, and I feel like you’re particularly suited to this task. If you care about my sister at all, you will handle this with utmost discretion.”

“This isn’t anything illegal, is it?” Not that Jughead hadn’t done anything criminal in pursuance of his daily duties, but he did those on his own. He didn’t need to be in cahoots with anyone else.

Chic shook his head. “Just that—well, this has to do with the Blossoms. They’re my employers and my family. Our family. As such, they protect us. They protect my sister. As a powerful coven, they have enemies, and what I’m going to tell you has the potential for their enemies to exploit the opportunity, call this a sign of weakness, and try to wrestle power from them. I don’t mean to be alarmist, but if the Blossoms appear weak and word of Betty’s powers get out, then the protection of the Blossoms will mean nothing. She will be in danger and we’d have to move again.”

Jughead didn’t want to imagine a scenario where Betty would have to leave, existing in a perpetual state of alarm.

It was clear to him that Chic was doing this to negotiate his silence, and Jughead got it. The Blossoms were big enough to care about their reputation and credibility.

His interest was piqued ten-fold. He’d done one or two things for the Blossoms in the past, and often it had to do with Creatures that had done them wrong one way or another.

It didn’t usually mean that the creature had actually done anything, of course, but Jughead was just glad the Blossoms let him handle it—at least those creatures were still alive and thriving.
“What’re the Blossoms cooking up now?” he asked, smirking.

“What tells me you’re fixing to trap a succubus and you need bait to catch her.”

Jughead straightened in his seat. “D’you know someone being visited?”

Chic nodded and Jughead, looking at Chic closely, realized that the man was ill and struggling.

“Is it you?” Jughead demanded.

Chic looked at him in clear surprise. “Absolutely not. I’ve got a bad cold, Forsythe. That’s it. It’s not me, it’s Jason. Jason Blossom.”


On Saturdays, Betty woke up later for her jog. Where during the week, she needed to get up at 5 in order to make it in time for school, on weekends, she could wake up at 7. The sun shone bright and a few more of the residents could be seen stepping out of their homes. She would jog between 40 minutes to an hour, which usually got her home closer to nine.

On her way back, she spotted the bus to town. It whistled as it came to a stop, picked up a passenger, and roared briefly as it left.

Betty watched it go as she crossed the intersection and got to her side of the street.

The bus inexplicably stayed in her mind when she crossed the threshold of their front door. She remembered it at breakfast, too, while Alice told them that Chic was down for the morning with the worst cold ever known to man.

“I have hand sanitizers everywhere and I’ve stuck small bottles of them in your purses,” Alice told her daughters, who were already exchanging eyerolls. “I’d prefer it if you actually wash your hands, but the sanitizers will do in a pinch, so if any of you catch what he has, you’ll get no sympathy from me. Colds are so inelegant and I can’t have any of you sick for Beltane. We’ll be singing.”

Betty and Polly groaned at the same time.

“I don’t want to hear it from either of you,” Alice told them in a clipped tone. “And do your gowns still fit you from last year?”

“Why wouldn’t it?” Polly demanded.

Alice arched an eyebrow. “Some of you seem to be enjoying the local diner’s menu too much, I think. That unhealthy stuff catches up on you.”

“Oh, my God,” Polly grumbled, a look of disgust passing between her and Betty.

Betty wanted nothing to do with this conversation. She ate her fruit and toast quietly, hoping that she could get through breakfast without any further criticism from her mother.

Betty finished her apples and hurried upstairs to change. She figured that a trip to town could take about a couple of hours, coming and going, and she’d be done in time to meet up with Jughead. She could even ask him to pick her up there--maybe they can make out in the coffee shop again.
The thought made her giggle softly to herself.

It was unseasonably hot today, which she liked. She could walk around town in a t-shirt. She just had to make sure her mother didn’t see her leaving in it. In the bathroom, Polly sniffed out that she was heading into town and said she wanted to go there, too, offering to drive for them.

It was a little detour from Betty’s plans, but it was manageable to get around this little obstacle, and she did want to spend time with her sister. She told Polly that she was planning to meet up with Jughead there, which Polly absolutely had no problem with.

Betty was curious to know what Polly thought about her trusting Jughead with the truth about her Wickedness, but she was more afraid than curious because Chic reacted so badly. In a certain sense, she should’ve been thinking about her family, too. How they would feel about the secret getting out. It wasn’t just her safety at stake but theirs as well.

“We can have a late lunch in one of the pizza places. Juggie told me about it and he introduced me to the chef, who’s a Wood Elf. His ingredients, I was told, are magical. Dunno if Jughead meant it literally…”

It was nice having these moments with her sister again, picking outfits and doing up each other’s hair. It took a bit longer than Betty planned, heading out, but she didn’t mind.

When they got to town, Polly shopped for herself and got Betty a few things, too.

They passed a jewelry shop and the display caught Betty eye. Sitting in the window was a familiar piece: an amber skull, priced at $75.

She dragged Polly into the store, finding that the box her package came in was the same one that had been left at her door.

“You thinking of getting some bling, sis?” Polly asked, looking at the display of charm bracelets.

“No, look at that skull on the display. It’s the same one as mine.”

Polly’s eyes widened with some excitement. “D’you think we can find out who got it for you?”

Betty shrugged, making eye contact with the lady behind the counter.

The attendant approached them. “Interested in the charms?”

Betty didn’t hesitate. “I was looking at the amber skull you have on display. I received that the other day from a ‘Secret Admirer’ and my sister and I have been trying to solve the mystery since.”

“I think it’s from a boy she likes,” Polly said in a hushed excited tone, catching on to the charade.

The lady laughed lightly. “Well, as deeply intriguing as this is, I’m afraid I can’t divulge to whom I sold it to. It is, however, a very interesting ornament. Amber itself is distinct in its properties. I’m told it absorbs anxiety and enhances psychic energy--if you’re into that sort of thing. The shape is odd, as well, but skulls in general seem to be popular around these parts. Would you like to bring in the skulls to get them set? I think they’d make excellent earrings.”

“It’s alright. I was just hoping to solve the mystery,” replied Betty in a disappointed tone. “Thank you, anyway.”

She ushered Polly out of the store and as they walked down the sidewalk, Betty said, “At least now
we know that whomever she sold them to got a pair. Why do you think I only got one?”

Polly frowned. “You don’t know if the person who bought a pair is the same person who bought them for you.”

“She seemed very sure I received a pair. I think that means she’s only sold one set so far.”

“Okay, but what does that mean then?”

Betty shrugged. “I have no idea, but it just seems like it’s a harmless trinket, don’t you think? If it’s readily available in the local jewelry store…”

“I’m still curious about who got it for you. It’s not exactly cheap. Are you sure Jughead wouldn’t have left it for you?”

“Not his style. Jughead’s the sort of boy who would give me a first edition signed copy of a book from an author I like. Jewelry would seem… prosaic to him. At least at this stage in our relationship.”

Polly smirked but didn’t say anything more about it.

Betty grew less and less concerned about the origins of the skull when the bookstore came into view as they passed it to get to the pizza parlor. They were seated by the hostess and as they looked over the menu, Betty texted Jughead, telling him where to find her in the next hour.

He texted back saying he’d be joining them in twenty minutes, which meant Betty had to order one extra pie for him.

It was while they were waiting for their orders that Betty said she had to go back to the jewelry store, having put down one of her packages by accident.

“I’ll be right back! I hope it’s still there!” Betty said, hurriedly, and rushing off amidst a confounded Polly.

Betty left the pizza parlor and headed straight for the bookstore.

As she entered, she heard the familiar chime overhead, and as Astanphaeus looked up from his work, he didn’t look that surprised to see her again.

He welcomed her into his store, calmly asking what he could do for her and adding, “Perhaps your sister would like more books?”

Betty shook her head. “You know why I’m here.”

Astanphaeus exhaled a deep breath. “Humans never cease to amaze me in your ability to never let things be. You will find the answers anyway. Why not wait? There is a reason things come to you at their own time.”

“I need to know what you saw when you looked. What and who is keeping things from me?”

Astanphaeus took her hands unexpectedly. “If I tell you that, it will throw your life in turmoil. I am not here on this plane to cause turmoil, Elizabeth.”

Her fingers flexed in his hands. “Is that what you do? Delay the inevitable?”

“I do not wish for your to turn your back on the wrong people. That is what I am protecting you against. There are people in this world that wish to cause you harm, but that is never immediately
apparent. You are a curious being. Ask the right questions.”

“Who? Who will hurt me?”

Astanphaeus chuckled. “I am not a fortune teller, Betty. I can’t see futures, only project them based on what I see in your past. I don’t know who will harm you. That is not clear, but I know that those that surround you want to keep you safe. You received a gift? A skull?”

Betty’s eyes widened. “Y-Yes…”

“Dispose of it. Don’t destroy it, for I know not what its destruction will wreak. You’ve had it for too long and I’m afraid of what it’s already done, but keep it away. Give it to someone who can take it away from you. Someone you trust.”

“O-Okay. Okay.”

Astanphaeus nodded. “Remember what I’ve told you. Don’t turn your back on the people who love you. Humans are flawed and they make mistakes, but much of the time, they do it for love. You will need them, Elizabeth. Like I said, I cannot tell the future, but I can make out the rain clouds in the horizon. Your storm is brewing and you will need the shelter your loved ones provide.”

Beyond them the chime of the door signaled a new customer.

Astanphaeus left her with a whispered apology and Betty stood there, transfixed for a few seconds, before the ding of her cell phone broke through her haze.

It was Polly, asking if she found what she was looking for.

Betty didn’t know what to tell her.
Chapter Notes

Sorry it took so long, but this chapter is 12K words long.

The many events in this chapter were in no way influenced by the latest Riverdale episode.

“Whoever fights monsters should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster. And if you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.”

— Friedrich Nietzsche

Betty was distracted.

A million circular thoughts crowded her mind, its endless spinning powered by Astanphaeus’s foreboding words.

She pretended to listen to what Jughead and Polly were saying, nursing her slice of pizza. She picked the mushrooms off and popped them in her mouth, then she peeled off the pepperoni one at a time so she could set them aside, her subconscious telling her to leave it off while her fingers obeyed its command. She hardly even realized she was doing it.

She kept asking herself who it was among her family was keeping what from her that would, according to Astanphaeus, wreck her relative peace. She wondered, too, if they all knew whatever this was and if this was something they all conspired to keep from her.

She kept thinking about the skull. Was it the right time to bring it up? If she brought it up now, would she be ruining lunch? In the grander scheme of Astanphaeus’s warnings, that seemed silly—or the machinations of her anxiety.

Betty, you ruin everything.

“Betty!”

She blinked, surprised that she was being addressed at all.

Polly was scowling. “If you didn’t want pepperoni on the pizza, we could’ve ordered something else.”

Betty looked at her plate, marvelling at her pile of uneaten toppings. “Umm…”

Jughead’s brows were knitting, the quiet wonder in his gaze making her fidget in her seat.

“Mom’s not here, you know.” Polly’s tone was one of irritation. “We can eat whatever we want. And are you even listening? You’ve been distracted since we sat to order, with that package you thought you left at the jewelry store—what’s the matter with you?”
“Nothing,” she stammered. “I was just—I couldn’t—"

“Is this about the amber skull?” Polly demanded.

Well, Betty thought. I guess that’s one way to bring it up.

Jughead’s eyebrows lifted slowly. “Amber skull? What—"

Polly had no qualms at all as she spoke. “Betty received a package the other day, addressed to her but with nothing about who gave it. It was a tiny amber skull, the kind you put on a charm bracelet. We’ve been trying to figure out from whom it came from. It wasn’t you, was it?”

Jughead shook his head, a scowl settling upon his face. “Hell no. There are only two kinds of people who wear skull jewelry around here. The goth kids and the Ghoulies.”

Betty felt her stomach spasm. She was well aware that goth kids never took a shining to her.

“The goth kids and the what?” Polly asked.


Betty’s fingernails dug into the fabric of her jeans.

Polly gasped, turning her gaze to Betty. “What? You mean a bunch of vampires and werewolves are sending you things?”

“One thing. They sent me one thing. And we’re only assuming it’s them.”

“Oh, sure. Like the local Panic at the Disco! dude thinks you’re Lisbeth Salander.”

Betty shot Polly a glare while Jughead chuckled.

“I happen to like Lisbeth Salander,” Betty grumbled.

Polly tilted her head and regarded Betty thoughtfully. “Yeah, I guess you would.”

Jughead’s hand reached for Betty’s under the table and she clasped back desperately. “I have eyes on the Ghoulies, okay? And we’re going to figure this out.”

Polly looked at him. “Are they a threat, Jughead? Why are they sending my sister trinkets?”

“They’re troublemakers, yeah. Creature hives tend to be—they get bored and they need to make money to support their lifestyles, often through illegal means. I could only try to figure out what they will do next. I don’t know why the Ghoulies are sending Betty trinkets. I’m not even sure if they are. We’re just guessing.”

Betty caught Polly’s gaze and the question was there. Is it happening again? Do they know?

Betty tore her eyes from her sister’s. She didn’t know what to say.

They finished their meal, their respective private thoughts hanging heavy over lunch. At the end of it, with their bill paid, Polly said she was done shopping and was headed home.

“You can come with me or you can stay.”

Betty looked questioningly at Jughead. They hadn’t finalized plans for the afternoon. Things could
have changed, but Jughead was rubbing her arm lightly and his eyes had that soft look.

“Stay.”

She couldn’t help the smile that blossomed from her lips.

“Well, that answers that,” Polly muttered, taking her things and Betty’s. “I’ll take your stuff home for you. You kids have fun, and it was nice having lunch with you, Jughead.”

They separated outside the restaurant, and as Polly walked away to her parked car, Betty sighed, turning her worried gaze at him.

His eyes conveyed concern while his hands massaged that delicate crook between her neck and shoulder. Its effect was immediate, her anxieties calming at his touch.

“Want to sit out in the park for a bit?” he asked.

She nodded, letting him hold her hand as they walked. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you about the skull immediately. I just didn’t think it was anything. I had my family look at it and it’s just an ordinary trinket, with no magic attached to it.”

He shrugged and shook his head lightly. “You couldn’t have known. Do you have it with you?”

“It’s at home.”

He nodded, pulling her closer as he led her in the direction of the park walkways.

They found a spot—a cozy bench shaded by some cherry blossoms.

As they sat, Betty felt a quiet calm blanketing her watching Jughead settle in his seat and his long arm stretching along the bench behind her. There were a few people in the distance lounging on the grass, while some jogged by. Most people were milling around the shops area, which gave them relative privacy.

“I spoke to Astanphaeus,” she began. “I did it behind Polly’s back and it was the whole reason I wanted to come into town in the first place.”

He gave her a compassionate look. “What did he say?”

“Not much more than last time. He told me he didn’t want to throw my life into turmoil and that he was afraid I’d just be angry at the wrong people, that I should rely on my loved ones and whatever they did, they did it out of love. I mean, who does he mean, exactly? All of them? Mom, Chic, Polly, and the Spellmans? Maybe just mom and Chic? What have they done? Juggie, I don’t remember everything about what happened the night my dad died and I’m beginning to freak out—“

She was hesitant to tell him that sometimes, when her magic was too much for her and anyone else to control, they had to dose her with propofol. She didn’t want to have to explain to him why that had to be done, because then that might be too much for him. There was a line and she didn’t want him to get shoved into crossing it.

“Hey,” he interjected gently, rubbing the back of her neck. “Don’t freak out. It’s okay. Astanphaeus is a good person and he wouldn’t lie to you. Whatever it is your family is keeping from you, it’s for a good reason, I’m sure. Astanphaeus would tell you if it was terrible.”

She cast him a grateful look. “There’s more. He told me to get rid of the skull. He told me to have
someone take it away from me and he said not to destroy it.”

Jughead frowned. “He said that?”

She nodded. “I swear, I can’t detect any kind of curse on it, but I’ll take his word for it—“

“I’ll take it from you. And I’ll put it someplace safe, away from you.”

“Okay, but whether or not the Ghoulies gave me that skull, why are they asking about my family? What’s making them do that? Do they know I’m Wicked? If they do, what else would they possibly want to know?”

“I don’t know,” Jughead admitted. “But whatever their reasons, I won’t let them hurt you.”

His certainty and the way he looked at her made her want to tuck herself in the crook of his arm and stay there.

Instead, she said, “I missed you last night.”

He didn’t say anything. He just leaned in and kissed her. She had no doubt that he missed her, too.

She clung to the front of his plaid shirt, hoping that she could prolong this. Perhaps they can just make out all afternoon, out here in the park, with this light brushing of lips and gentle flicks of their tongues. Sweet enough that that it was permissible in public, she supposed, but intimate enough that they could work themselves up enough to want more.

When he pulled away, she gave a quiet whine of complaint and a small smile turned up the corners of his lips. “I can do this with you all day…”

“Then lets. Just this. We don’t have to stop for snacks or anything else that requires money. I don’t mind telling you I’m a cheap date.”

He chuckled. “I’ve got something to tell you, too. I couldn’t tell you while Polly was there.”

It sounded serious, and the way his thumb brushed lightly over her cheek felt like an apology.

“Tell me,” she said.

“Chic came to see me last night.”

That was unexpected.

God, did Chic go to him because she told him Jughead was her boyfriend? Chic had never bothered with any other boy in the past. Then again, she never told those other boys that she was Wicked. They weren’t slayers, either. She didn’t know what to think.

“What did he say?” she demanded. She swore that if Chic said anything untoward to Jughead, she was going to call Chic right this minute.

“A lot,” Jughead replied, sighing. “You’ll never guess.”

“Did he give you The Talk? The one where he threatens you if you hurt me? Please tell me he didn’t.”

He smirked. “Kind of, but I was the one who brought that up. It wasn’t what he came over to talk about.”
She found that surprising. What else would Chic possibly go to Jughead for?

“He told me that Jason Blossom was being visited by a succubus.”

Jughead was right. She never would have guessed that.

Betty supposed that this succubus was pretty good at her job. Jason was a great route to finding out more information about her and her family. It also occurred to her that the potential for embarrassment, or worse, exploitation, of this new fun fact could be astronomical.

Her eyes widened. “Jughead, if any of the other big covens find out about this--”

“Yeah, it could be bad. We need to keep this quiet. That’s why Chic came to me.”

It occurred to her as Jughead stared into her eyes that Jughead didn’t need to keep this quiet. He was a slayer and he didn’t have to care about Coven politics. If this had been any other situation, he might have held this little piece of scandal above the Blossoms’ heads for innumerable future favors, but he instead decided to keep this quiet because of her. He was willing to keep the secret of Jason Blossom’s visitations because it meant keeping up the Blossom reputation of power, which keeps her safe.

Her brows knotted as she touched his face. Chic knew what he was doing when he told Jughead. He could’ve chosen Toni, or he could’ve gone with Tall Boy or Farmer McGinty, maybe even Jughead’s father. If he just needed someone to banish the succubus, any one of the slayers could’ve, but Chic chose Jughead because he knew they were together, and that Jughead would be amenable to keeping things under wraps.

“Chic is using you…” she whispered.

Jughead put his hand over hers. “I know, but I wouldn’t have wanted him to go to anyone else. None of them would’ve cared about the implications. This way, Chic and I and everyone else are on the same page—we’re doing this for your safety.”

She remembered Jughead’s promise about everything being alright, about him keeping her safe, and she knew now that she was falling for him so fast it was dizzying.

“I want to help you do this,” she said.

He nodded. “And you will. I just need to make sure everything’s lined up as it should be. This is going to happen soon because it has to be soon.”

“Okay.”

They stayed in the park a while longer, talking quietly about what sort of help Jughead might need.

“I’m going to need Kevin to secure us some hallowed ground,” he said, counting out the things he’ll need with his fingers. “I’m going to need a couple of pretty powerful charms, potions, and a witch that can perform the spells--”

“I can do it. Whatever I read from that journal you brought over, I know I can do it. I can even make the charms and potions.”

He tried and failed to contain the smile from lifting his lips. “I know you can.”

She was enamored of how free of doubt and fear he was for what she could do. He believed in her
and he wasn’t going to tell her no.

“I’ll need a Seer--”

“Ronnie, for sure.”

He nodded, sighing. “I can’t trust anyone else. I thought about Sweet Pea--”

“Ronnie will have your neck if you go with anyone other than her.”

“I know this, and the only reason I’m doing this is because I know she’s level-headed and listens to reason. Sweet Pea’s too hot-headed--too volatile. He’s a good bruiser, but covert operations are not his thing. I’m just nervous that V’s going to be put in a position she’s not used to. She works best as a kind of spy--recognizance. She’s good at scouting the situation, not going into a fight to preserve someone’s soul.”

Betty shrugged. “I’m of a mind that Veronica can do anything she puts her mind to.”

He chuckled. “You’re not wrong.”

She marveled at how much faith Jughead had for his closest friends. How he believed in what they could do.

Jughead held up one last finger. “I’m also going to need a second Slayer--like, a real one. I have to get Toni on board.”

Betty still felt a slight pang of jealousy whenever Jughead mentioned Toni. They had a history, no matter what, and she would be lying if she said that Toni’s fashion sense didn’t intimidate the hell out of her. Toni was so edgy and clearly, her brass was legendary, because why not? She was a slayer.

But she pushed those feelings aside, knowing that she was being ridiculous. Sabrina was right. She had no reason to be insecure about Jughead’s feelings for her.

“Hey,” he said quietly, cupping the back of her head tenderly. “Don’t look so worried.”

She was at least glad she could be spared the humiliation of explaining to him that she was jealous of his ex-girlfriend.

She gave him a plaintive smile. “Why shouldn’t I be? You’re going up against a demon. Just--you know, an extra-dimensional creature that delights in the suffering of others. Last I heard, they are very capable of dragging you back to Abaddon with them, and for someone like you who isn’t easy to kill, demons would probably delight in torturing you while you’re there.”

He paused, swaying his head and quirking his eyebrow. “I didn’t think of it that way until you mentioned it.”

“And now I hate myself.”

“I’m kidding. Of course I know the risks, but I’ve got an awesome team that will help ensure that won’t happen. I’ve been doing this for years, Betts.”

“You mean you’ve banished a demon before?” she asked, hoping he’d say yes.

“Well, no--”
She sighed, her brows knitting and her shoulders sagging. She had only just come up with that excuse about the demon to cover up her jealousy, but now she was worried, for real.

“But,” he added quickly. “I was trained for this even before I could read. All Slayers learn the banishment ritual as early as they could. We’re taught to draw the sigils with our eyes closed. We’re taught the latin and Enochian even before we could speak straight in our own language. Our elders made sure it’s a ritual we can pull out of a hat at a moment’s notice. This is why folks like the Blossoms will go with no one else. You can hire a two-bit exorcist, but Slayers know how to get the job done. So don’t worry. I’m going to be fine.”

She stared into his eyes and saw no uncertainty or lie. “Are you sure Astanphaeus can’t do this himself? I mean, you’d think that an angel would have experience in fighting demons.”

Jughead shrugged. “Angels, even Earth Angels, probably do, but Astanphaeus said something about the Accords, or some such thing. It’s like they have an agreement about banishments. They’re not to do it to one another, because if they do, angels are punished for it by becoming fallen and demons by becoming reborn.”

“Reborn?”

“They get a soul. They slowly become human, as do the Fallen. It may take a couple of hundred years or so, but human they’ll become. Lost, more accurately. Apparently, this is the worst fate for both beings.”

Betty thought about it. She didn’t mind becoming Lost.

“So I’m it, unfortunately. I’m the one who has to banish this thing.”

He certainly didn’t sound completely reluctant to be burdened with this duty. If anything, he was probably a little thrilled to do something new.

“Juggie, if I’m going to help you do this, then we need to get the materials and ingredients for those charms and potions.”

“Right… like a normal couple would go to the nearest Joe’s Exchange and shop local?”

She laughed lightly. “Yes.”

He sighed, but nodded. “Then I guess we’ve got our day cut out for us.”

********************

“Elizabeth? Is that you?” came Alice’s voice from the kitchen after Betty had keyed herself and Jughead into the house.

Betty could smell apple and cinnamon in the air and knew that her mother had been baking.

She steeled herself for her mother’s presence as she took Jughead’s free hand in her own, clasping it firmly and pulling him further into the house.

“Yes, it’s me!” she called, hauling in the things she bought with Jughead. He had several bags in his clutches, as well.

She led them into the living room, instructing him where to set things down so she can sort through them later, which was where Alice found them.
“Hi, Mrs. Cooper,” Jughead said, politely.

“Jughead.”

Alice was holding her mug of coffee and she gave Jughead the once over, probably taking in his overall look of jeans and leather. It was, for sure, not the kind of look she would’ve preferred for the boys Betty would be seen hanging out with, and her disapproval was probably further exacerbated by their linked hands.

It was one thing to rely on the town slayer, quite another when he was dating one’s daughter.

The latter was what motivated Alice’s impassive expression right now. She didn’t say or do anything rude, however. Alice knew her sisters would have a thing or two to say about it if she suddenly threw out Jughead based solely on the fact that Betty and Jughead were seeing one another. Alice wasn’t quite as impulsive as people tended to think she was.

“Mom, the house smells really good,” Betty said to cut through the tension. “Did you just make apple pie?”

“Apple crumble cupcakes,” Alice replied. “Jughead might want some, but I’d skip it if I were you, Elizabeth.”

Betty rolled her eyes.

“Uh, thanks, Mrs. Cooper,” Jughead grumbled in reply. “I’ll, um, have some.”

Alice nodded and turned to leave, grumbling something that sounded suspiciously like, “Slayer dating my daughter...”

Jughead watched her go, and when her bedroom door closed overhead, he said, somewhat rebelliously. “You can have as many cupcakes as you like and you can tell her I ate it all.”

Betty couldn’t help but laugh and peck a kiss on his cheek. “You’re sweet and I--I think you’re awesome for being unafraid of mom’s judgment.”

He smirked. “Well… it’s not as if her opinion of me could be worse, so you might as well get cupcakes out of it.”

Betty sighed, wishing her mother had been less obvious about her general displeasure. “Mom has had a notion of my life since I was born and she reacts this way when I don’t follow the script.”

He seemed amused, his lips fighting a grin. “You really knocked that script off its shelf--a leather-wearing, motorcycle-riding, creature-wrangling slayer boyfriend who conspires to eat cupcakes with you?”

“You probably know by now that I never do things in halves.”

He regarded her with affection. “No, you don’t, but speaking of safety… are you going to give me that skull for safekeeping?”

The abrupt change in topic caught her off guard and she took a small step back.

Involuntarily, she shoved her hands in the pocket of her jeans. An old habit to keep her fingers from flexing inward. Her palms inexplicably began to sweat. “What?”

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She began to feel slightly alarmed at the strange emotions bubbling in the pit of her stomach. “Right! The skull!”

He was looking at her with curiosity in his expression, like he was taking in details of her face. This was, she realized, his Slayer Face. She actually liked when he got this way, because it was inquisitive and curious—the expression he had on his face the very first time she laid eyes on him that first day she was in school, but now it was making her feel uneasy, like he was seeing right through her.

“Can I have it?” he asked.

“Um… yeah. Let me, um, get it.” She could feel beads of sweat forming on her back.

She turned, her mind forming what she recognized as panic. She rushed out of the living room, up the stairs, and into her bedroom.

She stood there, fidgeting, and spiraling inwardly, before making a desperate grab for the skull on her dresser.

She feverishly began to make up excuses about not showing it to Jughead. Maybe she could say that she had thrown it away by accident? Maybe she could pretend that she couldn’t find it. Maybe—

There was a knock on her bedroom door and she jumped as the door gently creaked open.

“Betty?” It was Jughead. “Are you okay? You looked a little freaked out.”

Betty whirled on her feet to stare at him, willing herself to tell him what she was feeling. She could feel her body overheating now, her fist tightening around the skull. She began to tremble. “Juggie, I don’t feel so good.”

His brow furled as he went to her.

Involuntarily, she stepped away from him, even as her face conveyed shock at her own actions.

He froze in his tracks. “Betty?”

Betty tried to take deep, calming breaths. “I’m—I didn’t mean to—“

He gaze went from her fisted hand to the rest of the room, landing on her dresser where the jeweler’s box lay open and empty. Alarm was bessetting the expression on his face. “Betty. Give me the skull.”

She nodded vigorously, raising the fist that held it. She felt no pain and she could hardly feel any magic. All she felt was a magnetic and all-consuming need to keep the skull safely with her. She couldn’t explain what was compelling her not to give it up.

Her hand shook as she willed her palm to open. Instead the fist tightened and the ridges of the skull begin to bite into her palm. The pain surged through her and she used that pain to blanket the skull in what she could only describe as a shell. Maybe if she could just let go of this thing, she could get away from it.

She cast the spell, desperately.

Her own magic pulsed, bright light seeping through her enclosed fist, but it wasn’t working. The spell was going awry and smoke began to unfurl from between her fingers. Unbearable heat
emanated from the skull in her hand. It was like holding a hot poker in her grip. To her horror, there were flames.

“Betts!”

The last thing she remembered was the sound of her screams.

****************************************

Betty began to wake, but she didn’t feel rested.

Her body felt heavy. Leaden, and as she pried her eyes open, she began to make out the shapes and voices of people in her room.

Polly, Jughead, Alice, and Chic. They were standing around, talking—arguing, maybe.

“I never got to see this skull,” Jughead was saying in a forceful tone. “You all had a chance to examine it. Are you telling me none of you felt a single inkling of magic?”

“No, we didn’t.”

“Do you even think we’d have let her keep it if we did?” Chic hissed.

“That thing burned her!” Jughead cried. “That was plenty magic!”

“Are you blaming us for what happened?” Chic demanded. “You only just waltzed into her life, Jones. Don’t act as if—”

“Waltzed?”

“Oh, did you prefer sauntered?”

“Right. At least I’m not keeping secrets from her.”

“You sonofa--”

“Whoa, whoa!” Polly interjected.

“Both of you, stop it!” Alice’s voice sliced through the emerging chaos. “This is utterly pointless. Whatever that thing was, it’s gone now. Betty’s magic has destroyed it and we have no idea whether that did her any good.”

Slowly, Betty lifted her hand, and where the skull once was there was a bandage. Moving her fingers felt excruciating and she gave a soft moan.

“Elizabeth?” Alice gasped, pushing her way through the bodies and settling beside her on the bed. “Elizabeth, honey, how are you feeling?”

Her body ached, and her hand burned with pain. “Like crap.” She moaned, trying to sit up.

“Just lie back, Betts,” Jughead said in a gentle tone, pressing a firm hand to her shoulder. He was kneeling by her bed, perhaps even closer than Alice was. “Your magic threw you halfway across your room. It wasn’t a gentle landing, but thank goodness you’re okay.”

Polly sighed. “Thank goodness you didn’t break your neck, is what it is. You’re probably going to be sore for a while, though.”
Betty swallowed. Her throat felt incredibly dry. She remembered what happened until her magic blacked her out. “Where’s the skull?”

“Destroyed,” Chic said. “It was nothing but ash in your hand. Your palm’s been burnt raw.”

That explained the ever-present pain emanating from beneath the bandages.

She could feel the gentle caress of Jughead’s hand on her and could see the look of intense worry in his eyes. He squeezed her arm.

“Did you recognize the spell?” Jughead asked. “When it was happening. Can you tell what kind of hex it was?”

She shook her head. “I couldn’t. It just felt--it just felt like my own magic fighting against me, Jug. I’m sorry--”

“Don’t be,” he said, softly. “It’s not your fault.”

“Right. When it’s Betty, it’s not her fault,” Polly drawled. “I have never seen anyone more whipped.”

Jughead sighed heavily, shooting Polly a mild glare, though he said absolutely nothing to refute it.

Alice scowled. “Are you going to find out who did this, Slayer? Isn’t that part of your job?”

Jughead frowned and turned to look at her. “I already have suspects, Mrs. Cooper. Don’t you worry about how I do my job.”

“Good. Now go do it. Betty needs her rest.”

Betty wanted to whine and tell her mother to shut up, but she honestly didn’t have the strength. She’d imagine that her current condition just needed a night’s rest--she was Wicked. She would heal quickly, but right now she was wasted.

Even Jughead didn’t disagree. “I’ll head out, but if there’s anything you can tell me about this skull—”

“It was bought at that jewelry store in town,” Polly told him. “Hared’s. The lady at the counter wouldn’t tell us who, but she let slip that the thing had been sold as a pair. There’s another one out there. I don’t know if that’s important, but there you have it.”

Jughead nodded. “I can work with that.”

Betty felt her stomach twist with worry. She called to him and found that her voice barely carried, but his attention swerved back to her, as if totally attuned to her.

“Be careful,” she said. “Anyone who could cast a spell like this…”

His expression softened. “You don’t need to worry about me, Betts.”

“You’re not invincible, Juggie.”

“Nearly am.”

She cast him a scolding look, though she didn’t argue, knowing that his strength was formidable in itself.
Even Alice didn’t approve of his bravado. “Well, Jughead. Your neck isn’t invincible.”

“Mom!” Polly gasped.

“She’s not wrong,” Jughead said, shrugging. He leaned over Betty and pressed a kiss to her forehead.

She closed her eyes and savored the feel of his lips on her skin. It only took a couple of seconds, but it made her heart soar.

When he pulled away to look at her, she could tell he was reluctant to go.

“You can call me about anything, okay?” he said. “And if something doesn’t feel right, call for help —”

“She’ll be well taken cared of here, Jones,” Alice interjected.

Jughead’s lips tightened to a line and Betty had to squeeze his fingers.

“I’ll be fine, Jug.”

He didn’t look entirely convinced, but with the entire Cooper family behind him, he couldn’t exactly hang around and argue that point.

“I’ll walk you out, Jones,” Chic said behind him.

Chic wasn’t messing around and Jughead sighed, resigned.

“I’ll come by tomorrow to see you, Betts,” Jughead whispered.

She smiled, reaching up to caress his face. He returned her smile with his sexy little smirk before he turned and left with Chic.

Alice watched him go as well before turning her gaze back to Betty. It was not the face of a woman pleased with her daughter. “Honestly, Elizabeth. This thing you have with him is cute and all, but you can’t be serious.”

Betty rolled her eyes and sighed. Trust her mother to lay on the criticism even while she lay recovering from a hex-inflicted injury. It was peak Alice, but Betty just didn’t have the strength right now.

“I mean,” Alice continued. “I completely understand the allure of the Jones men…”

Polly’s jaw dropped. “The Jones men?”

Alice shrugged. “So I had a history with his father. I was young once, too, you know.”

“Oh, my God,” Betty muttered, closing her eyes.

“That boy looks so much like his father when FP was eighteen that I know exactly what you’re thinking, Elizabeth.”

Betty couldn’t believe that her mother was talking about this right now. She shot Polly a pleading look and mercifully, her sister understood.

“Mom, we really should let Betty rest. Save your bombshells for another day—when she’s strong
enough to be emotionally compromised.”

Alice cast Polly a withering glare. “Really, Polly.” She pulled a vial from the pocket of her pants and put it gently down on Betty’s bedside table. “This is a pain reliever. My special brew.”

“In other words, it will knock you out for at least twelve hours,” Polly said.

“The best thing you can do for yourself is sleep,” Alice said, loftily.

Betty sighed, knowing that her mother was right. “Thanks, mom.”

Alice nodded, pertly. “You’re welcome, honey. I want you to get better and you will only be able to do that with proper rest. I’ll leave my door and yours slightly ajar. If you need anything, just call and I will hear you.”

Alice left, dragging Polly with her.

Betty lay in bed for a few minutes before hearing the tell tale rumble of Jughead’s motorcycle driving away.

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Thornhill always gave Jughead the willies, even during the day. Once you got past the guards at the perimeter, it was free of all staff and coven personnel. Then it was a long driveway of manicured cypress trees lined up like sentinels and properly placed poplar trees beyond them.

Only a select few beyond its masters and the house staff were allowed in the Blossom abode on a regular basis, Chic being one of the handful, because he was family. Aside from the occasional coven gathering, coven witches and employees went to work at the New York City property. A helicopter transported Penelope from Thornhill to their office building in midtown Manhattan almost every day.

On the days Penelope stayed at Thornhill, it was usually because she was meeting with other covens. Being at the top 1% of the Otherworld took a lot of work.

At the moment, Penelope hardly had time to attend to her son’s succubus problem, which was why he and Chic were meeting Penelope and Jason at Thornhill on a Sunday morning. It was, it seems, the only available time she had to see anyone at all.

Not that Penelope hadn’t “cared.” By Chic’s account, Penelope had been furious at the fact that a succubus had gotten through at all, then she grew concerned for her son and she stayed by Jason’s bedside most nights to try to ward the demon off, which Jughead thought was particularly disturbing.

“So while Jason gets off, his mother…”

“I’d appreciate you not finishing that sentence, Jughead.”

“And what about Cheryl?” Jughead pointed out. “Does she know about this?”

Chic nodded. “She does, but Penelope didn’t want Cheryl to get infected. They’ve been forbidden to interact the last couple of weeks and Cheryl has been a raving banshee about it.”
“Yeah, V had complained about it,” Jughead said. “Loudly.”

Chic looked thoughtfully across at Jughead. “V, huh? I might have seen her here. Dark haired? Petite? Signature shoes and purse?”

“That’s her, alright,” Jughead grumbled. He wasn’t a huge fan of Veronica and Cheryl having something, but Veronica could take care of herself, and he was not in the habit of telling people who they should be dating.

“Do you think she suspects anything?” Chic asked Jughead. “It’s imperative that none of this gets out.”

“I doubt it,” Jughead replied. “Because if she knows something, she would’ve told me about it already. In any case, I’d trust V with my life. And just so we’re clear, I’m going to need help doing this, so it can’t just be me. I’ll need V’s and Kevin’s help—“

“Kevin? The Keller boy?”

Jughead nodded. “Half fey. And I’ll need a second slayer.”

“What? You didn’t tell me there was going to be a second one. I specifically went to you because—“

“Relax, Chic. I’m not risking exposure of this any more than you would. Toni won’t say anything if I tell her to keep this quiet.”

“You’re going to tell me right now who else you’re bringing into this—“

“Are you seriously ordering me around right now?” Jughead’s tone was one of clear disbelief, like how dare you.

If he didn’t let any of the slayers tell him what to do, he sure as hell wasn’t going to start with a witch, especially someone who was probably used to getting his way.

Chic’s fingers around the wheel tensed and Jughead’s signature scowl, his lips slightly parted, did not back away from the tension.

“I went to you for a reason,” Chic said through grit teeth. “I thought we understood what was at stake here.”

“And we’re on the same page, Charles. But if you want to get this done, I do it my way, or else find yourself another slayer. Farmer McGinty might be fixing to chop off heads. He’d be shockingly efficient, I can promise you that.”

Chic simmered in his seat for a moment, no doubt biting back words. Finally, he said, “You know I can’t go to anyone else, but don’t make me regret this, slayer. I’m not the only one counting on you to keep this away from the public eye.”

“Just let me do my job.”

A brief silence descended upon them before Chic spoke again. “I know you’re not a fan of me working for the Blossoms, but—“

Jughead made a sound if annoyance. The problem with guys like Chic was that they thought they knew everything. “You don’t know a single thing about me, Chic. You think I didn’t figure out that you took this job to take care of your family? To take care of Betty? You took this job so that your
sisters and mother didn’t have to. I get it. We do things we’d rather not do for the people we love.”

He stared out of the window, also thinking that sometimes, the things they did wasn’t enough.

He wondered whether his own willingness to work on a Sunday wasn’t a result of is own feelings of sudden inadequacy, given the events of the previous day. He needed a distraction and this presented the perfect opportunity.

He had promised to protect Betty--was so sure he could do it, too, and then someone sends her a bespelled package, leaving it on her front door for her, and just like that, they had her. He would never forget her telling him that she didn’t feel so good. He would remember the look of shock on her face the rest of his life and her struggle to fight back the magic that was trying to overcome her.

He would never forget that scream of pain and the explosion of magic that burned her hand, or the way she was flung across the room, her body crashing against a wall and tumbling bonelessly to the floor.

It still terrified him, calling her name over and over, his voice unable to remove her from unconsciousness. He could barely touch her as she lay heaped on the floor, afraid that she had broken something that might be made worse by his moving her. The tendrils of smoke rising from the palm of her hand had been unnerving, as well.

It felt like an eternity, but Polly and Alice had rushed into the room after him, checking her sister over with practiced calm and skill. Jughead never asked why they were so good at this, but clearly it had to do with the kind of life they led before Riverdale. This was, it seemed, not the first time that Betty had gotten attacked into unconsciousness.

Jughead didn’t know who called Chic, but he arrived shortly after, and quickly enough it was established that Betty was safe to be moved, so Jughead carried her to bed, and when she was comfortably settled, Polly tended to Betty’s burn.

The skull had been reduced to ash and Jughead didn’t want to think about what the destruction of it had wrought. Is the curse now unbreakable? Jughead’s only chance of ensuring Betty’s safety was to find the other half of that skull.

Are you there yet?

Jughead read Betty’s text and he smirked, replying that they were just about to get to the front door.

They’d been texting since last night, his plans of seeing her that morning ruined by Penelope’s sudden availability, now all he could think about was finishing this meeting so he could go to Betty and see how she was doing.

I’ll tell you all about it when I’m done, Jughead texted. Can’t wait to see you again, Sunshine.

She texted back a heart emoji.

He stared at it, wondering if she meant what it actually meant. His finger hovered over the set of heart emojis on his phone, but before he could decide on how he was going to reply, they arrived at the Thornhill mansion.

They finally arrived at the Blossom front driveway, where Chic maneuvered around the ostentatious fountain and under a portico supported by intricate colonnades.

The grandeur of the house was even more imposing up close and Jughead felt no more welcome
here than he was the first time he set foot in it years ago.

And like a scene from a campy horror movie, the front door yawned open, with a butler to meet them.

Chic parked right in the front of the staircase. Getting out of the car, he climbed the steps and walked through the threshold. Jughead was once more struck by the expanse of the foyer. It was like walking into a hotel, with crystal chandeliers set in dark brass mounts.

The wood paneling was dark and rich, the upholstery on the furniture lush and probably priceless. The flooring was polished marble and one of the carpets that decorated the floor was no doubt more expensive than his entire wardrobe.

Beside the butler stood a younger attendant, dressed and pressed like him.

“Evening, Georgie” Chic said, casually, as if he saw the butler everyday, which was probably the case. “Evening, Steven. We’re here to see Aunt Penelope.”

Georgie nodded, his impeccably combed hair and butler’s suit staying firmly in place even as he moved. “Mr. Cooper, Madame Penelope will receive you in her study. May I take your coat? And you, Mr. Jones?”

“I’ll keep mine on, thanks,” Jughead replied without hesitation. His Southside Serpent jacket was not leaving his shoulders at all.

Chic shed his coat for Georgie.

“Very well,” Georgie said, handing Chic’s coat over to Steven. “This way.”

They followed Georgie through the wide open floor plan of the receiving room, then through large hallways, passing double-doored rooms that had been left wide open. Jughead saw a conservatory and several other rooms that he did not know what for.

Everything was lit with soft light mounted in old fashioned fixtures. It was the perfect set for a Gothic dark comedy, like the Addams family with all the fun sucked out of it.

They arrived at another set of double doors that Georgie knocked on, then opened. He stepped into the room, standing aside to let them through. With his back straight and shoulders drawn back, he announced their arrival.

Penelope stood from behind her desk, her dark red hair twisted atop her head in an elegant coif. Her silvery gray suit was sleek and well fitted, and her stiletto heeled black shoes looked deadly. She approached Chic with a practiced smile.

“Charles,” she said, coming up to him to exchange cheek kisses with him. “So very kind of you to accommodate me at this time.”

“It’s not a problem, Aunt Penelope. I know how busy you are.”

When Penelope turned to Jughead, her demeanor changed, the smile waning from her face and her chin jutting out. “Jones. Thank you for coming.”

Jughead almost chuckled because really, it was a little funny. “Penelope.”

He stopped at that. Pleasantries never suited him, anyway, and he was long past pretending with
them. He could be civil, nothing more.

“I hope you fully understand why you’re here,” she said in a clipped tone.

Jughead realized that Georgie was gone, slipped away before anyone noticed.

Jughead nodded. “Jason’s caught in the snare of a succubus.”

“I meant the implications of it all—why we need utmost secrecy. Charles convinced me you would keep this quiet.”

Again, Jughead nodded. “I’m aware. And I hope you understand that I’m the best option you have.”

“I am fully cognizant that this is a favor. You will be compensated for your efforts.”

Jughead’s eyebrow arched in surprise. He looked at Chic questioningly.

“We are witches, Jones,” Penelope said curtly. “The only thing we hate more than iron is owing people favors. I pay you and we’re squared. It’s better for all of us if we settle matters when they’re settled.”

Jughead sighed. “Fine. Is Jason here?”

“He’ll be by, shortly.” Penelope pivoted to Chic. “And Betty? Is she feeling better after yesterday’s accident?”

Jughead’s jaw tensed, displeased at how Chic had just turned and told his aunt about what happened, but he said nothing, his blue gaze withering as he turned his attention to what appeared to be a secret door opening on the side.

Jason walked in and he looked wasted. His red hair fell limp on his head, his face was sporting unkempt stubble, and his eyes were completely bloodshot. He was in a shirt and jeans, his normally athletic build looking somehow narrower, like he had already lost muscle mass.

He first greeted Chic with a handshake before turning his attention to Jughead.

“You look like shit, Jason.”

Jason scowled, his fist clenching.

Penelope stepped in. “As you can see, Jones, this scourge is taking its toll. We need that demon removed.”

“Agreed. How frequently has she visited?”

Jason sighed, resigned to the fact that Jughead was the one who was going to deliver him from his predicament. “Almost every night.”

“And aside from the obvious, what other interactions do you have?”

He seemed slightly hesitant. “She likes to talk about school, and my classmates. My family, too. She asks questions… about the things I like to do.” He blushed. “It usually… devolves from there.”

Jughead did not have time for his embarrassment. He needed to know if Jason had divulged anything about Betty and her family. “How much have you told her? About your family?”
“Not much. Just stupid stuff. Nothing confidential.” He eyed his mother and Jughead noted that Penelope didn’t appear to be affected, but it was hard to say when her eyes were being dead like that.

Jughead frowned. “Are you sure? Because that succubus is a hired PI. She’s trying to get information from you.”

Jason’s eyes widened and Chic shifted, alarmed.

“What do you mean she’s a hired PI?” Chic demanded.

“She was hired by the Ghoulies to gather information. She’d been working her way from Greendale to Riverdale for weeks.”

Penelope cursed under her breath and Jughead could see her carefully crafted veneer crumbling. “Those vermin! What information are they looking for.”

“Not sure, but Jason might know better than any of us. If you can tell us what type of questions she asks, then maybe we could suss it out.”

Jason looked horrified and mortified at the same time. “It’s a wide range, and it’s usually to figure out what I—what I might like. Whatever information she’s looking for, she hasn’t asked me anything consistently. It’s all very general.”

Jughead fully understood his hesitation to say it out loud. He looked around the office and saw a pad and pen. He took it and gave it to Jason. “Write down every question you remember. Don’t hold anything back. Don’t be embarrassed. I won’t show your mother—”

Penelope scowled.

Jughead looked her in the eyes when he added, “I swear.”

Jason sighed, but he nodded as he took the pad and pen. He started to write things down.

“How did you know about this, Jughead?” Chic asked.

Jughead shrugged. “I have my own network. I can’t tell you how without revealing my sources, but rest assured, this information is reliable.”

While Jason wrote down what he could remember, Jughead asked to be shown Jason’s bedroom. He needed to see layouts and figure out options, if necessary. He needed to take note of where everything was. He took pictures inside and outside of Jason’s room. He needed to show Toni all this so that she could do her job better.

When he was done scoping the site, he returned to Jason, who handed him what he had written down.

Jughead looked it over quickly, schooling his expression, even as he zeroed in on the questions regarding his cousins.

_Do you have a secret desire for your cousins? Do you want their bodies or their power? How powerful is Polly? How about Betty?_

He swallowed his disgust of the succubus’s questions. He pulled Jason aside, wanting to question him without Chic and Penelope overhearing.

He pointed to the questions about Polly and Betty. “Did you answer these questions specifically?”
Jason looked at where Jughead’s finger lay and his face turned an unbearable shade of red. “N-No! I mean, yes! But only to tell her that family is totally off the table.”

“Don’t lie to me, Jason. I won’t judge you. Dreams are a different landscape. Most of the time we have no control over what we think and do in them. What did you tell her, exactly?”

Jason swallowed and nodded. “I didn’t say much. I just told her I wasn’t going to have sex with my cousins. It’s--well, I’m sure I don’t have to explain, but I did tell her that I didn’t know what their powers were, just that Betty was pretty powerful. Powerful enough that mom wanted us to be nice to her so that one day she might join the coven.”

Jughead’s stomach dropped. “Is that true?”

Jason shrugged, as if the answer was a given. “Well, yes. Is that surprising to you?”

“Not really.” He sighed.

“Mother’s instructions to us from the very beginning was to protect Betty at all costs. To keep ourselves in her good graces. Obviously, Cheryl isn’t very good at such pleasantries, but that’s irrelevant. I shut down any thought of kissing my cousins.”

Thank God for small blessings. Still, however general Jason’s answer was, Jughead felt uneasy. It felt like Jason had said enough.

It was just all the more reason for Jughead to banish this demon back from whence she came. Soon.

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Jughead went to Kevin’s house to tell him the news about Jason Blossom. Kevin was, of course, delighted by this piece of information, which immediately prompted Jughead to make him swear not to tell anyone.

“Oh, my God, are you kidding me?” Kevin hissed from his bed. “This is prime info, Jug! You can get a million favors from the Blossoms holding this over their heads!”

Jughead sighed and leaned back on Kevin’s study chair, pressing the heels of his hands to his eyes. “Kev, you have to swear not to tell anyone. I’m serious. I may tell Toni and V because I need their help, but that’s about as much as I’ll risk it.”

Kevin took a deep breath and letting it out between his lips meditatively, closing his eyes and tenting his fingers, as if to focus on this effort of not saying anything to anyone else.

He wondered what Kevin would say if he came out with the truth and told Kevin that it wasn’t that there was a lot, it was that the one factor was kinda huge, and that it could spell the difference between Betty staying, leaving, or getting killed.

Since when, really, did he start keeping secrets from his best friend? Kevin was a masterful secret keeper. Perhaps the only reason he came off as a massive gossip was so that he could guard the most important secrets, like how Jughead could tell a witch from sight, or how, in the sixth grade, the fire that almost burned down the school gym hadn’t been because Jughead was a tough troublemaker, but because he was genuinely interested in rocket science and because he had aspirations of
launching things into space—apparently, this truth seemed incredibly damaging to a slayer’s reputation at the time and his father might not have approved.

Jughead had sworn Kevin to secrecy about the hows and Jughead got locked up in juvie for a couple of weeks for it, and for a few years, Jughead believed it was worth it, keeping his nerdom under wraps, but the last couple of years, especially, he had sometimes wished he had bitten the bullet and pursued the geekiest, nerdiest thing, slayer reputation be damned. He was old enough now to know he shouldn’t have fucking cared what anyone thought of him.

But at the moment, his concerns were beyond the realm of STEM and squarely in the matrix of slayer-town and his relationships.

He wanted to tell Kevin everything, but he was scared for Betty. He didn’t know what a careless reveal can set off.

He did tell Kevin about what happened to Betty and the skull, leaving out the part where she could’ve been targeted specifically. He told Kevin about the fire and the explosive nature of the magic, how Betty had gotten hurt, and as he told Kevin some of the details, he felt his anger of whoever did this bubble in his chest.

“I’m afraid that telling too many people about this will put Betty at risk. It’s bad enough that she’s in danger as it is.”

Kevin sighed and took the pack of Magic the Gathering cards from the side of his bed. He began to shuffle them idly. “Does your dad know about her?”

Jughead scoffed. “No. Telling him about her might have him hightailing over here, because God forbid I fall in love with a witch.”

Kevin scoffed right back. “Too late.”

Jughead shot him a look, which had Kevin rolling his eyes.

“Please. You’re so gone on her. I get how that makes you and her vulnerable, but I don’t care how long our Otherworlder lives can go, Jones. Life is short. No matter how long I can milk my half-fey lifespan and no matter how long your Slayer invulnerability makes you live, life is so fucking short. And how long do witches live? You can have a century with her, Jones. That’s fucking amazing. My only regret with Joaquin is that he will live a Lost lifespan. He’ll live to what? Eighty, if we’re lucky. And he’ll be an old man and I’ll look much younger by comparison.” Kevin sighed and pointed a warning finger at Jughead. “And don’t give me shit about how we’re only eighteen. That’s doing things in halves. We promised each other that in whatever we do, we’d go all in, Jones.”

Jughead sighed. “We were twelve and we were plotting to steal a dozen chocolate cones and fudge bars from the ice-cream truck, Kev.”

Kevin looked offended. “It doesn’t matter why we made the promise. What matters is that we did, and it wasn’t just about cones and fudge bars. It was a promise on life. Why would you ever want to do things in halves, anyway? I can live an immortal life and you’re invulnerable! Fuck halves!”

Jughead stared at his best friend. “Are you high?”

“As if. I let you and the Breakfast Club get high but I would never subject myself to such indignity.”

“You’re so full of it.”
“Okay, I’m a little high. Just a teensy bit. Had some before you got here.”

Jughead shook his head. “On a Sunday, too.”

“Were you not listening to my TED talk?”

Jughead wished vehemently he could live life the way Kevin does. “Listen, I need you to do a couple of things for me.”

“Will it get me arrested?”

“It’ll take a lot for you to get arrested, Kev. Your father’s the town sheriff.”

“Not true. I am vulnerable to be made an example of.”

Jughead rolled his eyes. “I need you to find me hallowed ground. Maybe that old abandoned church in Greendale, or one of those old mausoleums in the graveyard. Some place with space.”

Kevin nodded. “Easy enough. I can get you that.”

“Great. The other thing is I need you to go to the jewelers in town. Hared’s, and I need you to get me information…”

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“She’s training in the basement,” Polly had said at the door, stepping aside to let Jughead in. She had a bowl of cut fruit in one hand.

Jughead frowned. “Isn’t she supposed to be resting?”

Polly scoffed. “Tell that to her. Her hand’s better. Wicked healing powers and all--sometimes I hate her for it.” She grinned. “But if there’s one thing I love about my sister is that she never takes things sitting down. Go on ahead, if you want. I’m going upstairs.”

Before Jughead could say anything else, Polly bounded up the stairs with her bowl.

He wasn’t even sure where the basement door was, so he ended up opening a utility closet and a pantry door before he finally happened upon a flight of downward stairs.

He had to admit that he had always been curious about her training. He’d heard it bandied about the Cooper house every so often, and Betty mentions it so offhandedly, like it was no big deal.

As he descended the steps, he could hear the sound of gloves beating on a punching bag, mixing with short grunts of effort. As the basement floor came into full view, Jughead found Betty bouncing around a bag, light-footed and quick. She had on earphones, so she hadn’t noticed he was there as she jabbed, crossed, hooked, slipped, and dipped.

It wasn’t just punching, either. She used her elbows, her knees, and she kicked the bag with loud force. She did combinations quickly and with perfect form.

Her tight ponytail kept her hair in place and the sweat was glistening from her neck and shoulders. Her sports top showed off her midriff and her leggings clung to her shapely legs and ass.
So he just stood there, arms crossing over his chest to enjoy the view for as long as he could, admiring the way she moved and loving the rise and fall of her chest. That top was doing wonders.

Eventually, he had to tell himself that any longer and he’d be a total creep.

“Aren’t you supposed to be resting?” he cried, loudly.

His voice seemed to have carried, because she halted and turned, pulling her earbuds out. Her surprise only lasted a few seconds. A smile almost immediately blossomed from her lips, even as she caught her breath.

“How was Thornhill?” she asked, the sound of velcro pealed through the air between them as she started to remove her gloves. She approached and Jughead had no qualms about watching her walk towards him in her incredibly sexy state of exhaustion.

He shrugged. “Creepy. Gothic. Unnecessarily ostentatious. And you? I didn’t expect to find you down here. You’re supposed to be in recovery.”

She tossed her gloves aside. “I’m mostly recovered. The Wicked heal quick. And unlike you, the rest of us have to practice this self-defense shit. We aren’t born with an innate ability to defend ourselves and be badass.”

He laughed. “Hey, I had to learn this stuff just like everyone else.”

She pecked a delicate kiss on his lips and immediately began to step away.

He caught her by the waist and pulled her back in. “Hey, why so quick? You trying to get away from me?”

“I’m sweaty,” she said, shyly.

He had her flush against him, grinning as he pulled her taped hands over his shoulders. “And you think this is a turn off?” He ran his fingers up and down her sides, shaping her curves over the lycra of her pants.

“I’m so gross.”

“You are the opposite of gross.” He rooted for her lips, stopping all talk of her deliciously disheveled state.

It was always so easy to get lost in her, focusing on the points where they connected—their lips, the pads of his fingers against the soft skin of her face, the press of her stomach into his, her thigh slightly overlapping his. He wanted to kiss every part of her and he wanted to coax her desire again.

His lips traveled to her throat and shoulder, but then he saw the bruise there, no doubt from yesterday’s events. Being thrown across the room and crashing into a wall tended to leave a mark.

He stared at it, smoothing it over gently with his fingers. The mottled black, blue, and a hint of yellow made it look painful and raw. “Betts…”

They hardly had a chance to talk about it. With her entire family hovering, he could only be relieved that she was okay. Her hand had looked horrifyingly burnt, but Polly efficiently cleaned and wrapped it, telling him she’d seen worse on Betty.

He couldn’t imagine there being worse. He never wanted to see Betty so hurt.
“I hardly remember it’s there,” Betty replied. “It doesn’t hurt at all.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Why? This wasn’t your fault. How could you have known if I hadn’t told you? And I wonder if whatever magic it had wasn’t already working towards that goal—keeping me from saying anything to you.”

He pushed back some tendrils of hair that had come loose from her ponytail. “I’m going to find out who did this to you.”

She shook her head. “One thing at a time, right? First we banish Isheth—or Qodeshah—whatever name of hers that can send her back to where she came from. And then, we can probably find out who sent me the skull—”

He affected loud thought. “I might turn the order of that around…”

Betty used the tip of her finger to direct his gaze back to her. “And then we enjoy Beltane eve.”

They were kissing again, and it was a kiss that was meant to ignite a fire in him. If there was anything that could distract him, it was the anticipation of this event, and Betty seemed to revel in the power she had over him with regard to the coming festivities. She was well within her rights to believe she could sway him, because he was hard at the moment, and she could feel it through his jeans and her lycra.

“I know you’re trying to distract me,” he said, his voice rough against her ear. “And you know I love it.”

“Guilty.”

“But whoever sent that package is going to hear from me. I am going to get them back for every bruise and burn they gave you, twice over.”

She sighed even as she smiled up at him plaintively. “Technically, I gave myself every bruise and burn.”

“You know what I mean. This,” he took the hand that burned, wrapped as it was in boxing tape, and pressed it to his chest. “Is not going to happen again. I won’t let them hurt you again.”

Her eyebrows furled together, and her eyes conveyed apology. “Jug… I know it was hard. Seeing what you did, but you need to remember—I’m Wicked. The worst pain I’ve ever felt… I’ve had to inflict on myself.”

***************

The worst pain I’ve ever felt… I’ve had to inflict on myself.

Jughead couldn’t get her words out of his head as he rode his bike, realizing how he had actively pushed back that truth from his mind.

He had wondered, very briefly, how she summoned her magic in confrontations, and he had assumed she perhaps had to draw a bit of blood here or there, like how Blood Witches invoked their
spells. He might have even convinced himself that the blood letting of Blood witches required more hemoglobin than the pain Wicked witches required.

He was deluding himself. Betty needed more pain than he could imagine—pain that he wished she didn’t have to need.

It was getting late as he drove to Kevin’s house, but he had to make the trip, because Kevin said he had gotten the information Jughead had asked him to find.

“So the jewelers were a bit stingy about giving me information,” Kevin said as Jughead leaned over the kitchen counter. “So I did have to do a bit of fey mind tricks.”

“What’d you find?”

Kevin brought out two mugs and started to pour both of them coffees from a steaming pot of brew. “Their stock of amber skulls sold pretty quickly. They only had six. Some bought them using their credit cards and I have that list of names right here.”

He took out a folded sheet and handed it to Jughead. The list had three names.

“Honestly, though,” Kevin said. “Anyone who buys with a credit card has nothing to hide. The rest were bought with cash and I asked if they could recall who these buyers were. Naturally, they barely remembered anything about them, except… the one who bought a pair…”

Jughead’s eyebrow quirked.

“… wore a distinctly studded leather jacket.”

“Distinctly?”

Kevin nodded and pulled up his phone. He tapped on the screen before holding it up. It was a photograph from a news article—vandals arrested for defacing a public building, the group of perpetrators wearing the same studded leather jackets. “I showed her this article and I asked her if the jacket looked like this. The jeweler was sure—it’s the same kind of jacket.”

Jughead pursed his lips, feeling his anger build anew. Yesterday, as Betty told him about the skull, he had suspected already, but it was only just a guess. Today was different.

Between now and then, he had seen Betty’s hand burn, had seen her unconscious from a frightening collision, had seen her helpless, had heard her scream in the worse way.

“Ghoulies,” he growled. “I fucking knew it.”

Kevin nodded. “There’s still a chance that the buyer just happened to have a jacket that looks the same, but you and I both know… you don’t just give gang jackets to just anyone.”

Jughead took a deep breath. “I’m going to make them suffer.”

Kevin frowned. “Jug—“

“I’m going to raze their fucking hive to the ground.” Jughead knew he had it in him to do it—he was so angry right now.

“Please, please don’t go all Anakin Skywalker on me. You saw all the movies. It didn’t end well for him.”
Jughead crumpled the sheet of paper in his hand and slammed his fist on the counter. “Were you listening to me when I told you about what happened to Betty yesterday?”

“Yes. And I can’t even imagine what it was like watching her get hurt like that, but she’s alive and probably well. Jug, you lost sleep for weeks when you skinned Penny Peabody’s serpent tattoo off her arm—“

“That was something I had to do,” Jughead argued, forcefully. “She was using the Serpents to deal drugs for her and Tall Boy and dad wanted to kill her. I forced that compromise of sending her away and I had to be the one to do it! That was the deal I made with my father!”

“That is my point exactly,” Kevin replied, calmly. “You are not a killer, and if by some terrible compulsion you end up wiping out their hive, you will regret it for the rest of your life.”

Jughead breathed through his rage. “I can’t just stand around letting them leave cursed objects on Betty’s front door. And I don’t even know what it means that they have the other skull. What if they use it to do her more harm?”

“Jug, if there’s one thing I know you’re good at, it’s intimidating people. Go over there, bring your posse with you—hell, I’ll join you if you want my all-fabulous support, and you tell them that if they don’t give you that missing skull, there will be hell to pay.”

Jughead let Kevin’s words sink in.

And when they did, he knew exactly what he was going to do.

*****************

Jughead, with Sweet Pea, Toni, Fangs, and Joaquin, rode deep into Southside on their motorcycles at midnight and headed straight for the House of the Dead.

The towering old mansion at the edge of Southside and Greendale was a relic of Malachai Martinez’s family history. Two centuries ago, they were comfortably rich, amassing a fortune from such endeavors like opium smuggling, gambling, and even piracy in the high seas. As the years progressed and prohibition came into play, the Martinezes brought the moonshine and speakeasies. They eventually went into gun smuggling and drugs. They eventually earned their name Ghoulies because its Big Boss, Bartholomew Martinez, had the reputation of slitting the throat of his enemies.

As the 60s came around, Jericho Martinez, the then leader of the Ghoulies, took over the business. He was not as successful as his ancestor. Business started to decline. The once thriving empire dwindled to a smaller drug trafficking gang. This was not the kind of demise Jericho’s forefather had envisioned of his legacy. This slow descent into failure would have driven Bartholomew into madness. He would’ve much preferred that what his family built would implode in a blaze of glory.

It was around thirty years ago that Jericho became a vampire, and he started gathering more vampires into his hive. The werewolves, shapeshifters, and the occasional rogue witch and fey followed. Jericho’s only son, Malachai, conceived before his vampirism, grew into a young man and was initiated into the hive as a vampire, himself.

When Jericho had an untimely meeting with a slayer and his sword ten years ago, Malachai took over to run the business since.
That Malachai’s anticipated eternal life hadn’t sparked an epiphany of wisdom was perhaps why things weren’t looking to get better. The guy was turning thirty soon. One would think he knew better by now.

As they arrived at the mansion parking lot, a group of creatures came out to meet them.

As the Serpents dismounted, Jughead eyed the creatures intently. He spied Wyome in the crowd and her eyes had gone round with shock.

He hadn’t told her they were coming. All the better for her to keep up appearances.

“Like I said, you show up, you go home.” Jughead told the Serpents as he removed his helmet and set it aside. “That’s all you’re meant to do. No Shenanigans, Sweet Pea.”

Sweet Pea scoffed, taking out a cigarette and lighting it.

“Yo, anything hairy happens to Jughead tonight, Kevin’ll kill us all,” Joaquin said. “So behave, Pea.”

“Why you all picking on me? Fangs can be just as bad!”

Fangs shot him a pointed look. “Look at this bitch.”

“I need you all to focus,” Jughead said, cutting through their banter. “The slightest hint of trouble and you need to make an impression. Do what you have to do and don’t worry about me. I’ll fight my way out of there. I don’t want to see any of you going in there to save me. I’ll be fine no matter what.”

Toni rolled her eyes. “I’m going to have to be the one to tell Veronica and Kevin that, so whatever hero boy. Go in there, do your thing, and try not to get all of us in trouble, alright?”

A man named Samuel Williams began to approach them. He was one of Malachai’s most trusted and also among the highest ranked in the hive. He was arguably a smarter man than Malachai, except that he didn’t have a father who was a mob boss. He was a hard worker, possibly an offshoot of his mason past.

He was also a werewolf, and he was run out of his old hometown, which was the reason he turned to a life of crime 80 years ago.

“Jones,” Samuel said in his deep, rather soothing baritone. “What brings you to the House of the Dead?”

He was in full Ghoulie regalia and he was one of tallest, biggest men Jughead had ever seen in his life. He was gigantic as a werewolf. His head of dreadlocked hair added to his unforgettable appearance. His years of transformations have turned his eyes permanently golden.

Jughead marched right up to him and came at around shoulder height, but he was unafraid. He stared up at Samuel, eyes piercing. “I need to have a word with your boss.”

Samuel eyed the Serpents lined up behind him.

“They’re only here if your boss decides to do something stupid,” Jughead added, mildly.

Samuel frowned, his gaze falling upon the sword strapped to Jughead’s back. “A not uncommon thing. What should I tell him you’re here for?”
Jughead scoffed but replied. “I came here to talk about Betty Cooper.”

A smirk bared Samuel’s wolverine fangs. “I’ll be right back.”

Jughead didn’t move a step. And when Samuel had gone inside, Jughead looked every creature in the eyes as they stared right back at him and his Serpents.

Samuel came out minutes later, gesturing for Jughead to follow him. Jughead stepped through the parting crowd.

He entered the mansion, the musty smell of it masked by incense and scented candles. Creatures lounged about on couches, carpets, and coves. There was food being cooked in the kitchen and a few bottles of liquor here or there littered the tables, but for the most part the house looked clean and orderly. Malachai, at least, demanded that the premises be kept respectable.

Jughead was brought to the veranda outside, where Malachai sat on a lounge chair. A laptop was open on his lap and a terrified man in a suit sat beside him on a footstool.

A vamp with long and sharp nails caressed the suited man’s throat.

“Jughead Jones,” Malachai said, looking up from his work and leaning back on his seat. He was grinning, and as he spread out his arms, his jacket opened to his bare and pale chest. Pendants dangled from his neck and rings decorated his fingers, all of them in some form of skull. None of them silver.

That was, Jughead imagined, a very Ghoulie thing.

“Malachai.”

“What brings you to our lair? We aren’t in trouble, are we?” He laughed. A few of his minions laughed with him. Samuel was impassive.

Jughead calmed his anger. “It depends on whether or not you cooperate with me. There are a couple of things.”

“Both of them about Betty Cooper? She must be utterly fascinating, to conjure this kind of ruckus.”

“You’re going to stop lying to me now, you piece of shit. You’ve let loose a succubus in my town to try to find information about the Coopers and that alone is enough to make me want to burn this fucking place down.”

Samuel took a very deep breath, which probably meant this was something Malachai had done without his consult, or maybe he was just annoyed they got caught.

The smile did not waver from Malachai’s face. “I hired a PI, that’s all. How she gets her information is not my problem. Banish her. I don’t care.”

Jughead scoffed. “You’d like that, wouldn’t you? Don’t have to pay her. I find out that the two dead bodies in the Greendale morgue was a result of your succubus? Farmer McGinty and I are coming here and hauling you in. I will take anyone who tries to stop me down.” He took the entire room in with his gaze and a few averted their eyes.

“Must we always resort to violence? Maybe we can come to some sort of arrangement?”

“The second thing has to do with this.” Jughead pulled a folded piece of paper from his jacket. It was
ripped from the pages of the jeweler’s catalog and it had a picture of the amber skull. “You or one of your minions dared to leave one of these on Betty’s front door.”

Malachai eyed the picture and quirked an eyebrow, saying nothing.

“It was cursed and Betty got hurt. You have no idea how pissed I am right now.”

Malachai chuckled. “How hurt was she? Did she scream? I like a good screamer.”

Jughead took deep breaths to calm his anger but it didn’t work. He stepped forward, took hold of the coffee table and flipped it clear across the room to get to Malachai.

The man in the suit gave a yelp of terror and the creatures surrounding them started to shift aggressively.

Malachai bared his fangs but was unable to avoid Jughead grabbing him by the collar of his jacket and pressing him against the wall.

The whisper of Jughead’s sword sang through the air, its blade nicking Malachai’s throat.

Everyone, including Samuel, froze mid attack.

Malachai struggled to get away from Jughead’s grip, but he could not loosen Jughead’s hold. Aside from the sword, Jughead was strong enough to overcome a vampire’s strength.

“Just. Try. Me.” Jughead growled. “And if any of you idiots decide you can take on me, the Serpents are outside with cans of gasoline. This place will burn to the ground if the slightest comotion starts. Are we all going to be smart about this?”

No one moved.

“I’m going to get to the point, Malachai,” Jughead said in his face. “You get me the matching skull and I won’t come back here in three days and take out your sanctum. I will tear the roof from this place and have your hive scurrying for shelter elsewhere, and then when they’re thinned out, I will come for you. All that can be avoided if you give me what I ask. Are we clear?”

Malachai bared his fangs even more in a fit of fury. “This is a lot of blood for pussy, Jones.”

“This is a lot of blood to protect me and mine, Malachai. You come after Betty and it’s personal. Do you understand? You get me that matching skull. I don’t care how you do it. I don’t care who you have to kill. It was one of yours that sent it to Betty so you will be the one to make amends for it. I am nothing if I can’t protect my own.”

“Jones—”

Jughead shook him quiet. “Any questions?”

Malachai hissed. “None.”

“Good. Three days. I don’t have that skull by then, you better run.” Jughead dropped him unceremoniously, turning to leave.

“You slayers are going to get your comeuppance,” Malachai growled, straightening this clothes with furious swipes. “One of these days…”

Jughead said nothing as he stormed out of the den, out of the house, and back to the Serpents who
looked almost disappointed that there wasn’t more action to be had. He stuck his sword back in its sheath.

“God, I wish they’d made a fuss,” Sweet Pea said. “I always wanted to light up a can of gasoline.”

Jughead arched an eyebrow, casting him a withering glance as he put on his helmet.

“So were you able to do what you came here for?” Toni asked.

“Sure did.”

“Did you get what you want?”

“We’ll see.”

Jughead tucked on his helmet and got on his bike. As their bikes roared to life, the sound of it filled the air, the rumble of engines like monsters amidst the deadly looks of creatures that have known the taste of flesh, blood, and bone.
There Are More Things in Heaven and Hell

Chapter Notes

This chapter is over 13K words long and I'm sorry.

Also, there will be music talked about in this chapter and I'd like to share what songs they actually are, so here are the links (and you'll know when you read this story:
1. The song the band played at the start of the party: If I Had a Heart
2. The song that Polly Sang: The Skye Boat Song
3. The song around the fire: Dance of the Druids
4. The song they danced to: Gaelic Storm

Happy reading!

“Both angels and demons are ignorant of the future, yet they make predictions. The angels do so when God reveals the future to them and commands them to prophesy, and what they prophesy comes to pass. Demons also make predictions, but these are only guesses based on what they see from afar.”

--John of Damascus

Toni had done an impressive job of redecorating.

The rugs on the floor were gone, the bed was nowhere to be seen, and the only thing left of it was Jason’s $3,000 mattress, placed right in the middle of an ornately drawn Devil’s Trap.

How Toni ordered people around to get this arrangement was probably no small feat, so it probably helped that both Veronica and Cheryl had been around to reinforce Toni’s direction.

The sigil was drawn and salted on the floor, crafted perfectly with Toni’s practiced skill. The “corners” of the circle were marked with the necessary artifacts.

This hadn’t been a simple art installation. Toni had done the rituals, calling the elements, corners, and poles. This was a real circle—something only a trained slayer could accomplish.

Jughead nodded at Toni, extending a fist in her direction. “Good work.”

Toni tapped his fist with hers. “You say that like you’re surprised, jerk.”

He shot her a pointed look but didn’t say anything.

“This is really impressive, Toni,” Betty said.

“It is,” Chic said, examining the sigil on his hands and knees. “Did you do this all by memory?”
Toni shrugged. “I had to brush up on my demonology, but if you want to do it right, you do it by memory.”

“It’s so well done,” Chic added.

Cheryl huffed. “Yes, well, she gets a goddamn cookie.”

Veronica rolled her eyes. “Cheryl—”

“Let’s just get this over with!” she hissed. “The sooner we can get rid of that demon, the sooner Jason and I can get back to our normal routine. I need you all to understand that we can’t even cast spells as effectively as we could when we get separated for this long.”

“God, you must have been a delight the last week,” Betty muttered. She dug into her backpack for the potions she made for this ritual.

Jughead snorted.

Betty walked over to Toni and held up two vials that glowed purple. “One of these will help Jason go in a deep sleep—basic somnolence potion, but I enhanced it. It will mute his senses. He’ll hear less, feel less, and ‘see’ less from outside the dream. In turn, the succubus won’t hear, feel, or see much either. He can have hours of uninterrupted slumber. Second vial’s for emergency use only.” She held up two more vials which glowed blue. “One of these will wake him up.”

Toni smirked. “You need to sell your sleep potion on the market, Cooper. I’m sure Blossom Pharmaceuticals would appreciate it.”

Betty smirked and pressed the vial into Toni’s hand. “I think that’s a terrible idea. People are meant to wake up from sleep. And nobody ever wants to be stuck in a nightmare. Besides, I couldn’t have been the first one to formulate such a thing.”

Jughead frowned. “Toni, don’t give the Blossoms any smart ideas”

Toni put her hands up, shrugging.

Betty chuckled. “Ronnie, I have something for you, too.”

“B handing out the contraband. I like it!”

This prompted Betty to shoot Veronica a mildly chastising eyebrow arch.

Jughead bit his lip to keep from laughing, because while Betty didn’t seem to have problems bending the rules, she didn’t like having that reputation.

They all played their own roles.

“You can see the tendrils of everyone’s consciousness,” Betty continued. “The potion I gave Jason will help you see his more distinctly. If you drink this potion—” she held up a vial that glowed green, “—you will be able to access Jason’s dream through those tendrils. You can watch what’s happening in there.”

“Like a porno?”

Cheryl made a sound of disgust and Toni stifled a laugh.

Betty’s face turned an amazing shade of red as she took a deep breath. “I wouldn’t know.”
Veronica gasped. “Oh, my God, you’ve never watched a porno?”

Chic coughed. “Miss Lodge.”

“I don’t even know what’s more disturbing,” Cheryl sneered. “Knowing that someone’s going to watch my brother get off or Glinda Good Witch Barbie over here never having watched porn in this age of YouBoob. Like, how tight is that ponytail?”

The mortification in Betty’s eyes was evident, and Jughead was ready to step in and yell at Cheryl for making Betty feel uncomfortable, but he should’ve known Betty was no wilting flower.

“Why are you always so mean, Cheryl?” Betty said in a frosty tone. “It’s not my fault your family’s more excited about recruiting me into the coven than they are about having you around.”

That seemed to make Cheryl furious, because her snarl took on a ferocious quality. “Do you honestly think you’re fooling anyone with that innocent act, slut?”

Jughead sighed. Good, lord.

Betty took a step forward and Cheryl didn’t back down.

“This is riveting,” Toni gasped.

Jughead tapped her shoulder with the back of his hand, scowling. This wasn’t supposed to be entertaining.

“Ladies!” Veronica cried, getting between them and pushing Cheryl gently back by the shoulders. “You’re family. Cousins. Don’t fight. And we’re all women, here. Bitches stick together, remember?”

“Tell that to Cheryl,” Betty shot back.

Cheryl turned in a huff. “I wish you never showed up in Riverdale!” She stormed out of the room and slammed the door.

“She’s very spirited,” Chic remarked.

Betty gave a huff. “Sure, Chic. V, you won’t really be asleep, so you can still communicate with Toni while you’re in Jason’s dreamscape.

“Are you sure Grundy doesn’t suspect all of this is being planned?” Toni pointed out.

Jughead gave a noncommittal shrug. “Not at all. I had asked Jason if he could manage to keep things a secret and he said that Chic and his mother warded him since he told them, so theoretically, she doesn’t even know he’d been seeking help, but who knows? We’ve kept him out of the loop of all this since I last talked to him, just to make sure the succubus has no way of knowing all our plans--let’s just hope Jason manages to coax her back into his dreams.”

Chic nodded. “I’m sure Jason’s on top of it.”

How Jughead managed not to roll his eyes at Chic’s endorsement of Jason’s abilities, he didn’t know. He did refrain from pointing out that Jason was just a regular witch without his twin sister, and that their keeping Cheryl away from him might have done him worse.

“Betty and I are heading out with Kev,” Jughead said. “We’ll establish communications once we’re at Grundy’s. Everyone knows what they have to do?”
Everyone nodded.

Jughead put his hand out for Betty. “Ready?”

She slipped her hand into his. “Ready.”

“Good luck, everyone. And, uh, tell Jason sweet dreams for me, Chic.”

Chic glowered at him.

“I’m kidding.”

Geraldine Grundy’s house was small one-story built just beyond Sweetwater River in Greendale. The picket fence surrounding it was picturesque and quaint, as if a kindly old lady lived inside it, instead of an aggressive sexual predator.

Kevin drove the ambulance that he had managed to secure from his roster of paramedic friends.

He had a lot of connections off his father’s position in law enforcement.

They were parked a block away from the house, just so they weren’t so immediately conspicuous.

Betty sat at the passenger’s seat, holding the phone while Jughead knelt between them, peering at the dimly lit house.

It was eight at night, the streets dark and quiet. The occasional passing headlights cast shadows across their faces.

“Are you ready for this Jug?” Kevin asked. “You’re about to fight your first demon.”

The anxiety Betty felt at his words was only slightly mollified by the tilting of Jughead’s grin.

“I’ve been ready for this my whole life.”

Betty searched his face for any doubt. There wasn’t any. If he was uncertain in any way, he was good at hiding it.

The phone rang in Betty’s hand and she accepted the Facetime.

“Team Banish,” came Veronica’s voice on the phone before her face appeared on screen. “The bait’s been set. He’s sleeping soundly. We’ll let you know when the succubus is in the room.”

Veronica swung the camera showing Jason sleeping and breathing evenly on the mattress. The candles around the circle have been lit and tendrils of smoke rose up around him.

“Team Banish?” Jughead asked, scowling.

“Just go with it,” Kevin urged.

Jughead rolled his eyes but said nothing.
Veronica handed the phone over to Toni and settled outside the circle, staring up in the air at things only she could see.

Several minutes later, they could hear Veronica’s distinct but distant voice.

“It’s been a while. She’s not here yet.”

Toni looked straight at the camera. “Nothing yet.”

Another few minutes ticked by and Veronica sounded like she was getting impatient.

“Still nothing, guys,” Toni reported. “Maybe you should check on our nasty neighborhood demon.”

“What good will that do?” Betty asked, not wanting to get Jughead anywhere near Grundy unless she’s out cold, as they expected her to be.

“Figure out what’s keeping her.”

Jughead nodded. “I’m on it.”

Betty sighed. “I’m coming with you.”

“You’re not leaving me here while you two sleuth!” Kevin cried.

“You’re not leaving me here while you two sleuth!” Kevin cried.

“Someone needs to drive this ambulance when we need it, Kev,” Jughead replied.

“Fine. Make it quick, then.”

Betty stepped out of her side of the truck and Jughead jumped out with her.

“What do we do if Grundy’s not getting her groove on?” Betty asked, her stomach already dropping at the possible answer.

Jughead laughed quietly as he started to make his way to the house. “We go to plan B.”

She took a deep breath to calm her nerves. “Jug, burning off your protection is not a wise Plan B.”

“You saw what it said in the journal.”

“I know, and yeah, maybe there’s very little chance that you’ll encounter another sex demon in your lifetime, but you’ve had this protection since you were a child. There has to be some kind of repercussion for removing it.” She took his hand to stop him from walking. “Remember what I told you about breaking a curse? A curse doesn’t just affect the cursed, it affects everyone, too. Removing a protection spell will work the same as removing a curse-- everything resets and that could be harmful to you--a hoard of demons could suddenly know you’re vulnerable. It might become a free-for-all. You’ll be attacked on a constant basis...”

His fingers flexed around hers, pulling her closer. “Betty, one of the most important things we learn as slayers is that we do all we can to protect the people in our town. Everything. Removing my protections so I can invite the demon and complete the trap--it’s what I have to do. If removing my tattoo means a demon is banished for a thousand years, it’s a small price to pay.”

He ended there, walking off to continue on his mission.

Betty sighed as she followed him. She plugged her phone’s earpiece in and connected with Toni. “Any change?”
Toni made a sound. “Not at all. This demon’s not coming, it looks like.”

“Jug’s about ready to go to Plan B.” She looked up at Jughead who looked back at her with an apologetic smirk. She scowled back, letting him know that she did not endorse this.

Toni sighed. “You do what you have to do.”

“I want a second opinion from someone who isn’t a slayer,” Betty said in a clipped tone. “Put the call on speaker.”

Toni grumbled her acquiescence and Betty heard the faint echo of a widening audio range.

“Jughead wants to go to Plan B. I think it’s a terrible idea,” Betty said, arching a pointed eyebrow at Jughead. He just shrugged.

Betty continued. “Plan B means I have to summon witchfyre to burn off the tattoo that has protected him since childhood. I don’t care what anyone says—in my opinion, the blowback of that is not worth catching this demon.”

Chic made a sound. “You’re right, Bug. It’s potentially catastrophic for him.”

“Thank you,” Betty replied. “Jug, Chic says it’s potentially catastrophic for you.”

“Well, if Chic says so,” Jughead drawled.

Betty couldn’t blame Jughead for the uneasy relationship he and Chic were straddling, but she wished he would be more reasonable about this.

“Maybe Grundy just doesn’t know Jason’s in his dreams,” Betty pointed out.

“Sorry, mami,” Veronica said. “Jason’s been inviting her the last few minutes. She knows. She’s just ignoring him. I think he’s been made.”

“Dammit,” Betty hissed.

Jughead spurred them both forward. “We’re doing this now. Betts, either you burn off this tattoo or I do it myself. Then I’m going to have to go in there to meet Grundy in person for this invitation to work. We don’t have a lot of—”

“Jug, we can’t do it all in one night. We have to move this thing to at least tomorrow. You don’t know what the effect of the removal will be. Your strength might be compromised. I don’t want to risk her dragging you back to Abaddon.”

Jughead took her by the shoulders. “I’m going to be fine, Betts.”

“No, Juggie! You don’t know that!”

A small smile inexplicably began to form on Jughead’s lips and he cupped her face in his hand. His thumb rubbed the apple of her cheek. “Betty, you don’t have to worry—”

“That is ridiculous. Of course I worry. I love you and I don’t want anything bad to happen to you! You are not invincible—”

The rest of her words got swallowed by the press of his lips and the embrace of his arms. For a heartbeat, she wondered what she had done to deserve this exquisite attention, then it dawn on her that she had just told him she loved him and that maybe, just maybe, he was happy to hear it.
She melted into the kiss, letting it take her anxieties away. In these blessed seconds, she wanted to feel him, enjoying his lips and the press of his body.

Somebody cleared their throat, interrupting the bliss that she was getting lost in.

“Bug?”

She realized, then, that everyone had heard what she said over the phone, and that their ensuing silence, or possibly the soft sucking sounds of their kissing, had carried over to Team Visitant.

Betty pulled away, her eyes widening even as Jughead began to speak. She cut him off. “Chic! I mean--we’re here!” She tapped on her earpiece, signalling to Jug that she was still connected.

Jughead seemed completely unbothered, chuckling softly.

“Right,” Chic replied. “I--um, want to propose another way. A plan C, if you will.”

“Plan C,” Betty said, alerting Jughead to a new thread of conversation. “I’m listening.”

“I’ll invite Grundy,” Chic continued. “I’ll take Jason’s place.”

Betty was not adverse to the idea. “Okay, this is good. Are you sure you don’t mind inviting Grundy? You might have to come over here and get introduced--”

“No need. I, um, I’ve met her. Grundy. And, um--”

Betty frowned. She had never heard Chic so unsure. He was often so confident in the way he spoke. He made his points, shooting them off like bullets, and he was never so awkward. What’s wrong with him? “Chic?”

“She’ll come if I invite her. She always does…”

It dawned on her, then, what he was trying to say. Her jaw dropped. “Chic--”

“Yeah,” he sighed. “She’s been visiting me, too.”

********************

They were back in the ambulance and Jughead’s frown was deeply etched into his face as they spoke over Facetime.

“How long has she been visiting you?” he asked.

Chic was being prepared to take Jason’s place. “Almost as soon as I discovered Jason was being visited… about a couple of weeks ago. Jason told me what was happening to him and I thought I can divert the succubus’s attentions. I thought I can take care of the situation on my own.” He looked sheepish as he said this. “But--ah, I guess I was wrong.”

“Why didn’t you tell us, Chic?” Betty asked.

Chic shrugged. “I was embarrassed? I had a reputation to protect? And I figured that since you were banishing the thing, I didn’t have to broadcast that I was being visited, too. She’d be gone and my
problems would end…”
Betty gave a frustrated growl. “ Seriously, Chic… honest to God, that is literally toxic masculinity.”

Kevin stifled a laugh.

“How do you know she hasn’t made you, either?” Jughead asked. “She must’ve latched onto you like a leech. You were exactly the target she was working up to. You have the information she needs.”

“I was aware of the information I had even if I wasn’t aware she was a PI. I have too many secrets that I needed to keep, so I warded everything. I protected myself before I invited her into my dreams. I took the potion every night before going to bed. It’s probably why she keeps coming back to me, anyway. She knows I have the information she needs. She just needed to break my wards. She’s been trying, but unsuccessfully. She will come to me when I invite her.”

Jughead nodded. “Okay. Same plan, different bait. You ready, Chic?”

Chic nodded in reply. “I am.”

“Good. Restart. Reset. And let’s get this show on the road.”

************************

Almost immediately after Chic went under, Veronica reported that the succubus was in Chic’s dreams.

Toni closed the Devil’s Trap, carefully so that the succubus wouldn’t notice, and Veronica told them to go.

Jughead, Betty, and Kevin worked fast. They rolled into Grundy’s front curb and as soon as they were in position, Betty undid the lock on the front door.

It was Jughead who burst in and found Grundy in her hypnotic state, floating eerily above her bed, completely and utterly naked.

“Well, that’s burned into my eyeballs,” he grumbled, taking a blanket and throwing the sheet over her body. He was careful not to catch the sheet on fire from the many ritual candles that surrounded them.

Betty would’ve laughed if she weren’t so anxious for this plan to work. She took the edges of the sheet and wrapped it around Grundy from her side of the bed.

As expected, Grundy wasn’t budging from her spot. This was why they needed Betty there.

Betty had to conjure a mimic spell. It was almost nothing more than a glamour of reality--making a person believe that they were seeing something different than what reality presented. Except that a mimic spell went deeper--it was meant not only to convince the subject, but the subject’s magic, as well. It directed the illusion inward, as if the subject was a bubble.

This was not as simple a spell as a glamour. This spell required more pain.
Betty knew how to cast the spell. She had studied it before they got to this point. She just needed the pain.

She brought out her Athame, held the blade over one of the larger open flames, and waited for the blade to get hot.

Jughead looked on with concern, his brows knitting. “How much pain will you need for this spell?”

Betty shrugged. “More than usual, but I’ve had worse.”

He sighed, looking away.

When the heat from the blade was spreading to the handle, Betty knew it was hot enough. She steeled herself, took a deep breath and pressed the blade to her arm, sharp side down.

The hiss of flesh was bizarrely soft amidst the explosion of pain that coursed through her body. She might have given a cry. For sure her eyes watered, and when she had to drag that blade through her skin, she heard the distinct cry of her name in the background.

She was shaking, and the blade was still burning her skin, but she needed a little bit more. She drove the Athame deeper and the pain that burst through that single thrust was enough.

The Athame shook in her grip, blood poured from her wound, but she she cast the spell, splaying the fingers from her injured arm and letting the tendrils of magic wrap around Grundy’s levitating body. The magic circled her, spinning in multiple rings, like a gauntlet, before disappearing from sight as the spell set. Betty had cast the spell perfectly through the liquid veil of her tears.

As the pain waned to a steadier, more manageable buzz, she found herself on her knees, doubled up on the floor.

Jughead was beside her, his arm over her shoulders. “Betts, stop. Please stop.”

She looked up and saw in his face horror interspersed with pain of his own. The Athame fell away from her flesh as she let it go, dropping into the pool of her blood on the floor.

“It’s done,” she gasped. “The spell’s done. We need to hurry. We only have about an hour…”

“That’s plenty time,” Jughead said, a rough edge to his voice as he pulled out gauze, padding, and medical tape from his pockets. He began to tear the packaging for the gauze and padding open. “I brought these because I figured.... I don’t know if there’s enough--”

Betty watched him press the gauze to her wounds, the material soaking up her blood. He didn’t flinch in the slightest as he worked quickly, layering it with padding and wrapping her arm. He secured the dressing with the medical tape, pulling and tearing with efficient strokes.

“You might need stitches,” Jughead said, tearing the tape as he went.

She pressed her hand to his shoulder, touched by his care. “Jug, it’s okay… it’ll heal without the stitches.”

He took a deep, trembling breath and met her gaze. “Betts, if I had know it would cost you that much--”

“It’s what I am,” she interjected, gently. “It’s what I have to do.”

He looked down at her bandaged arm. Some of her blood was on his fingers and he closed his eyes.
briefly. “I know.” He met her gaze. “I know. I just--I don’t like seeing you get hurt.”

She cast him an apologetic look. She bit her lip and thought that he would either have to get used to it or not put up with it at all. She didn’t know what to say.

He wiped his hands down his jeans and took both her hand in his. “Let’s go and get this done. I don’t want your spell to go to waste.”

They got to their feet, and when they gave Grundy’s wrapped body a tug, it moved and levitated. They maneuvered her through the door and along the hallway, hurrying to get her through the living room and out of the house.

Kevin held the door for them and together, they got Grundy’s body into the ambulance. She was still deep in her own visitation, and when they called Toni, Veronica reported that the succubus was still quite engrossed in Chic.

Betty was already thinking of ways to thank Veronica for enduring this.

Betty and Jughead secured Grundy’s body as Kevin drove, sirens blaring, to hallowed grounds—an old, abandoned church just outside of town.

Jughead had cleared a space there where he could work, and then where he could fight. And as Betty said, he had about an hour to prepare.

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The politics of realms and free will didn’t change much between dimensions. Everywhere beings went, Free Will was a basic right for all creatures. If you wanted to circumvent it, you would have to make the effort, casting numerous spells and potions.

This entire operation was about circumventing it. The most ideal set up was for a demon and its Regan to walk right into your Devil’s Trap so you can banish it. Of course, demons rarely found themselves in Devil’s Traps when they had their full faculties intact.

Demonologists summoned demons within Devil’s Traps, but that was a different sigil and ritual—comparable to a cross dimensional Facetime. You can talk to them face to face, but you can’t banish them. It was a means to communicate, nothing more.

When you needed to get a demon in a Devil’s Trap while, for example, they were unconscious, you had to draw the sigil around their bodies on hallowed ground, because otherwise, you wouldn’t be able to push a demon into a sigil without their consent and unhallowed ground was generally a neutral space. Hallowed ground like churches, temples, and some cemeteries, created a space where the Lost were invulnerable—protected from the mischief of many Otherworlders.

To Slayers like Jughead, it was an interdimensional loophole. It’s where he could circumvent the rule of the realms, like trapping a demon in a sigil without its consent.

After they rolled Grundy’s body into the cleared space, Jughead got on his hands and knees and began drawing the sigil with his salt chalks. He started with a wide circle, using tools to make the circle perfect and enclosing the Regan at the center of it.
He made two rings within one another. With the border establish, Jughead started the ritual.

Jughead drew a cross at the center, saying the Enochian words as he finished each section. There was no elaborate hand waving or gesticulation. Just chalk to canvas, spoken words, and the touching of points.

Next came the pentagram and calling the corners--East, South, West, and North, as he drew. At each point, he left an object outside the circle. His dirk for the East, his beanie for the South, a lock of his hair on the West, and on the North his blood, cut from an Athame.

Finally, he invoked the forces, writing Enochian words in the space between the rings, calling angels and writing their invocations down until the inner ring was surrounded completely.

Jughead added the finishing touches--the symbols of his forefathers, drawn between the spaces of the pentagram. Filling them, strengthening the circle, and making it impenetrable.

It was at that point that Grundy’s body began to stir.

A phone’s ring pierced the air. Betty and Kevin jumped at the same time as Betty scrambled to get her phone.

“Hello, Toni?” There was a pause and Jughead had to focus. He was just finishing his last symbol.

“The succubus is done with Chic and it wants out, Jug,” Betty said. “Toni’s asking if she can break her circle.”

“Two minutes,” Jughead said, completing his Devil’s Trap. He stepped out of the circle and began lighting the corners with fire. He spoke one last stream of invocations as he set the fires alight in their bowls.

Grundy was thrashing now and she gave an unholy, frightening wail.

Jughead drew one final, big circle, encasing himself and demon in it. When it was closed, he drew a symbol by his feet--the two-headed snake on the back of his jacket. When the image was complete, he looked over his shoulder at Betty.

“It’s done,” Jughead said. “Tell Toni it’s finished.”

Betty delivered the message over the phone and they said their goodbyes.

Kevin gave a shudder. “Ugh, exorcisms are the worse!”

“How many have you seen?” Betty asked.

“At the movies? Plenty.”

Jughead smirked even as his entire body became drenched in sweat.

Seconds later, the unholy wail became a deafening, hellish scream.

Betty and Kevin stepped back, while Jughead had to step forward.

“Slayer!” Grundy cried, monstrously enraged.

The blanket had fallen off Grundy’s shoulders, pooling beneath her feet. She was vertical, now, her toes barely touching the ground. She was attempting to get out of the trap, but she was bound. There
was no place that she could run.

Profanities issued from Grundy’s lips, and then obscenities of the worse kind followed. With pieces of Jughead on the Devil’s Trap, the demon was given insight into Jughead’s history. That was the only drawback to infusing the trap with a slayer’s strength.

“Your Witch Whore of a mother didn’t want you!” Grundy hissed, her demon visage bleeding into Grundy’s otherwise beautiful face. Her brows thickening, her teeth sharpening, and her eyes becoming reptilian. Her skin began to take on a mottled green. “And your weak, pathetic father was never man enough for her. Do you think you’re any better, Jughead? You’re a child pretending to be a man. Don’t you think I know you wish you were anywhere but here?”

Jughead shook his head, feeling oddly calm against this verbal attack. There was absolutely nothing this demon could say that could weaken his resolve.

Rules of the Banishment included: Unless you were ordering it to do something or you needed to find out its name, do not engage.

If you already knew its name, you didn’t need to talk to it. If all you needed to do was banish it, no further conversation needed to be had. Speak the banishment without pause. Your resolve must be steady and your will strong.

“Your witchling is a wanton slut,” Grundy spat. “Do you think you’re the only man she spread her legs for? She is using you, Slayer. She needs your protection. She needs everybody’s protection.”

Jughead closed his eyes. Demons loved to lie. Demons loved to dig into your skin and crawl under it. He needed to focus. He couldn’t let the succubus’s words get to him.

“Betty, let’s leave,” Kevin implored behind him, beyond the circle.

“No! We stay,” Betty hissed, forcefully.

Jughead couldn’t help but smile. Betty was fierce. Betty was strong. Demons and their words didn’t scare her.

There was a flicker of two beings in one, separating slightly before fusing back together. Jughead could only guess it to be Grundy, trying to get away from the demon that inhabited her.

“Demon,” Jughead said. “Are you going to let Geraldine Grundy go?”

There was a pause in her rage as she chuckled with the voices of a thousand suffering souls. Wings erupted from her back, leathery appendages that gave her the appearance of devils in Renaissance paintings of yore, and it was then Jughead knew it was over for Grundy. Wherever Grundy was, she was not going to be separated from Eisheth anymore. She’d been Eisheth’s Regan for too long, her identity no more different than the demon’s.

He got to his knees, pressing his cut palm upon the symbol of the snake and activated the sigil with the only active magic the slayers were allowed to wield—the will to banish demons from this realm. The force of the will spread from his hand to the rest of the sigil on the floor. It was infused into the circle and Eisheth screamed even louder.

Jughead began to speak the Latin incantation that would banish Qodesha to Abaddon.
“Regna terrae, cantata Deo, psallite Cernunnos,

Regna terrae, cantata Dea psallite Aradia.

Caeli Deus, Deus terrae,

Humiliter majestati gloriae tuae supplicamus…”

It was a long incantation and needed to be recited without pause or hesitation, but Jughead knew it by heart. When banishing demons, Latin was necessary. Demons could not be compelled by Enochian words because, as the saying went, it was once the language of their forefathers, too. Latin was the language learned by the humans from the divine, pure and unchanged. It moved the forces that governed the realms, including portals, demons, and angels. Within the incantation, Jughead forcefully said the demon’s names, infusing it with the demon’s consciousness and essence.

_Eisheth Zenunim, Qodeshah, princess of the Qliphoth of the Binah, ruler of Sathariel._

As Jughead spoke the words, a fissure began to form beneath her. It glowed like lava through the crack and Eisheth grew even angrier.

“Do you think it even matters?” Eisheth screamed. “I’ve delivered the information to the agents of chaos! Your precious witch will hear from them soon and they will strike when you can’t protect her! You banish me for no reason, slayer! Except for your foolish pride!”

Jughead blinked but didn’t lose his place. Eisheth saw her chance and threw a spell. He felt the tug at his ankle, as if she had looped a rope at his foot and caught him. He skidded on the dusty floor. She was going to try to drag him to Abaddon with her.

He heard Betty’s voice screaming behind him, but he knew she could do nothing to help. If she crossed the circle, even the outermost one, she would shatter the sigil completely and Eisheth would be released.

Betty wasn’t even allowed to use her magic. That would break the sigil, too.

Jughead focused in spite of the unearthly pull on his body and continued the banishment. He was going to send Eisheth back where she belonged and nothing she could say could interrupt him.

“...Aradia ipse fortitudinem plebi Suae.

_Benedictus Deus, Gloria Patri,

_Benedictus Dea, Matri gloria!”

The fissure yawned open, pushing back the markings on the floor instead of cutting through it. Flames began to lick out of the crack and the smell of sulphur permeated the air. The heat was almost unbearable.

Jughead felt himself getting pulled closer towards the Devil’s Trap. He was sweating profusely now, not just because of the heat, but because of the effort to pull himself away. If he got caught in the trap and Eisheth dragged him across it, his body would break the cage and she could still escape—or he
could get dragged into Abaddon with her.

She was weakened, though, and the invisible force she was using to pull him to her began to flicker into visibility. The rope was not a rope, but her tail, and Jughead knew what he had to do. He dug frantically into his pockets and pulled out a vial of holy water.

He wasn’t religious, but he believed in the logic of it. Priests performed rituals to make water “holy”, but in some cases, where the priest was actually an Otherworlder, the water was infused with magic. This water had been procured from one such priest.

Jughead uncapped the vial and poured its contents out over her tail. The liquid sizzled against her reptilian skin and she screamed, uncoiling her tail with a jerk and setting him free. He back-pedaled away from the Devil’s Trap, watching her get sucked back into Abaddon.

Eisheth screamed and cursed the entire way down. The portal yawned even wider, like a maw, swallowing her whole. And when she was completely underneath, it sucked the smoke and flames back into itself, a whirling gale of fire and refuse, before it sealed itself closed, leaving nothing but the smell of sulfur, traces of smoke, and a smudge of ash at the center of the trap.

“Jug, oh my God!” Kevin cried. “Can we--”

“Yes,” Jughead choked out. His voice felt rough and his throat hurt. He was probably shouting out the incantation and hadn’t even realized it.

Kevin and Betty were on both sides of him, each holding an arm to help him to his feet.

Betty threw her arms around him as soon as he was steady and held him tight. “I was so scared, Jug! I saw you getting dragged by the ankle and we couldn’t do a single thing!”

“I made a mistake,” Jughead explained, his hand still trembling slightly. “I got distracted for a split second.”

Betty pulled away, looking him in the eyes. “Because of what she said? About having already told the agents of chaos?”

Jughead nodded solemnly.

Kevin sighed. “What does that mean? Is she even telling the truth? She’s a demon. She’d say anything to disrupt the ritual.”

“Demons lie,” Jughead said, firmly. “She wouldn’t have told the Ghoulies a thing if they hadn’t paid her.”

Betty nodded. “I’m just glad you’re okay and you’re here.”

Jughead couldn’t even imagine what Abaddon was like.

He looked at the stain on the floor, noted how the smell of sulfur had dissipated considerably, and how the temperature in the room had lessened.

After they cleaned the trap off the floor and picked up their things, there would be no evidence of the exorcism left.

Then they could forget this. They could move on to better things.

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When someone gets dragged into Abaddon, nary a trace is left of their bodies. The sheet that Eisheth had discarded at Grundy’s feet fell into the portal with her and the sad truth was that if no one went looking, Grundy would be forgotten, never to be heard from again.

Of course, assuming she survived and someone went on a Dante-esque mission to save her, she might make it out alive, but given that Grundy had probably cut ties with all her family by virtue of Eisheth possessing her, she was lost forever and was probably dying a pretty gruesome, tortured death.

Jughead wondered if his lack of guilt about it made him a bad person.

These were his thoughts as he walked to the Spellman house on Beltane Eve.

The aftermath of the banishment had been relatively low key. Jason and Chic were free from the clutches of the demon that entrapped them and as far as they could tell, nobody beyond the inner circle knew that a succubus had penetrated the notoriously powerful Blossom coven.

The facade of their power had been maintained and so long as the secret never got out, Betty would be safe by virtue of her association with them.

Jughead was feeling much better about the Ghoulie situation, as well.

The morning of Beltane Eve, Jughead received a delivery in the mail—an amber skull. On it was a note signed by the Ghoulie Godfather himself, Malachai Martinez.

_The skull, delivered. As demanded. Remember you promise._

~Malachai

Jughead had stashed the skull in the library vault, hoping that the wards around it would cut off any influence it may have over Betty.

Now it was time to celebrate and Jughead was looking forward to all its promises.

He could hear the merry making from outside the Spellman house.

The party hadn’t exactly started, what with the ceremonies still to be had, but Beltane was a supposedly joyous occasion. Everyone would be in high spirits.

There were already several motorcycles parked at the curb and his phone had already gotten blasted by several text messages from Kevin and his other Serpent friends.

There were also several cars lining the block, one of which was Veronica’s Escalade, complete with a driver, of course.

The one text he hadn’t gotten was Betty’s, which he supposed shouldn’t have surprised him. She, out of everyone, knew with complete certainty that he would be there just in time.

He only lived a few houses down from the Spellmans and he could’ve gotten there earlier, but he had to squeeze in a few errands, the first being a trip to the nearby Italian place to pick up some pasta
and cannolis, then to Tall Boy at the library, to ask him if there was anything the old Serpent needed.

Of course, Tall Boy had all he needed: his weapons, his phone to stream movies from, and his phone charger, but Jughead did give him the pasta for dinner, which the man appreciated.

The cannolis were for the party, and as Jughead rounded the Spellman house to go through the backyard gate, box in hand, he looked at himself briefly, making sure he was presentable.

Hilda had told him, sternly, to dress for the occasion, which meant only one thing. He had to wear his kilt.

While most Joneses tended to be of Welsh or Anglo-Saxon origin, the Celtic connection from the Welsh contingent must have intermingled with the Scots at some point in the Jones family history—perhaps a wandering Slayer who fell in love with a bonnie lass, as Jughead would like to think. The alternative, which was tribal marauding and mayhem, was decidedly less romantic.

There were precious few occasions he bust out the Jones kilts, and while he’d mostly had to wear it with a formal top, he still opted to dress it down for Beltane with a plain black shirt—which put the tattoos on his arms in full display—and his usual biker boots and hosen. He kept his beanie on, which he was half sure Zelda would disapprove of.

The backyard gate was unlocked and as he walked through the passageway, the noise grew much louder.

He walked into the yard and saw a Beltane Eve feast far different than the ones in the past. There was a bonfire, for sure, burning merrily within a circle of artfully arranged stones. At the other side of the Spellman’s enormous backyard was a maypole, its colorful streamers dangling from its tallest point. The chairs and tables were decorated by colorful and crafty decor and almost everything, even the ground was festooned with flowers and petals. Lively music was playing from speakers and there appeared to be an incredible amount of food, some still cooking over the open grill, which appeared to be manned by Chic.

The Spellmans were decked in colorful robes and face paint, but the Cooper ladies wore flowing ivory robes.

Betty turned and saw him. Her face burst into a smile and she bounded towards him, her golden hair flowing down her shoulders and ringed with flowers.

She flew into his arms and he caught her. She smelled like berries and lilacs, and her green eyes glowed with with the glistening fires around them. Her cheeks were highlighted with flecks of shimmering makeup.

She pressed a kiss on his lips and he held her, enjoying the welcome, and when she flicked her tongue against his lips, he knew he was going to give up any semblance of the brooding, reluctant Beltane-feaster that evening for the thoroughly-in-the-palm-of-Betty’s-hand boyfriend.

He ran his hand up her back, feeling the material of her dress against his fingers. The fabric was so delicate that it was a wonder it wasn’t see-through.

When they finally separate, he couldn’t help but run his fingers against the wide collar that was showing off her shoulders. “This makes you even more ethereal.”

Her cheeks turned pink even while she traced the studs along his thick belt. “You look gorgeous, Juggie.” She kissed him again and he was seriously thinking of just skipping the ceremonies altogether.
“Betts,” he whispered against her open mouth. “I am *this* close to turning around and taking you with me.”

“Okay, smooth-talkers.” It was Hilda, smirking as she came up behind Betty. “Those cannolis for me?”

To say that he wished Abaddon would just open up beneath his feet and swallow him was an understatement. Betty’s ears were burning red and he imagined that his didn’t look that much different. His ears felt like they could’ve seared themselves off his head.

Summoning what dignity he could, he held up the box. “All for you, Hilda.”

Hilda laughed, mostly at their expense, and winked at him. “You’re welcome.” She walked off as Jughead stood there, mortified half to death.

Betty rolled her eyes and slipped her hands into his, grinning. “Everyone’s already here!”

He loved her excitement and he let her take him to their group of friends, who were sitting on some benches around the fire. Even Archie was there, and that was no surprise. Generally, the Beltane Eve celebrations were more pagan than witchy, so it wasn’t a bother having the Lost there. Probably half the guests were Lost, anyway.

Of the ones that were Otherworlders, many were in Beltane garb of their own--more robes, more kilts, and a few other Celtic traditional wear.

Jughead got engulfed in a sea of greetings—handshakes, hugs, and cheek kisses.

“I’m glad you went with this outfit,” Kevin said. “I approve of this. I was half expecting you’d show up in your jeans.”

“Zelda would’ve had my head,” Jughead muttered.

“So.” Kevin’s eyebrow arched. “You wearing that kilt the ‘traditional’ way?”

Jughead smirked but didn’t reply.

“Hey, man!” Archie cried. “This party’s great! Lots of interesting people, and look at you! If I had known this was a kilt-affair, I would’ve buste out mine!” His gaze was suddenly distracted, following a pretty girl with raven black locks and olive skin.

“So are you?” Betty whispered in his ear. “Wearing it the ‘traditional’ way?”

Her interest in his answer was enough to get him just a little worked up already.

He was about to give a saucy reply when he spotted Cheryl, which was surprising enough, but when Toni slipped her arms around Cheryl’s waist and kissed her, Jughead lost all train of thought. They giggled into the kiss then ran off hand in hand to the refreshments table.

Jughead blinked, jaw dropping in complete surprise.

“Pick that jaw off the ground, Jones,” Veronica said, triumphantly.

He looked around at Kevin and Betty, neither of them surprised.

“I’ve been seeing it since they got here,” Betty said, putting up her hand and then crossing her heart. “Didn’t know until this evening.”
Kevin looped an arm around Veronica’s shoulders. “I’m impressed you didn’t tell us, V. I’d have blabbed at the first instance.”

“Oh, it wasn’t so hard. It was fun to help Cheryl and Toni meet in secret. I’m welcome at Thornhill and people just thought Toni and I had a thing,” Veronica sighed. “I kind of figured that was why Toni couldn’t step in herself to—you know, fix the situation at Thornhill.” She looked briefly at Archie, who wasn’t exactly paying attention, but would probably tune in if the word “demon” got uttered. “Cheryl couldn’t let on that she and Toni had a relationship, especially not with her mom. Her mom’s crazy homophobic.”

Jughead sighed and saw that Cheryl and Toni appeared to be having a good time. He supposed that if Toni could fall in love with the daughter of the most powerful Coven witch in the east coast, then Cheryl Blossom might not be the holy terror they all thought she was.

“I guess so long as she treats Toni okay,” Jughead muttered. “She does, doesn’t she?”


Jughead smirked. “Those are nice and all, but is she good to her? You know?”

She smiled at him with pure affection and nodded. “I think so. I wouldn’t have helped them sneak around if I thought someone was going to hurt the other.”

“I’m happy for them,” Betty said, slipping her arm around his. Her smile was tentative and inexplicably hopeful. “Aren’t you?”

He looped his arm over her shoulders. “I am. Maybe Toni can soften Cheryl’s jagged edges.”

Betty made a face, but she was smiling. “I highly doubt that, but if Cheryl’s happy, she’ll spend less time thinking of ways to torment me.”

He could only marvel at the way Betty so easily let Cheryl’s behavior towards her seem like nothing. “Betts, just because Cheryl’s involved with Toni, it doesn’t excuse the things she did to you.”

“I know that, but I’d rather not cling to anger. It’s like holding an Athame by its blade and expecting the other person to get cut.”

He pushed a lock of hair gently off her face and tucked it behind her ear. He tilted a smile. “The world doesn’t deserve you, Betty Cooper.”

“I’m going to introduce myself to the girl with the violin,” Archie said, resolutely. “She’s been looking my way the last five minutes.”

“You might want to hold off, Romeo,” Betty said. “They’re about to start playing.”

The band were all in kilts, though they didn’t have them in plaid. In addition to the violin, there was a flutist, a drummer, and of course, bagpipes.

“I am so excited about the bagpipes!” Kevin gushed. “Your aunts really went all-out this year.”

Betty snorted. “This is all mom. I swear, I’m surprised her sisters hadn’t hexed her yet.”

Jughead scanned the entire area, saw Fangs and Joaquin talking to some other Serpents, but didn’t see Sweet Pea. “Where’s SP?”
“Disappeared with Sabrina, like--ten minutes ago,” Betty muttered.

“Oh.”

The band started to play a haunting melody, first with the drums and then with the violin. The guests quieted down to listen and the violinist had them captivated with the quiet strength of her skill. The song made Jughead feel like they were watching a fleet of Vikings row off to their next adventure.

Betty, much to Jughead’s delight, sat on his lap and looped her arms around his shoulders. He couldn’t resist and pressed a kiss on her shoulder. He could sit here all night, just listening to music with Betty in his arms.

The song ended and guests clapped appreciatively.

Polly stepped up onto an apple crate and without accompaniment, began to sing about a lass going on a trip, sailing to a mystic island of her dreams where she sought to find the love that she lost. The flute and drums came in to accompany after she finished the first verse and the song only got better.

“Polly has the prettiest voice,” Betty said softly in his ear. “And she only really lets anyone know it at Beltane.”

“Does it run in the family?” he teased.

She chuckled. “I’m a decent singer, but nowhere near that.”

Polly’s voice did have a beautiful quality, the instruments unable to overpower the pleasing timbre and tone. It was a nice lull to the excitement, settling the guests for whatever rituals that needed doing.

When she finished her song, the band transitioned to an even slower tune, and Polly trotted towards her sister, grabbing her hands. Betty pulled Jughead with her, and every guest began to get pulled into the circle.

The music in the background began to get overlayed by first the Spellmans and Coopers blending their voices, and then some of the other Otherworlder guests.

_A Righ na gile_

_A Righ na greine,_

_A Righ na rinne,_

_A Righ na reula,_

_A Righ na cruinne,_

_A Righ na speura,_

_Is aluinn do ghnuis,_

_A lub eibhinn._
It was a traditional Gaelic prayer called *Dance of the Druids*, put into song by many artists, but this haunting version did pull Jughead into the solemnity of the occasion.

“God, this is so amazing,” Veronica gasped as she turned with the circle. “I wished I knew the lyrics!”

The song was about the kings of heavenly bodies and of the sky, thanking them for the light that they shone upon the people of the earth.

The song repeated a couple more times and Jughead didn’t mind in the least. The sound of Betty’s voice had him completely enamored.

The music quieted down and the circle stopped turning. Zelda stepped forward, holding her hands out in a welcome gesture. “Thank you, everyone, for joining us on this wonderful occasion. The Beltane fire feasts have long been a tradition in our family. We greet it with a celebration at its eve, sharing it with our most beloved of friends and—” She winked at no one in particular. “Lovers.”

Chuckles rose above the crowd, mostly from Otherworlders who knew the significance of Beltane on the matter of coming of age.

Betty draped Jughead’s arm over her shoulders and slipped her arms around his waist to get closer.

“We always kick off the rituals with song,” Zelda explained. “Many thanks to our sister, Alice, who made certain that this would be an evening to remember with her impeccable skills in decorating and her faultless taste in music.”

Betty gave a quiet little snort and Jughead laughed softly into her hair.

“And if you all received the text I sent you,” Zelda continued. “I had asked you to bring an offering—something you are willing to toss into our fire. No plastics or synthetic materials, just natural, biodegradable things, something to signify what you wish for in the coming year, then say a little prayer of your own.”

Jughead took a deep breath and dug into the sporan slung around his hips. When he got the text from Zelda, he thought long and hard at what his offering would be, and he realized it needed to be a book—*The Thorn Birds* by Colleen McCullough.

It was the book discussed the first day that Betty came to Riverdale, and he felt it absolutely apropos for the struggles and thoughts that have plagued him all his life. His emotions and challenges were in this book, and by offering it up, he wanted his fate to be better than those of its characters.

He looked over at Betty, and from the sash around her waist, she plucked a small bouquet of red, purple, and blue anemone flowers.


He smirked. “Well, I’m not doing it because I hate it. I happen to relate to this book a lot.”

She arched an eyebrow. “You can relate to a priest falling in love and having a love child?”

He laughed because he knew she was teasing. “I can relate to a man who is expected to follow his duties and does so, until he falls in love and wants nothing more than to be free of them.”

She was silent for a heartbeat, and he hoped she knew he meant what he said, but instead of responding, she took his hand and said, “These are called Windflowers. They symbolise health,
protection, and healing. I want this for my family, my loved ones, and maybe myself, because its other name, Anemone, also means Forsaken.”

His brows furrowed. “Betts…”

“I don’t mean I’m forsaken. I just mean that I refuse to go the way of the Covens—using what I have for their goals and means. I am not the witch of my forefathers. I won’t ever be that.” She smiled at this and Jughead realized that what they wanted for their futures weren’t that different.

The music swelled and Betty started singing with her family again.

She looked into the fire and urged him to throw his offering into the flames. He tossed his book into the fires as she tossed her flowers. Several others around the fire were doing the same, and the song ended in one round, then the tune kicked up.

It was a lively Irish music, with an animated fiddle, a fast drumbeat, and a very enthusiastically blown bagpipe. People started cheering and Betty started to clap with the music, then she placed her hands in his and he looked at her in alarm.

She laughed. “It’s just an Irish Jig! Simple and fun! Follow along.”

Betty started to dance and skip sideways and Jughead frantically looked around them at the other paired up dancers. It looked like a simple enough dance, fun and lively. He found himself in step and tune, and soon he was turning and leading Betty, smiling and grinning, mostly because he couldn’t believe how much fun he was having.

Sabrina came out of nowhere, partnered with Sweet Pea, and they pranced around the fire just like everyone else. Moments later, Sabrina led a new chain of people, this time snaking around the Maypole. The streamers were picked up and began to turn twists prettily, wrapping the pole in colorful whirls.

Jughead and Betty watched the guests finish wrapping the pole and the music ended, people clapping and cheering merrily.

Alice and her sisters started distributing dainty flower wreaths for men and women alike and Betty placed one atop Jughead’s head.

“How do I look?” Jughead asked.

She giggled. “Would be better without the beanie.”

He smirked but didn’t take the beanie off. They got pulled to their circle of friends, gathering at a table and partaking of the feast, which was plentiful and delicious. There were salads and vegetable dishes aplenty, but there were also burgers and other cuts of grilled meat, stews with barley and herbs, and boards of Beltane bread and various goat cheeses.

The dessert table was where the traditional flavors were shown off: Wildflower Pound Cake, Lemon Curd Mousse, Marigold Custard, and punchbowls of Mead. There were also honey cakes and lots of strawberry desserts. Jughead’s cannolis were now artfully arranged on a plate.

As they ate, talked, and laughed, the music played in the background.

Jughead watched Betty’s face and appreciated how carefree she was that evening. It was as if the cares of the last few days had melted away. She was lighter with her smiles and the movement of her body. He liked her best this way.
She noticed him looking. “You seem perfectly happy where you are, Jones.”

“I am. I never enjoyed Beltane this much.”

“It’s not over yet,” she said, popping a small strawberry in her mouth.

He can watch her eat strawberries all night.

Shortly thereafter dinner, as the guests thinned out, the unmistakable smell of weed began to waft through the air.

“Now the real party begins,” Joaquin said, clapping his hands and getting up. “I’m going to ask Hilda for some of it.” He went off and Kevin sighed.

“Honestly.”

Sweet Pea slapped Kevin’s back. “Live a little, Keller. Daddy’s not looking.”

Jughead chuckled as everyone else followed Joaquin. Jughead didn’t get up and neither did Betty.

“Dude, this is epic,” Archie said as he got up to follow. “Aren’t you coming? Even Cheryl Blossom’s going for some.”

Jughead shook his head. “I’m good.”

Archie was not going to waste his time convincing him.

Betty moved into Jughead’s lap and he smiled up at her, molding his hands to her waist.

“Jug, I’ve got an idea better than weed,” she whispered in his ear.

“This right here is already better than weed,” he replied, chuckling.

She gave him a small smile.

There was a look in her eyes, the slow flutter of her lashes and the way she looked at his lips. His heart began to thump frantically in his chest.

“Let’s celebrate Beltane the way it was meant to be celebrated,” she said, softly, as she got up and took his hand in hers.

He stood with her, letting her lead him into the trees and darkened brush of Fox Forest.

********************************

They wound through copse and thickened shrubs, moving through a path that Betty followed amidst the shadow of trees and the dim light of the moon overhead.

She cast him a reassuring smile, though she wasn’t sure if he even saw it. The pocket light she had in her hand glowed faintly with ultraviolet light, and as she waved it at a tree, the marking she left on its bark gleamed and told her where to go.

This was not the Fox Forest that edged Pop’s Chock’lit Shop. This was the side of the forest further
out into the Southside. If they walked a couple more miles, they might come upon Crystal Lake. This side was quieter, less foot traffic, and perhaps a little enchanted, because it was the side of the forest that her aunts foraged ingredients for their potions from. It was also the side of the forest where the old and ancient Spellman cabin stood.

Generations ago, when the Spellmans first arrived at Riverdale, before it was Riverdale, the Spellman woodwitches thrived in the splendid expanse of trees and greenery. There was a rolling, healthy lake a little further north and nothing but trees all around. Their nearest neighbor would’ve been miles away in all directions and most of what they needed grew from the ground. They only ever ventured into town for the few things they couldn’t produce themselves. Two hundred years later, the forest had been reduced to accommodate the Town With Pep.

The Spellman cabin, however, remained. It had maintained its ancient cabin structure, repaired through the years. Perhaps less than half of it in its original material, but it still maintained that precious bit of history that the Spellmans were so proud of.

The well-cared for cabin housed their herbs and dried flowers--materials that needed curing and time to be usable in potions and charms. The earthy colors hanging from the rafters and lovely jars made the place beautiful and homey. The herbs and flowers drying on the shelves and strung all over the house made the place smell fresh and wonderful.

It was enchanted, for sure, because no ticks or pests invaded it, and the woodland creatures never bothered to come close.

The cabin did tend to be chilly at night, but it used to be the Spellman home, so it had a hearth, and in front of the hearth was a space where their ancient family used to gather for meals, conversation, and rest.

“Have any of my aunts ever brought you here?” Betty asked as the cabin came into view.

“Never,” Jughead replied, staring at the cabin in quiet awe. “They talked about it, but there wasn’t a need for me to come here.”

They came into the clearing, hand in hand.

“Mother talked about it all the time, how she and her sisters would spend hours out here. They loved this forest, and at some point in their lives, they tried to revitalize the water wheel.” She gestured to the right of the cabin, where a lifeless, decaying wheel leaned broken against dry rock and overgrown shrub. “I guess there used to be a creek running through here long ago, but I suppose even three wood witches didn’t have enough magic in them to make the water come flowing back.”

“It’s really quiet here,” he said, stepping close enough for her to crane her neck just so she could look into his eyes.

He pushed some of her hair off her forehead and she smiled up at him. “It is.”

She flexed her fingers, digging her nails into her palms for a spell she had been wanting to cast all night.

Firebugs, hundreds of them, began to flicker to life and slowly, gently, took flight into the air, surrounding them with tiny pinpricks of light.

Jughead looked up and around them, smiling at the lovely display, perfect against the dimly lit darkness and the natural beauty of the forest.
She giggled as one landed on his nose. He blew the bug off and his breath tickled the small ringlet of dark hair that had escaped his beanie.

The soft laughter from his smile suddenly began to dwindle and the sparkle in his gunmetal blue eyes waned. “This is your magic…”

His meaning didn’t escape her. She nodded. “It’s just a pinch, Juggie. I just wanted you to see… just because my magic comes from pain, it doesn’t mean it can’t make beautiful things.”

His brows knit worriedly. “Betts… I’m not use to--I’m not used to letting the people I love hurt themselves.”

She reached up to cup his face in her hands. “It’s going to be alright, Jug. I’ll be alright.”

When she kissed him, it was a tender joining of lips, and for a few heartbeats, they stood perfectly still.

Betty wanted to relish this. She wanted to tell him, this time without an audience to overhear them, that she loved him, too, but when she pulled away to speak, his lips chased hers and took on a deeper need. His arms enfolded her in his embrace and she didn’t want to break away.

He lifted her, easily, and she wrapped her legs around his waist. His kiss was taking over her senses and the spaces between them were radiating with heat. She instantly felt the burn between her thighs, and she hadn’t even realized he was moving them until her back was pressed against the cabin door.

His body pinned her against this barrier and she could feel him through his kilt. She gasped, realizing perhaps that he couldn’t possibly be wearing any underwear.

“I’m sorry,” he breathed, even as he nipped at her ear. “Did I hurt you?”


He groaned, fumbling for the latch on the door while trying to kiss the column of her throat. “I’m going to make you feel so good, Betts.”

The latch gave and Jughead might have kicked the door open. It swung so hard that it banged against the back wall.

She smiled slightly at his enthusiasm, a warm thrill running down her body as he set her on her feet.

He kicked the door closed with his foot, too, and his strength in display made her want him even more.

She dug her fingernails into her palm again and whispered the spell between them. “Ignis.”

The fire in the hearth burst to life and the candles mounted on stands and holders around them flickered into steady tongues of flame.

Whatever reservations Jughead had about her use of magic seemed to have dissipated in the heat of their joined bodies. He pulled her to him to continue the kiss, while also following the path of candles, into the section of the cottage where a futon and fluffy pillows were laid out on the floor.

The passion of their kiss was interrupted by his boots knocking over a candle. He hissed a curse as it toppled on its side. He set it upright and she giggled lightly.

“It’s alright. They’re warded not to set the house on fire,” she said, gently.
“Not as smooth as I wanted that to be,” he grumbled sheepishly, taking her hands gently in his.

She lowered herself to the mattress and he sank to his knees, tugging on the laces of his boots and slipping them off along with his knit socks. She kicked off her sandals as well.

Their eyes met when they were settled comfortably on the futon and Jughead captured her lips with his own, the earlier fervency of his kiss tempered to a slow, tender caress.

He lowered her onto her back and his knee slid slowly between her legs.

The weight of his body on hers was pleasing, and she could still feel his readiness against her thigh, but now that he had slowed, she realized she wanted this pace. She wanted to savor her first time, and she was also a little nervous. She was afraid she couldn’t please him because her experience only went so far.

He pulled away to look at her, his gaze taking her in. It was a mixture of affection and desire, and it made her ache where she needed him. He pulled his beanie off his head and she watched the dark curls of his hair tumble around his face. She couldn’t resist flicking the strands with her fingers. Perhaps she was a little envious of its softness.

“Are you okay?” he asked, softly, and she warmed at his care.

She nodded, but immediately her mind began to churn her worries. “Why? Is there something wrong?”

“God, no,” he whispered, his fingers once again tracing the wide, off-shoulder collar of her dress. “You look so beautiful, Betts.” His gaze met hers and her fingers came up to caress his cheek. “And I want you so bad right now.”

She bit her lip, desire coursing through her at his words. He wants her. He wanted to take her. “Then take what you want, Jug. I want you to.”

His mouth fell upon hers, his tongue sliding between her lips. She moaned into his kiss and combed her fingers through his luscious dark curls.

Her foot ran up his leg and his hand immediately slipped behind her thigh to wrap it around his body. His hardness pressed more firmly against the ache between her legs and she rolled her hips for even more friction.

He thrust back, groaning into their kiss. Their bodies pressed together more urgently, both of them needing that sensation to intensify.

When he began to lift the edge of her skirt higher up her thigh, she helped him manage the soft fabrics, untying her sash and pulling the robe over her body in one fluid motion.

“Oh, my God,” he gasped, his gaze burning through her body.

She stifled a smile, knowing full well what she had done, because of course she would wear lingerie. It was a simple two-piece ensemble. Easy enough for her to get into, with no complicated hooks or belts, but most importantly, easy for Jughead to remove.

The delicate pink baby doll was mostly sheer, but the lace and silk flower design still managed to cover her most intimate parts.

His fingers traced the patterns and she could feel his touch through the lace, coursing from her
nipples to the rest of her body.

He whispered *baby*, just as he kissed her again, starting with her lips and then traveling to her throat and chest. She arched her body into his kisses as he bunched the baby doll up to her waist, his lips trailing to her stomach.

When his fingers gently began to push into her panties, she moaned softly in anticipation. She grasped the fabric of his shirt, tugging at it to coax its removal. He pushed himself back to his knees and tugged off his shirt. What she saw of his body left her breathless.

There were lines of muscle, only slightly defined—he was only just eighteen, but the tightness of his body was eclipsed by the art—the tattoos of sigils, round and hexagonal, tribal symbols, and Enochian script. Some of the markings were inscriptions, some pictures from cultures long extinct.

She barely realized she had pushed herself up to trace the images with the pads of her fingers, then along the trail of hair that ran down the center of his stomach. She saw the line of his muscle twitch beneath her touch and she looked up at his face, his gaze taking in her fascination.

He was a beautiful canvass, with his blue and green kilt, studded belt, and inked body, she never knew desire like this before.

He teased a tilted smile before getting on his hands and knees above her to kiss her upturned lips. As their tongues tangled, she reached for the edge of his kilt, sliding her fingers up his leg, but he took her wandering hands in his and pulled away.

“*You first, baby,*” he said in a somewhat authoritative tone that sent her gasping with need.

His lips began to mark a trail from her bellybutton to the bony knot on her hip. She felt his tongue tasting her skin and she squirmed with mild impatience.

She called his name in a soft whine, not quite sure what she wanted him to do, but whatever it was, she knew she wanted it and she wanted it now.

Hooking a finger beneath the top of her panties, he tugged. She lifted her knee so he could slip the material off one leg and then the other.

Searing heat crept up her neck, but she wasn’t sure if this time it was desire. She had a sudden urge to close her legs, self-conscious about what he would see. But he didn’t stop to stare. Instead, he began to kiss the inside of her knee, kissing a path down her inner thigh with the slow circling of his tongue while his fingers traced the outside it.

She found herself watching this intimate worship, forgetting to be shy, and while his lips left kisses on her skin, she hadn’t realized what his other hand was doing until she felt his fingers slip between her folds.

A sensual sound escaped her throat, neck arching involuntarily at the sheer pleasure his fingers had strummed from her. All thoughts of self-consciousness left her, and when his tongue joined his fingers, she couldn’t even process how incredible it felt.

Her fingers were in his hair, gasping his name as she lost herself to the sensation of his tongue moving small circles around her while his fingers caressed her sensitive walls. Pleasure was building and she was so close to an orgasm.

When he sucked her clit she lost it, tumbling against the waves of climax, her cries filling the room.
As her orgasm waned and she caught her breath, she ran her hand through her hair, feeling the beads of sweat that had formed there. She had barely moved from where she lay and yet she was sweating.

Jughead rose above her, a small, self-satisfied smile threatening to burst from his lips.

She didn’t care. He should be proud of himself. She hooked her arm around his neck and kissed him, tasting herself and finding that she liked it.

She wanted all of him and she trailed her hands to the thick belt of his kilt, slipping it off so she could access, first the buckles for his sporran and then the two other buckles at his hips.

He smirked. “Well, you seem to know your way around a kilt.”

“I Googled it,” she admitted, unashamedly. “But if we’re being completely honest, it’s not like you have anything under there to remove…”

A chuckle rumbled out of his throat, even as he began to kiss the soft skin beneath her jaw and behind her ear. “I don’t want anything at all between us, Betts. We can--um, keep on the kilt for future encounters.”

She closed her eyes to savor the feel of his kiss on her neck. “Hmm, that kilt is incredibly sexy.”

“You’re incredibly sexy with nothing on,” he murmured in her ear.

The kilt finally fell away from him and there was nothing else for her to remove, proving that he stayed true enough to tradition. She took his cock in her hand and ran her grip along it.

He groaned, nipping her ear. He reached for his sporran and fished out a condom. She was warmed by his consideration. She had a few tucked under the futon, as well, but his would be preferable.

Taking the packet from him, she removed the condom from its packaging and carefully, just like she was taught in sex ed, rolled it over his dick.

He tilted a smile at her then gently tugged at her lingerie.

“Betts, take this off.” He pushed the hem of the baby doll dress up her stomach and over her breasts, helping her slip it off her shoulders and arms. Discarding the garment, he kissed lower down her chest until he took her nipple in his mouth, swirling his tongue around it, first one and then the other.

His fingers lowered to her center again, the gentle strokes coaxing another moan from her. If he continued on, he would make her come again.

“Are you sure about this, Betts?” he asked, a small tremble in his voice.

“Yes,” she moaned. “I want this. I want you, Jug.”

He kissed her, tangling his fingers in her hair and tilting her head back so he could dip his tongue deeper. He nestled his body between her legs and she felt his dick settle against her center. Slowly, he pushed into her and she gasped softly at the stretch.

He stopped, watching her face for any sign that she didn’t want to continue.

“It’s okay,” she whispered, running her thumb against his cheek reassuringly.

He thrust into her fully and she gasped again, feeling pain, this time, mingling with his deep, guttural groan.
Holding still, he looked at her face again. “Betts,” he moaned. “I’m sorry.” He wiped the tears from her cheeks. She hadn’t even realized she had shed them.

She shook her head. “I’m fine, Juggie. It’s okay. You can—you can move.”

He did, slowly, rocking into her as he kissed her, and for a few seconds, it did hurt a little, but the pain waned, and it just felt odd, just being completely aware that he was inside her.

His thrusting was a steady rhythm now and Betty began to feel pleasure again. She moaned, their lips touching but not really kissing. He began to moan, too, burying his face in the crook of her neck and shoulder.

She closed her eyes, loving the feeling of his strong body molding to hers.

What she didn’t expect was for him to pick her up and have her straddle him. Her knees were now firmly on either side of him and as he looked up at her face, he saw the lust in his gaze, mixed with his thoughtful concern.

“Move the way you like it, Betts,” he whispered, his hands spayed against her back.

At first, she wasn’t sure. What if he didn’t enjoy it?

“I promise you, I’d like it.”

Tentatively, she rolled her hips. He groaned, kissing the valley between her breasts.

She moved more confidently, the position hitting her just at the right spot when she moved. His thrusts became electrified and her clit was getting incredibly stimulated. She was crying out at each thrust because it felt so inexplicably good.

And as the pleasure coursing between them mounted, she felt herself coming apart.

“Jug, oh—oh, my God, please don’t stop.” She gasped. “I’m coming.”

He held her body to his, both their hips thrusting to meet until she shattered, crying his name out loudly. His deep groan followed seconds later and they finished together in the embrace of each other’s bodies.

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The cabin did tend to get chilly, but on cool spring nights, with the fire going, it was perfect.

Their feet tangled under the sheets, and Jughead’s hand tracing the hills of her hips and thighs, she felt warm and loved.

She traced the sigil drawn on his pec, the one that supposedly allowed him to walk through barrier spells or at least to just see them. She supposed it had to be literal barriers, not the ones that were made between people, when one wasn’t being completely honest about something.

“I love you, Jughead,” she said, softly. “I think that’s been true since the day you came after me at Sabrina’s.”
He wasn’t saying anything, but he hadn’t stopped caressing her hips, and when she looked up into his gaze, she saw complete adoration.

He tipped her chin up with his finger and pressed a kiss to her lips, pulling her closer so that their bodies were flush against one another.

She wanted this closeness. She wanted to be cocooned in the embrace of his body for hours, to have his fingers feathering down her spine and hers tracing the art along his arms and shoulders. She wanted the smell of his skin, of soap, cologne, and sandalwood, permeating her senses. She wanted to feel all of him all the time, where she had his love, where she felt safe.

“How long do you have?” he asked. “To be here?”

She smiled. “Probably all night. Probably even until sunrise. Mom will be drinking with her sisters and will be passed out before twelve. Sabrina’s covering for me with Chic and he’d likely be drinking, too. He’ll be out cold until lunch tomorrow. Polly knows so she’s expecting me to be gone. Why?”

“Because I want to be with you for as long as I can. Because I want to wake up with you in the morning, like this.” He was kissing her neck and shoulder, and she closed her eyes, tracing the bumps of scarifications along his back. She was curious about them and if she stayed, they would have hours to talk about everything.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she breathed. “There’s nowhere else I’d rather be, Jughead.”

“Good,” he whispered in her ear. “I want you here, with me.”

She settled into his embrace and kisses, reveling in him, his desire, and how they had these hours to give and receive the gifts of Beltane, over and over again.
You know what I love about holiday weekends and having lots of rain? Time spent indoors.

“If you want to keep a secret, you must also hide it from yourself.”

— George Orwell, 1984

Betty’s waking moments were permeated with her inner voice telling her that she had to get up to jog. The reluctance to move her body more an act of petulance rather than the warming comfort of her bed. But as it began to dawn on her that she was staring at the dying embers of a fireplace that she did not have in her bedroom, she slowly reoriented herself to the fact that the reassuring warmth spooning her body wasn’t merely her favorite comforter.

Jughead Jones always ran hot and she was benefiting from his gifts, in so many ways.

She smiled to herself, so content, that she was sure she was about to start purring at any moment.

When his hand started squeezing her breast while his thumb made gentle circles around her nipple, she was immediately ready to go with it.

She sighed, reaching behind her to run her fingers through his hair while his mouth sucked kisses down the back of her neck.

His erection was already pressing on her back and she rolled her ass against it.

“You are so sexy,” he murmured into her ear, dragging a lobe gently between his teeth.

The hand that had been touching her breasts trailed down her stomach and then between her legs, his fingers immediately teasing her clit.

She knew that she was already wet, and she never knew that one could be so ready this early in the morning.

She was only half-conscious of the things he was whispering in her ear, about how he loved her, loved being with her, loved her body. All she could process was that his words filled her and made her need him, and when she craned her neck to kiss him, he was reaching for the condoms under the mattress, because they’d used up the ones he’d brought.

She’d had her potions, too, heeding Hilda’s practical reminders about sex and protection.
That brief and slightly entertaining discussion she had with Jughead about it sometime in the night had her giggling softly, then and now. She had surprised herself with her reaction: unembarrassed and delighted, but this was what she felt when she was with Jughead. She never had to be afraid of being vulnerable to him.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, grinning himself.

She shook her head. “Nothing. I’m just giddy.”

“Giddy,” he repeated, sucking the skin on her shoulder. Her giggling ceased and now she was gasping, because he was thrusting into her, his fingers rubbing her clit from behind.

Laying on their side and spooned in the warmth of the futon, Betty marveled at how they could be so relaxed and so worked up at the same time. Was early morning sex always going to be like this?

Betty was uttering sounds she never knew she was capable of making. The words “Fuck, yes,” slipped out, not for the first time. She had never uttered so many curse words in one night. Jughead Jones was strumming her like an instrument and he was doing it really well.

“This feels amazing, baby,” he whispered as they moved against each other. “I’m not gonna last long.”

Betty gasped, closing her eyes. “Just a bit harder…”

He was always aware of her, always responsive, so his thrusts intensified at her prompt, and it felt incredible.

She moaned, feeling the waves of climax lick at the edge of her consciousness.

He groaned against her ear. “God, Betts. Oh, God…”

And she was there, her orgasm engulfing her, only vaguely aware that Jughead was muttering his own profanities because he was coming, too.

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When they walked out of the forest, hand-in-hand, and into the Spellman backyard, Jughead was half expecting that unconscious party-goers would be strewn across the grass and tables. He might have imagined at some point that his friends were crazy drunk or sloppy high amidst lively Irish tunes, all while he was making sweet love to Betty Cooper.

He didn’t know why he thought the revelry outside would be wild and rambunctious.

His night with Betty had been intimate and intense, amazing and beautiful. They were so good together, and the only reason they weren’t still at the cabin was because at some point, Betty’s mom would be looking for her, and she might send Chic, of all people, to go looking, which was a scenario Jughead did not care to imagine any more of.

But the backyard, however strewn it was with party implements, was free of any wayward guests.

The sun was only just peeking out of the horizon and the house was completely quiet.
Betty put her finger to her lips as she led him into the Spellman back door.

He grinned, resisting her pull at the threshold. “I can’t be here looking like this when your mom and brother wake up,” he whispered.

“You look perfectly fine to me.” She gave his kilt a teasing tug, kissing him.

He cast her a mildly amused look. “You know what I mean. I just need twenty minutes to walk to my house, shower, and change. I’ll come right back, I promise.”

“Fine,” she grumbled. “I’m making waffles, so don’t dally, okay?”

“I won’t.” He gathered her in his arms and kissed her soundly. “I love you.”

“Love you, too. I’ll see you in a bit.”

He let her go and he made his way across the back yard, walking out through the fence door.

He must have been grinning the entire walk home, because by the time he got to his front door, his cheeks were aching from his excessive smiling.

He keyed himself in and stepped across the threshold but stopped at the sound of banging in the kitchen.

He froze on the spot, listening for more sounds. Quietly, he crept into the house and he took hold of the bat he kept in the coat closet.

His steps were quiet and he took the bat in both his hands, lifting it over his shoulder. His muscles tightened, preparing to swing at a moment’s notice.

He never dropped his stance as he crept towards the kitchen.

The freezer door banged close and Jughead rushed through the passageway, bat held high. It would’ve been the perfect swing, right into the intruder’s brain, but the stranger turned around and Jughead gave a yell of surprise, almost clobbering himself in his effort to stop his swing.

“Boy!”

It was his father.

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“What the hell, dad!” Jughead cried. He sounded angry. He felt angry. He wasn’t quite sure why.

Perhaps he was pissed that FP hadn’t called to tell him he was arriving. Perhaps he resented his dad for ruining his intensely good mood. All in all, FP had the worse timing. Always.

“You were going to hit me with a bat,” FP said, aghast.

Jughead did not know why FP found that so surprising. “I didn’t expect anybody to be here! I thought you were an intruder, or a Ghoulie! Things have been happening around here, you know!”
“Like what?”

“Don’t distract me!” Jughead cried, even more annoyed.

“Okay, but you gonna put that bat down?”

He realized that he still had his bat raised and he had to tell himself to relax his shoulders and lower his weapon. “You should’ve told me you were coming.” Jughead grumbled, shooting him a glare. “I would’ve appreciated a heads up. When the hell did you get back?”

“Just got here,” FP replied, twisting the cap off a beer bottle.

Jughead frowned. “That’s beer. It’s not even six in the morning.”

“I know it’s beer. I’ve had a long night.” He took a swig and gave a relieved sigh. “You look like you’ve had a long night, too.”

“It’s Beltane, or have you lost track of the sabbats?”

FP paused and seemed to realize something. “The Spellman party. Right. That where you came from?”

Jughead nodded, his jaw clenched mutinously at FP’s nerve to try to small-talk him.

“They make you wear that kilt?”

Jughead refused to get sidetracked. “So you just finally decided to come home? Did you run out of silver bullets? Needed more potions, maybe?”

FP pursed his lips and put his beer bottle down on the counter. “Just thought it was time to go home. You’ve been by yourself for too long—“

Jughead snorted and set the bat down on the counter with a noisy plunk. “Whatever. I’m going to take a shower and I’m going back to the Spellmans for some breakfast. You do whatever you have to do and we can talk later. God, you’re unbelievable.”

“Tall Boy tells me new witches are in town.”

Jughead paused in his step and turned to look at his father pointedly. “So you talked to Tall Boy and told him you were coming home but didn’t bother to tell me. That’s messed up.”

“Watch your language, boy.”

“Give me a goddamn break.” Jughead turned around again and headed up the stairs.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the Coopers being in town, Jughead?” FP cried after him.

This time, Jughead didn’t let FP keep him.

He stormed up the stairs, banged into his room and worked himself into a fine lather as he showered, then dressed.

By the time he was done and heading down the stairs, he was furious, and FP was still in the kitchen.

“You know,” Jughead began. “I didn’t want to say anything because I wanted to see if you would come home for—I don’t know, your kid, or maybe just Riverdale. I’ll take it over you coming back
because there’s slaying to be had. But that’s way too much to ask. And by the way, the Coopers are at the Spellmans, so do me a favor and don’t show up there right now. I’d really rather you don’t ruin their family breakfast. It’s embarrassing. Find some other time to make Alice Cooper uncomfortable. You might want to know that her husband was recently killed, so that’s one less witch you have to worry about.”

FP looked on mildly, staring intently at his empty beer bottle. “About the Coopers…”

Jughead snorted, turning to leave.

“You and I need to talk about the daughter, boy.”

“Fuck you. Leave Betty alone.” He didn’t want to listen to the rest and he stepped out of the house in a hurry. He didn’t want his father to lecture him on dating a witch.

Honestly, what the hell else did Tall Boy tell him?

When Jughead got to the curb he stood there to take deep breaths, trying to calm himself.

He still felt himself trembling with anger and before he could stop himself, he kicked the plastic recycling can sitting at the curb. It made a loud, satisfying rattling sound.

“Fuck!” he yelled at no one in particular.

His father had some nerve coming back into town, showing up at the house like a burglar, trying to pass off that he just casually decided to come home, then go ahead and insinuate that he came home to tell his kid to quit dating the witch daughter.

For a split second he thought he might go back into the house and yell that FP had lost all right to tell him what to do.

_He didn’t even ask how I was doing! No, “How’s school? Got any college acceptance letters yet? Anything interesting happen while I was away?”_

FP just waltzed into their house, drank a beer, made a lame-ass, perhaps passive-aggressive, perhaps obligatory, excuse about why he was back, then just casually stated the real reason why.

Jughead began to walk back to the Spellmans, striding purposefully, each step a symbol of defiance.

Nothing his father could say would make him stop seeing Betty.

Betty was the best thing to happen to him right now and he’d be damned if he let his father ruin it.

When he got to the Spellman front curb, he stood there, willing himself to calm down, to let go of his rage, and to get his best self back for Betty.

He didn’t want to walk in there brooding and stormy. He wanted to soak in her mirth and sunshine. He wanted to deserve it.

After a few seconds of thinking about her and last night (and this morning. _God, that was great sex_) he found that calm. And when she greeted him at the door with a lingering kiss, as if being apart for thirty minutes was already too long, he was smiling for real.

She had changed, too. Her freshly showered hair tied up in a bun and circled by a golden braid. Her blue sundress looked comfortable and beautiful on her.
Just looking at her made him feel incredibly lucky.

She pressed her hands to his face and searched his eyes. “Are you okay?”

He supposed he couldn’t just pretend nothing had happened. Not with her. “I’ll tell you later. I just want to enjoy breakfast with you right now.”

She eyed him for a moment before perhaps deciding to acquiescence. “Alright, then. You’re just in time. The waffles are about ready.” She lead him to the kitchen.

Zelda and Hilda were up now, and they were arranging several places on the long, rustic dining table. It had two long benches along each side, community style. The two end chairs didn’t match, but they still looked like they belonged.

The Spellman decor was the exact opposite of their sister’s manicured and magazine-ready house, and yet it was homey, welcoming, and pleasing to the eyes.

Betty stepped up to the waffle grill and began to stack the first batch of waffles on a serving plate.

“Good morning, Jughead!” Hilda cried, giving him a cup of steaming hot black coffee. “I’m so glad you decided to come back for breakfast!”

Betty gasped quietly as she poured batter onto the grill’s hot surface. Jughead guessed the reddening of her face wasn’t from the heat of the waffle grill.

He felt his own cheeks burning and he tried not to roll his eyes. Of course Hilda knew he’d been there the whole time.

He took the offered coffee, trying his best to maintain his dignity.

Zelda laughed. “Oh, stop teasing, Hilda. You’re making Betty uncomfortable. And what if Alice hears you? You know how uptight Alice is about these things.”

“Alice and her hangups,” Hilda grumbled. “Like she hadn’t gotten knocked up at sixteen.”

Betty dropped the spatula she was holding. “Excuse me?”

Jughead’s eyebrow arched in surprise. Never a dull moment in the Spellman household.

Zelda frowned. “Hilda, shush!”

Hilda looked offended, as if what she said was normal breakfast conversation. “Oh, my God, did Alice not tell you about that, Betty?”

“No!”

“Oh, look what you’ve done, you blabbermouth,” Zelda said, hand to hip.

“For God’s sake, we’re wood witches,” Hilda shot back. “Fertility and pregnancy are things we always talk about! That should be true in Alice’s household, too!”

“It is not,” Betty cried. “It is so not.”

Jughead decided he was going to concentrate very hard on his coffee.

“Hilda,” Zelda began, sternly. “It was more reasonable to assume that Alice wouldn’t tell her
daughters that she had gotten pregnant at sixteen!”

“Well, she should’ve! Who else is going to tell them that their bodies are fantastic at making babies and that they should be really careful?”

Betty’s hands flew to her face. “Oh, my God. Make it stop!”

Polly shambled into the kitchen, scowling. “Did someone just say someone got pregnant at sixteen? Or am I still dreaming? Oh, hi Jughead. You didn’t knock up Betty, did you?”

Jughead was too shocked that someone had directed a question at him with the words “knocked up” and “Betty” in one sentence.

“Polly!” Betty hissed. “Aunt Hilda just said—“

Zelda scowled. “Alice was pregnant for a week, okay? Then she miscarried.”

“That’s terrible!” Betty cried.

“Lucky, if you ask me,” Polly grumbled. “God, can you imagine mom having a lovechild?”

“With FP.”

Jughead decidedly choked very badly on his coffee.

Betty gasped. “Juggie!”

Polly pounded on his back. “Jesus Christ, Aunt Hilda! What is it with you Spellmans and your bombs about the Jones men?”

Jughead gasped for air. He was going to dry drown, he thought for sure. It was bad enough that his father made an appearance and upset him, but this little landmine was just the cherry on top.

“Sounds like someone’s dying out here,” came a deep, male voice from the stairwell. Sweet Pea emerged in a white undershirt and jeans. “You okay Jones?”

“Fine,” Jughead gasped. “Perfect. Can we stop talking about this?”

“Good luck, buddy,” Polly muttered.

“Talk about what?” asked Sweet Pea.

Fangs emerged from the living room, apparently lying (or hiding) on the couch the whole time. “FP knocked up Betty’s mom.”

“No!” Sweet Pea gasped, delighted. “Oh, shit! Do you share a sibling? Is it Chic?”

Polly laughed. “Won’t that be exquisite?”

“I’m glad you all find this amusing,” Betty said, loftily. “I think it’s horrible for mom and, and—“

“You and Jughead could’ve never been born!” Fangs concluded.

Jughead dealt him a deadly glare. He was beginning to hate this conversation.

Zelda, perhaps sensing the change in the room’s mood, began to hold up her hands. “Betty, darling, your mom was not broken up about it. It was a lesson on knowing better next time and Jughead,
sweetie, FP and Alice were never meant to be. No bullet was dodged here. It was just a firework that fizzled, okay? Can we all go back to having pleasant conversation and not ridiculously tossed cherry bombs?” She shot Hilda a look so stern that Hilda actually ducked her head and began pouring coffee for everyone. “This discussion ends here, alright? We move on!”

Jughead was only too glad to let the subject drop. If he had any questions, he wanted to direct it at his father.

Eventually Sabrina, Chic, and Alice emerged and it was as if they never even had that conversation at all.

When they were all seated at the table, Jughead found calm sitting next to Betty, watching her slather her waffles in butter, maple syrup, and whipped cream, and eating it defiantly in her mother’s face.

Alice scowled and got so far as saying, “Is that nonfat butter?” before Zelda came blazing to the rescue with, “If you dare mention the word ‘nonfat’ in my house again, I will smack you, Alice, I swear to God. And please don’t tell your children they need to cut calories. Honestly, it’s offensive.”

Alice was so shocked that she couldn’t form a proper response and Betty could barely contain her laughter. Her face was ruby red from the effort of it.

Jughead pushed a plate of hash browns in Betty’s direction, whispering in her ear, “Have some more calories, baby.”

She giggled softly, but by the look she tossed him whilst popping a dab of cream into her mouth with her finger, he may as well have been talking dirty to her.

The rest of breakfast was consumed without incident and Betty did grab that extra helping of hash browns.

At the end of the meal everyone stood up to clear the table and then proceeded to help the Spellmans clean up the mess from last night’s revelry.

Several volunteered to clean the yard outside, where most of the mess was anyway.

Betty and Jughead partnered up for the yard cleanup, picking up the trash that happened to get left unthrown.

“So, are you going to tell me what’s wrong?” Betty asked as they worked.

He sighed, knowing that unless his father left in the next couple of days, he’d have to tell her. “Dad came home. This morning.”

Betty’s eyebrow lifted in surprise. “That’s good, right?” She paused, eyeing him. “Or not.”

He sighed, knowing that unless his father left in the next couple of days, he’d have to tell her. “Dad came home. This morning.”

Betty’s eyebrow lifted in surprise. “That’s good, right?” She paused, eyeing him. “Or not.”

He shrugged. He felt a lot of things about this. “First of all, I thought an intruder had gotten in the house. I had a bat in my hand and I was ready to hit someone with it. Then I found out he talked to Tall Boy first. He didn’t even bother to text a heads up. And then I--” He shook his head, scowling. “I guess I’m just pissed at him. He should’ve been home months ago and now that he’s here, I just want to yell at him for being gone so fucking long. He didn’t even come back because of me, he just-” He paused, at a loss at how to put it. “He’s just here for slayer stuff.”

She took his hand in hers. “Maybe you should go home. Spend time with him.”

“I’d rather not. I’d rather stay here, with you.”
She chuckled. “Cleaning? Throwing out the trash?”

He looped his arms around her waist. “You know what I mean.”

“Jug,” she said in a gently chiding tone.

He grinned. “Betts.”

“You’re going to have to deal with him some time.”

“Not if I can help it,” he grumbled.

Rolling her eyes, though smiling, she gave up the argument and continued with their chores.

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Sweet Pea and Fangs were long gone by the time the Coopers set out to go back home. Jughead helped load their SUV with their overnight things and some other kitchen and yard equipment they had brought for the party.

The whole time Jughead was there, Betty hadn’t mentioned FP again, which Jughead appreciated, but his father’s presence still left him unsettled and slightly upset.

“I’ll see you soon, Juggie,” Betty said, pressing a quick kiss on Jughead’s lips before joining Polly in the back seat of Chic’s SUV.

Jughead gave her an affectionate smile before stepping back onto the curb and looking through the window at the rest of the Cooper family. “Bye, Mrs. Cooper. I’ll see you around Chic, Polly.”

Chic and Polly waved.

Alice arched her eyebrow at him and nodded, frostily.

Hilda and Zelda stood on either side of him, each taking an arm and waving at their sister and her family.

The Spellmans cried their own farewells cheerfully, with Hilda yelling, “We love you kids so much!” and Zelda adding “And you can have dinner with us anytime!” at them as Betty and Polly blew kisses out through the window and Chic drove off.

Jughead stifled the rolling of his eyes at Zelda and Hilda’s obviously passive-aggressive goodbyes.

Sabrina laughed. “You guys are so extra.”

“Ugh, Alice could be such a pill!” Hilda said. “I’m so glad you told her off, Zelda. I couldn’t stand the digs she throws at her daughters. And poor Betty was such a tight ball of anxiety until Jughead arrived.”

Zelda gave a huff. “Alice has always been that way, Hilda. And yes, Jughead, you’re a dear.”

“You make Betty so happy,” Sabrina drawled.
This time, Jughead rolled his eyes hard, gently breaking away from the aunts. “I gotta go home.”

“Why don’t you stay a while, Jug?” Hilda offered. “It’s almost dinner and you might as well stick around.”

Jughead shuffled on his feet. “Dad’s home.”

All three Spellman ladies stared at him in surprise.

“This whole time?” Zelda finally demanded.

He nodded. “Since this morning.”

“Well, why didn’t you tell us? We could’ve--”

“Given him a piece of my mind, that’s what!” Hilda cried, angrily. “Is he at your house right now? Because I’m coming over--”

“Hilda, stop,” Zelda said, sternly. “I’ve got several choice words for him myself, but Jughead needs to have a good long discussion with his father. After he’s done, then we’ll pitch into him.”

Sabrina laughed. “Oh, boy. FP better run.”

Jughead sighed, shaking his head and rubbing the back of his neck in a nervous gesture. “I don’t know if I can talk to him without completely losing my shit.”

“Then lose your shit,” Hilda said. “FP’s a big boy and he should be able to handle it.”

Zelda dealt Hilda another firm glare. “Can you and Sabrina finish up inside? I need a second with Jughead before he leaves for home.”

Jughead didn’t want to go home but when Zelda started ordering people around, everyone listened. Sabrina and Hilda scurried indoors and Jughead was left standing on the curb with Zelda.

“It’s going to be tough having FP home,” Zelda said. “Especially if he starts telling you what to do again. As if you hadn’t been living your life and his the last few months.”

Jughead stuck his hands into the pockets of his jeans. “It’s what pisses me off, and I hate that. I’m supposed to be glad he’s home, as my dad and my leader, but all I can think of right now is that he expected me to hold the fort down here then when he rides back into town, he’ll just sit right back down on his goddamn throne and tell me to make my bed, clean the dishes, and take out the trash.”

Zelda nodded. “I’ve always found FP’s entitlement infuriating.”

“And not only that, he started asking questions about the Coopers. He said he wanted to talk to me about Betty. Is he going to tell me to stop dating her? Because that’s a fight I’m willing to have with him…” He closed his eyes and gave a frustrated growl. “It doesn’t have to be a fight.”

Zelda clapped a hand on his shoulder and gave it a supportive squeeze. “Well, you know you’re always welcome at our house. If he has the nerve to throw you out, we’ll be here for you. You know Hilda and I have been trying to adopt you since you were nine.”

Jughead gave a mild laugh, but he knew she was serious about offering up her home, and deep down he knew that the Spellmans would never let him be homeless, so he had no fear of that ever happening to him, but if he were being completely honest, he didn’t know if he wanted to be the boy who lost his family because he couldn’t get along with them.
As angry as he was with FP right now, the man did raise him in the best way he knew how, and that
the reason he left for long periods of time was because he did believe Jughead was totally capable of
being on his own.

He’s eighteen. Of course FP would think him adult enough. At any rate, FP was taking care of his
upkeep. Not once did FP tell him to get a job or think about moving out. While college was not a
conversation FP was thrilled about, he never complained when Jughead asked him to sign the
college applications or pay the fees for it. FP gave him his motorcycle and told Tall Boy to never
serve his son alcohol at the bar.

“Is it true that he got Alice Cooper pregnant?” Jughead asked nonsensically.

Zelda laughed. “Yes, but like I said, she knew she was pregnant for about a week before she
miscarried.”

He didn’t know what to do with this new piece of information. “So what was that like? Their
relationship? Were they—“

Zelda sighed as she paused to remember it. “They were crazy for each other. Inseparable, especially
at the beginning, and they kept it a secret from FP Jones I. Then when Alice found out she was
pregnant, they made plans to leave town together.”

Jughead could hardly believe what he was hearing. “Like, elope?”

Zelda nodded. “Yes. And you know… we were willing to support her. You know Hilda and I--
we’re romantics. We loved the idea of them being so passionate that they would run away, but Alice
had always been--well, grounded. She waited a week, for whatever reason, and then she lost the
baby. Their relationship broke down from there. I don’t think the miscarriage ruined it, I think that
week she took, it was like—like she paused, to think, and many things came to the fore in both their
minds. It was like their relationship and the future of it got distilled into a vial, clear and
unquestionable. They saw what they were—individually: FP, the committed slayer and Alice, the
witch who wanted to live a normal life with someone more… milquetoast.”

Jughead’s stomach was beginning to twist in all of this and he couldn’t help but wonder if he wasn’t
hearing his and Betty’s fate. “D-do I remind of you of dad?”

Again, Zelda laughed. “Oh, Jughead, of course you do. You’re his son and you’re a slayer—good at
it, too, but at this point in your life, FP was nothing like you. FP did not have a plan B. FP’s Plan
Only was about him and Alice being a slayer-witch duo, fighting bad guys forever. He never tried
for college. Never kept another job. He never opened a single text book. And he was kind of
traditional—man of the house, bring home the bacon, Alice barefoot and pregnant—you are not
going to grow up to be him. And Betty… she may be Alice’s daughter, but I can see Hilda and
myself in her, too. Alice cannot turn her into a younger version of herself.”

Jughead clung to Zelda’s words. “And do you—do you think I can get out of this life?”

She smiled. “I don’t know, but you have a knack for relationships the way your father never did, and
I don’t just mean the kind of relationship you have with Betty. I mean friendships, too, and yes,
family. I know that you feel like yours abandoned you, but they aren’t all you have, Jughead. Hilda,
Sabrina, and I consider you family. I hope you come to realize that even if you don’t right now.”

He always did feel welcome at the Spellman house, and he would be lying if he didn’t admit that he
felt like he belonged when he was with them, even with Sabrina grumbling in the corner whenever
he was there.
He chuckled. “What if Betty and I break up?”

Zelda snorted. “That makes no difference to us. And besides, having you both come and go in our house, having awkward post-break up run-ins is just an opportunity for us to get you back together. I’m not saying we’d meddle, but—”

“Right.”

Zelda cast him an affectionate smile. “Go home and talk to your dad. At least tell him how this situation he’s put you in sucks.”

Jughead nodded, already bracing himself for that charged conversation.

They said their goodbyes on the sidewalk and Jughead dragged himself to his house.

This was not how he had wanted to spend his evening.

FP was in pajamas when Jughead got home.

The smell of coffee was strong in the air and Jughead could hear the sucking sounds of the coffee machine as it slurped up the last of the liquid from the tank.

“Had your fun?” FP asked, taking a mug from off the shelf.

Jughead scowled, settling on one of the stools around the kitchen counter. “How about you? Got some sleep? Found something to eat? I at least have some bread and peanut butter in the cupboards.”

FP nodded as he poured himself some of the brewed coffee. “Found some eggplant parmigiana in the refrigerator. Zelda’s?”

Jughead shook his head. “Betty’s.”

FP drank his coffee. “The Cooper girl.”

Jughead’s mild mood began to bubble into irritation again. FP’s tone had been one of displeasure and it irked him that FP would even posit to talk about “the Cooper girl” like she was some degenerate. It was a travesty, really, to be so derisive of someone as heartbreakingly amazing as Betty.

His father had some nerve. “You didn’t have a problem with Alice Cooper when you got her pregnant.”

FP choked a little on his coffee. “Boy,” he rasped.

Jughead would be lying if he said he didn’t find that petty comeback satisfying. He wanted to dig it in deeper. “God, could you imagine? If you ended up running away with her, Jellybean and I wouldn’t exist. The Cooper kids wouldn’t exist. What a life you might have had.”

“Stop,” FP said in a clipped tone. “For one thing, Alice wasn’t a Cooper at the time. She was a Spellman—”
“Right. Gotta be accurate.”

“Don’t get smart with me, Jughead. That was a mistake--Alice and I were a mistake. We would’ve eventually destroyed each other.”

Jughead scoffed. “Didn’t do too well with mom, either. Maybe it’s not them, dad.” He was riding the wave of resentment and he found that it was driving this catharsis, this need to put everything out in the open.

For a moment, FP looked like he was going to reach over the counter and throw him across the room, but his father breathed a couple of times and leaned back, nodding. “I’m terrible at relationships. When problems come up, I hide behind my slayer duties. It makes me terrible at everything else.”

Jughead had expected a lot of things, but admitting failure was not one of them.

FP shrugged. “The problem is that nothing in life is perfect so there will always be problems in a relationship. I’m not strong enough for any of it. The only thing I’m strong at is being a slayer. Otherwise I’m a crappy boyfriend, husband, father…”

Irritation began surface again. This almost felt like his father was saying all these things to disarm him. “What do you want me to say, dad? Do you want me to give you a cookie for admitting you’re crappy at everything? Hand over a participation medal? I get it, it’s not me, it’s you. Congratulations, you’re officially an asshole.”

The sigh that escaped FP was one of exhaustion, but Jughead wasn’t willing to go easy on him. Not this time.

“Is this discussion too much for you?” Jughead asked. “Wanna hunt some Ghoulies for a bit then come back when you’re done?”

FP shot him a look. “Help me out here, kid. What do you want from me?”

“Tell me what you’re doing here and then tell me what your plans are now and the next two weeks. Then I’m going to tell you what I hate about it and you’re gonna think about how you’ll make it better!” He was yelling now, and he was stabbing a finger in the air because he was angry that he had to spell it out like this. “Because all this supposed running away that you’re doing? It’s not cool. I hate to disappoint you dad, but I’m not letting you off the hook just because you admitted your short-comings. This time you’re not just going to own up to it, you’re gonna fix it, too. You got that?”

FP looked back at the refrigerator. “I need another beer.” He arched an eyebrow at Jughead. “That okay with you?”

Jughead scowled. “Just one.”

FP put up his hands in surrender and took a bottle from the refrigerator, unscrewing the cap and taking a gulp. “Alright, kid. Alright. I’ve never been good at working out relationships—“

“Never noticed.”

FP chose to ignore his sarcasm this time. “So I’m going to go about this exactly the way you just said. I’m here because Tall Boy did tell me the Coopers were in town.”

“Doesn’t take a rocket scientist.”
“Also that you’re getting close with Betty Cooper.”

“She’s my girlfriend. I love her. Got a problem with that?” He regretted what he said the second it left his lips. He hated it that he had chosen to share that fact as a weapon, not a means to bridge the chasm between him and his father. What he had with Betty was real, not a means to rebel. He hated how his anger was making him say things he wouldn’t normally say.

FP paused and sighed. “Kid, this girl…”

“Betty. Her name is Betty.”

“She is dangerous. Bad people come after her and her family. I don’t want you to get caught in the crossfire. Believe it or not, I was worried about that. I may be a crappy father, but I’m not going to let anything bad happen to you.”

Jughead wasn’t even that surprised that FP knew certain things about the Cooper family history. Just like him, his dad had a network of informants, except that FP’s sources spanned the country. He could’ve gotten that information from anywhere.

“I know that bad people come after her,” Jughead said. “The Ghoulies have been asking about her, but I’m not going to abandon her because of that. I want to protect her. I promised her I would.”

FP looked him straight in the eyes. “Boy, believe me when I say that that girl can protect herself pretty well.”

Jughead’s instincts kicked in at that moment, noting the way his father’s gaze didn’t waver. “What do you know, dad? What aren’t you telling me?”

“D’you say the Ghoulies have been asking about her?”

Maybe Jughead was a little afraid of what his father had to say. He wanted the truth but was he ready for it? His father was many things, but he was never a coddler, especially not when it came to his son. So Jughead took the reprieve, telling his father about what he’d learned about the Ghoulies and the skulls the last few weeks, and about the succubus. He even told his father about Cheryl and Josie colluding on binding Archie, and how it all tied up to Cheryl’s resentment of the Blossoms trying to get Betty to join the Coven.

FP didn’t appear to be too alarmed by that last part, but then again, he could be faking that. “And what does Betty think about it?”

Jughead didn’t want to reveal too much. Betty had told him her feelings about these things in a moment of vulnerability. He didn’t want to toss it off as if it were a relevant piece of information in his father’s investigation. “Joining the Blossom Coven was never in her plans.”

“But the brother’s joined them already?”

Jughead nodded. “He needed a job. He needed the Coven to leave his sisters alone. Yeah, he joined them. I respects his reasons for doing so.”

The corner of FP’s lips turned down. “Yeah. Charles Cooper will do a hell of a lot for his baby sisters.”

“Whatever that is, would I do the same for Jellybean?”

FP fixed him with a stare. “Probably.”
With that answer, Jughead saw no reason to fault Chic for any of it. “Anything you wanna say about Polly? She lures kids into her den and mesmerizes 5-year-olds to do her bidding.”

“What!”

“She’s a kindergarten teacher, dad.” Jughead didn’t even find it funny that his dad had no sense of humor when it came to these things.

“That happened in Colorado, I’ll have you know…” FP’s voice trailed and he took another pause. “So Betty helped put the succubus away.”

“Everyone helped put the succubus away. That’s what friends do, dad.”

FP gave a grunt of discontent. “Things would’ve been a lot less complicated if you just stayed with Toni.”

He deferred from telling his father that Toni was dating Cheryl Blossom. “So what’s the plan? What do you intend to do?”

“You doing your rounds tomorrow?”

“Yeah.” He gave his father a suspicious look. “Why?”

“I’ll ride with you, get caught up in what’s been happening in Riverdale and Greendale.”

Jughead supposed it wasn’t the worst thing in the world to spend the whole day with his father. He had been hoping to spend most of tomorrow with Betty, but if his dad wanted to get caught up, he was sure Betty would understand.

“Okay. And then after that?”

“I hadn’t thought that far.”

Jughead found that he was okay with that. So long as he could keep an eye on his father for the time being, then things weren’t likely to get out of hand.

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Jughead woke up to sounds in the house. It was unnerving, having gotten used to waking up to complete silence. Now he had to remind himself that his father was home and that the man tended to be an early riser.

He looked at the time and saw that it was just past 7 in the morning.

Groaning, he got out of bed to get ready for the morning rounds that he was taking his father to.

He showered and dressed, and as he headed down the stairs, shrugging on his jacket, he heard adult voices arguing downstairs. One of the voices was definitely his father’s. The other two were familiar, and it took him a bit longer to recognize them, but when he did, he found himself eavesdropping.

“--would’ve appreciated a heads up before you went gallivanting all over town!” said Alice Cooper.

“For God’s sake,” FP said in a quieter tone, so much so that Jughead strained to hear. “Keep your voice down. Do you want my kid to hear? He’s upstairs--”
“I’m frankly surprised you haven’t told him all this,” Alice continued, sharply. “One would think you’d take every opportunity to turn him away from the whiles of a witch.”

“Mom,” Chic said in a softer tone. “Please. FP’s right.”

“Why didn’t you tell us you were here, FP,” Alice demanded, lowering her voice, finally.

“I wanted some time with my boy before I sat down with you and Chic,” said FP, calmly. “I didn’t want to blindside him. The events in Seattle were pretty intense, especially for your daughter, who my kid is dating, in case you didn’t know.”

“As far as Betty’s concerned, she doesn’t remember you being there.”

Jughead frowned. That was Chic. And what the hell did he mean by that?

He might have stopped breathing, straining to hear as he made his way quietly down the stairs.

“Wait, what do you mean she doesn’t remember me being there?”

“She wouldn’t,” Chic interrupted. “I wiped her memories. All she remembers is that dad was killed and that she fell unconscious shortly after. She thinks it’s the propofol that messed with her head and-”

“Propofol?” Conversation ceased and Jughead stood there, shooting accusing stares at all three of them. He didn’t care if they knew he was eavesdropping. He wanted answers. “Who gave Betty propofol?”

FP put up his hands. “Son, butt out of it. It’s a family matter—”

Jughead looked at Chic in shock. He couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “You dosed your baby sister with propofol?”

Chic glared at him. “You don’t know a thing about it, Jughead. Listen to your father. Stay out of it.”

“That shit can put people in comas, Chic,” Jughead said, hotly. “That shit can kill people and you gave it to Betty?”

“She’s Wicked, Jughead. She can take it, and it’s not like she doesn’t know,” Chic hissed. “She fully understands why we needed to employ it, so get off your high horse, Jones, and—”

“But does she know you wiped her memory?” Jughead challenged. “You said she thinks it’s the propofol. What are you hiding from her?”

“Enough!” Alice said, her sharp tone cutting through the charged atmosphere. “There is a reason we did what we did. It’s for her own good. Jughead, I’m asking you—if you care about my daughter at all, you will not mention this to her.”

Jughead’s jaw dropped. “You expect me not to say anything to her about this? Are you serious?”

Alice didn’t waver. “I do. Because if you tell her about this and she starts digging for answers, it will destroy her. Do you understand?”

He looked to his father for support, but FP just shook his head. “It’s for the best, kid. You’d do the same for Jellybean.”

“You all are f*cked up,” Jughead declared, heading for the door. “I don’t want any part of this big
secret. Betty has to know.”

But before he could reach the door, his father had grabbed him by the collar of his jacket and slammed him against the wall. Jughead fought to push him back, unaccustomed to being overpowered. Only a slayer can hold a slayer.

Jughead grunted to get away, summoning his slayer strength and feeling it build from the back of his skull. He could feel the power of it starting from his eyes and spreading to the rest of him. He could already see the light of it glowing in the reflection of FP’s gaze.

But FP was not to be overdone. His father summoned his own slayer strength, his own eyes now beginning to get that tell-tale glow. The brown in his irises fading as the blue light of slayer strength began to manifest in FP’s eyes, too.

“Stand down, boy,” FP said, roughly.

Jughead struggled to push his father off him. “Let me go!”

“You leave this be!” FP hissed. “This isn’t for you to fix!”

Jughead held still but dealt his father a glare. “If Betty finds out that I kept this from her, it’ll break her heart. I promised her we’d be honest with each other.”

FP dragged him away and Jughead couldn’t fight him off. He took Jughead into his study and tossed him into the room. Jughead shoved himself away from his father and tore off his beanie in anger, slamming his fist on the desk with it.

The heavy wooden desk groaned under his strength.

“What the fuck is this, dad?” Jughead yelled.

FP was breathing hard. Strong as he was, he too had to struggle to restrain someone as strong as he was. “This is a matter for the Coopers. You’ve no right to meddle in this.”

Jughead stared hard at FP and it dawned on him—what his father wasn’t telling him. “You know. You fucking know what this is! How is that, dad? Were you there the night her dad was killed?”

FP clamped his lips tight.

Horror suffused his chest. “Jesus Christ, dad! Did you kill Hal Cooper?”

“I didn’t!” FP declared resolutely, but then he stopped, a flicker of doubt creeping into his resolve. “At least I think I didn’t. I’m not sure—”

Jughead couldn’t believe it. He was breathing deeply now, too, thinking about the devastation of that possibility—that he would have to tell Betty that his own father killed hers. “Fuck. Fuck! Dad!”

“I don’t know! I don’t—I’m not sure who did! It was all crazy and confusing! There was so much magic and—” FP gave a frustrated sigh and he clenched his fists. “Alice Cooper called me. They needed help. They needed me to—Jug, just stop asking questions. I swear it’s for the best. And that’s why I’m asking you—begging you. Stay away from her. Just—she’s dangerous, son. She can hurt

“Betty would never hurt me,” Jughead said, hotly. “You don’t know anything about her. You don’t know—“
“I know you think you’re in love, and I know how that feels, but you’re only eighteen—”

“I’m not breaking up with Betty,” Jughead growled.

“Boy.”

Jughead made for the door but FP stepped in his way. It took all of Jughead’s willpower not to shove his father aside. “Get out of my way.”

FP tried to say something else.


Neither of them moved, but finally FP put his hands up and started to back off. The moment Jughead had a clear path to the door, he stormed out of it and when he got to the living room, Chic and Alice were there.

Their stares were expectant and that just made Jughead even angrier.

“You better get your stories straight, Chic, Mrs. Cooper, because if none of you care enough to tell her, I’m going to do it for you.”

He turned and left his house, calling Betty as he hopped on his motorcycle and headed towards Elm.

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Betty grinned when she saw Jughead’s name flashing on her phone screen.

Happily, she picked up the call. “Hey, Juggie.”

“Hi, Betts.”

It wasn’t even eight in the morning and he already sounded tired. “Rough night with your dad?”

“More like rough morning, actually.” He sighed. “Listen, do you think I can come by? I really need to talk to you about something.”

Her smile withered. He sounded so serious. “Yes, of course. Is everything okay?”

“I don’t know. I’ll be there in a bit, okay?”

“Okay.”

When they dropped the call, Betty sat quietly for a moment, feeling her anxiety mounting.

Last night they had texted before going to bed, with Jughead telling her that it was the best Beltane Eve and Beltane day he had ever had. He told her he loved her and she told him the same, telling him she missed him already. They flirted suggestively for a spell with Jughead joking that if she didn’t stop, he would be showing up at her bedroom window in the next five minutes. She was tempted to say, “What are you waiting for?” but knew that he should spend time at home with his dad for the time being.
So she did stop and she told him to get some rest. They said their good nights and she hoped he’d make the most out of the night they’re not spending together.

Now she was worried that he had bad news, like maybe he had to go with his father out of state for months on some kind of mission, or worse, maybe FP Jones told Jughead to break up with her or he’d be disowned, or something as equally devastating.

But she should’ve known Jughead was never so predictable. She should’ve known that Jughead always took care of her. As soon as she opened the door, his gentle smile washed away all her anxieties, and she was barely able to breathe out a “Hi,” before he wrapped her in his arms and kissed her.

She basked in this heightened sense of intimacy. Their immediate need to touch. This was post-Beltane Eve, and she loved it.

“Hi,” he said against her mouth. “I was hoping you’d tell me to come over last night.”

She laughed softly, her fingers playing idly with the buttons of his plaid. “I wanted to tell you to sneak into my window…”

He was looking at her lips, and maybe a little down her shirt. She might have chosen one with a deep v-cut collar. “Why didn’t you? I’ll take any excuse to come here.”

“I know… but I wanted you to have time with your dad.”

At this he sighed and threw his head back, the mood shifting. “Right.”

Her earlier worries resurfaced, but thankfully in more manageable levels. His kisses and words of love were reassuring, so she felt a bit less like she would be getting devastating news.

“Jug, what’s wrong?” Her tone was gentle. Undemanding. If she were being honest, she was afraid to know, but if he needed her help, she wanted him to know she was there for him.

He closed the door behind them and walked further into the house, stopping in the living room and pacing agitatedly before taking her by he shoulders and looking her in the eyes. “I need to tell you something, but I--I'm not sure if I should. It's about your family.”

Anxiety knotted her stomach. “My family?”

“Do you remember what Astanphaeus told you?”

She closed her eyes, recalling every word that had gotten burned into her memory: Don’t turn your back on the people who love you. Humans are flawed and they make mistakes, but much of the time, they do it for love. You will need them, Elizabeth... Your storm is brewing and you will need the shelter your loved ones provide.

Betty looked at him, seeing the worry in his gaze. “Yes, I do. I remember. Is this about that?”

He nodded. “This morning. Your mother and brother were in my living room and arguing with my dad. I overheard them.”

Betty’s stomach clenched.

“I can tell you what I heard, Betts, but this is your family. You can give them the chance to tell you themselves. I only heard parts--not the whole story, but what I heard… I don’t want you to hate
them. And I--I don’t want you to hate me...”

She couldn’t possibly hate him, could she? She cupped his cheek and he leaned into her touch. She loved him. How could she hate him? And she didn’t doubt his feelings for her. Especially when she let his words sink in, turning them over and over in her head.

He was giving her the chance to think this through. To see reason before her emotions clouded things into unrecognizable masses of misery, because his news wasn’t good and because he cared about her deeply enough that he was mindful of its consequences.

She took a deep breath and hardened her resolve. “Tell me what you heard. And I promise, Jug, I won’t hate you.”

Taking her hands in his, he told her what he knew.

FP Jones II had never been a complicated man, and maybe that was both his biggest asset and his main downfall. People expected him to have certain layers and dimensions, and when he didn’t, they were disappointed and he felt incapable of changing the situation.

On the other hand, he had no pretensions. No special demands or quirks. With FP, what you saw was what you got, even if he wished he had more to offer.

That was how he got things done as a Slayer all the time, and he was great at it, while everything else around him fell apart. His singular focus was why his wife left him with their daughter, miserable and fearful, and it was also why he was doing no better with his son. He built a life around his slaying, setting up a business--a bar and a brewery, just so he could say that he was providing for his family and he could do what he did best.

The only person who ever really understood him was Alice Cooper, and it was the very reason she left him, too. When she told him she was pregnant at 16, his first thought was not to deny that the kid was his--he knew it was, but it was how they could have this child and still be able to fulfill his life’s destiny.

Alice saw that, even if for a brief moment she fantasized that they could be happy living that kind of life. It took her about a week before she came to her senses--she had always been the clever one, Alice. Ruthlessly so. Where her sisters were kind, creative, and determined to bring about world peace, Alice had no such compunctions. Alice saw the world the way it was: mean, impetuous, and selfish.

So Alice aborted that baby and moved on, telling FP, “I don’t hate you, Forsythe, but you and I--we will make each other miserable. I don’t want that. No love is worth that. You have a right to live the life you want and so do I. I’ll always be your friend when you need me.”

And he’ll always be hers.

It was why when she needed help in Seattle, he came running. She had never called for him until then. Something evil had taken over her family and she needed him to stop it because none of them were strong enough.
By the time he got to them, however, it was far, far too late. Someone had to die.

There were moments after the events of that night that he thought about what could have been. He wondered if it hadn’t been better that he kept his slayer hat on.

Perhaps if it hadn’t been Alice Cooper that had needed him, he might have done the best thing, which was to kill both Betty and Hal.

In the end, he couldn’t silence Alice’s screams from his head. He couldn’t keep the anguish from seeping into his supposedly uncomplicated heart.

“Is she alright? Is my baby alright? Dear, God, Elizabeth! ELIZABETH!”

Of course, Betty was alive. Betty was safe, but at what cost? How long before she lost control again and none of them could stop her?

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Something coiled in the pit of Betty’s stomach, tight and painful. She’d had this feeling before, this sense of internalized panic, where she needed to bite down on her anxiety, because taking the medication she would need to calm her fears down required amounts in suicidal proportions.

She dug her nails into the carpet, refusing to think about what Chic and her mother could possibly _not_ want her to remember. What was so terrible that Alice and Chic Cooper would believe that Betty couldn’t handle it? She, Wicked Witch, trader of pain, nightmare to many, didn’t exactly scare that easily. What had she done?

“Betty.”

His voice. His touch.

He was cupping her face and calling her name, and when she looked at him, his brows were creased in worry— _for her._

“Betty, did you hear what I said?”

“What?” she whispered absently. “What did you say?”

“My dad,” Jughead repeated, gently. “I think he knows you’re Wicked. Chic said it right in front of him and dad didn’t even blink. He spent years telling me that the Wicked should be—“ He paused. “Deal with.”

Betty did not attempt a more explicit word.

He went on. “If he knew and didn’t just tell me that—“

“Jug, he didn’t want you to know that he knew about Seattle. At least not immediately. You told me he wanted to do rounds with you today. He was probably going to tell you everything while you were together, but—“
“Yeah.” He sighed. “I’m just a little on edge. I want to know what happened, too. I mean, what about Polly? What does she know about this?”

Betty blinked, thinking back on those weeks where Polly was completely inoculated from everything, until the day Alice had to call her eldest daughter over the phone to tell her something terrible had happened. “Probably not much. She was out of state. Had been out of state. It was an internship in California and… I remember hearing her arrive after it happened, and the sound of her voice. She was angry, Jug. She kept telling Chic and Mom that they were lying to her, because we did everything right in Seattle. That dad couldn’t possibly be dead. And then she was angry at me.” Her eyes stung from the effort of keeping her tears at bay. “Because it’s always my fault. We only ever get attacked because of me and she blamed me for a while. We all just wanted to live normal lives, Juggie, and here I was, making that impossible.”

“It’s not your fault, Betty,” Jughead said. “You don’t make people want your powers. You just want to live your life.”

She took his hand, holding it tight. “Do you think your dad would tell me what happened? Do you think he’d be willing to?”

His eyes filled with compassion. “Betts… your family should tell you what happened.”

“Right.” Of course. She didn’t know why she was looking to Jughead’s father for answers. Or maybe she did. Maybe it was that easy to lose her trust. Maybe she was angry. At Chic. At her mother.

A door closed upstairs and soon, the gentle footfalls of Polly were followed by her appearance in the living room.

She took one look at them sitting on the floor and arched an eyebrow, though the corner of her lip was lifting on one side. “You guys had breakfast yet?”

They shook their heads.

“I’ll go fix some, then. Bacon and eggs sound good?”

Betty didn’t reply and she watched her sister leave for the kitchen, completely oblivious to the dramas transpiring so early in the morning.

Her gaze met Jughead’s, and for a second, a trickle of mirth eased her frayed emotions. Polly making them bacon and eggs was jarringly normal and perhaps a welcome diversion.

“She nodded and cast him a pleading look. “Just... stay.”

“You’re going to be here soon,” Jughead said. “I don’t know what that’s going to be like.”

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“She nodded and cast him a pleading look. “Just... stay.”

“You’re going to be here soon,” Jughead said. “I don’t know what that’s going to be like.”

She sighed and closed her eyes, sinking into his side and tucking herself into the crook of his shoulder. His arm held her close and she felt calmer. Better equipped.

She wasn’t sure how long they stayed that way, but next thing she knew, Polly was calling them over for breakfast, and as if in silent agreement, they rose to join Polly at the kitchen.
“Jeez, Jones. You should join a contest,” Polly remarked as he took his fourth egg and third helping of bacon.

Betty could see Jughead’s ears redden and she felt an inexplicable need to protect him, even just from Polly’s good-natured ribbing. Just as Alice tormented them for eating too much, she did not want the same to be done to Jughead, especially not when he didn’t often get home cooked meals. “Oh, leave him alone, Pols. You only wish we could eat this way.”

“I swear, this is my last,” he muttered through a mouth full of bacon. “I’m just really hungry.”

It was true, what she said. She wished she and Polly could pack in it like he could. No doubt, some kind of slayer metabolism takes over and the amount of calories from fat isn’t likely going to slow him down anytime soon.

She smiled and rubbed his knee. “There’s plenty, Jug. Don’t worry about it.”

“In the meantime, you haven’t had any,” Polly pointed out. “Mom’s not here, in case you haven’t noticed.”

Betty pursed her lips. “I’m not hungry.”

“I stress eat,” Jughead said, by way of explanation. “I eat more when I’ve got things on my mind.”

It went without saying, then, that Betty was the exact opposite.

Polly, mercifully, attributed his stress to his regular slayer duties and didn’t ask too many questions.

He did finish up soon after his numerous helpings and they all helped to put away the plates and pans. They were in the midst of having some coffee when the sound of people coming through the door had Betty exchanging a look of trepidation with him.

It was definitely Alice and Chic.

“Elizabeth? Are you home?”

Betty took a deep breath. “In the kitchen.”

Alice walked in, followed by Chic. There was a third person—a man, and while Betty did not know him, she could make an educated guess. He was tall, trim, he wore dark jeans, a Serpent jacket, and he definitely had a striking similarity in face and features as Jughead.

This was, she concluded, FP Jones. And as he strode into the kitchen, he looked at no one except his son. He was not there to make friends.

Jughead gave a start, surprised that his father had shown up. “Dad, what are you doing here?”

“I came to pick you up,” FP said firmly. “I will tell you everything I know, but Betty and her family need to talk alone.”

As her name fell from his lips, everything changed.
Everything.

It struck her like a blunt object, sending pain from the back of her head. It was so overwhelmingly real that her grip on her coffee cup failed and it shattered on the floor beneath her.

Her vision swam.

Betty felt ice pierce the tips of her fingers, traveling up her arms, then straight to her head. It was as if the cold overtook her, just before it became a blazing heat. The entire kitchen was consumed in flames and the morning became cloaked in darkness.

She wasn’t in her kitchen at Riverdale anymore. She was back in Seattle to the night her father perished in a pool of blood.

She was sitting on a raised concrete platform on the grounds of a city graveyard--probably an unfinished mausoleum, or a ruined one, wearing nothing but her underwear, like she had been stripped down. Her fingers were digging into the soil because her body felt electric, crackling with magic.

She looked around her and found herself in the middle of a sigil. She didn’t know what the symbols meant, but from outside of this vision--

No, this memory.

--she knew that the writing was Enochian. Knew that the bowls alighting the corners of the sigil had been deliberately lit. Knew that the things surrounding it meant that whoever cast this circle had infused it with his power.

She recognized who owned these objects. They were her father’s. They were Hal’s.

“Dad?” She called out, and she thought her voice was different, even if it was undeniably hers.

Slowly, she turned, searching for him, and she found him, not far away, doubled over in pain. He was having trouble breathing, but he was moving and pushing himself off the ground. He was outside the circle.

When he stood, she saw the Athame in his hand.

As she sat up, she tried to move past the sigil but a burning pain shot through her body when she tried. She screamed even as confusion suffused her. This wasn’t just a sigil, this was a cage, and she was in it.

Confusion swam through her pain. “W-What’s happening?”

Her father, slowly recovering from whatever injury he sustained, used the Athame to cut his hand and placed it on an image of a maple leaf, drawn onto the concrete floor. He began to speak an incantation in Latin.

Betty felt the magic grip her entire body. This magic was not meant to protect. This magic was sinister, and her immediate instinct was to resist it. It was trying to stretch her flat on the ground, but
she refused, fighting it--curling into a protective ball. Her magic jumped from her body to the circle outside, reaching for Hall.

He sprung on his feet to avoid its tendrils. One almost caught him and it exploded like electricity. Had one already caught him earlier? Is that why he looked like he had gotten the wind knocked out of him?

“What’s happening?” she asked again, screaming this time, as she tried to fight the forces that were trying to control her.

Hal did not pause. Like a slayer speaking a banishment spell, he continued, unmoved. His eyes were glowing green now, and while her magic began to spin a cocoon of power around her, whatever hold he had on her was not weakening in the least.

She was sobbing, now, the pain from resisting both battering her and serving her magic, but now she felt like her entire body was on fire--searing heat that could’ve blistered anybody’s skin, boiled anyone’s blood, and yet Betty wasn’t burning away. Her suffering was intense and she had lost cognizance of how strong her magic could be, but she spoke through the agony. “Daddy, please make it stop!”

And then the hold on her body loosened and her magic was unleashed. It was more painful than holding it in, like uncoiling it had ripped several holes through her body. And for certain, she was bleeding.

Everywhere.

She lay wasted on the ground, catching her breath, but she could see amidst the smoke, fire, and blood that her father was on the floor again, on his hands and knees, while another man stood above him, and Chic knelt beside him.

She felt the growing presence of creatures coming in from a distance. When her magic grew, her awareness of everything expanded, as well.

She didn’t know why these creatures were coming. Didn’t know what brought them. What she did know was that these creatures were being sent to harm them. Not her, them. Chic, her father, and this stranger were in dire danger--there would be claws and fangs in overwhelming number.

The stranger that stood above Hal held an Athame, perhaps the same one that Hal had held in his hand, and Chic was holding on to the man’s wrist, as if begging him not to use it.

Not a stranger.

It was FP Jones, speaking harshly at Chic and Hal.

All three of them were saying something at once, their words jumbling together in the chaos. She found that in spite of her wounds, she could push herself off the ground, managing to sit up. Her magic was still alive and moving through her. The wounds on her body were already healing.

“Chic,” she rasped, pushing herself to her knees.

All three of them turned in her direction, and that’s when she heard her father’s voice.

“Abomination.”

With all the pain she had felt that night, that word, spoken to her like a curse, hurt the most.
“Shut up, dad,” Chic cried, his voice wracked in sobs. “Shut up! Bug, he’s not himself! He’s not--”

Hal began to speak the latin incantation again and Betty felt that same magic trying to overcome her once more, but Hal’s magic had been weakened, and Betty was used to pain. She fought back with her own magic, and it filled her to breaking.

Even as she felt Hal’s magic reaching into her chest, as if to rip out her heart, she fought back and screamed with the pain and effort.

Her magic exploded and everyone, FP, Chic, Hal, the creatures… they all fell to their knees in agony as she took their pain to power her spell.

“Chic!” FP screamed as he writhed in pain.

“Betty, please!” Chic cried. “Please, stop!”

His voice snaked into her senses and for a brief heartbeat, her hold on their pain loosened.

“Chic,” she whispered, realizing what she was doing. Realizing that she was hurting everyone because she was giving into the instinct to survive.

And yet all she could think was that there were all these other creatures that sought to do them harm. She needed to protect her own, too. Her magic pulsed and she pushed it outwards. The creatures that came for them began bursting into flames. Their dying screams were terrifying.

It was then she felt arms around her and the stabbing pain of a needle being jammed into her neck. She felt herself go immediately boneless, the power draining from her arms and legs. She fell against someone, and as she dropped into a boneless heap, she heard Hal give a strangled cry, like he was choking on his own blood. She saw both Chic and FP removing themselves from Hal’s dying body, and as she slipped into unconsciousness, she saw FP turn to look at her, glaring at her with eyes aglow in blue iridescence, heaven’s righteousness shining from his gaze.

He came at her, Athame raised, perhaps poised to plunge the blade into her heart, and the last thing she heard before she succumbed to the darkness was her mother shrieking. “Don’t, FP! For God’s sake she’s my daughter! She’s my daughter!”

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Betty’s body was cramping. She was curled into such a tight ball that she almost couldn’t remember how to unfurl. The intense pain in her head, however, was waning, and she realized that someone had her in his arms, and he was whispering in her ear as he rocked her.

“It’s alright, Betts. It’s going to be alright.”

“Chic! Hurry with the potion!” That was her mother’s voice in the background.

Her throat felt sore, like she had been screaming the entire time, and maybe she was. Maybe not everything had stayed in her dream.

Her fingers uncurled from her head and she saw her nails stained red. She felt pinpricks of pain from her scalp and knew then where the blood had come from.
Chic was suddenly there, uncapping a vial in his hand.

“Whoa, what the hell is that?” Jughead said, pulling her closer in his embrace, as if to protect her from Chic.

“It’s just a relaxant--”

“No,” she managed to croak out. “No more, Chic.”

She was done with the relaxants and the propofols and the milk thistles. The kind of memory wipe they had done for her required maintenance and constant dosing, because unlike the haphazard memory wipes they’d done on attackers in the past, she needed to function. She couldn’t be a drooling catatonic mess like them, because she was Chic’s sister. And Alice’s child.

Everything they’ve ever given her to calm her down, she now suspected was a potion of some sort to maintain that memory wipe. She realized that now, and she was over getting drugged if that was the case.

What she had just now wasn’t a dream, it was her memories resurfacing. It was what happened that night and for some reason, FP’s voice and face had unleashed it from its bonds.

Some memories, they get burned into your brain, and no amount of spells and potions can make it go away. FP’s voice had been the crack in that spell, and seeing him had blown that spell wide open.

“I remember,” she choked out, her voice rough with emotion. “I remember everything.”

She pushed herself up and Jughead helped her. Polly was on the other side of her, pale and trembling. Betty didn’t know how much Polly knew, but she found herself distrusting her entire family. She wrenched away from her sister, clinging closer to Jughead almost desperately.

“Betty,” Polly whimpered, hurt in her gaze.

“Don’t any of you touch me,” Betty hissed. “I need you all to tell me the truth. Who killed him? Did I do it? Did I kill my own father?” She was sobbing, but she didn’t care. This was not the time to hold back. It made sense. The reason they were keeping this from her. “Oh, my God, I killed him, didn’t I?”

FP gestured helplessly. “Kid, we don’t know--”

“I did it,” Chic said through a choked sob. “I killed him. I had to, Bug. He was going to kill you.”

And somehow, that hurt worse than anything in the world. Her father. Her own father had tried to kill her. There must be some mistake. “No, that’s not possible. Dad would never--”

“It’s true,” Alice choked out. “Something happened to him, Elizabeth. He hadn’t been himself for weeks and I was afraid--for you. I called FP to take care of it, to look into it, but he was unreachable by phone. I could only email him, and by the time he got my message, it was too late. Your father had fully gone into whatever dark place he was venturing, and he was--he was trying to take your Wickedness, Betty. He was--”

Alice began to sob into her hands.

More memories began to trickle into her mind. Little bits now--nothing like the explosive one that had her folding over, but still as devastating. “He wasn’t trying to take it from me… he was trying to make it go away. He didn’t want to kill me--”
“He did, bug,” Chic said. “At the moment he did.”

“He’d gone bad, kid,” FP said, indelicately. “If he had survived that night, I would’ve had to slay him, anyway. Chic just got to it faster, I suppose.”

“I did it for Betty.” He said this in a more resolute tone. “I’d do it again, if I had to.”

FP sighed. “There you have it. And here we are…”

“Did you change my memories, too, Chic?” Betty asked. “Did you alter some things--?”

“I didn’t. I just wiped it. Whatever you remember wrong, it was just your mind trying to make sense of the images that never left you. Your mind filling the gaps.”

“She wasn’t even sure why she was asking. She already knew the answer. It hurt, knowing her father wanted her power enough to destroy her, but instead of that hurt going away, she was afraid that now, now it would do its worst, destroying her slowly. Bit by bit.

She didn’t know how she was going to live with the knowledge that her own father was willing to sacrifice her for his own gain.

All their lives, they were protecting her from threats coming from outside, when all this time, the threat could’ve come from within. And even more devastating was the truth that she could’ve killed them all to protect herself.

Chic gave an anguished moan. “Because it was all I had left to protect you, bug. I couldn’t protect you from dad, or from what he’d done, so I just--I just wanted to protect you from the aftermath. You’ve dealt with enough. Explaining to you why our father wanted to kill you would be too much for you or me.”

And there it was, and she knew he would say that.

She felt sick to her stomach and she needed a moment to breathe before she could speak again without vomiting the contents of her empty stomach. When she found her equilibrium, she looked pleadingly at Jughead.

“I need to get out of here.”

He didn’t hesitate. He nodded and took her hand. “Come on.”

“Where are you taking her?” Alice demanded. “Elizabeth, I don’t think--”

“Mom!” Polly hissed. “For God’s sake, let her be.”

Betty, however suspicious she was about what Polly knew, threw her sister a grateful look as she let Jughead lead her out of the house and to his motorcycle.

When he told her to hold tight, she did. She didn’t know if she could ever let go.
Jughead brought her to the restricted section of the library. On Sundays, the library was closed, so there was no fear of interruption, but also, he knew that they both took a lot of comfort being surrounded by books. He knew that libraries were always her escape, wherever she went. He could tell by the impressive collection of library cards on her keychain. It was his escape, too. The mundanity of library life and keeping a job there was his zen away from slaying, even if he also knew that there was a store of weapons through a secret door and a vault of magic underneath.

As they sat at the table, enveloped by the quiet of the room, he observed that Betty looked unsettlingly calm.

Her fingernails were gone of her blood, having washed them in the bathroom. She had fixed her disheveled ponytail, too. She looked collected. She looked cool as alabaster.

“Betty…”

She swallowed, some of the cold veneer wavering at the sound of her name. “I can’t, Jug. I don’t want to feel right now. If I let myself, I will throw up and then I’ll spiral.” She ran her hands over her already smooth ponytail then folded them together, her lips pressed to her knuckles. Her gaze was lost and for a second, it looked like she was going to hold it together, but something broke and she began to cry.

She collapsed into his arms and all he could do was hold her in her grief.

He couldn’t find the words. He’d been abandoned by one parent and neglected by another, but for all their failures, they’d never wanted him dead.

Betty didn’t cry long, and when she was done, she wiped her eyes on her sleeves and pulled back her shoulders, shaking her head as if to clear the fog of tragedy that surrounded her.

“I wonder where I went wrong,” she stated, sniffing pertly to clear her stuffed voice. “What did I do wrong?”

Jughead squeezed her shoulder. “I can’t imagine that it was anything you did. Something was very wrong, yeah, but it wasn’t you.”

“But when did it change? I thought my father loved me, Jug.” She splayed out her hands helplessly, trying to grasp at something— anything, that might give her a clue. “He bought me ice cream cones in the summer and corn dogs in the fall. He took me to ballet lessons when he can, and when he can’t, he taught me how to fix a car’s engine. He hated roller coasters, but he rode them with me when Polly didn’t feel like accompanying me. There were so many moments, Jug, and now all I can think was that they were all a lie.” She looked into her palms. “Did he just grow tired of me, you think? It must be exhausting to make sure that I don’t get kidnapped or killed. I know I’m exhausted…”

He couldn’t imagine ever growing tired of her, of protecting her. Besides, one would think that Hal being her father, it was his life’s purpose to protect his kids, whether or not they were Wicked. But it did hurt him to think that what was once so real to her is turning out to be a fantasy. Like waking up and realizing that one’s whole life was just a dream.

“I think all that was real, Betts,” he said, softly. “I think whatever your dad did for you in the past, it was because he loved you. What happened in Seattle… something triggered that. Something outside of you. Besides, I can’t imagine anyone not loving you. You are incredibly, irresistibly, and heartbreakingly lovable.”

She smiled a bit at that, her eyes filling anew even as a stuffy chuckle escaped her. “That’s because
“Maybe. Or maybe I just want you to know that you’re the best thing to happen to me and what our parents say about us don’t define who we are.”

She gave him a look of gratitude, which was kind of a travesty in itself, since Betty Cooper shouldn’t have to be grateful for anyone’s good opinion of her. She was amazing. Anyone should be so lucky to be in her good graces.

“Jug, I can’t go back to that house. Not right now.” She slipped her hands into his, her eyes pleading.

He nodded, understanding. “If dad weren’t home, I’d let you stay with me, and I have a better idea anyway. You can stay with your aunts. I’m sure they’d love to have you and you’ll never have to open an empty refrigerator.”

She laughed, softly. “Always thinking about the food.”

“Always. Let me drop you off at the Spellmans, then I’ll ride on over to your house and pack you some things, okay?”

She blushed and fidgeted. “You going to go through my underwear drawer?”

It was kind of cute, hearing her be so shy about her underthings. He touched her chin. “I’ve seen you naked. Touched you naked. Your underwear is just something that wraps what I want.”

Her cheeks reddened even more. “I know… just--” she rolled her eyes. “They’re not all fancy, pretty, lacy things. One might even say there are period panties in there.”

He thought that hilarious and laughed. “Look, Polly’s going to be there. I’ll be asking her help, anyway.”

“Sorry.” She laughed at herself. “I know there are more important things, but…”

“I know, but this conversation is nice.” This time, he pulled her onto his lap. “I want to help you come to terms with what happened in Seattle. We’ll talk about it for as long as you need, but I’ll take topics like lacy underwear and seeing you naked, too…”

She pressed a kiss to his lips. “We haven’t even really talked about Beltane Eve. I thought that’s what we would be doing all day today. How amazing it was…”

“It was incredible,” he whispered in her ear. “We’re so good together.”

“I’ll be staying with my aunts, so--”

He chuckled as he pressed kisses along her neck with soft suction. “We can talk all night.”

She sighed, closing her eyes. “Yes. Talk. I’d love to talk. Over and over.”

It was almost pathetic, how easily Betty can turn him on.

“We should go,” he said, running his hands along the outside of her thigh. “Before I start doing things to you.”

“That is not a reason to leave, Jones. Like, what things?”

He grinned. “Betts.”
“Fine. I get it. I’m emotionally wrought and mindless sex isn’t healthy.”

“Yes to the first reason and we’ll talk about the second one a bit more later.”

“Promise?”

He kissed her. “Promise.”

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Jughead saw his father’s bike still parked outside the Cooper house, which was just as well. He had words for FP.

He was still in the midst of removing his helmet when the front door opened and Alice Cooper stormed out of it.

“Elizabeth? Where’s my daughter, you hoodlum?”

Jughead supposed he’d been called worse things. “Relax, she’s at Zelda’s.”

“Chic! Chic, take me to Zelda’s right now!”

“Mom, that’s probably not a good idea,” Chic said from inside the house. His sigh was so loud that Jughead heard it from the front step.

“You don’t know that!”

Jughead shook his head. “Yeah, it’s a terrible idea. She doesn’t want to see any of you. She doesn’t even want to come home. I came by to pack some of her things.”

Alice’s jaw dropped and Jughead stood there, waiting for someone to let him in.

“Great going, guys,” Polly said, waving Jughead into the house. “You’ve driven Betty away. This is a feat I never thought possible. You’ve made the one person in this family who doesn’t get mad, mad. This is just great.”

“Oh, shut up, Polly,” Chic groaned as Jughead shouldered his way through the door. “This wasn’t supposed to happen. That memory wipe wasn’t supposed to fail.”

Jughead arched an eyebrow. “That memory wipe should’ve never happened. Jesus, what is wrong with all of you?”

“This is FP’s fault, honestly,” Alice griped. “It was probably the whole Slayer thing—the lot of you are immune to everything. We can’t even get memory spells to work on your ugly mugs.”

“Ugly!” FP cried, laughing.

Jughead scowled. “Really, dad? That’s what you object to in all this?”

Polly rolled her eyes. “Come on, Jughead. Let me help you get Betty’s things.”

He nodded, but before he followed her up the stairs, he turned to his dad and said, “You and I need
FP sighed. “Sure, I’ll wait.”

As Jughead followed Polly up the steps, she gave a frustrated sigh. “I’m sorry about all that, Jug… this is kind of news to me, too. I mean, not about the memory wipe. I kinda knew about that, but I guess I don’t really--” She sighed. “I don’t fight for things the way Betty does. I’ll rebel, but mostly about stupid stuff. I suppose I lack conviction in important things. But I had no idea dad tried to--” She shook her head, walking into Betty’s room. “Whatever. It is what it is. We just have to pick up the pieces.”

Jughead wasn’t sure he knew what to say to Polly. On the one hand, Polly had nothing to do with the decision to keep Betty in the dark, but on the other hand, Polly could’ve done the right thing and told her sister about it, but there’s something to be said about coming home to the shock of finding out your father had been killed, and perhaps for resenting her sister a little bit, because she was the easiest person to blame.

Polly pulled out a carry on and laid it open on the bed. She started pulling open drawers and cabinets, stacking Betty’s clothes on one arm.

Jughead took a moment to look at the photographs on Betty’s mirror. It was mostly the Coopers and the Spellmans. No pictures of former classmates, no friends from out of state. He saw a picture of whom Jughead can only assume is Hal. They had their faces pressed together on the photo, taken like a selfie.

He found it hard to believe that anyone can pretend that kind of love and affection for someone for years.

Polly held up a strappy green dress by its hanger. “Any chance you’ll take my sister out to a fancy dinner while she’s over there?”

Jughead fidgeted. “Er--”

“It was a joke,” Polly added lightly. “We bought this dress before I went on my internship. She was going to a school dance with this kid named Miguel. Nice guy she helped tutor in English class. He immigrated from Mexico with his family and they bonded over Laura Esquivel’s Like Water for Chocolate. Really dreamy. Had the accent of a heartbreaker.”

Jughead never realized he could be that guy, the guy who got jealous of another guy he’d never met, and yet here he was.

“This kid introduced himself as Mick at school, but it turned out that it was just a nickname his parents told him to use so that he could assimilate. He wasn’t fond of it. He liked his real name, so it was Betty who started calling him Miguel on a regular basis. I guess that kinda sealed the deal on him liking her.” Polly gave him a pleading look. “Betty does that sort of thing. She accepts people for who they are, and maybe it’s because she’s projecting her own need--to be accepted the way she is, because she can’t help what she is.”

“Polly,” he said gently. “I already know Betty’s Wicked.”

She nodded. “Yes, but that’s--she’s powerful, Jug. Scary powerful, even…” Her voice trailed and she paused, as if rethinking what she was about to say. “She never got to go to the dance with Miguel. The thing with dad happened and we just had to leave Seattle. I don’t even know if she got to say goodbye to him. It wasn’t the first time it happened, either.” She sighed. “She never kept
friends—not until now, because things go to shit and it feels pointless to have friendships. I really, really hope this is not one of those situations, Jug. I hope she doesn’t have to pull away again.”

“It won’t be,” Jughead said, automatically. Maybe he needed it to be true, too.

Polly put the dress back into the closet and took a smaller bag. She started to pack some of the things atop Betty’s dresser. “Listen, if you can let me know if she’d be willing to talk to me, that would be great. I won’t tell mom and Chic, if that helps.”

He nodded. “I’ll ask her.”

“Great.” She packed the small bag to bursting then stuffed it in the carry on, then she zipped the carry on closed. “Think you can get this on your bike?”

“Shouldn’t be a problem. Thanks, Polly. I’m sure she’d want to see you sooner rather than later.”

The corner of her lip lifted. “Yeah, thanks. I know we did her wrong, but we did it because we didn’t want her to get hurt any more than she already was. Her life is about pain and—sometimes we feel helpless about that, so maybe we do stupid things to try to shield her when we can.”

Jughead didn’t argue.

He carried the bag down the stairs and when they were back in the living room, Chic wasn’t there and Alice and FP were on the couch, speaking but not looking at one another.

FP seemed mildly relieved to see Jughead and he stood without prompting. “You going back to the Spellmans, kid?”

“Yeah. I promised Betty I’ll be back as soon as I’m done here. We can talk outside.”

“You can stay here. I’m going upstairs,” Alice said, heading for the stairs.

FP snorted. “Yeah, right. And give you the chance to eavesdrop? Come on, son. Outside is just fine.”

Alice’s lips pursed but she didn’t deny FP’s accusations.

“I’ll see you around, Jug,” Polly said. “And please tell Betty I’m really sorry.”

It occurred to Jughead then that no one else had ventured to offer an apology.

He and FP headed outside, going to their motorcycles that were parked side by side on the curb. Jughead started strapping the bag to his bike.

“So when exactly were you going to tell me about Seattle again?” Jughead asked. “You had all night.”

“Today. While doing the rounds. But it was just like Alice to come barging in and ruining the surprise.”

Jughead snorted and shook his head. “And Betty? You knew she was Wicked?”

“Did you?”

He shot his father a withering look. “Yeah, of course. I’ve known for weeks. She told me about it herself.”
Something like surprise flickered in FP’s gaze. “She did?”

“Yeah, dad. Betty and I have no secrets.”

“Son…”

“I’m not leaving her, dad.”

“Did she also tell you that she can take the pain of others to power her magic?”

Jughead scowled. “That’s not how it works for the Wicked—“

“She’s more than Wicked, boy. She’s worse. Taking the pain of others… others, Jughead! That’s unlimited power—“

“I’ve watched her hurt herself!” Jughead spat. His head was pounding, but he wasn’t sure if it was because he was angry with his father or because this revelation was upsetting him. “I’ve seen her shed her own blood to make her magic. You can’t tell me she uses other people’s pain because her pain has been so intense. Why would she endure that kind of pain if she could spare herself? If anything, that probably means she chooses not to take the pain of other people.”

FP’s hard expression didn’t soften in the least. “That night in Seattle, when her father tried to take her Wickedness from her, she drew from all of us. It bowled me over, kid. My legs were cramping beneath me. I couldn’t move. I couldn’t stop her. She—”

“Was probably defending herself,” Jughead said hotly. He didn’t know what to feel about this new piece of information, but he sure as hell wasn’t going to let FP think that he could so easily be turned away from Betty. If Betty was getting attacked, she needed to survive. She needed help and no one was giving it to her.

“That’s why I’m telling you— that witch you love, she’s a menace. One day, she will realize that she doesn’t have to put up with the pain and the bullshit and she’ll use that power, because she fucking can.”

“If you believe that, why haven’t you slayed her?” Jughead demanded. “Mr. Run Away from the Wicked then Think About How to Kill them Later.”

FP snarled and made a derisive sound. “Alice. It’s always Alice. You and I aren’t that different when it comes to the women we care about, kid. We will do anything for them. The only reason your girl didn’t die that night in Seattle was because Alice got between her and me.”

Jughead’s heart skipped a beat—he was so shocked, then he found purchase, rage overcoming him. “You tried to kill her. You tried to fucking kill her! You sonofa—”

FP grabbed his shoulder and Jughead shook it off violently, pushing his father off him.

“You stay away from her!” Jughead yelled. “You stay away from Betty, or I swear to God, dad, you’ll have to run your Athame through me, first. You hear me?”

“‘She will be the death of you, boy,’” FP said. “‘You think you can handle her, but you can’t. They don’t even have a name for her kind yet, so those tattoos you have drawn all over you–none of them will help you. I sure as hell couldn’t stop her.”

Jughead took his helmet and jammed it on his head. “You have no idea what Betty is like. All you see is that she’s Wicked and you’ve got preconceived notions about what she’s like already. If she’s
as uncontrollable as you say she is, I’m guessing she would’ve leveled you all, but no. You’re still here. Somehow, she managed to know when to stop—”

“Do you know why her family wiped her memory?” FP shot back. “I’ll tell you why. It isn’t because they wanted to protect her. They say they want to keep her from getting hurt—that’s bullshit. They are keeping the truth from her because the truth could get under her skin, then eat into her soul, and it could mess things up in her pretty little head, and if she realizes that the pain is too much? She will take it from others, and she will be unstoppable. Her family is afraid that she’ll destroy them all. That’s why they lied to her. They lied to her to keep her sane.”

Jughead shook his head and kicked his bike to life. “You know what your problem is, dad? You are completely incapable of believing that people can be there for you. That family and friends will stick by you simply because they love you and not because it benefits them in some way. You think safety and security is always about disposing of threats and terrifying others into keeping the peace, but you have it wrong. Safety and security is sometimes about trusting others, too. It’s about making them feel that you’re on the same side, that everyone just wants to live their lives and that we don’t all have to cancel each other out.”

FP laughed. “I was a lot like you, boy. Growing up I thought I can make this place a nirvana where everyone—witches, slayers, fey, and creatures could all get along and sing songs around a campfire.”

“I’m not like you. I am not going to be like you.”

“Same thing I told my old man. Look at me now.”

Jughead shot FP a look of utter consternation. He was done talking about this with his father.

Revving his motorcycle to drown out the sounds of FP’s voice, he looked away, refusing to listen to anything else his father had to say, and sped off.

*************

Betty was with her aunts and Sabrina in the back porch when Jughead got back to the Spellman house.

Her head was on Zelda’s lap, swinging gently with a quiet creak of the gears. Sabrina and Hilda sat nearby, their face somber and maybe a little shell shocked.

There were many things the Spellmans had to be serious about. For one thing, Zelda and Hilda would’ve never done what their sister did. But the other thing—Hal trying to kill Betty, was not something anyone could’ve prepared for.

Jughead didn’t even know if Betty realized FP had tried to do her in, too. Not likely, because if Zelda or Hilda knew about that, they’d be explosively furious right now.

At the moment, however, they were talking quietly, and he paused behind the screened door, thinking about the things FP had revealed to him and how he was going to talk about it all with Betty.

“It’s the Blossom blood,” Sabrina muttered from her perch at the porch railing. “Clifford Blossom had it in him. He tried to kill Jason, too.”
Zelda sighed. “Sweetie, that was just a rumor.”

Hilda scoffed softly. “If you ask me, that accident he had years ago was probably arranged by his wife. If my husband threatened our kids, I’d be murderous, too. I don’t know if I blame Penelope.”

Betty sighed, covering her face with her hands.

Hilda’s face crumpled. “Oh, honey. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean--”

“It’s alright, Aunt Hilda. I’m just--I’m still trying to get used to this reality.”

Jughead sighed, catching the attention of everyone.

“You’re back!” Betty said, getting up. Her face had brightened, and Jughead found that he relished that reaction, that he could turn her misery into happiness instantly, just by showing up.

He pushed through the door, stepping out on the porch. “Your things are in the living room. Polly packed it, so you’ll probably have everything you need.”

“Thank you,” Betty said, going to him and slipping her arms around him.

He couldn’t help wrapping his arms around her, too, his chin resting on her head.

Zelda got up. “I’m going to put lunch together. Everyone’s staying for it. I’ve decided--yes, you too, Sabrina. You’re not running off to Harvey’s--or Sweet Pea’s, or whomever you decided to be with this weekend.”

“It’s Sweet Pea,” Sabrina grumbled, her face suddenly turning a bright red. “Harvey and I aren’t together anymore.”

Jughead welcomed this slight diversion. His eyebrow arched, questioningly. Was she with Sweet Pea just because her vanilla boyfriend was no longer in the picture or did she break up with Harvey because she finally realized that she and Sweet Pea were meant to be?

“But look at me like that, Jones,” Sabrina said.

“Like what? I’m just wondering, that’s all.”

“Not gonna tell you.” Sabrina walked into the house and Zelda followed.

Hilda hung back a bit, rolling her eyes. “Both of them finally came to their senses. Honestly, those two wouldn’t know love if it bit them on the face.”

She left and Jughead felt a sense of mild trepidation. His father had revealed to him that Betty could take the pain of others for her magic. The fact that she kept that secret from him hurt a little, and yet he had defended Betty with his father.

In a sense, he had forgiven her already, but it didn’t mean he could ignore it.

“We need to talk, Betts,” Jughead said, firmly. “About your magic. About how you can take other people’s pain.”

She stiffened in his arms before immediately pulling away.

He wasn’t expecting that she would pull away so abruptly. He tried to reclaim the closeness, but she tore herself away and her eyes began to fill.
“Who told you that?” she demanded.

He swallowed. “My dad. He might have seen it in Seattle—is it true?”

She bit her lip, blinking furiously to staunch her tears. She nodded.

He sighed. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“It makes me a monster, Jug. It’s a terrible power and I never want to use it. I just—if I don’t talk about it, then I’m not likely to use it, and maybe one day, it’ll just go away and it won’t be a part of me anymore. Like an unused muscle. I don’t know. It’s stupid but it’s how I sleep at night.”

He plopped down on the swing seat, tearing off his beanie and running his fingers through his hair. “Betty, you’re not a monster. This doesn’t make you a monster.”

“Doesn’t it?”

“It doesn’t! And you can’t un-make it you. It’s a part of your magic.”

“I hate it. I hate myself for it. Things are coming back to me, Jug, and I’m remembering things that were wiped out before. Before everything, before the disaster, I told dad that if I could stop being Wicked, stop being a witch, I would welcome it. Maybe he tried to find a way—maybe he just wanted me to be happy, and so he went looking for answers, and it’s what drove him to madness. In the end, maybe killing me is the only way.”

There was a desperation in her tone that scared Jughead. He had never seen this side of her. This self-loathing. He didn’t even know it had been there. “Betty, no. That’s not even an option! Don’t—don’t say that.”

“Your dad’s right. I did it in Seattle. I remember it. My dad was trying to destroy me and I—I acted on instinct. I needed more pain to survive, and I took it. I took it from everyone around me.” She sat against the porch railing. “I didn’t mean to, but I did, and I could’ve killed everyone. I think I killed a lot of people.” She started to weep and he tried to go to her but she shook her head and waved him away. “There were these creatures and they weren’t friendly, Jug. I just—I directed my magic at all of them at once. I don’t remember how I managed to keep your dad, Chic, and my father alive. Maybe it was the propofol. Maybe I got stopped before I did them in. Mom dosed me from behind and I was out.”

Jughead hated that propofol. He would never do that to Betty. He would never drug her like that. And this overwhelming knowledge, of her telling him that she had killed, whether by accident or strategically, he didn’t know how to process it yet, but he couldn’t bring himself to think that she did it with murderous intent. Not when her innate goodness was so profound.

“Jug, do you remember that first day we met in school?”

It was an ordinary question in this intensely extraordinary conversation. He was so unsteady, so unmoored that he had no choice but to go with it. He let her current take him. “Of course I do, Betty. I’ll never forget the first time I saw you and talked to you.”

She smiled a little through her tears. “At the lab. You had me then. You were funny and charming. I was instantly smitten.”

Intellectually, he knew that these were good things—words that were meant to tell him I saw you and I was yours, but there was a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. It was her eyes. They looked so incredibly sad. “Betts—”
“But I told myself I shouldn’t. That anyone who got close to me would instantly be in danger. I’ve been in that situation where I was with other people and I was attacked. People get hurt when they’re with me.” She closed her eyes and shook her head. “I’ve clearly let go of that concern since, but it isn’t less true. I can still put my friends in danger. I am the danger, Juggie.”

Dread roiled in his chest.

“Your father must’ve told you to leave me,” she went on. “Any sane parent would, and even the way he is, Jug, even with the way my father wanted me dead, I know your dad’s instinct is to keep you alive, otherwise he wouldn’t have taught you everything he knows, or gave you all the protections you could get. I am a menace to you and everyone else.”

That her words were exactly the same as his father’s jolted him from the building fog her words were churning in his brain. He reacted, forcefully. “Betty, don’t.”

“I love you, Jughead, but--”

He went to her, wrapping his arms around her. He didn’t want her to go on. “There’s no ‘but’. Don’t say it. We’ve gotten this far and I know you’re not dangerous. I know for sure.”

“You don’t know, Jug. And I might as well tell you now. I have two vials of propofol on me at all times, in case I ever lose control. One vial usually knocks me out--”

“I will never use that stuff on you. Never.”

She looked up at him, meeting her eyes. “You should. You don’t know what I can do.”

“You’re a good person, Betty. I don’t think your magic can ever take that away from you. I believe in you.”

“Jug… maybe it’s better for you if--”

He didn’t let her finish. He kissed her, passionately, because he desperately needed for her to stop thinking about breaking them up for his own good.

When her body became boneless against him, he felt that the thought had finally passed.

He pulled her closer, resting himself against the railing and settling her against his thigh so they can continue comfortably, languidly. She was sighing into his mouth and draping her elbows over his shoulders.

He wanted to stay this way for hours, or until she stopped thinking about breaking up with him. Until he could haul her out of her dark thoughts and make her see reason. Her memories were all still jumbled in her brain. She was still piecing things together. She needed to give herself time to think, and to give them time to grow stronger for this.

It was Zelda’s voice that finally cut through the haze, calling them for lunch from inside the house.

When they separated, Jughead ran his thumb softly over the apple of her cheek. “I love you so much, Betty.”

“I know, Jug.” She pressed her forehead against his, closing her eyes.

He was deeply aware of how she didn’t say it back this time, but for now it was enough that she knew he did.
He held her, afraid to let go, until Zelda called them one more time and they had to go inside.

******************

Jughead didn’t want to go home, either, not while his father was still under the notion that Betty would put him in danger. He needed to talk to FP again. He needed to make it clear to his father that Betty’s life was not to be threatened—not by him. Betty was under Jughead’s protection and he needed FP to understand that completely.

The second reason was that tonight, he was keeping Betty company. Not that she would be lacking in it. Her aunts and her cousin were certainly great company for her. Zelda warm and loving, Hilda gregarious and free-wheeling, and Sabrina the voice of mischief and fun, but Jughead wasn’t comfortable separating from Betty when she had thoughts of breaking up with him swimming in her head.

If it was because she no longer loved him, or if her passion had waned, or she just simply believed he was an idiot with a knack for throwing people around, then he could probably, miserably, take himself away from her, but she was thinking of it to protect him, and because of that, he was going to fight this tender fight. He was going to fight for them and convince her they were worth it.

Zelda, whose big heart never lacked for expression, said that she had made up the guest room for Betty to stay in for as long as she needed.

Sabrina, just to be a little gadfly, said, “Or better yet, Betty can stay in my room! My bed’s big enough. She and I can share and we can have a little slumber party!”

It took all of Jughead’s willpower not to shoot daggers at Sabrina, but because he was determined to have Betty to himself, he gamely said, “Great! This works out perfectly because I kinda don’t want to see my dad tonight. I was hoping to crash in your couch, Zelda, but if the guest room’s free, maybe I can take it?”

He didn’t care if it was tacky to invite himself. He was trying to save his relationship, and Sabrina was waging a skirmish in a battle she didn’t know he was fighting.

“Of course, dear,” Zelda said, gently, patting his shoulder. “If I were you, I wouldn’t want to see your dad, either.”

After dinner and dessert, everyone retired for the night, and Jughead was glad to see that Betty was at least laughing again. Maybe her good mood would help reverse the spiral.

Jughead showered, dressed in the clothes that had so often traveled between his house and the Spellmans’, and didn’t think twice about interrupting Sabrina’s supposed slumber party.

“You’re not invited!” Sabrina cried through the door, which was followed by Betty’s giggle, which emboldened him.

He barged right in and jumped on the bed, sending both girls squealing in protest as the weight of his body rocked them and the bed.

“Oh, my God, you asshole! My bed cannot possibly withstand another one of those, you big lug!” Sabrina scolded, trying to be serious but failing. She punched his shoulder and he pretended it hurt.
“Oh, don’t, Sab,” Betty whined, grinning and gently shoving Sabrina off him.

He looked Betty over, enjoying the view of her long legs and the skin bared by the skimpy material of her cami. He relished the look of love that was shining from her glassy eyes. Her hair was loose and he reached over to push some of it off her shoulder.

“We’re going to binge a show on Netflix,” Betty said, lacing her fingers through his. “Do you want to watch with us?”

Sabrina rolled her eyes. “Ugh, don’t invite him!”

“Shush, witch!” he hissed at Sabrina. “What are you watching?”

“Gilmore Girls.”

He groaned, slinging his arm over his eyes. “Really? Of all things? How about Mindhunters? How about Stranger Things, Betts? We never got to finish that!”

“Those are dark and depressing,” Sabrina said. “And again, you were not invited to this so your opinion doesn’t matter. Go away. I have Betty until I fall asleep and she sneaks out to go to you.”

“Sab!”

“I’m onto you!”

Jughead wasn’t even going to pretend. He sat up on the bed. “You’re a little shit, you know that, Sabrina? If you hadn’t suggested this dumb slumber party, I’d have Betty all to myself right now.”

Sabrina stuck her tongue out at him.

Betty giggled. “Maybe go read a book, Jug. That is, if you don’t want to watch Gilmore Girls with us.”

“Normally, it’s a hard pass on the rapid fire, too-clever for everyday discourse, Aaron Sorkin-esque dialogue—like, who talks that way in real life?”

Sabrina arched an eyebrow. “Really, dude? You’re not seeing the irony in what you just said right now?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” He slid himself between Sabrina and Betty, tucking Betty into his embrace and jamming a pillow between him and Sabrina. “I’ll stick around because it will annoy you.”

Sabrina growled and took yet another pillow and stuffed it tight with the first, though she did lean against it, smothering half his face. “I hope you suffocate.”

He chuckled. Betty half draped herself on him and he grinned, getting comfortable.

Sabrina huffed and grumbled as she set up their viewing screen, which was her laptop, and slamming it hard where his precious parts were.

“Whoa! Watch the hardware!” Jughead cried, making Betty laugh.

Sabrina shot him a withering look. “Be grateful I don’t hex them off.”

“I am, actually, grateful.”
“Shut up.”

Betty sighed contentedly, rubbing his stomach as she cuddled him.

“And watch the hands, Elizabeth,” Sabrina warned.

The giggle that tinkled out of Betty’s lips made him smile and press a kiss on the top of her head. He was off to a great start.

He could do this.

**********************

When Sabrina started snoring, Betty craned her neck to check if Jughead was still awake. He was, widely, and he pressed a finger to his lips.

Again, she giggled, feeling lighter than she had all day. She rubbed her foot against his leg, pushing back the material of his pajamas so that her toes would run along his skin.

He nudged her to get off Sabrina’s bed and she quietly got to her feet, never letting go of his hand as they sneaked out. Hastily and quietly, they slipped into the guestroom, and when they were closed in, Jughead didn’t waste time.

He wrapped his arms around her from behind and began to nip at her neck and shoulder while sliding one hand beneath her cami to cup a breast and sliding the other in the front of her shorts and panties. Immediately his fingers were teasing her desire, pinching her nipples and pressing circles around her clit.

She knew she was wet. Had been for the last half hour. His touch was all she could think about as she willed and wished for Sabrina to pass out. She rubbed her ass against his cock, which was already tenting the front of his pajamas.

He moaned in her ear. “You’re soaked.”

“And you’re hard as a rock,” she whispered, craning her neck to capture his mouth with hers, their tongues swirling together in a kiss that Betty had been longing for the last couple of hours. She reached up to comb her fingers through his hair, coaxing his face towards her so she can kiss him harder.

She needed this intensity. She needed this release. The day had been harrowing and she knew she had to face the hard truths that had pummelled her, but for now, she wanted to forget. She wanted to be consumed by this desire. She wanted to be consumed by Jughead.

His fingers slipped between folds and inside her, moving in and out. She closed her eyes, letting the sensations spread through her body. It felt amazing, her heavy breathing accompanied by her mewls of pleasure.

“Jug,” she breathed, turning her head so she could drag his earlobe between her teeth. “That feels so good.”

She could feel her climax already building.
In Sabrina’s room, her body tangled with his, she had worked herself up to a state just by making idle circles on his rock hard abs with her fingers. His wiry body, lined with muscle, was beautiful to her, and she kept imagining him naked, moving between the embrace of her thighs.

It wasn’t going to take him much effort to make her orgasm now.

“I know it does,” he answered, his voice rough with desire. “I love seeing you come.”

That sent a jolt to her center, and she threw her head back against his shoulder, his words pushing her over the edge with unexpected ferocity. She came, crying out as his fingers drew her orgasm from her.

He murmured sweet praises in her ear as she let his hand finish her off.

She was panting when she was done, her body trembling. “Oh, my God, Jughead. Oh, my God... we aren’t even naked yet.”

He laughed softly, the ripple of his breath along her neck sending pleasant heat through her body.

“I’ll take care of that,” he said, pulling her cami off her, quickly, and God, she wanted that roughness. Both his hands took her breasts and squeezed, and she told him, *harder.*

He sucked bruises onto her shoulder, before he pulled her shorts and panties down, letting them drop in a pool around her ankles.

She turned around, pushing the hem of his shirt up and he yanked it off himself quickly, so he can cup her face in his hands and kiss her with fervency. Their teeth clacked, their tongues dueled, and her hands dove into his pajamas and boxers, clapping his rock solid dick. She pumped it, already knowing how he liked it.

He groaned. “Oh, my God, Betts.”

It was the reaction she was hoping for. She wanted to hear more of it, but he held her wrist, stopping the movement of her hand.

“Condom,” he suddenly said, directing his eyes to the jeans he had draped on the dressing table chair.

Relenting, she rifled through the pockets of his jeans and pulled out one of three. She dropped to her knees in front of him and pulled down his pants and underwear. His dick sprung free and giving into the temptation, she took his length into her mouth. She let her tongue run along his cock before sliding her lips around him again. She still wasn’t completely certain that she was doing this right, but the sounds he was making was encouraging, and his hand fisting her hair seemed like a positive sign.

She sucked him as she pulled her lips back and he gave a somewhat strangled sound. It made her want to keep going, but his fingers grazed her chin and he told her gently to stop.

“I don’t want to stop,” she whispered, following it up with her tongue licking around the base of his shaft.

He groaned again. “I know, baby, but I don’t want to come this way. I want to come inside you. Now put the condom on.”

The authority in his tone shook her, but it lanced molten desire through her body. She didn’t know she liked being ordered around. That tone would’ve certainly irked her in any other setting, but here,
naked with Jughead, she wanted him to tell her what to do.

Hastily, she tore open the packet and rolled the condom over him. He was panting, but he helped secure the rubber around his shaft before giving her an intense stare, saying, “Get up.”

She closed her eyes, relishing that tone.

As she unfolded from the floor, he lifted her to him. It was barely an effort for him and his strength made her gasp with delight. She wrapped her thighs around his body and his hands squeezed her ass.

“I’m going to nail you hard against the wall,” he growled, like a dark promise.

Yes, she thought, feeling his fingers pressing deep into her thighs as he braced her. The wall came up behind, knocking her slightly breathless, but she liked that, too. She liked that force. It made her gasp with desire.

“Is this alright?” he asked, suddenly. Though his voice hadn’t lost its rough edge, he had paused, apparently genuinely concerned.

“Yes, God, yes.”

That was good enough for him. He buried himself inside her, his hips meeting hers--hard, over and over. His kiss muffled her cries, meeting his thrusts with the furious roll of her hips.

It was incredible. He was so strong, she felt so anchored, and she kept saying harder. He kept pushing, their bodies drumming a rhythm.

The climb to her climax was fast and vigorous, reaching its summit with a loud cry. Throwing her head back against the wall, she felt his mouth on her throat, tasting her as he drove into her and shattering her completely.

She gasped when swung her around, carrying her and dropping her onto the bed’s coverlet. Before she could even marvel at his strength, he took both of her hands in his, laced their fingers together and pinned them above her on the bed.

“I still need you,” running his teeth against the lobe of her ear. “Baby, please…”

His kiss was desperate, ravishing her mouth, and she slid her legs around his body, canting her hips towards his to convey her consent. He thrust into her and the sensations were electric. Her hands were immobilized by his, but she touch him with her lips and her tongue. She arched her body so that her breasts would rub against his chest. She locked her ankles over his ass so she could meet his thrusts, and the whole time he was rocking vigorously into her, he whispered how beautiful she was as their lips brushed, their breaths mingling hot and heavy.

It was almost too much. She was falling into sweet oblivion again just as a deep groan rose from his throat.

“I’m coming, Juggie,” she cried. “Don’t stop.”

He didn’t and he moaned that he was coming, too. They stumbled over the edge together, her vision bathed in light and her name falling from his lips.
It was intense, making love to Betty. Learning her this way. The glimpses of darkness interspersed with her effervescence probably shouldn’t have surprised him, but even with the nightmares of her past, her spirit remained buoyant.

She was tracing his tattoos with the pads of her fingers again, her gaze focused on the art, the lines, and perhaps the colors, since she seemed to pay more attention to the red tints.

“I endured pain for all these,” he told her, softly. “Inflicted, but also conjured, by different magic wielders at the end point of a needle or blade. They are permanent spells inked and scarred into my skin to protect me. To keep me whole.”

Her fingers paused in their tracing. She looked up, her eyes questioning, but also hopeful.

He caressed her face with the brush of his knuckles. “You’re not the only one who has to give and take pain to make magic. And while magic can harm, it also protects.”

“I’ve been told that I reach a point where I can’t tell the difference.”

He shook his head. “They’re afraid. I’m not. I see you as you are. Strong, compassionate, and willing to endure pain for others.”

He knew it was a bold statement, considering “they” was her family, but he didn’t take it back. It was the truth. Her family had been so intent on hiding her, keeping her, that they’ve forgotten that who she is at her core can carry her through, even with her eyes wide open.

Her fingers ran lightly along his jaw and she tilted her chin to kiss him, slowly and deeply. He melted into it, feeling suddenly elated, because this felt like he had done what he had set out to do: convince her to set aside all thoughts of pulling away, of shutting herself out, and breaking this beautiful thing they had, however filled it was with uncertainties.

But those uncertainties were outside of them. Between them they were solid and sure, tangible and true.

Everything else, the forces that were trying to pull them apart, was at its essence, nothing but white noise.

Betty woke from a dream about her family, of her mother standing in a room at Thornhill, of her cousins sitting on one side of a dinner table and her brother on the other. She dreamt of Cheryl, aiming an arrow at her and missing. And once again, she dreamt of Thornhill ablaze.

When she opened her eyes, it was still quite dark outside and there was a nip to the room that pushed goose-pimples through her arm.

The pleasant weight of Jughead around her was comforting and she wanted to sink further into the sheets so that she could wrap herself in his protective love.
The events of yesterday still filled her with pain, but whereas before it was sharp and cold like steel, this morning it was muted. There, existing, sore, but no longer crippling.

Jughead had stayed with her through it all. The pain, the anguish, and even the spiral.

Then last night, he made her forget, in the best way possible, with his body and his passion for her.

He was incredible and she felt blessed to be loved by him.

She shifted and perhaps thinking that she was leaving his side, he pulled her in by her waist, moaning a complaint.

“Where are you going?”

His warmth, blanketing her against the cool morning, felt heavenly.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she whispered. “I’m staying right here.”

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His phone buzzed again and he tried slapping the alarm off. His movements disturbed Betty, who slept curled in his embrace.

She stirred and mumbled her complaints. “Jug, don’t.”

He shushed her gently, hating his phone, which wouldn’t quit buzzing.

It slowly began to dawn on him that it was ringing, and that it was early enough that it could only be one person.

Forcing himself awake, he picked it up and accepted the call. He already knew who it was.

“Wyome. I’m here. I’m awake.” He barely was, but when Wyome called, it was always important.

Wyome huffed. “Jesus, what the fuck are you doing still sleeping, Jones? It’s almost seven. Don’t you have school?”

Jughead groaned. He did. They did. “Right. Goddamn Monday…”

“Well, this’ll wake you up. Did Malachai deliver the skull yet?”

He frowned, trying to jog his brain awake. “Skull?”

“You know, the amber skull that you came storming in here for and didn’t warn me ahead of time about? That skull.”

“Yeah, yeah. How could I forget?” He gingerly slipped his arm from underneath Betty without disturbing her. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes with the back of his hand. “Yeah, he left it on my doorstep. What about it?”

“It was a woman that brought it to him, to give back to you. Thought at first it was just some random chick Malachai had ordered to retrieve it, but when I saw who it was, Jug, I knew. I knew that she’s the client the Ghoulies have been working for.”
He tried to piece Wyome’s words together. “Client…”

“God, wake the fuck up already. You know, how the Ghoulies have been running around, trying to find information about the Coopers? I don’t know if that’s what she asked them to do, or if it’s for something else, but she’s ordering Malachai around, telling him to give back the amber skull, and that’s exactly what he did. It’s her, Jug. If it were anyone else, I wouldn’t think it important, but—”

“Her? Who are you talking about?”

Wyome sighed in frustration. “Penny Peabody, who else? That bitch Snake Charmer’s back in town and she’s got something big and something very bad planned.”

tbc
Chapter Notes

Trigger warnings for violence and somewhat graphic imagery.

“... have violent ends
And in their triumph die, like fire and powder
Which, as they kiss, consume”
— William Shakespeare, Romeo and Juliet

The school parking lot was bustling with its usual activity, with kids arriving on various means of transport and meeting at points with emotions running the gamut of uncomplicated squeals of excitement to harrowing depths of despair. Those who languished in between were just resting from their extremes the day before, because this was high school.

Jughead pulled up in his parking spot, always miraculous empty for him. Whether by magic or reputation, he didn’t know for sure.

He wasn’t blind to the fact that many of the Riverdale kids who didn’t know him looked at him and thought he was an all-out thug. The jacket was enough, if anything, but Riverdale gossip had him armed with a knife at all times and being strong enough to overcome Reggie Mantle, maybe even Moose Mason.

Nobody really dared to cross him. He could only imagine the kind of talk that went down when it became clear that the sweet looking new girl, all pastel sweaters and bouncy ponytails, was dating the scary gang leader apparent.

He killed the engine and took off his helmet. He ruffled his hair and the strands sprung back to its usual volume as magic crackled through his fingers.

When Betty dismounted and removed her helmet, her own ponytail looked undisturbed. She was such a classic beauty. With a face that belonged on the silver screen. She looked like the wholesome girl next door, but it was so far removed from all the shadowed valleys she’d had to brave that it almost hurt him to think that people thought so little of her. There was enormous strength in her, scary to most, but not to him.

She straightened a collar on her blouse of an imaginary wrinkle and he smiled at what was so ineffably Betty.

“I have to go somewhere,” he said, handing her her backpack as he remained on his motorcycle. “I’ve got something I have to do.”
She blinked, confused. “You’re missing first period?”

There was something extraordinarily endearing about her worrying that he’d miss a class, given everything else that had happened.

He laughed softly, hooking his fingers over the pockets of her jeans to pull her closer.

She frowned, even while she draped her arms over his shoulders.

“I’ll be back as soon as I’m done,” he said, admiring the pout of her lips.

“Where are you going?”

“The Whyte Wyrm. I have to meet someone.” He was going to see Wyome, who had told him she had information that she’d rather not discuss on the phone. “Serpent business.”

Betty sighed. “Isn’t that something your dad should be doing now that he’s back?”

Jughead had thought about that briefly this morning. Wyome knew her father, so telling her that FP would be seeing her instead wouldn’t be that big of a deal, but this was a matter possibly concerning Betty, and Jughead didn’t trust his father with anything to do with her just yet. He had decided he would be taking point on this Ghoulie business until it was resolved.

“Maybe, but I’m handling this for now,” he said, feeling a rush of longing course through him.

Perhaps if he had wanted to be less distracted today, he should’ve resisted the urge to join her in the shower this morning.

Whatever. Totally worth it.

“Is it dangerous?” she asked, the skin between her brows crinkling.

He shook his head. “Not for me. For my informant, maybe.”

Her eyes scanned his face and he could feel her fingers fiddling with his hair. “Is it about the call you got this morning?”

“Why, Elizabeth… were you pretending to be asleep?”

“No,” she muttered, rolling her eyes and grinning. “Yes… I heard you say a girl’s name and then I was thinking—who’s this girl calling my man so early in the morning?”

His jaw dropped, delighted and appalled. A soft bark of laughter escaped him. He didn’t know what to say just yet.

“So,” she continued. “Is it about the call this morning?”

“Yes, but—” He ran his hand up her back beneath her shirt, tracing the dip of her spine. He never thought her jealousy would excite him like this. “First of all: in the years I’ve known Wyome, I never thought of her that way, ever, and secondly, this is work. She works for the Serpents, and so I’m kind of like her boss, so it’s gross, really, for me to even think it.”

Betty’s eyebrow arched.

“Also,” he added, pulling her even closer so that his lips were pressed to her ear. “I thought we had enough fun in the shower this morning to convince you that I am hopelessly, irrevocably, gone on
“Are you?” she whispered, a slight hitch in her breath.

He chuckled. “I’ll write you bad poetry and serenade you under the light of the moon with my terrible voice. I’ll even watch more Gilmore Girls for you, babe.”

She giggled and he kissed her, getting lost in the slow, languid joining of their lips and the lazy massage of her tongue. For a moment, he let himself forget that they were at a parking lot for everyone to see.

“Excuse me? Right in front of my salad?”

It was Kevin, of course.

Veronica’s enthusiastic laughter followed.

That prompted the end of their pleasurable interlude and Jughead sighed with deep exasperation. Why did his best friends have to be such dicks, sometimes?

“What salad?” Betty asked.

“I’m sure Kevin and Veronica would be more than delighted to explain that to you,” Jughead quipped, letting her go gently and reaching for his helmet. He was more than glad to leave that task to them.

Veronica scowled, resting a hand to her hip. “Where are you going?”

He secured his helmet with a tap. “Work. I’ll be back by lunch. Maybe even before that.”

“Forsythe Pendleton III,” Kevin said, pointedly. “You aren’t just running away because the rumors of your father’s return are true, are you? Because I’m honestly a little mad and hurt that you didn’t tell me.”

He threw Kevin a genuinely apologetic look. “I’m sorry, Kev. Lot of things happened and I was a little distracted. Come to the Spellman’s after work later and I’ll tell you everything.”

“What Spellmans?”

“I don’t feel like staying at my house right now.”

Kevin turned his incredulous look at Betty’s direction, who shook her head.

“Fine,” Kevin grumbled. “We’ll talk later, Jug.”

Veronica sighed, looping her arm around Betty’s. “Come on, Betty. I have a ton of questions for you, anyway. About Beltane eve…”

As Betty and Veronica walked away, Jughead kicked his bike back to life.

Kevin hadn’t moved, scowling at him.

“I said I was sorry,” Jughead managed to say, weakly.

“I expect a full report, Jones. And I mean everything.”
Jughead cocked a smile and nodded. It was only then Kevin acknowledged the apology and walked towards the steps of the school.

With that, Jughead rode off, taking the route to the Southside.

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Wyome was not there.

And Jughead had no way of finding out why.

At first he was only mildly curious what could be keeping her. Wyome had been late before, but when twenty minutes later, she still hadn’t arrived, or even called, he got worried.

He was already contemplating going to her trailer--a pretty unlikely place for her to be, considering she spent most of her hours at the House of the Dead, but it was the only place he knew to look without giving her away to the Ghoulies--when his phone rang.

It was an unknown number and Jughead picked up immediately. “Wyome! Are you--”

“Jug.” Her breathing was labored. Her voice weak and raspy with effort. “The Vault...”

Dread filled him, his throat going dry. “Where are you?”

“Twilight,” she gave a strangled, liquid cough. “The vault... and your girl--” She heaved. It sounded painful.

“I’m going to you,” Jughead said, quickly. “Hold on, Wyome. Just hold on. I’m coming over.” He looked over his shoulder at Tall Boy as he began to head out the door. “I need you to call for help. Wyome’s in trouble and I need to get to her, right now.”

******************************

Jughead found Wyome behind the dilapidated drive-in movie screen. Her body was mangled beyond recognition, sprawled awkwardly in a pool of her own blood. The phone she had used to call him was still in her hand and for a horrible minute, he was sure she was dead.

When he checked her pulse, it was faint, but it was there. He could barely feel the breath leaving her lips.

A minute later, he heard the siren sound of help. There were two kinds of emergency services in Riverdale--the Lost kind and the Otherworlder kind. There were the paramedics, and then there were the para- medics.

As the ambulance rolled in, magical healers spilled out of the back of its carriage, potions and charms at the ready.

Jughead stepped back, his shirt and jacket covered in Wyome’s blood, and as he watched them work
to save her life, he felt a palpable sense of rage growing, for the Ghoulies, a little for himself, and at Penny fucking Peabody.

About a dozen Serpents rolled into the empty lot of the Twilight Drive In soon after, just as the healers were loading Wyome into their van. She would be brought to Saint Brighid, the nearest Otherworlder infirmary, and Jughead would be following soon after.

“Jesus Christ, Jug,” Toni said, looking at the pool of blood Wyome’s body had left behind.

Sweet Pea looked livid. “Those Ghoulies are gonna fucking pay. I say we go over there right now and torch the entire place.”

Shouts of agreement rang out among the Serpents.

Jughead had to count to ten to keep from screaming a resounding “No!” This was typical of the Serpents, responding with red-hot rage and righteous fury, but as much as he wanted to throw caution to the wind and do it, he needed to be the voice of reason. He always was.

“We burn down the House of the Dead, and then what?” Jughead responded hotly. “I know we threaten it all the time, but you know what will happen if we do that. That’s an all out call to war. It’s why we’ve never actually done it. Now I know none of you are afraid to go toe-to-toe with Ghoulies, but that will cause a riot that will destroy the peace we’ve built in Riverdale. The Covenant of the Dales--”

Fangs scoffed. “The Covenant that basically work in favor of the Blossoms and all the witches? Witches aren’t the only ones who live in this town, Jones.”

“It’s an agreement our forefathers-- Wyome’s forefathers in the Uktena--saw fit to uphold, Fogarty,” Jughead said. “You best remember that. We aren’t going to raze Riverdale for this. Wyome knew the dangers. She’d gut you all if she knew you were willing to cause a town riot for her.” He eyed Toni for support. She of all people would know the importance of the Uktena to the Serpent and slayer tradition, but she only gave him a withering look. She was not going to be used as a mouthpiece.

Joaquin sighed. “Jughead’s right--”

“What would your dad say?” cried an elder from the back. “I heard he rolled into town the other day. That true? Tall Boy? You’d know.”

Tall Boy pursed his lips but said nothing, his face stoic.

Jughead rolled his eyes as cries of dissent rang through the gathering. There were still several FP loyalists among them who thought Jughead too soft to lead them in what they believed was a cold war with the witch covens, particularly the Blossoms.

“Dad’s back in town,” Jughead admitted, reluctantly.

There were a few cheers.

“Holy shit,” Toni gasped. “So it’s true.”

Jughead nodded. “But if you think he’s going to dive headlong into this, you’re mistaken. He will side with me on this one.”

“In the meantime, what?” A Serpent named Angus called. “We’re going to let the sons-of-bitches think that we’re just going to let this go?”
“We find out who among them did it,” Jughead said, his tone decisive and unwavering. “Then we take them in and we’re going to remind them that they can’t do shit like this in our town.”

His words were met with approval.

Joaquin said he’d know by sundown who did the deed and Sweet Pea said they can have them in the dungeons of the Whyte Wyrm by tomorrow morning.

“So you coming with us for the hunt, Jones?” Sweet Pea asked.

Jughead hadn’t gone on a hunt like this in months. This was not something they did regularly. And he hated that word, *hunt*. It made it sound like this was a sport and that he enjoyed it.

Kidnapping and torture were not activities that the Serpents indulged in, but when a rule abiding Otherworlder was hurt, particularly if it was a Serpent, consequences had to be swift and brutal.

They would be hauling these perpetrators in and the ones who got to decide their fate was the Council of the Dales and the victim, or the victim’s immediate family.

The Council consisted of four facets:

The first were the Witches: Coven leader, Penelope Blossom for Riverdale, Head Witch Della for Greendale, and Head Witch Ying Yue from Midvale.

The next were the Fae: Head of the Seelie Court, Mayor McCoy and Head of the Unseelie Court, Lady Gendra of Greendale.

The third were the Creatures: Ulfric, a title given to the highest ranking Alpha werewolf in the Dales, currently owned by a powerful man named Vihaan Chatwal and the Royal, Princess Jamila, a vampire descended from the first vampire recorded in history, Queen Fari.

The final facet were the Peace-Keepers: the highest ranked Slayer, FP, and an Ancient.

Ancients were traditionally any kind of Otherworlder, whose only qualification was that they were the oldest known Otherworlder who wasn’t any of the other represented creatures. In this council, that was Astanphaeus. He never voted, abstaining by virtue of the Divine Accords, but he always offered his voice, because as an Earth Angel, that was what he was bound to do.

To Sweet Pea’s question, Jughead responded with a quiet nod. “I’ll be there, if only to make sure you all don’t kill their sorry asses. This has to be brought before the council.”

Groans reverberated through the group.

Jughead glared at them all. “It’s *what we do*. Newsflash: the reason why people trust us is that we don’t just go around killing Otherworlders. Wyome’s grandfather will decide for her, too, and if they decide execution is the way to go, then that’s a Council decision. Everyone will respect that.”

No one objected to what Jughead said. At least in that, they were reluctantly of one mind.

As Jughead dismissed them all, he asked Toni to stay for a moment.

She nodded, settling on her bike and waiting for everyone to leave.

As the sound of the last motorcycle faded in the distance, Toni arched a questioning eyebrow at him.

“You’re the only one I can trust with this,” Jughead admitted.
“Has to do with Betty?”

Jughead shrugged. “Maybe. I figured, because you and Cheryl…”

“That I’d understand how it is to care for a witch? Shit, Jones. Maybe half the Serpents have at least dated a witch or two.”

Jughead shook his head. “Not a witch like Betty. Or a witch like Cheryl. I can’t go into specifics about Betty, but you might find out and I’m hoping you’d have the compassion not to call for her blood.”

Toni eyed him askance before rolling her eyes. “Jones, why d’you always have to be so fucking special in everything?”

“I’m not doing it on purpose!”

“You know what it is? You’re a picky sonofabitch, that’s what.”

“Picky! Since when?”

“Since, forever. I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised. You’re picky about your boots and socks, and those just go on your feet.”

Jughead shot her with what Toni used to call his Sarcastic Eyes.

She cocked a grin. “I guess I shouldn’t make fun of how picky you are with your women.”

“Saw that one a mile away.”

“Eh, so am I, come to that. So whatta ya need, chief?”

Jughead gladly took the opening. “Wyome said Penny Peabody’s back in town.”

Her eyes widened. “Holy shit. Wyome told you this? Like, did she just happen to see Penny walk into town?”

He cast her an annoyed look. He never figured Toni as someone who went for the comfortable explanation. “What do you think?”

“Is she shacking up with the Ghoulies?” Toni asked, incredulous.

He gave a somewhat impatient sound. “It’s not that hard to imagine, Toni. The night I drove Penny out of town, you were there. You heard what she said.”

“God, Jug. She made a lot of dark promises that night, but I always just figured that as her getting caught up in the moment. She knew it was either you ran her out of the club and the town or she turns up in Sweetwater river with her throat slit by FP’s athame. She knew you were doing her a favor!”

“Somehow, I don’t think skinning her tattoo off and exiling her from Riverdale feels like a better deal for her, especially not when she’d had to sit on that indignity for a couple of years.”

Toni sighed, leaning against her bike and pausing to give it more thought. “Have you told anyone else about Penny?”

“Not yet. I need the Serpents to focus on one thing at a time.” There were too many unanswered
questions for Jughead to field lynch mobs calling for Penny’s head. The moment he told the Serpents about Penny, it will be all about hunting her and not about finding out what she’s doing back in Riverdale.

And while that could possibly work out for the best, the bigger implications of what Penny had planned was valuable knowledge that he couldn’t afford to be in the dark about.

“But that’s beside the point,” Jughead went on. “Penny’s hired the Ghoulies for something, not sure what, but Wyome said something about the vault before she passed out.”

She frowned. “What does that mean?”

He shrugged. “I don’t know. I’ll look into it, too, but from the vault end of it.”

“You think they’re gonna try to steal something from it? Can they even force their way in there?”

Jughead nodded. “If they can get a Slayer to undo the wards, yes.”

“Jesus, that’s virtually impossible! They can’t even force a slayer under duress! They’d have to be in cahoots with one!”

“Wyome almost died for this information. We don’t even know if she’ll make it yet, so yeah, we need to know what she means.”

Toni cursed, scrambling to get on her bike. “I’m on it.”

He was just beginning to feel the panic. “Be careful, alright? There’s another way to break the wards…”

Toni paused and when the horror set on her features, he knew she’d figured it out. “If they kill us all or incapacitate all Slayers for over 48 hours…”

“Yeah. The wards go down…”

“Holy shit.”

“Find out, Topaz. As soon as you can.”

**********************

When he wasn’t back by lunchtime, Betty called him.

Her relief when he answered was palpable. “Juggie! Oh, my God, is everything alright?”

He looked up from where he sat, the bustle of healers filling the space with a never ending churn of urgency.

Otherworlder infirmaries tended to look less modern than Lost hospitals. It was often converted from abandoned hallowed ground, more likely masked behind glamors and enchantments so that the Lost didn’t stumble upon them inadvertently. Old churches and convents were the most common type of facility used, so the interiors were gothic and dim.
The equipment looked like an alchemist’s dream, medieval jars and cauldrons along the walls, with herbs and gemstones packed on shelves. There were spell books, scrolls, and charms piled in offices and carried by staff.

The walls and floors were etched with sigils and characters from dead languages and different magical disciplines.

Magic was thick in the air.

The waiting area was peppered with Serpents. At the center of it was Wyome’s grandfather, Sho, short for Shoemowetochawcawe, eerily calm and collected. His glassy eyes were blank. Like it was all he could do not to start howling in rage.

Beside Sho was FP, his stoic, stone-cold expression frightening in its intensity.

Jughead didn’t want to approach his father for anything and he hoped FP would leave him alone.

“Jug?” came Betty’s voice from the phone.

He shook himself out of his musings to answer her. “No. Something happened, Betts. Something bad.”

Her breath audibly hitched. “Are you okay?!”

“I’m fine, but my informant--” He sighed, shoving his beanie off his head and crumpling it in his hand. “She was left for dead at the old, abandoned drive in.”

“Oh, my God, Jug. Where is she now?”

“Here, at Saint Brighid’s. They’re working on her. We don’t know yet if she’ll make it. I’m waiting with her grandfather to find out.”

“I can head over there right now if you want company.”

Jughead smiled at her concern. “And miss fifth period?”

“Jug…”

“Stay in class. I’ll see you later at the library. I’m heading there after this to do some research. Bring Kevin. I’ll need both your help on this.”

She sighed. “Okay, but if you need me between now and then…”

He nodded. “I’ll call you.”

They said their goodbyes and Jughead leaned back on his seat, closing his eyes and hoping Wyome would pull through.

******************

Wyome pulled through. At least for now. She was still in a coma with every possibility to take a turn for the worse, but she was stabilized. If she made it through the night, she would have a greater
chance of making it the next, and with her fate left to healing, Jughead found that he could focus on what he had to do next.

He was glad to be in the library surrounded by books. He needed something to ground him after his conversation with FP at the hospital.

“Tall Boy told me what you said to the Serpents at the Twilight,” FP had said.

Jughead hadn’t replied. He just stood there, waiting for his father to go on. He was in absolutely no mood to be criticized.

“It’s a measured response,” FP went on to say. It sounded neither like approval or disapproval.

“I don’t want to spark a riot,” Jughead had said.

FP shrugged. “You can argue the Ghoulies already did. You’re just... dousing the flame with a tiny little hose.”

Jughead had shot his father a sardonic look. “Ah. Here stands proof that the male species never outgrow penile metaphors.”

“I don’t disagree with your decision, Jughead, but if they don’t find out who did it by the end of the day, you’re going to have a harder time convincing the boys and girls of the club to settle down and wait. What then?”

Jughead had gotten in his father’s space, balling his fists but trying very hard not to swing and clock him. “Right now, the Ghoulies are fractured and lazy. They lounge around in their separate little dens waiting for Malachai to tell them what to do. It drives Samuel crazy that they aren’t a more united hive.” He stabbed a finger in the general direction of the Southside. “We raze the House of the Dead to the ground, I can see Samuel taking the opportunity to take over. He might even kill Malachai in the chaos if our fires don’t do him in. And when that happens, you’ll see every Ghoulie in the Dales rise up and answer Samuel’s siren call. All in all, Ghoulies outnumber us ten to one. We don’t have an army, dad. The Serpents keep things in order because we keep hives like the Ghoulies scattered and unmotivated.”

FP had nodded, unfazed. “Then you better make sure you find your sacrificial lambs, boy. I’ll help you reign in the Serpents, but I can’t promise you they’ll follow.”

The unsettled feeling in his gut had stayed with him all afternoon, and all Jughead could really do was ask Joaquin for an update while he rifled through library records. Toni hadn’t gotten back to him with information, either. If it got any later in the day with nothing new, he would go out himself and find these perpetrators.

It was just past 3:30 when Betty texted him, informing him that they were outside the Restricted Section. When he let them in, her eyes flickered over him, noting his change of clothing, no doubt.

He had to change out of his bloodied shirt, pants, and jacket, and he had to launder what he could. He wasn’t going to let Zelda find his clothes in the state they were in. He had wiped his jacket down and sent it to the cleaners for express service.

Sometimes he thought that it could be the end of the world and people would still be dropping off their dry cleaning.

He sat them both down and told them everything that happened, including the mission he sent Toni on. He didn’t, however, tell Betty that Wyome mentioned her during that phone call. That he would
leave for telling her later.

Betty’s face was a mask of horror, hand pressed to her lips. He could tell, by her eyes, that she was spiralling.

“Hey,” he said, taking her hand and lacing her fingers through his. “It’s going to be alright.”

“How could it be alright? They left a woman for dead, they could possibly want to get into the Vault either by means of betrayal or violence--we don’t know which, and we are at the brink of a riot that you’re not sure the Serpents or the town of Riverdale would survive. All of this point to Slayers getting killed. I am not okay with this, Jug.”

Kevin put an arm around her shoulders. “Jughead is hard to kill, Betty. Believe me. He’s insufferable and people have been trying for years.”

She cast Kevin a watery smile.

“Kevin isn’t wrong,” Jughead added. “We’re a tough bunch. And if I can’t stop this gang tension from escalating, I can probably wrangle a few more troops from Ulfric Vihaan and Princess Jamila, not to mention from Penelope Blossom. What they could give us to fight would be worth a couple dozen Ghoulies a piece. I’m estimating 30 more from them altogether in our ranks, and they would all be highly trained soldiers. We’d also still be more organized than them. We can fight them into submission.”

She nodded but said nothing. She looked, however, strangely determined. “And now we need to know how the Vault plays into all this.”

Jughead nodded. “I can’t let either of you in there without destroying the wards, but we keep a record of everything that goes in there in these.” He began distributing blocks of recorders. “You do artifacts, Kev. Betty you do spells. I’ll do keys.”

Betty’s eyebrows quirked with curiosity. “Keys?”

Jughead nodded. “There are magical prisons and specially constructed vaults around the dales. There are Otherworlders that have been sentenced to imprisonment and there are magical objects that need to be contained elsewhere and warded differently because of their properties. Each of those places have a key. We keep those keys in this vault. The Ghoulies can potentially be needing someone or something else that isn’t here.”

She nodded, contemplative. “It’s a lot to get through, but we’ll figure it out.”

There was that optimistic spirit that Jughead was looking for. “Betts… it is a lot, and if we want to get through all this, we need Kevin’s help, but for him to do that, we have to tell him everything, because all this is pointing to what the Ghoulies have been doing the past few weeks.”

Kevin’s look of surprise was only surpassed by Betty’s crestfallen expression. There was fear, too, and he knew it was her old fear of being shunned.

“I promise, Kevin won’t think you the worse for it.”

“What?” Kevin gasped, as if the mere suggestion of him thinking badly about Betty offended him. “Sweetheart, I adore you! There’s nothing you can say that can make me hate you. Now tell me what this is about.”

She sighed, her eyes filling momentarily before she blinked her tears away. “Okay.”
Jughead nodded. “We don’t have a lot of time, so here’s the short version, Kev. Betty is Wicked, and people have been wanting to take her powers ever since they knew she had it.”

***************

Hours later, they found exactly one reference to Wicked Witches, and it was from a Demonology text.

Betty’s head hurt from reading off old scrolls. Their work had overtaken the entire twelve foot table, and they each had a magnifying glass, without which it would be impossible to decipher the older text.

It was tough research. They were essentially just scrolling down lists. It felt like reading through phone books. Reading keyword after keyword, hoping something would jump at them from the dull pages.

More than once, Betty contemplated proposing a project to digitize this record. Make it so that the vault could be categorized like an organized library, or perhaps a museum. Where keywords could be entered and researchers can just hit “Search”.

Then again, perhaps the idea was that the Vault’s contents shouldn’t be so easily accessible, because really, only the worse people wanted to steal what was inside it.

She thought it fitting that she would be the one to find the reference to Wicked Witches, and when she showed Jughead, he said he would have to go into the vault to look into it.

“Just me.” He sighed, pressing the heel of his hands over his eyes. “And if you think this is a hot mess express, you should see the inside of it.”

Kevin tossed a book away from him. “Nope. That’s all yours, big guy. When are we getting dinner? I’m starving.”

Betty marveled at how these boys could probably eat through an apocalypse.

“Agreed,” Jughead said. “Quick bite at Pop’s. See where our heads are at after that. You can go home, Kevin, if you like. I can drop you off at the Spellmans, too, Betts. You’ve both been working hard.”

Betty reached across the table to take his hand. “So have you. Why do I get to go home while you work?”

“Because this is my duty, not yours.”

Kevin groaned. “There he is. GI Jughead.”

“I hate it when you call me that. I’ve told you a million times, Kev.”

“And I hate it when you get all macho about being a Slayer. God, you know I can’t stand it when you get all Captain Paramerica on me. Like, get over yourself!”

Jughead spread his arms out in a dramatic flourish. “I would love to get over myself, but I can’t. It’s a burden I was destined to carry. In case you haven’t figured it out, I was born this way.”
“Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Kevin put his hands up, eyes wide with incredulity. “You did not just reference My Lord and Savior Lady Gaga!”

Jughead huffed. “Now who needs to get over themselves?”

Betty laughed and they both turned to her with scowls on their faces. She laughed some more and when they didn’t join her, her jaw dropped. “Oh, come on!”

“Babe, this is serious.”

“Oh, please!”

Of course they weren’t serious, and seconds later they were giggling like kids at church. They were exhausted, frustrated, and scared, but they could indulge themselves a few minutes of laughter, and probably burgers, too.

“Come on. I need carbs,” Jughead said, taking his beanie and shoving it over his head. “Can we pile in your car, Kev?”

“Absolutely, and we’ll be blasting Lady Gaga whether you like it or not.”

“Sure! So long as I get to sit in the back seat with Betty.”

Kevin shot him a glare. “I am not going to chauffeur you around while you make out with your girlfriend in the back seat.”

Betty laughed, her face flaming. “He’s joking! Tell him you’re joking, Jug.”

“I am serious as a heart attack, babe.”

She was both thrilled and mortified by this firm declaration, but Jughead’s phone rang and when he picked it up, the color from his face drained, and it was like it sucked the air out of their playful mood.

When Jughead ended the call, they were silent.

“I gotta go. They found out who did it. I have to--” Jughead sighed.

“Lead the hunt?” Kevin finished for him.

Jughead nodded. “Someone’s gotta make sure the Serpents don’t slay them on sight.”

Betty’s stomach tightened into painful knots, cradling his cheeks in her hands. “Jughead, be careful.”

“I always am.” He pulled her close, giving her a brief but heartfelt kiss. “Please, please hitch a ride with Kevin going home. That is a serious request.”

She shrugged, casting a shy glance at Kevin. She never wants to impose.

“I’m not letting you walk alone in the dark,” Kevin told her, firmly.

That seemed to work for Jughead as far as assuring her safety went and he waved his goodbye to Kevin before saddling up on his bike.

Betty watched him drive off, trying to control the thoughts that were trying to hammer her deeper into her pit of anxiety.
“He always comes back okay,” Kevin said, gently. “You don’t have to worry about him so much. I’ve seen him fight vampires and he wins every time. He’s well equipped for what he does.”

She didn’t want to worry so much, but she couldn’t help it. Slayers were not invincible, no matter how hard they were to kill.

************

There were probably half a dozen perpetrators of this crime, but they were only able to pinpoint three. That was good enough.

Jughead led one contingent, FP led the other, and Tall Boy led the third, all of them staging an organized strike to bring in their suspects.

Jughead’s perp was a werewolf, and to avoid escalating this manhunt into a town incident, he had his team wait until the werewolf was alone before attempting to wrangle him.

This suspect had very little tactical experience. He was strong, as all werewolves were. He was fierce, as was expected of a Ghoulie. He also liked the taste of raw, bloody meat, whether human or animal. But pitted against trained slayers and their teams, he didn’t stand much of a chance.

Jughead didn’t even need backup. He simply sauntered up to Ezra Alcock, aka, Bates, and clocked him with a punch to the jaw. Which didn’t knock him out.

It did, however, force Bates's transformation, which Jughead thought was unfortunate. As Bates quickly transformed, Jughead fitted his silver knuckles around his fist and delivered another knockout punch that sent Bates sprawling and unconscious. With Bates’s tongue lolling from the side of his snout, the Serpents dumped him into a silver lined cage and brought him to the underground courthouse--a secret facility underneath City Hall where Otherworld hearings were held.

FP came back with his half-born fae perpetrator, soon after. The fae was wrapped neck to ankle in a cocoon of iron chains. His visage was fierce with rage but he was weak. Iron affected them worse than it did witches.

The third perpetrator, another werewolf, didn’t survive his encounter with Tall Boy.

“He went for Fogarty’s throat,” Tall Boy said, calmly, as they hauled the dead body in for proof. “Silver bullet was ready in the chamber. I had to.”

Jughead sighed, the eyes of a dead man staring right back at him as blood leaked from the bullet wound at his temple. While Jughead would’ve done the exact same thing to protect Fangs, Jughead was half certain Tall Boy didn’t try so hard to haul the werewolf in alive.

With the hunt concluded and the perpetrators in custody, they were brought to judgement before the council. While all council members were required to attend, they didn’t have to be there. All of the council attended from their homes through modern means--live feeds. Their faces showed on a large split-screen monitor mounted in the ancient courtroom.

The courtroom was shaped like an amphitheatre. The center of it was spacious enough to accommodate perpetrators that needed to be restrained in cages, chains, nets, or sigils. Just out of
reach were the council seats. Traditionally, council members had to physically show up, but given that technology allowed for members to be present remotely, the more modern approach had been easily adopted.

Most of these proceedings were low-key affairs like this, often quickly assembled, and always expedient. Defendants were allowed to have advocates—lawyers, in some cases, but defendants could refuse them, too.

These creatures did not want advocates.

As creatures with representation in the council, their counterparts had the option to bring them before their fellowmen and be judged by their peers.

Ulfric Vihaan, with his deeply brown skin and intensely penetrating wolverine stare, spoke first. “I am Ulfric Vihaan, representing the werewolves of the Dales. Alpha to the Upadrashta Pack. I have consulted with my Lupa Aditya and Frekki Terrence. The Bolverk abides. We waive First Judgement.”

Lupa and Frekik were the Ulfric’s female counterpart and General, respectively. The Bolverk was the Ulfric’s bodyguard and hitman.

Mayor McCoy spoke next, her hair tied back in a dignified chignon and her suit unwrinkled even so late in the day. Her cold gaze conveyed displeasure. Her fae characteristics were in full display, gone of the glamours she usually employed. “I am High Fae of the Seelie Court, Sierra McCoy, representing the Light Fae of the Dales. We waive First Judgement.”

Lady Gendra, head of the Unseelie Court, looked every bit the fae she was, as well, with her silver hair, pointed ears, and golden complexion. She spoke next. “I am presiding as the impartial council member. First Judgement has been waived for both defendants. We may proceed. Defendants, you have refused advocates. The floor is now open to question you.”

Jughead stepped forward. “Who ordered you to kill Wyome?”

Bates sneered. “Did we? Kill her?”

Jughead didn’t reply, except to ask the question again.

The fae huffed. “No one ordered us. Wyome was an uppity bitch. We just wanted to wipe that smirk off her face.”

“If you cooperate, the council may call a recess and reconvene with better circumstances in your favor.” Jughead had very little feelings for them, one way or another, but their cooperation could mean valuable information.

Bates snorted but said nothing. The fae, Daniel, refused to talk as well.

Jughead’s eyes met FP’s, who had taken the seat beside Jughead’s at the audience gallery. He could see the skeptical arch of FP’s eyebrow, probably trying to figure out what he was getting at.

Jughead wasn’t ready to speak to him about it yet.

From there the proceedings became even more procedural. The presiding mitigator asked the routine questions: Do you have witnesses? What is your defense? Is there any reason for us to suppose you aren’t guilty? Will the slayers in attendance share their accounts? What were the events leading up to the perpetrators’ capture?
Jughead could only wonder what the hell Malachai, or maybe Penny, promised these creatures to keep them quiet, because they were answering nothing even as the slayers and slayer adjacents told their sides of the story, all of which were damaging to the defendants.

Back in his seat, Jughead leaned over so he could speak quietly to Toni.

“What do we know about these guys?” he asked.

Toni shook her head. “Not much. Both of them poor kids, both with Lost family members to support--Bates has his mother and younger brother. The fae, Daniel Poole--he doesn’t even get out in the field much. He watches over a little half-sister who lives with an aunt. He sends her money. They’re not even hitmen. They’re foot soldiers.”

Jughead pursed his lips. “This whole hearing is a pointless exercise.”

“Not all pointless. Sho wants their blood for what they did to Wyome. It’ll give him the justice he wants.”

He said nothing. He didn’t know what this was going to accomplish. If anything, it would only give the Ghoulies reason to retaliate. “Where would they even get the money for this kind of payoff? I’m assuming someone promised them that their loved ones would be taken cared of? Unless they think someone’s going to come rescue them? It just all seems so far-fetched.”

Toni nodded. “All good questions. You know I’m also still looking for answers, don’t you, Jones? You can’t expect me to do all the work.”

He couldn’t help but chuckle. “I will gladly trade you sleuthing assignments for the day-to-day duties of watching the vault, making the Riverdale rounds, the Greendale rounds, the daily omens check… like I would love to hang out at the Wyrm every Friday night, playing pool, or taking Betty out to dinner while you make sure that our Otherworlder safeguards are secure.”

“Fine, fine. Cool your tits, Jones. I’ll look into what’s in it for these assholes and who’s funding everything.” Toni gave an exasperated sigh. “God, when is this going to be over?”

It didn’t take much longer. With the defendants refusing to defend themselves, the hearing went quickly and their fate was put to a vote.

Astanphaeus made his usual pitch. “I am obligated to abstain from the vote in fulfillment of the Divine Accords, but it is also my sworn obligation to advocate for mercy. These boys are foot soldiers. They have been asked to perform a terrible task for the furtherance of their masters’ goals. For their part in the crime, they must be punished, but I recommend imprisonment, not death. Justice will only be fully served if you bring forth their masters.”

With Astanphaeus abstaining, the presiding council member asked Sho what outcome he was asking for.

“Death,” Sho said without hesitation. “They left my granddaughter for dead and she is yet to awaken from her coma. She is stable at the moment, but her condition can worsen. I want these perpetrators executed, their bodies delivered to their masters to serve as examples.”

Jughead gave a start. Nobody said anything about delivering body parts. He motioned to rise from his seat to speak up. “But--”

“Boy,” FP told him aside, grabbing his arm and squeezing it.
Jughead scowled but did not shake his father off. “Delivery of bodies, dad?” he whispered. “That’s a horrible idea. That’s pouring gasoline on a fire! The Ghoulies will riot for sure!”

“Be quiet!” FP hissed.

Jughead glared at his father. Other than his line of questioning, he did not have a voice in this court, but FP had a say with the Serpents. Especially the elder ones. Jughead hoped his father can talk sense into Sho.

Lady Gendra nodded, oblivious to the argument Jughead and FP were having on the side. “The plaintiff’s plea to this court is noted. A sentence of death requires the unanimous vote of the council. How does the council vote?”

Their votes were cast out in the open, down the line, member after member spoke, “Death,” until it got to FP.

For a moment, Jughead wondered whether the pause meant he would dare to gainsay the majority vote with “Mercy.” Jughead told himself it was too much to ask, but he sometimes allowed himself a glimmer of hope that his father would veer away from the hardline rule and choose another way.

As it turns out, FP went with Death--as Jughead expected, but he was disappointed, nonetheless. It could have been the means to put an end to the gruesome theatrics of leaving bodies on the House of the Dead’s front door.

With FP’s vote, the fates of Bates and Daniel were ultimately settled.

Jughead couldn’t bring himself to feel bad about the outcome. These people had brutally mangled Wyome and if she hadn’t had the wits to call him, she would’ve simply bled to death. No, he did not feel bad for them, but he did feel an overwhelming sense of apprehension. What were they were setting off by this execution?

Nothing felt right. Not while he didn’t have all the answers.

“Who shall be executioner?” Ulfric Vihaan asked.

That jolted Jughead out of his thoughts. Slayers were expected to be executioners when death sentences were pronounced but Jughead never had to raise his voice to volunteer. The task often fell to older slayers, so Jughead was spared for now, but his time would eventually come to step up. He was not looking forward to it.

Right now, the obligation fell to FP, Tall Boy, or Farmer McGinty, if he were here. It was FP who spoke up.

“I’ll serve as executioner.”

FP was proclaimed executioner and it automatically fell to him when and where. Jughead did not care to stay for the rest of it. He fell back into the crowd of spectators and slipped out. His work that night was done.
Betty heard a sound from outside the guestroom and for a moment, she wondered if her aunts were still shuffling about the house, but seconds later, she could hear the running of water, then the spray of a shower. It had to be Jughead, and the thought brought her relief. The anticipation of finally having him beside her made her body shudder.

He stayed in the shower a while, and when he was done, it was several minutes more before the door to the guestroom opened and Jughead snuck in quietly in a shirt and boxers.

“Jug,” she called out sleepily. “You’re back.”

He peeled off his shirt, then, before he settled on the bed, wrapped himself around her and buried his face in her hair. He smelled like soap and his body was incredibly warm in spite of just having come from the shower.

He took a deep breath, as if taking in her scent. “You’re still up. It’s past midnight.”

She turned around to face him, surreptitiously checking him for injuries. “I couldn’t sleep.”

She looked at his face and saw his exhaustion. The shadows under his eyes and the slackened expression around his beautiful mouth.

She was very glad to see him. Gladder that he didn’t seem hurt at all, but she wished she could take some of his burden off him.

His fingers came up to brush some hair off her face. “You shouldn’t worry about me so much.”

She wasn’t going to argue. This was a conversation that they were going to have constantly. If we’re lucky.

“Did you find the ones who hurt Wyome?”

He didn’t call out the change of subject. Rather, he went with it and nodded. “We only found the three. We think there were more of them, but the three were enough. We brought in two of the three. The other one was killed during the encounter.”

Her anxiety blossomed anew. “Who killed him? Or was it a her?”

“Him. And it was Tall Boy who killed him. Claimed he had no choice and no one in his company disputed it.”

Uneasiness fluttered in her gut for a second. “I’m sure it was for a good reason. Where are the other two now?”

“Detained. Their hearing was held this evening. It’s why I stayed out so late. I had to attend. And when my part was done, I stuck around to find out their sentences.”

Her eyes widened. “And? How have they been sentenced?”

“To death. They’ll be executed at dawn by my father.”

For a town with pep, violent deaths seemed to be commonplace here.

“Won’t that anger the Ghoulies?” she asked.

He nodded. “It might. Or maybe they’re already angry and it would just be another reason to start a
A war. She had wondered out loud once how Riverdale and its surrounding towns seemed so orderly and peaceful and Jughead had told her about the Covenant of the Dales, how long ago, the Slayers and Witch Covens came to an agreement to keep the peace. She’d never read the agreement, but she had wondered if certain powers that be sometimes wished that the covenant weren’t so congenial.

Did the slayers wish they could be less bound to procedure? Did the witches hate that their power was being policed at all? Did the Fae resent the repression of their urges? Did the vamps and werewolves think that the witches were given way too much power? There was plenty of discontent to go around, but the covenant demanded that they set aside their primal wants in favor of growing up and thinking for the greater good. That wasn’t always easy.

All these years and not a single major incident. One had to wonder whether something had to give.

Betty began tracing his tattoos again. Doing it always managed to calm her.

“Betty, Wyome mentioned you when she called me. It was right after she mentioned the vault.”

She blinked in mild surprise, her fingers pausing. “Me? What for?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what it means, but she told me this with her dying breath. She considered it that important.”

Her fingers began to curl into fists. “Maybe they want to take me. And my powers.”

He gently unfurled her hands. “They won’t. Not while I’m here.” He pulled her closer in his embrace, as if to prove how well he could shield her from these dark possibilities.

She kissed his chest, her body reacting to the intimacy. She sucked softly as she trailed her kisses up his neck. She kissed around the corners of his mouth before settling her lips against his.

His lips responded gently, breathing as they parted. “Betts.”

It sounded like a half-hearted protest, because his breathing was already heavier and his blue eyes were significantly darker.

“You are probably exhausted and that’s okay,” she whispered, kissing him again, this time less gently. He kissed back eagerly, holding her head by her hair. It was his tongue that sought hers and she let it sweep into her mouth, the gentle massage quickly become a torrid push and pull.

He gasped, his hand already snaking beneath her top. “I am exhausted, but I want you... “

“Then just lie back. Relax. Let me do all the work.” She sat up and pulled off her cami, her breasts bare for him to touch, which he did without hesitation. She straddled him, settling herself just on top of his hardening dick.

He braced her thighs with his hands and bucked his hips up towards her. She felt the delicious pressure right where she needed it, making her gasp.

“What happened to me doing all the work?” she breathed, planting her hands on his chest.

He did it again, smiling slightly at the gasp it got from her each time. She realized that he had a touch of trouble relinquishing control, which she understood, but she’d had her share of dealing with the worst of them, and Jughead was far from bad.
“That feels good,” she confessed.

“I know it does,” he replied, without pause or hesitation. For him, it was a fact. He could make her feel wonderful things. He reached up, cupping her cheeks to pull her down for a kiss. She let him, lowering herself onto him with her chest pressing on his.

The slow but intense tangling of their tongues was him building that climb. Working her up. Making her want him. And it was working, of course. He was certain of his physicality. He knew how to stoke her desire.

She was beginning to enjoy this pleasurable parry for control.

She pulled away, stalking lower down his body.

“Betts--”

She splayed her hands on his chest, giving him a gentle push down, while her lips followed the line of hair down his belly.

When she pulled off his boxers, she clasped his cock in her hand to give it a light squeeze before taking him in her mouth.

His deep groan was a satisfying sound, and as she sucked and licked, she watched his fingers dig into the sheets, noted the arch of his neck, and how his eyes drifted close whenever she moved her grip along his shaft a certain way.

It was unexpectedly thrilling to get such reactions from him. This was not just her going down on him after she had gotten him to the point of release by other means, this was her, giving him a blowjob and clearly becoming more successful at it.

She was learning him and she loved it. When she combined the bob of her lips around him with the movement of her hand, his groan was louder and his hips gave a jolt.

“Damn, babe,” he gasped. “That was good.”

She did it again, intensifying the way she pulled her mouth back along his length and moving her hand a little faster.

His fingers dove into her hair and she had to resist a smirk of triumph. She didn’t want to break the rhythm she had, so she continued, and moments later, he was moaning, “Fuck, don’t stop. Don’t stop. Betty, that feels so fucking good.”

And when he bucked into her mouth, she felt his hot cum hit her throat. She kept working him with her lips, tongue, and hands until his groaning calmed into quiet gasps for breath. When he was spent, laying on his back with a somewhat shocked expression on his face, she allowed herself that smile of accomplishment.

His eyes flickered to her face and he must’ve seen the smile, because he threw his head back and chuckled. He held his hand out to her and she slid up to settle into his embrace. He pressed his lips to the top of her head and settled there a moment.

“That wasn’t exactly my plan,” he said into her hair.

She made a soft tutting sound. “Plans don’t always go the way you expect.”
He arched an eyebrow, grinning at her. “The night’s not over yet, you know.”

“It is, for you. Get some rest. It’s a school night, for goodness sake.”

He laughed, softly, and he pulled the covers over them, the warmth radiating between them under the sheets.

It was insanely comfortable, and soon they were both drifting off into a deep, exhausted sleep.

*****************************************************************************

Jughead got her back in the morning.

When she woke up, he was underneath the sheets with his head between her thighs and his tongue making circles around her clit. She didn’t stand a chance.

He was sucking and lapping her into completion scant minutes later. And when that was done, he hovered over her body and entered her, rocking into her in a slow, steady rhythm that sent her toes curling and her fingernails clawing light lines down his back.

His kiss muffled her cries, and when he wasn’t kissing her, the low, arousing timbre of his voice whispered words of love, admiration, and obscenities by turn. She loved it all, responding with the same.

While sometimes she liked the reactive, torrid sex that they’ve had, she loved that they could talk, too. However incoherent with lust their words probably were, but to have him moving inside her while his words coaxed her desire was the kind of connection they had that she cherished.

When the inevitable oblivion swallowed her, she let the tide of her climax take her, and he followed soon after, gasping her name like it was the only lifeline he had.

*****************************************************************************

The morning following the hearing, the heads of Bates, Daniel, and the third perpetrator, Zacharias Migos, were dropped off at the front courtyard of the House of the Dead.

It didn’t make the news because it wasn’t reported to the police, and if it ever did make it to the Register—the town paper, it would probably be tucked away in page three, because that’s where Alice Cooper would’ve put it, deep as she was in her silent takeover of the publication.

Betty can pinpoint the exact time Jughead got the news. It was around 4th period, Calculus. His phone lit up with a message, and as he read it, the crease between his eyebrows deepened so intensely that it would surely leave a mark. That scowl stayed on his face for a full two minutes, while she was biding her time to call his attention and the teacher wouldn’t notice.

She touched his arm lightly and quickly, and when he looked at her, the creases smoothed away. She still mouthed, “What’s wrong?”
He shook his head and mouthed back, “Lunch.”

She was certain that no catastrophe had befallen his second meal (or third. He had finished a peanut butter and jelly sandwich at free period), so she could only assume he meant to tell her then.

Sure enough, when lunch came around and before Archie and Veronica could join them, Jughead told her and Kevin about the severed heads, showing them a picture of it on his phone, which had been taken by some spying Serpents.

It was difficult to determine what she should feel about it. The Ghoulies were the enemies of the peace, but wasn’t terrifying one’s enemy with severed body parts just as bad?

Kevin bit his lip. “Did your dad—“

“Yeah. Dad executed them.” Jughead’s expression was stoic before his eyes fell to concentrate on the extremely delicious lunch that Zelda had made him. Her lunch was no slouch, either. Their lunches were different, because as Zelda said, they might want to share.

“I asked him not to,” Jughead grumbled. “Do that. Send their bodies to the Ghoulies. I guess he didn’t send their bodies, just their heads.”

Betty swallowed nervously, not sure if she still had an appetite. Kevin looked at his pastrami sandwich. He didn’t look too enthused about it, either.

By the time Archie and Veronica showed up, she had barely gotten through half of her lunch and she was steadily grinding to a halt. Jughead, of course, devoured his lunch in quick time.

When she put her fork down, Jughead asked, “Are you gonna eat that?” which prompted her to slide her container in his direction.

Truly, they were a match made in heaven.

Veronica leaned over to speak softly in Betty’s ear. “Are you guys okay?”

Betty nodded, nudging Jughead to indicate Veronica. Jughead wordlessly slid his phone in Betty’s direction, which she took and unlocked to show Veronica Jughead’s latest message.

“You guys talk in eye signals now?” Veronica grumbled, reading what was on Jughead’s phone.

Betty felt her face growing hot, but Jughead seemed pleased by Veronica’s crack, sliding his hand over Betty’s knee.

When Veronica’s face paled and she looked at her tomato and avocado bruschetta bites beside her 3-bean ratatouille like she wanted to hurl, Betty wondered if she should’ve warned Veronica about the photos.

With Archie there, they couldn’t say much, but perhaps Archie’s obliviousness was what they needed at the moment.

His talk about football was strangely soothing, and his excitement about the home game enabled a prolonged discussion on how they absolutely needed to support him now, because the game was right there.

Betty could already imagine Jughead’s inward groan at the prospect of watching a bunch of uniformed meatheads running from one end of a field to another fighting over a bizarrely shaped ball.
It was so far removed from Jughead’s experiences of hunting werewolves and vampires that no wonder Jughead couldn’t stand it.

“If Betty were a Vixen, you would be at every fucking game,” Archie pointed out.

Jughead snorted. “That is probably the smartest thing you’ve ever said.”

Veronica grinned. “Come on, Jug. It’ll take--what, two hours? Maybe two and a half? It’ll be fun! Bring your Serpents. It’s always amusing to see the other side get nervous about the leather jacketed dudes lined up a the bleachers.”

“See, that’s what you’re really after, aren’t you?”

Betty saw, as lunch wore on, that Jughead’s shoulders relaxed just the tiniest bit.

They separated for classes and at the last period, she saw him staring at this phone again, though the severity of his expression didn’t stay like it did after he’d typed back his messages.

When the final bell rang, Archie and Veronica went to practice with their teams and Kevin had to go direct his play.

Betty did wonder if Jughead ever expected Kevin to give up normal, high school activities to do Slayer things like researching artifacts, but given Jughead’s tendency to take as much of the burden of all this as he can, she concluded that Jughead would never impose such a choice on his best friend.

“Are you going to the library?” Betty asked as they walked to his bike.

He nodded, somberly. “I gotta get in that vault and check out that reference you found.”

“I’ll go with you. We aren’t really done with the records yet. I can look through those while you’re in the vault.”

He put his arm around her. “Sounds good…”

It seemed like he wanted to say more. “What is it, Jug?”

He paused, casting his gaze around the parking lot, at the students filing out of the school and the cars pulling out of their spots. He watched everyone going about their business, Lost and Otherworlder alike, before finally meeting her gaze. “All of this feels weird. Like I’m missing something. Everything has been a bunch of re actions. Me and the Serpent reacting to something or someone. I feel like I should do something else. Look for something else. Something is happening and I can’t put my finger on what.”

Jughead was a thinking man, but he was also instinctual. She wasn’t going to let him shrug off this feelings.

“Think,” she said, calmly. “What’s triggering your unease?”

He let out a breath. “I’m not sure. I don’t know. Everything? I feel like I’m looking at pieces but not checking to see if they all fit together. And I feel like you’re in the middle of the puzzle.”

He looked at her with such deep concern that it made her heart ache.

She cupped his face in her hands. “Maybe if you stop worrying about me and start focusing on the leads you have, you might find your answers.”
“Maybe I’ll stop worrying about you when I’m dead,” he muttered.

She didn’t like hearing him talk like that.

He sighed. “I’m sorry. That came out wrong. I’m just--yes, I worry about you. That’s not going to change. You worry about me, too, so you understand that it’s just this constant state between us--”

She cocked a sad smile. He returned it with a somewhat pained smile of his own.

“--but at the moment, I’m handling that. If I can make sure that you’re never alone, I can function.”

Somehow she knew that he was making sure that he always left her with someone. Like when he left her in school, or when he made sure she had a ride home, or when he dropped her off at the Spellmans, or when he brought her to the library with him, like he was doing now. They were all calculated for her safety, and she can’t necessarily fault him for that, but she did wonder how he’d react if he woke up one morning and realized she’d gone running by herself, especially now with Wyome mentioning her in the same breath as “vault”.

Her eyebrow arched. “You know I can handle myself, Juggie. I’m trained to fend off attacks.”

“It doesn’t mean I’ll let you deal with half-a-dozen werewolves by yourself. Everyone can do with backup, Betty.”

She pursed her lips and didn’t argue that point.

“I just feel like I don’t have all the facts, that’s all,” he concluded, picking his helmet off his bike and wearing it over his head. He mounted his bike as she secured her own helmet on her head.

“We can only follow leads,” she said, mounting the bike behind him. “And you’ve got people looking into them, right?”

“Yeah. I’m hoping I’ll know more by the end of the day.”

He kicked the bike to life and they headed for the library, where Betty kept scouring through the records as Jughead went into the vault to look into the reference she found.

When Jughead re-emerged from the vault, he looked disappointed. “It wasn’t a spell. The book itself has rare, scary spells in it, but for the entry on the Wicked, it just said something about how the Wicked were created by Lilith.”

Betty swallowed, looking at her hands. “Right. A popular theory. That the Wicked were born from the Mother of All Demons.”

His hands covered hers. “It’s just a theory. And even if that’s true, it doesn’t change anything about who you are.”

“My father,” she began carefully. “When he was trying to take my magic, he had me in the middle of a sigil, like a Devil’s Trap, and I couldn’t get out of it. He had it all set up the way you did for Qodesha, except that the sigil looked different. The words he invoked were different, too. They weren’t the same as yours, but whatever he was doing, it felt like it was working. It felt like something had put their hand through my chest and started yanking my insides out of me.”

He looked at her with eyes filled with compassion. “That doesn’t mean you’re a demon, Betty. That just means the mechanics of removing magic and removing a demon are the same. You said so yourself—the sigil was different. The words were different.”
She didn’t feel convinced. She had seen how Jughead had banished a demon and can compare it to how her father did the ritual on her. It was far too similar for comfort. Her father didn’t even get to the end of it. Who knew if it didn’t also end up with her getting sucked into Abaddon?

“You’re not a demon,” he said, cupping the back of her neck.

“Not me, but my magic might be, and maybe that’s why I lose control. Maybe it’s my magic possessing me.”

He shook his head. “You don’t know if you lose control. You get dosed before anyone bothers to find out if you’re there.”

She smiled, grateful for his love. She also, not for the first time, heard that tiny voice in her head that warned You could be the death of him.

She closed her eyes to kiss him, letting the pleasurable feelings wash that tiny little voice away.

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It was while Jughead and Betty were having dinner that Toni walked into Pop’s, a determined look on her face. She dropped by the counter, probably to place an order, before she slid into their booth to sit across them.

“Figured I’d find you here,” Toni said, grabbing a few fries off Jughead’s plate. “I didn’t want to crash your date but I didn’t think this could wait.”

“You’re not crashing anything,” Jughead said, exchanging looks with Betty. “We were just having dinner before heading back to the Spellmans. What’s up?”

Toni gave him a look, like oh, boy, have I got something. “Just let me have my grilled cheese sandwich, first. Like, I need carbs to weigh me down because I’m kind of shaking.”

If there was one thing that Jughead understood about Toni, it was her relationship with food.

He felt Betty’s fingers dig into his thigh and he tried to soothe her tension by rubbing her shoulder.

When Toni’s order arrived and had her first slurp of chocolate milkshake with a bite of grilled cheese, it was like she was revived. “Okay, that’s better. Jones, this shit you sent me to find, it’s bad.”

Jughead swallowed. “Tell me.”

“Let me start easy. You know that question you had about the payoffs for Bates, Daniel, and Zach? They each got 5 grand apiece to dispose of Wyome. Now, who knows if they got paid with her making it to the hospital. Maybe they’re waiting for her to die, or maybe they just needed her so badly beaten that it would get the whole town and council worked up. But then I found that there was an agreement that if any of them are caught and killed for this, their family gets a thousand a month payoff the next couple of years.”

“Is that big enough to die for?” Betty asked.

Jughead understood the skepticism. It seemed like a paltry sum when you had a middle-class
upbringing, but he had Serpents who lived on less on a monthly basis.

Toni shrugged. “It’s a pretty sweet deal if you live in a trailer park and you don’t know whether you’ll get to eat on the regular.”

“Who’s funding it?” Jughead asked.

“Penny,” Toni said in a resigned tone. She seemed wholly unconvinced. “At least that’s what everyone’s saying. I couldn’t believe it myself, but she’s been paying Malachai off pretty regularly the last few weeks. She’s got the money.”

Jughead couldn’t quite wrap his head around it. “Did she build a booming drug business in Poughkeepsie that we didn’t know about?”

Toni shook her head. “I haven’t even heard of a moderately successful drug business. Whatever happened when we ran her out of town, the drug connections she made doing business in Riverdale didn’t follow her up north.”

“This doesn’t make a lot of sense.”

“Then follow the money,” Betty pointed out. “The disconnect is there. All this might make more sense if you find out where that money’s coming from.”

Jughead nodded. “Toni, have your guys follow that trail. How is she getting that money? Is it handed to her cold? Does she get a wire transfer?”

“I’ll put my guys on it. As for the vault… my sources point to them wanting to break into it, by any means necessary. I heard talk of the 9th.”

“Full moon,” Betty pointed out.

Jughead’s heart sank. “They’re planning a riot, aren’t they?”

Toni nodded. “They’re not the most organized bunch, Jones, but the grumblings of a riot have been getting louder since those heads showed up at the House of the Dead.”

“I fucking told dad this was going to happen,” he growled, running a hand down his face in distress. “There’s so much more of them than there is us. And if they’re doing this on a full moon, it means they’re going to get all werewolves in their ranks, young and old, to be at this thing. There’s going to be so much more than we even realize.”

Older werewolves, or werewolves that have had their lycanthropy longer, often developed the ability to transform even without a full moon. The younger werewolves still needed the full moon’s magic, but if they were doing this on a full moon, it meant all their wolves would be there to wreak havoc.

“In fairness, your father didn’t agree to the delivery of those heads, Jones,” Toni said, carefully. “He told Sho, point blank, that if those heads were left at the House of the Dead’s front lawn, he may as well leave the heads of all the Serpents at their wake.”

Jughead pursed his lips. His father always had a flair for the dramatic, but it was probably what the Serpents liked about him best—that he was such a hardass that wasn’t afraid to use his words.

“Sho wasn’t happy about FP telling him no,” Toni continued. “But Sho appeared to comply. It wasn’t supposed to happen, but someone, dunno who, probably some of our more hot-headed members, just did it without anyone’s permission. Your dad’s been trying to find out who since this
morning, but nobody’s talking.”

Jughead cursed. This always happened when his father came home. It was like his presence at Riverdale fired up Serpent testosterone. “The Boss is back, so we’re going to do whatever the fuck we want.”

“So now the Ghoulies have gotten fired up,” Jughead concluded. “And they’re going to use that chaos to maybe try to get through the Vault.”

Betty made a sound. “They’re going to try to kill all the slayers at once.”

Toni scoffed. “Well, they’ll be in for a fight. Farmer McGinty’s not exactly the type to lay down and let them take him.”

Jughead surmised that Farmer McGinty’s going to very pissed and woe is the Ghoulie that gets near him. “We aren’t going to make it easy for them, either. I need to call a council meeting. Like now.”

“I’m sure FP can get you what you need,” Toni said.

Betty bit her lip. “I might be able to get Aunt Penelope to--”

Jughead clamped a hand on her wrist. “Betty, don’t. I don’t want you to ask favors from your aunt. You might find yourself beholden to the Blossoms. Let me call the council first. I might be able to get everyone’s buy in without giving favors up.”

She nodded quietly, and Jughead was a little concerned that her gears were turning in another direction. Betty was a troubleshooter. She wasn’t going to let him do this while she sat from the sidelines.

“Are you gonna finish that other half of the burger, doll?” Toni asked her.

Betty gave Toni a faint smile and shook her head.

Jughead couldn’t blame Toni at all. The way things were going, he might have a couple more burgers himself.

The flint had been lit, counting seconds down to the powder keg. Things were about to get explosive.

tbc
“When I look out my window
Many sights to see
And when I look in my window
So many different people to be
That it's strange
So strange”
-Donovan, Season of the Witch

When Jughead and Betty got back to the Spellmans, Polly and Kevin were in the living room talking like old pals.

Polly looked animated and open, and Jughead couldn’t help but credit Kevin for his ability to unfurl the most tight-lipped people. Then again, Polly’s slow transition with Jughead could’ve just been him, projecting his own caution.

When Polly saw Betty, her demeanor changed, slowing to a quieter version of herself, contrite in the way her shoulders hunched even as she stood to greet her sister.

“Oh, Betty,” she said, quietly. “I thought I’d stop by and see how you were doing. I was hoping we can talk, but if you’re not ready, I’ll go.”

Betty’s lips pursed, but perhaps only to hold in her own emotions. Betty didn’t strike Jughead as someone who held grudges, especially because he knew first-hand that she gave him a second chance. She was, in essence, very forgiving, and she didn’t think Polly carried as much blame as her brother and mother, either.

She ran into Polly’s arms and Polly cried as she said she was sorry.

Jughead watched the scene with mild fascination and a hint of envy. He had gotten used to Jellybean not being there, but sometimes he still missed her, and it still made him sad that he saw her in stages rather than have her grow up with him.
The sisters sank into the couch, hand in hand, speaking quickly to one another as if they’d been holding back on each other for more than a couple of days.

Kevin jerked his head in the direction of the backyard deck and Jughead followed, leaving the sisters to their reconciliation.

“I wish I had sisters,” Kevin said as he settled on the swing seat. “They’re always so delightfully and unapologetically dramatic, then they tell each other everything at a hundred miles a minute. I can’t stand how boys hold it in like manly men. So gruff with your heavy steps and burdened sighs like the world wouldn’t understand.”

Jughead shot him a look of amusement, recognizing Kevin’s way of telling him that his best friend should’ve been in on the drama of FP’s return sooner than this. He sat beside Kevin on the swing. “Hey, I tell you things, you know.”

“Not lately,” Kevin grumbled. “Like, seriously, Jug. I don’t know if you did it deliberately or you just forgot because you were busy…”

Jughead sighed and snatched off his beanie, ruffling his hair and giving Kevin his own contrite look. “It was a combination. I got caught up in all sorts of dramas and there were things about Betty I couldn’t tell you, then you know how my dad kind of…”

“Throws you off your game?”

“Yeah. Sort of disrupts our routine of making rounds together, hanging out at the house…”

Kevin patted his shoulder. “I guess I know… was it Betty’s Wickedness that you couldn’t tell me?”

He nodded. “That’s still a secret, Kev.”

“I wouldn’t tell a soul. So how was that like? Finding out she was Wicked? Couldn’t have been easy for you.”

“It was that day I told you Betty ran off and didn’t tell me where.”

“I remember. And she ran away because--?”

“She said I looked at her like she was a freak.”

Kevin’s eyes widened in horror. “Did you?”

“Probably,” Jughead could feel his ears warming at his own mistake. “But I wasn’t exactly thinking it. I was shocked, yeah, but only because dad painted this picture of the Wicked and I couldn’t reconcile it with what I knew of Betty. So I was thinking-- But She Doesn’t Look Like a Freak when I probably should’ve been thinking It Doesn’t Matter Because You’re Betty and You’re Amazing.”

Kevin’s wan smile was one of understanding. “Well, it worked out, anyway. That’s all that matters. And I swear your dad…” He sighed and shook his head. “Your father still terrifies me with the way he thinks. I still think he thinks my dad should’ve whipped me straight.”

Jughead motioned to say something about his dad not having a problem with Kevin’s sexual orientation but paused, realizing that he spent a lot of his days trying to hide his perceived weaknesses from his own father, and at some point, he might have tried to build Kevin up as some macho tough dude just because he was afraid FP would tell Jughead to stop hanging out with him.
Also, in light of FP’s confession about what he almost did to Betty, he realized that Kevin’s instincts weren’t off the mark.

“Yeah,” Jughead finally said. “He scares me, too.”

Kevin grunted. “He’s just that extra landmine on top of everything else, isn’t he? Does he know about you and Betty?”

“He does.”

“How did he take it?”

“Bad. Like, really bad.”

“Sorry, bud. What are you going to do about it?”

Jughead cast Kevin a defeated smile. “Love her harder?”

“Not a solution, but it’s honestly what I would do, too.”

This is why he and Kevin got along so well. Fundamentally, they agreed that there’s little to be gained from half-assing things.

Jughead told Kevin about Toni’s information, and how he needed to get his father to gather the council.

Kevin frowned. “Do you really think the Ghoulies would cause a riot?”

Jughead nodded. “I do, and I also think there’s something bigger going on here. Penny isn’t just promising them money. The money will run out if she has to keep paying them. She’s seeking retribution for getting ran out of Riverdale and she wants her drug business back. Right now it’s the Serpents who are standing in the way of her ambitions. She’s after all of us, and when she’s cut us down to size, she’ll run Riverdale her way.”

“Are Midvale and Greendale going to let her do that?” Kevin asked. “They know full well that if they let Penny run free, her drug business is going to bleed to the rest of the dales. If Penny even manages to successfully overrun Riverdale, she’d have to fight her way into Midvale and Greendale next.”

“If she gets through Riverdale, Midvale and Greendale will be a cakewalk.” Jughead didn’t like to sound so foreboding, but he had to consider all the possibilities. “Besides, we don’t know what they want from the vault. Whatever it is could be the key to Penny having control over all the dales.”

“What’s in there that’s like that?”

“The Keys, maybe? All those imprisoned witches and creatures could possibly serve her. Or there might be an old spell in there that we didn’t know about. I could speculate, but that’s beside the point. They mustn’t take over Riverdale and they absolutely must not get into that vault.”

“Maybe your dad has an idea?”

Jughead fell silent. “Maybe.”

“You’re going to have to talk to him soon, anyway. You need him for the council. Be thankful he’s here at all.”
He threw Kevin a sardonic look.

“You know what I mean.”

Jughead leaned back on the seat and it swung slowly. “The irony of all this is that I spent the last few months wondering when the hell he was going to come home and maybe even wishing he was around so I can—I don’t know, graduate high school like a normal person?”

Kevin nodded. “That’s a reasonable ask.”

“Now that he’s back, he’s been nothing but trouble.” He pressed the heels of his hands over his eyes. “God, I’m pissed that I have to talk to him and ask him for something.”

“Do you need—“

“Back up?”

“I was going to say company, but jeez. Alright, Jones. Back up it is.”

Jughead gave a heavy sigh. “It’s just that all I’ve done was yell at him since he got here.”

“So do you? Need back up?”

He shook his head and smiled wryly. “This shouldn’t take long. I’ll try calling him first. Hope he picks up. He usually does when he’s in Riverdale.”

Kevin patted his shoulder and got up, heading back inside to give him the privacy he needs.

Jughead called his father. It took Jughead about three tries before he gave up and texted his dad with a pointed Call me. He was just about to head back into the house when his phone rang, his dad’s ID flashing on his screen.

Filled with trepidation, he answered the call.

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He met his father at the Wyrm, sitting across him in his office.

FP’s office was perched atop the stairs overlooking the dancefloor. At a certain angles from the glass windows, there was a view of every section of the first floor.

It didn’t really matter, ultimately. FP hardly spent time there, as evidenced by the sparse decorations. The room was useful for filing and tax season, and Jughead did not like being in it. Everything he did for the Wyrm in his father’s stead, he did from the Manager’s table by the bar.

“How are Zelda and Hilda?” FP asked him nonsensically.

Jughead frowned. “You ask that like they haven’t been blowing up your phone and practically kicking down the door at the house.”

A chuckle rose from FP’s lips, shifting folders into stacks on his desk. “Right. The voice messages are pretty aggressive, too.”
“I haven’t even told them what you tried to do to Betty,” Jughead said. “I tell them that and I’m pretty sure they’ll kill you with their bare hands.”

There was visible tension in FP’s smile then as he leaned back on his seat. He tented his fingers in front of him. “Whataya need, kid?”

At least his father understood that he wouldn’t be here if it weren’t absolutely necessary. “I need you to call the Council. I have reason to believe that the Ghoulies are preparing to launch a coup on Riverdale around the 9th.”

FP’s lips pursed and he looked pissed. “In retaliation for the severed heads?”

Jughead was glad his father believed him immediately. He shook his head. “I think they just used that to rally the troops. You might even consider that one of them delivered the heads themselves, just to fire them up. They have other reasons to riot in our streets, but Penny Peabody’s been giving them ample motivation. Apparently, she’s been back in town for a while now and moving them around like chess pieces.”

“Penny Peabody!” FP exclaimed, the tension on his shoulders snapping his body straight on his seat. “How long have you known?”

“The day Wyome got attacked.”

“Boy, why didn’t you tell me?”

“I’m telling you now,” Jughead growled. “She’s had the Ghoulies on retainer and I don’t know what she’s promising them, but their motivations have been uncharacteristically abstract of late. When Wyome told me Penny’s working with the Ghoulies, it became increasingly clear that Penny’s been behind all their activities the last few weeks. Now they’re staging this riot.”

FP rose to his feet, glaring at his son. “None of this would be happening if you had just let me dispose of her, Jughead.”

His stomach tightened into knots. He knew his father would come back to him on that one, but he couldn’t bring himself to be sorry for what he did. Penny was born half-witch, but she never really got the hang of it. She couldn’t control her magic, could barely get potions to work, and as far as slaying had been concerned, she was dependably heartless. She was good at getting things organized and wrangling teams to do exactly what she needed them to do, and she did do the dirty work, probably without conscience, but her involvement in drugs turned her into something else altogether and Jughead knew they had to get rid of her--but not kill her. Even with Jughead removing the tattoo, she had been one of them, first.

He wasn’t going to let the Serpents be that kind of gang. He wasn’t going to let Penny tarnish their integrity like that.

“Forgive me if murder is on my list of Things I Would Never Fucking Do,” Jughead shot back. “If you felt strongly about it, you could’ve followed her to Poughkeepsie and disposed of her there, but you didn’t, so don’t come at me with that.”

FP made a huffing sound but didn’t argue the point. “You want me to call a Council to rally support?”

Jughead nodded. “There aren’t enough of us to overcome their numbers. We need to get pledges from the council members. We need to protect Riverdale. They know that if Riverdale falls, Greendale and Midvale will follow, easily. They’ll give us the manpower we need.”
FP pulled open one of the filing cabinets and pulled out a map. He unfurled it on the desk. It was a map of Riverdale and its surrounding towns. “Do you know how the Ghoulies are going to go about this?”

Jughead hunched over the map and let his gaze travel over its landmarks. “There’s something in the Vault that they want, so there’s going to be a large contingent over there, but they’re going to start from the House of the Dead here in Riverdale. They will come from Ghoulie outposts from Greendale and Midvale, as well.”

It began to occur to Jughead how overwhelming this all was, especially in light of the fact that the Vault needed to be protected at all costs.

“They’ll be going after us, dad,” Jughead continued. “The slayers. It’s probably why they’re going after that vault in the first place. They’ll know that the slayers have to protect it, and we will. We have no choice. They’re going to want to kill each of us: You, Toni, Farmer McGinty, and Tall Boy. It’s the only way to break the wards.”

The vein that popped up on FP’s temple was the only indication that this was making his father nervous. “Do you think someone’s turned?”

Jughead had thought about this over the last few days. “If there’s a traitor among us, why couldn’t they just walk in there and take whatever it is the Ghoulies want? I don’t think the slayers are compromised.”

FP ran a hand through his hair. “Then why riot at all? Just to kill us? They can try to do that stealthily. Off us one by one in our beds or something.”

“I’m still trying to find answers, dad. This whole thing doesn’t make a lot of sense, but they’ve expressed discontent about how we run things and maybe all they needed was an excuse to rise up and rally the troops.”

FP sat silent for a moment and Jughead settled on the couch along the window, watching the floor of the Wyrm. He wondered how many of them would fight to preserve Riverdale and how many of them would make it. Did they even suspect that they’d be in the thick of a riot in a few days time?

The Lost could be prepared via Mayor McCoy. In her own way, she could get the cops to help to a certain extent, but only to keep the Lost calm—make them feel protected. It would be completely unfair to put the cops between them and the Ghoulies. The Lost had no idea that they were fighting werewolves and vamps. They were utterly ill-equipped for that encounter.

“You still gonna stay with the Spellmans?” FP asked.

Jughead arched an eyebrow, surprised by the question. “So long as you think Betty’s a danger to me, yeah.”

His father made a sound of annoyance. “That will never change, but you already know I just can’t off Alice’s kid. I don’t think Zelda and Hilda would be forgiving about it, either. You want someone killed, get a Blood Witch. You want someone tormented, Wood Witches are the way to go. I have no intention of provoking the wrath of three Wood Witches.”

Jughead glared at him. “I’ll think about it after all this is over.”

“Alice is getting agitated about the fact that her daughter is living in a house where her boyfriend’s staying, too. I hope you’re being careful. Those Spellman girls…” He sighed and shook his head.
Jughead stared at FP. He couldn’t believe he was getting a sex talk. This was a fucking sex talk. “Oh, my God.”

“I’m just saying. The moment you have a kid, you are no longer in control of your life. I hope you’ve been using condoms.”

Jughead could feel himself physically pale at his father’s words of warning, and then he got angry. “D’you know who gave me this talk years ahead of you, dad? Hilda. Fucking Hilda had to give me this talk. I had to sit on a couch while Hilda talked to me about sex. It was mortifying! But she knew you weren’t to be depended on. She was looking out for me. You come to me when I’m eighteen with this bullshit.”

FP looked frustrated. “Look, kid, I didn’t mean to piss you off. I’m just trying to come to some middle ground here.”

“God, work on that when we aren’t trying to figure out how to protect Riverdale. Like, stick around after the slaying for fucking once in your life.” He got off the couch and stormed towards the door. “Text me when you’ve got the council. It has to be soon, dad. The 9th is a couple of days from now.”

“I got that.”

Jughead swung the door open. “Don’t text me about anything else.” He stepped out of the office then slammed the door close behind him.

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The following day, Chic came by the Spellmans and asked if he could drive Betty to school. Jughead, who had answered the door, stood at the threshold for several seconds just thinking that he wanted to punch Chic on the jaw and then call Betty. In the end, he did no such thing and let Chic come in to ask his sister himself.

Betty did not look thrilled at all. Chic’s reception was far icier than Polly’s, but Betty did go with her brother, and Jughead did note that Betty missed first period.

He met her at her locker for second, and she looked exhausted. She looked like she had washed her face, her eyes darkened with smudged makeup. She had been crying, but she smiled when she saw him.

“Are you okay?” he asked, gently.

She shrugged, opening her locker and shifting her books.

He gave her arm a gentle squeeze. “Do you want to talk about it?”

She paused, looking up at him with a pleading expression. “I don’t know. There were things about that conversation…” She sighed and he could tell she was reluctant to go on.

“I’m here when you’re ready,” he said, caressing her shoulder.

She looked relieved that she didn’t have to say anything.
He realized only then that she had started decorating her locker with pictures, colored paper, and stickers. He saw a picture of them at Beltane, cosy by the fire. She was sitting on his lap, her arms draped over his shoulders while his hands cupped her waist. Their noses were touching and they were smiling at each other, completely oblivious to a camera.

“Where’d that come from?” he asked.

The anxious look on her face disappeared with her smile. “Veronica. She took it with her phone. It’s my favorite picture, ever.”

He loved it and he couldn’t help but pull her close, feeling an urge to recreate that feeling of loving abandon.

She giggled softly as they kissed quickly behind her locker door.

They went to class and at lunch, Betty still appeared to have something weighing her thoughts down. Starting and stopping when she turned to him.

He didn’t want to pressure her, so he let her be, but at the end of school, just after he dropped her off at the Spellmans before he went to work, she said, “Juggie, you know I never take things sitting down, right?”

He gave her a puzzled grin. “Yeah?”

She sighed. “I worry about you and what you have to do for this town. Everyone looks at you and they think you don’t need help, but you’ve said it yourself: everyone needs back up.”

“Betty, we’ve gone over this,” he said, gently. “I’m tougher than I look.”

She nodded, solemnly. “I know that, but Jug, it doesn’t mean you’re invincible. I just want to be clear. If I have to protect you, I will, because I can. Remember that, okay?”

He saw the conviction in her eyes and he stifled the chuckle that almost left his lips. He didn’t want her to think he wasn’t taking her seriously. He knew, on a base level, that she was protective of him.

She looked out for him when she could. He felt loved by her because of it.

He nodded, kissing her.

They said their goodbyes and he drove off to the library.

Before the end of his shift, he got a text from his father saying that the council was meeting in an hour and that he had to go to City Hall.

Jughead calmed the knots twisting in his gut.

The war games have begun.

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This time, half the Council actually showed up in person. In the conference room with them was Mayor McCoy, Ulfric Vihaan with his entourage, Penelope Blossom with her entourage, and FP with his entourage, which consisted of Jughead, Toni, and Tall Boy.
The room was filled to the brim with Otherworlders. The Ulfric brought his Lupa, Frekki, and Bolvark, while Penelope brought her personal assistant and, much to Jughead’s surprise, Chic.

Princess Jamila, Lady Gendra, and the witches of Greendale and Midvale were on the splitscreen. Astanphaeus was on the phone, listening. He didn’t do war on any level, but he was going to be there when the wounded started rolling through the hospital doors.

FP presided, telling them about the impending riot and how the Ghoulies were overwhelming in number. He also let Jughead and Toni tell their portions of the story.

Jughead tried to be as straightforward as he could be, leaving out the fact that there were a lot of things pointing to Betty. They didn’t need to know that.

Ulfric Vihaan made a sound of annoyance. “Your Serpents caused this, FP. You created this monster when you drove Penny Peabody away. You should’ve killed her.”

Jughead felt the urge to react. Everyone knew he had sent Penny away. He had argued that killing wasn’t the answer. He would argue it again, but now it was suddenly the reason all this was happening. His father had said the same thing last night and he was annoyed that he had to justify what he believed, still believes, was the right thing to do.

He was poised to argue when FP wagged a finger at Ulfric Vihaan with casual ease. “I take responsibility for the decision to drive her out of town instead of kill her, but let’s not pretend that you couldn’t have if you really wanted to. Your Bolverk could’ve easily done the deed—take a daytrip to Poughkeepsie for some fresh air, then be back before dinner, and yet you didn’t order him to. Everyone in this room underestimated her. You all just thought she was a crooked lawyer who would one day piss off one hoodlum too many. None of us thought she could stir up this kind of chaos.”

“And let’s not forget,” Mayor McCoy interjected in her no-nonsense voice. “Many of Malachai’s werewolves were rejected by your pack, Ulfric. You essentially built his army.”

“And since we’re pointing fingers,” Penelope added, smoothly. “Why didn’t Princess Jamila summon Malachai to heel? He is one of your own, isn’t he?”

Princess Jamila’s eyebrow arched. “You are accusing me of something.”

“Would you prefer to be accused of negligence or of funding their entire operation? Maybe you’ve made them your Foot soldiers?”

Jamila’s eyes flashed red and her fangs elongated. “How dare you?”

Jughead frowned at the bickering and FP stood to calm everyone down.

“We can’t afford to fight amongst ourselves,” FP said, firmly. “We need to stay united, because we all know that if Riverdale falls, Midvale and Greendale will soon follow. Riverdale hosts the most respected covens in the east coast. We can’t have it falling to the mercies of a small time drug dealer and a bunch of foppy rabble rousers.”

The Council settled into quiet agreement.

Ulfric Vihaan spoke first. “I will send you twenty of my best warriors, including me and my Frekki.”

Lupa Aditya gave a start of surprise. “You do not need to be in this skirmish. Send me in place of you or the Frekki. We cannot have our pack leaderless if both of you fall.”
“Our pack will not be leaderless if we both fall,” Ulfric Vihaan said. He gave her a pointed look and Jughead realized that the Ulfric thought highly of his Lupa.

FP nodded. “The Serpents accept and are grateful for your pledge.”

One by one, the council members gave their pledges. When it came to Penelope Blossom, it was Chic who spoke.

“The Blossom Coven pledges fifteen witches.”

Lady Gendra gave a snort. “Penelope, you can do better than that!”

Chic didn’t like being overlooked and he spoke for his aunt. “Our fifteen best witches are better than your twenty five best fae and the werewolves and vampires combined.”

“It isn’t a great loss if you lose them all!” Lady Gendra hissed.

Penelope scowled. “I am sending my nephew and nieces, Lady Gendra. That is a sacrifice that will stay with me forever should they fall.”

Jughead gave a start. “What?” Everyone turned to him in surprise, but he didn’t care. “Did you just say—?”

Penelope’s eyebrow arched in disdain. “Is there a problem, Forsythe?”

Jughead looked at Chic incredulously but Chic dealt him a warning glare to shut the hell up. He didn’t want to. He wanted to demand answers, but Toni had grabbed his arm and squeezed firmly, which prompted him to clamp his lips shut.

Arrangements were finalized and the entire time, Jughead was seething. Was this what Betty was hesitant to tell him about all day? Did Chic just make up with her just to send her into battle like this? What the fuck is Chic thinking?

When the meeting adjourned, Toni preemptively shot him a look of warning. “Jones, take it easy—"

“Fuck that,” he said, getting up from his seat and immediately going after Chic.

Chic was already outside when Jughead caught up with him. He was holding a car door open for Penelope.

“Chic!” Jughead called, his fury clear in his tone. “You and I need to talk.”

He exchanged a look with his aunt and Jughead heard her sigh as Chic shut the door. The car drove off and Chic turned to face Jughead, his answering scowl just as intense. “You don’t know a thing about this, Jones.”

He knew exactly why he had been summoned.

“You’re sending your sisters into this?” Jughead cried without bothering to lower the volume of his voice. “What the hell kind of brother are you?”

Chic looked livid. “You want me to chain them to the basement, Jughead? Because that’s what I have to do to make them stay away from this.”

“Like how did this conversation even go? How did it become Betty volunteering for this?” Jughead was so angry that his tone had taken on a steely edge. “I thought you were apologizing to her for
deceiving her. How did it go from that to this? What did you say to her? Did you recruit her for this? It’s not enough you did in your father, now you’re putting your sisters on the line?”

Chic looked incredibly offended. “Watch it, Jones”

“I don’t know what to think, Chic!”

“If you have a problem with her joining this fight, take it up with her,” said Chic, hotly. “I didn’t tell her to do this. For the record, I did try to tell her no, and guess what? She went and told Polly, who promptly said she was going to join, too. Now both my sisters are fighting and I can’t stop them, Jughead. I’d have to stun them to do that, but honestly, I don’t want to discourage her. Not really.”

He could hardly believe what he was hearing. “So you’re just going to let them?”

“Look,” Chic said with a tired roll of her eyes. “It’s nice that you live in a world where your sisters do what you say,”

His sarcasm caught Jughead a little off guard and for a moment, he thought about Jellybean who didn’t have to do anything he told her to do. “I don’t—“

“But in my household, the one time I tried to take control, I had to kill my father and wipe my sister’s memory. So fuck off, Jughead. Maybe you can talk Betty out if it, but I doubt it. She’s doing it for you, and to be completely honest? You’ll want Betty on your team. When she’s done, the Ghoulies wouldn’t know what hit them.”

Chic stormed off to his car and Jughead stood there, at a loss for words and breathing through his anger.

“Well, that was intense,” came Toni’s voice behind him. “You alright?”

Jughead took deep cleansing breaths and shook his head. “I don’t know.” He turned to leave. “I gotta go.”

“Hey,” Toni called after him with a sigh. “You’re not going to do something stupid like yell at your girl, are you? Because if you are I’m gonna have to punch you in the crotch.”

Jughead scowled. Was she joking? Because he failed to see anything humorous about all this. He continued to walk.

“Jug!” Toni’s tone was more insistent. “You aren’t thinking!”

He turned on his heel and Toni almost ran into him. “What do you expect me to do, Toni? She’s going into that fight with a bunch of werewolves and vampires whom we have reason to believe want to kidnap her. I mean—I can’t protect her if she’s in the front lines!” He threw his hands up and ripped his beanie off his head in frustration.

“From what I heard of what Chic said, it sounds like she’s protecting you.”

Jughead looked back on the conversation he had with Betty before he went to work that evening, how she had said exactly that.

If I have to protect you, I will, because I CAN.

He sighed, mounting his bike and shoving his helmet on. “Be careful out there, Toni. Nothing’s to stop the Ghoulies from trying to off you before the uprising.”
She scoffed. “I’m about as hard to kill as you are, Jones. Be careful, yourself.”

He kicked his bike to life and lowered his visor. With a last wave to Toni, he took off.

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Betty rolled onto her back in bed, closing her tired eyes. She had been reading and rereading her homework the last 30 minutes and her progress was slow.

She was distracted for so many reasons, one being her conversation with Chic this morning, which had revolved around him apologizing for what he did—to her and to their father. It had felt so emotionally devastating.

She couldn’t remember having cried so much. The last time she shed this many tears, they were burying her dad. Talking to Chic about it felt like they were burying him again.

He told her he’d been trying to figure it out. What had changed with Hal? Why did he turn on her? What was it that triggered his psychosis?

Was it some kind of family curse? Did they all turn bad eventually?

“I know it’s too late,” Chic had said, his eyes hauntingly dry. “But I don’t believe for a second that he’d pretended to love you best only to try and take your powers at 18. If I can figure out what happened, I can make up for what I did to you and to him.”

She was still trying to wrap her head around it all, but it was hard to stay angry with Chic. He had made the difficult decision of killing Hal to save her and he had carried this burden for months.

It was what he meant about giving up a piece of his soul. She remembered because his words had struck her and she had been hurt by it.

Chic had turned to her. “Can you remember anything about what he said to you that might have been an indication that something was coming over him?”

She had frowned so deeply. “You’re the one with all your memories intact! I’m just remembering bits and pieces!”

He had looked so shame-faced that she felt sorry for being so harsh.

“Look, if I remember anything new, I’ll let you know,” she said, tiredly. “I’ll look into it, too. I have more time to do that.”

Chic left it at that, moving their conversation along to how she was doing, what their aunts thought about all this, and whether she and Jughead were okay in light of FP being home.

“Jug and I are great,” she replied, almost insulted that he would ask such a thing. “Why do you ask?”

Chic shifted on his seat, obviously thinking about his reply. “FP is intense, and from what I hear, he expects certain things from his son. He makes no time for friends or maybe even family. The one person he claims to give a shit about is his son.”

Betty had frowned, annoyed by this concept of FP’s priorities. “Big hand of applause for FP. Isn’t
that a given, though? You look out for your kid?"

He nodded, looking her in the eyes. “I just don’t want you to get hurt. FP isn’t happy about his son
dating a Wicked witch, bug.”

Her silence was one of simmering hurt and annoyance. She already knew, deep down, that
Jughead’s father didn’t like them being together. FP almost had her convinced that she wasn’t good
for his son, but Jughead had been adamant about being with her, about loving her, and she had been
clinging to that these past few days.

“We’re dealing with it,” Betty replied in a determined tone. “Besides, FP’s probably going to gallop
off to some other mission sometime soon, and Jug and I can be together in peace.”

Chic made a sound, which Betty recognized was skepticism. She asked about it and Chic had said
“it’s nothing,” which only made her more certain it was something.

Finally, Chic said, “Things are happening, bug. FP called an emergency council meeting last night
and Aunt Penelope said I should be there with her tonight, when we attend it. FP’s going to ask
pledges to quell a possible Ghoulie uprising. If it happens, FP’s going to be sticking around for a
while to clean up this riot. Individuals and groups are going to be hauled in for trial and… he’ll be
here.”

Betty had known about this possibility of a riot, because Jughead had spoken about getting support
from the council members to make up the discrepancy in numbers between the Serpents and
Ghoulies. She had, also, decided that she was going to help fight the Ghoulies off, no matter what.

“They going to come after the Slayers,” she said in a determined tone. “So they can gain access to
the Vault.”

Chic did not at all seem surprised that she knew details. “It’s going to be intense.”

“I’m going to protect him.”

And that’s when the argument began. Chic refusing (as if he could) to let her throw her hat in the
ring, her resolutely declaring that he can’t stop her (he can’t), and her clever appeal to his vanity
(“You trained me and Polly for this! You turned us into these deadly weapons and you know I’m
capable. You know I’m strong!).

In the end, Chic knew he couldn’t stop her, and with Betty telling Polly about this battle to get her
sister’s support, Polly insisted on being in the fight, too.

Chic’s final shot had ended the argument in a whimper. “Mom will kill me. Jesus Christ.”

“Tell her we get a medal afterwards.”

Chic had shot her a deadly glare but said nothing back.

Now Betty was a little worried. She had tried to tell Jughead all day about her discussion with Chic,
but she realized Jughead would like it even less—her participation in this violence. She didn’t want
them to argue. She didn’t want him to stew on it all day, but with the council meeting—probably
concluded at this hour, he would know by now, and the silence of her phone made her anxious for
his reaction.

When she heard the sound of heavy boots outside the bedroom, she rolled over on her stomach,
waiting for him to walk through the door.
When he did, he stood there, staring at her, looking wholly uncertain about what he was going to say.

“You can’t stop me from being there, Jug,” she finally said.

He didn’t smile. There wasn’t a trace of amusement or any hint that he had thought any of this a good idea. He was displeased, perhaps at how he found out, but he wasn’t already yelling, so maybe that was something.

He took off his beanie, closing the door behind him and sinking onto the dressing table chair. He hunched over the seat, elbows to knees, and ran his finger through his hair, his head dipped between his shoulder blades.

When he looked up, his eyes were dead serious. “I don’t want you to be there. I don’t want you to get hurt. I don’t want any of them getting near you.”

Her gaze didn’t waver from his. “How do you think—” she began slowly, her tone soft and non-combative, “—I feel about you being there?”

His lips pursed and she could tell by the way he crumpled his beanie in his fist that he was trying to temper his emotions. “This is what I do, Betts. I get between Otherworlders and the people who need protecting. This is not your job.”

She tried to remind herself that this was not Jughead trying to control her. This is him being hyper-aware of the dangers. This is him being scared for her safety. “I haven’t been training all my life only to sit by, hoping and praying that no harm will come to you. I felt helpless watching a demon trying to drag you into Abaddon. I’m not going to feel that kind of helplessness again.”

He just shook his head. “I need you to be safe.”

“And I need you to listen,” she replied, sitting up in bed to square her shoulders. “I need you to think of the scariest witch you’ve ever fought. The strongest one you’ve had to put away. The most skilled one you’ve ever had to outmaneuver. Think of them. Then think of them being 10 times whatever they are. That times 10? That is me.”

She knew this for a fact. She knew in her bones that nobody can touch her. Through the years, her fears had always been for the others around her, because she knew that if it were just her, none of them stood a chance.

This time surprise flickered in his gaze.

“Ask Chic,” she continued. “Ask Polly.”

He was quiet, pensive, and Betty let him remunerate.

When he spoke, it was in a tone of resignation. “It isn’t like I could stop you, could I?”

She shook her head. “No, Jug. You couldn’t. Any more than I could stop you.”

He sighed, setting his beanie aside. He sounded so out of his element that it felt strange to her. He had always seemed so self-assured.

“If anything happens to you,” he said. “I don’t know what I’ll do.”

His blue eyes remained unflinching, like instead of this being a moment of vulnerability, he was
saying it like a warning, not to her, but to everyone outside of this conversation.

“I don’t know what I’ll do,” wasn’t “I won’t be able to function,” it was, “I will lose my mind and I might do crazy shit.”

She leaned over to push some hair off his face, cupping his cheek and letting the pad of her thumb caress it.

The steel in his eyes softened and he leaned into her touch.

“Nothing will happen to me,” she said, her voice feather light. She didn’t know if her words were true, but she knew how it was to worry, and sometimes even a kind lie could make a big difference.

He rose in his seat to kiss her and she accepted his need for physical reassurance, letting the flare of heat between them melt the iron-clad barriers of anxiety.

Perhaps this conversation wasn’t over. Likely, they would talk about this again, but for now he needed to be lost in her. For now, it was just the two of them, fitting into each other amidst a splintering world.

***********************

On the morning of the 9th, Betty slipped out of Jughead’s arms as he slept and jogged to her house on Elm.

It was a three mile run going, first in the dark and soon after, to a dimly lit sky.

No one was awake to greet her at home, which was how she wanted it. She didn’t quite feel like talking to her mother just yet.

Alice wasn’t ready for it either, it seemed. She hadn’t called or texted, though Betty suspected that was more Chic’s doing. She had no doubts that Alice never waited for the winds to sway her—she was always the storm.

Betty loved staying at the Spellmans. She loved being with Jughead and waking up in his arms, but her home was where her closest family lived, the family who, while they did indeed deceive her, had stood by her through the worse time of their lives. They had shouldered her burdens and gave up bits of their souls along the way.

She could be angry at them, but they were inextricably bonded by blood, bone, magic, and tears. They had shaped who she was and she would never abandon them for the bliss and paradise her aunts offered.

It was while she was making coffee in her family’s kitchen that Jughead’s call came.

“Hey, Jug,” she said over the phone, pouring water into the coffee tank.

She heard him sigh, followed by a soft, sleepy groan.

She smiled to herself, imagining his floppy hair tumbling over his face as he turned over in bed. “You okay?”
“Yeah.” His voice was thick with the remnants of sleep. “Sorry, I…” He sighed again. “I woke up and panicked that you weren’t—I swear I’m not psycho.”

“I should’ve left a note.”

“No. It’s me. I’m just—I’m so on edge, Betts.”

She wished she could take him in her arms and give him the comfort he craved. “I’ll run back in about an hour, okay? I didn’t want to wake you up. You needed the sleep.”

“Did you jog in the dark?”

“Jug—“

“Sorry, sorry. I didn’t mean to—you don’t have to answer that. Where are you, again?”

She let him slide this time. He hadn’t had his coffee yet and he had a lot of things on his mind. “I’m at my mother’s. There are things here I need to pick up. Things I need to do.”

She could hear him shifting again, though it didn’t sound like he was getting up from bed. She could hear sheets rustling and settling. “Do you want me to pick you up after you’re done?”

She wasn’t adverse to the idea. In spite of everything, they still had to go to school, and she knew that Jughead wanted to gather the Otherworlders together at lunch so he can let them know that tonight wasn’t a good night to be out.

“Give me an hour,” she said. “Bring a car.”

His pause was distinct, but he didn’t ask. “Okay. I love you.”

It never ceased to give her that warm, pleasant feeling, hearing him utter those words in that tone of his—that low timbre, sometimes breathier, sometimes firmer, soft at times, sexy when he said them while moving inside her. Those three words, in his voice, had made her feel like she was his world, and there were times it felt a little primal, like she was no one else’s but his.

She hoped she could make him feel the same whenever she uttered it back. “I love you, too. I’ll see you in a bit.”

She flipped the coffee machine on and immediately, the sound of filtering clicked and clacked through the kitchen.

It was done in a few minutes, and Betty poured herself a cup while she made her way to the basement.

She grabbed a bag from their storage closet before making her way to a heavy chest at the far end of the space.

She undid the lock and lifted the lid. Shelves and drawers emerged, front and sideways. Their collection of weapons and implements was not as vast as the slayers’, but only because they’d had to move around. Their weapons were a bit more portable, and they did rely on a lot of charms and potions.

For her, it was different. For her, pain was necessary, so she had to wear the things that induced it. At the bottom of the trunk were the cilice belts, four in total, one for each limb.

There was irony in the fact that cilice belts, which had such deeply Christian origins, were being
used by Wicked witches such as herself to weave magic. An implement of holy torture, used by monks and the devout to purge their bodies of sin, was being used by those they claimed to be the soldiers of the devil to cast evil spells.

She ran her finger lightly along the dulled barbs dotting the chain. The leather straps at both ends of the chain were a little frayed at the edges. The belts probably had to be restrapped soon.

She took them carefully, lifting them by their casing and putting them in her bag. Polly would have to help her put them on later. She was the only one who had the stomach for it.

Betty took a few potions, too. A few charms. She didn’t want Polly to run out. She knew Chic would be properly armed and strapped by the Blossoms.

There were athames, too. She took a few, holstered and sheathed. They had several crossbows and Betty took hers. Chic would have to supply them with the arrows, so she texted him right there, just so she wouldn’t forget to tell him.

The retractable bo-staff was mounted on the trunk’s lid, and perhaps out of pure amusement, she took it. Jughead might get a kick out of it.

When she was done with the weapons, she closed the trunk and headed for another closet to grab her clothes—all black.

*The better to hide the blood.*

Nobody should suspect that she was hurting herself for magic.

With her bag stuffed to bursting, she made her way out of the basement and up to her room, where she showered and dressed for the day.

She still had a bit of time, which was perfect for what she needed to do. She quietly made her way to the end of the hall where she reached up and pulled down the trap for the attic.

The small, wooden ladder unfolded, slipping gently to the floor. She climbed it and let her eyes adjust to the dark.

In a neat pile to one side were her father’s things, most of them boxed and labeled. She would sift through those, as well, but her eyes fell on what she came here for—his old suitcase, small enough to be a carry on, with the airline baggage tag still attached to it.

******************

Her mother was sipping coffee in the kitchen when she walked down the hallway to get to the front door. She hardly noticed, her mind focused on Jughead waiting outside in his dad’s truck.

“Elizabeth,” her mother had called after her.

She paused out of sheer surprise, looking over her shoulder.

Alice stared at her a moment, words poised at her lips, then she saw the bag at Betty’s side, recognized it, probably, and sighed heavily.
“Watch your brother and sister for me,” Alice said, tiredly. “And—and be careful.”

Chic or Polly probably told her already, and Betty couldn’t bring herself to scorn her mother’s way of saying she was sorry.

“I will,” she replied, nodding.

She left, crossing the front lawn and dumping her bag in the back seat before joining Jughead in the front.

“That looks heavy,” he remarked.

“It is,” she replied, leaning over the console to give him a kiss that might have distracted a less intelligent man.

But Jughead, being Jughead, while having kissed back with toe-curling heat, gave the bag a pointedly suspicious look before settling back on the driver’s seat and taking them to school.

******************

Jughead sat on the teacher’s desk, carving an apple with a switchblade. He looked intent on his task, his scowl deep and unyielding.

He had just finished delivering the news to their fellow Otherworlders in school, gathered in an empty classroom. He had told them to stay in their homes, that the slayers, covens, courts, hives, and packs were set to guard the borders, and that in the event that Ghoulies got the upper hand, someone would send word out to them so they can take care of their families.

Jughead hadn’t had lunch, but this thing he was doing needed doing, and lunch would have to wait.

Betty could tell that everyone in the classroom was feeling it—Jughead’s lowering blood sugar. The million questions the handful of Otherworlder students had about what was expected to go down that night bounced between silent glances and shrugged shoulders, but no one was going to interrupt Jughead’s pregnant pause.

The slayer was thinking (and staving off his hunger).

Finally, he looked up. “Any questions?”

The avalanche began. Voices speaking above each other and surging forward. The scowl on Jughead’s face deepened even more and Betty exchanged winces with Kevin.

After about several seconds of this, Jughead yelled above the din. “Everyone shut up! One at a time! Trev, you first.”

Trev didn’t waste time. “I need to be in the dungeon, man! It’s a full moon! I can’t be out there, yet. I’m only just starting to get control of my thoughts when I’m were, but I’m nowhere near in total control!”

Jughead nodded. “You’ll be in the Whyte Wyrm dungeon. Slayers will be there to guard the place.”

“Who will take care of my family while I’m gone?”
Josie stood. “I’ll take care of your family.” As Mayor McCoy’s daughter, she knew the riot was happening. She had attended this meeting just to show her solidarity, knowing that there wasn’t a lot of them in the school.

Her offer to Trev surprised no one. Valerie was her human. She would take care of her human and her family. It was just the way the fae were.

A few others spoke up, and it was while Jughead was fielding questions that Cheryl and Veronica walked through the door.

Everyone was too busy to care, but Cheryl sidled up to Betty, a puzzled expression on her face.

“Mommy said you were joining this fight.”

Veronica’s jaw dropped. So did Kevin’s.

Betty sighed and rolled her eyes, taking Cheryl’s hand and dragging her to a corner of the room.

“Why must you always drop bombs?” Betty hissed.

Cheryl scowled. “I am simply aghast that you would rumble with these gang bangers, dear cousin. Why would you do such a thing? What good is a slayer boyfriend if you don’t let him take out the trash?”

It was difficult to hold her temper in the face of Cheryl’s outrageous words. “I can’t stand by and watch Jughead fight them off while I’m totally capable of helping him. Are you just going to let Toni fight this fight?”

Cheryl glared. “I want to stand with her, but mother—”

“Right. We mustn’t displease mommy, must we?”

“Are you telling me I should jump into the fray? Battle against the Ghoulies?”

Betty sighed, shaking her head. She realized she was being unfair. Unlike her, Cheryl was not honed to fight attacks. She never had to defend herself because she had bodyguards aplenty. Also, if she wanted her full powers in a fight, she needed her twin brother to be there. He would have to be convinced to fight as well.

“I’m not,” Betty finally said. “And if you’re not prepared, you shouldn’t. But don’t try to convince me not to. Don’t try to make it seem like the slayers are cannon fodder. They’re our friends, my boyfriend, your family. These are people you know, Cher. Whether you detest them or not.”

Cheryl scowled. “You don’t know anything about me. Don’t presume. I came here to lend my support. Offer my home as refuge. We have room.”

“And that is so appreciated. Thank you, Cher.” She bit back her retort of “thanks for your generosity, but try not to insult your house guests, okay?”

“Mother said you were capable,” Cheryl said, appeased. “She isn’t all that worried about you.”

Betty knew her aunt Penelope knew about her Wickedness, so she wasn’t surprised by what Cheryl said. “Your mother knows what I can do.”

“What can you do?”
“A lot.”

Cheryl gave a silent huff. She was about to leave when Betty clamped a hand on her shoulder delicately.

“Cher, can I ask you something?”

She turned to look at Betty, eyebrow arched as she eyed the hand that dared to touch her. The withering glare she cast Betty would’ve slayed a lesser person.

Betty wasn’t deterred. “I was just wondering… was my father ever here in Riverdale a few months back? Just, you know—did he drop in for a visit?”

“Maybe? Why?”

“Just wondering… it doesn’t matter. I’m just—I had a head injury a while back and there are things I’m just beginning to remember.” The lie rolled off her tongue easily.

“Head injury,” Cheryl repeated, looking her up and down. “That explains a lot.”

Betty let her go. She didn’t know why she bothered to think her cousin would be cooperative.

Cheryl stalked off, joining Jughead at the front of the room—much to his surprise—announcing that Thornhill is open for refuge, that she offered safety, room, and board.

Kevin and Veronica quickly crowded around Betty.

“Girl, are you joking?” Kevin cried. “You can’t seriously be thinking about joining the slayers at the front lines!”

Veronica clutched her arm. “Those creatures are vicious, Betty.” As if that weren’t obvious enough. “Hon, you can get seriously hurt.”

Betty refrained from mentioning that that would probably work to her advantage, and when she caught Kevin’s eye, he sighed, probably thinking the same thing.

Nevertheless, it didn’t seem to lessen his worry. “What did Jughead say?”

Betty couldn’t help but forgive them for their concern. “Jughead would prefer that I didn’t, but he can’t convince me otherwise. I’m going to stand with him.”

Kevin and Veronica exchanged looks of incredulity, and seeing that they didn’t have much else to say, Betty went back to watching Jughead take questions from the Otherworlders.

********************

It was that time of the day between light and dark, when the afternoon made way for evening and the sky was lit from the rays of the setting sun.

Betty looked up at the darkening blue sky and saw a faint, cloudy outline of the full moon to come.

Leaning against the door casing, she braided her fingers with Jughead, hoping to prolong their
goodbye for a little bit longer.

He wasn’t going away. Neither was she, but it did feel like they were poised at the precipice of something ominous. Like between their ideal life living together in the Spellman house and him leaving on his bike that minute, they would be thrust in a new, alternate universe where nothing would be the same, because tonight they would be fighting for their lives and for Riverdale.

Jughead had said that his sources confirmed that the Ghoulies were gearing up for an uprising. That members of their creature hive were being armed and prepared for a takeover. The slayers were prepared to fight back and most of the council members had sent their pledges--the vampires weren’t expected to arrive until nightfall.

“I need to help finalize plans at the Whyte Wyrm, Betts,” he said, as if chiding her for chaining him to the door with her hands.

She grinned, as if they weren’t riding into battle in a few hours. “I’m not stopping you.”

“Yes, you are.” He pulled her closer, the irony of his words not lost on her. “I can read the language of your eyes.”

She laughed. Sometimes he spoke like a poet and it came at the most unexpected times. “Exactly what are my eyes saying now?”

“That you wish things were different.” He said this like he was completely sure. Maybe he wasn’t exactly reading the language of her eyes. Maybe her eyes were reflecting what he wanted for himself.

“I wish we can get on your motorcycle and ride off into the sunset,” she whispered.

“No more Ghoulies,” he added softly.

“No more covens.”

“No more slayers.”

She remembered the first night she ever spent with him, talking about a world where they weren’t slayer and witch, where the Otherworld didn’t exist and everyone they knew was simply Lost. He had envisioned a pretty depressing life for himself. She hoped that she could make it so that he could believe that people can deserve their happiness.

They kissed languorously, like they had no reason to be afraid, like there wasn’t an urgency to be somewhere else.

Betty lost herself in the soft caress of his lips against hers, the slow massage of their tongues, and the warm exchange of breaths licking at the tips of their noses. She sighed into his mouth and a low growl answered.

She wished she could whisk him back into house. They’d never done a quickie, but perhaps there was a better time for it.

They separated, and for a moment they just looked at one another, as if waiting for each other to speak.

Finally, he said, “I have to go.”
She pressed her palm to his cheek and nodded.

He left and she watched him get on his bike. When he rode off, she picked her phone out of her pocket and called her sister.

“Hey, Polly. You going to help me get ready for this thing?”

At the other end, Polly sighed. “Yes. I’ll be there in a few.”

“See you then.”

************************************************

Darkness had descended on Riverdale.

The moon overhead was full and the streets surrounding the library had grown deathly still.

As Jughead sat on his motorcycle, his weapons strapped to his body and limbs, he tried not to let his dread overcome his focus.

The rumble of motorcycles around him were steady, occasionally punctuated by an agitated rev of someone’s engine. Around him, slayers and Serpents were armed and prepared, just as extensively as he was. Creatures stood among them, werewolves, vampires, and various fae.

The witches stood at the front lines with them, with Chic leading the witch contingent.

Jughead hadn’t seen Betty yet, and deep down, he hoped that someone had changed her mind. He wanted to beg her to stay home, keep safe. Her absence was making that hope more realistic by the second.

Check-out points had been established all around town, with teams guarding some of the more vital areas. Most of their small army was positioned around the library, but they had teams assigned to the Whyte Wyrm, the City Hall, and certain entry points into town.

Communication would be open at all times, in case the other teams needed help.

They didn’t know how organized the Ghoulies were, but they expected that the Ghoulies would try to overwhelm them through sheer number.

Toni and Farmer McGinty stood by him, waiting for the Ghoulies to come trudging through the mist. FP and Tall Boy were assigned somewhere else.

Chic turned in Jughead’s direction and nodded at something coming in the distance. “She’s here.”

Jughead’s heart sank and he sighed. It was Betty.

He saw her walking down the sidewalk, Polly beside her. They approached with purposeful strides, and while Betty still had her ponytail, she somehow looked vastly different.

For one, there wasn’t a trace of pink on her. Jughead didn’t know why that was so jarring. Perhaps he had always tied that color to her effervescent personality.
To see her like this, wearing all black—it made her look sleek, almost like a cat burglar in durable and heavy army boots, strapped with holsters and holding, of all things, a bow staff. It was jarringly surreal. Almost like he didn’t know her.

At the same moment Betty and Polly appeared, a commotion began to emerge from the fog surrounding them. Hoots and yells began to filter from up the street, the rumble of footfalls following.

Someone’s radio crackled, and Jughead realized it was his.

“They’re coming,” came Joaquin’s voice over the small speaker.

Jughead could only watch in horrified fascination as the reality of their numbers became apparent. There were hundreds of Ghoulies coming towards them, overwhelming and dreadful. He wondered if any of them would survive the night. He wondered if he had led everyone to their death.

Betty came to a stop in front of her brother. “Are you ready?”

Jughead felt his heart beating in his ears. Are they ready? Is she?

“We’re good, bug,” Chic replied. “You be careful out there.”

She nodded. “I will. I promise.” She turned and headed towards the Ghoulies on her own.

What?

“What?” Jughead asked. Was she going off alone? This wasn’t part of the plan. “What are you talking about? What are you—”

Betty cast him an apologetic smile before turning to continue towards the approaching hoard. Jughead surged forward with the intention to follow her, but Chic’s arm shot out, his eyes boring into Jughead with intensity.

“You sit tight and let her,” Chic said. “If you want to make it out of here alive, you let her.”

Betty stopped about ten paces away and touched the metal tip of her bow staff on the ground. She scraped a line along the pavement, sparks flying as she went.

With the line drawn, she looked up at Chic and pointed.

Chic nodded and gave Betty the thumbs up, then he looked at Jughead. “Nobody cross that line until I say it’s okay.”

When Betty stepped beyond it, Jughead revved his bike. “I didn’t agree to this, Chic. Nobody told me she would be alone!”

“She’s not alone. We’re here,” Polly said.

“You know what he means!” Toni hissed.

Farmer McGinty made a sound. “What these witches are telling you, young fry, is that she needs space to do what she has to do.”

Jughead shot Farmer McGinty a scowl. All he could see was that Betty was yards away, like a sitting duck, as a vicious hoard approached.
“When you’re outnumbered, like we are,” Chic said, calmly. “You let Betty go first to scare the shit out of them.”

Jughead couldn’t conceive of Betty being that scary, ever.

Polly must have seen the doubt in his eyes, because she laughed. *Laughed.* “You’ll see.”

The Ghoulies rose above the horizon and Betty stood motionless amidst the shouts and howls. The wall of creatures came closer and closer until they stopped, seeing Betty and perhaps wondering *what* she was doing there.

They were terrifying. Vampires and half-formed werewolves growled and roared at the sight of them, and Malachai, at the head of the contingent, bared his fangs. His face and mouth were already soiled with blood.

Jughead revved his bike again, followed by several others in their platoon. “We need to go.”

Chic glared at him and yelled “Hold!”

The Ghoulies’ guns came out and Jughead jumped in his skin.

“Fuck, we have to go!” Jughead cried.

“Hold!” Chic shouted again, clamping a hand on the handlebars of his bike. “Dammit, Jughead, trust me! Trust Betty!”

Jughead was going out of his mind. He was shaking his head. He was inching his bike forward. He was going to run over Chic if he had to.

Then something happened. Something Jughead had never seen before.

Betty widened her stance and her hands began to glow a bright and intense shade of gold and obsidian.

And that’s when the gunfire began.

...tbc

**Chapter End Notes**

Quick note: It’s going to be a while until the next chapter as I will be traveling the next couple of weeks. I’ll be writing, for sure, but I won’t have as much time to do so. As soon as I get back, I will write like mad again.

I’m busting out these Creative Works one more time: These beautiful offerings of art from *srainebuggie* (who made this wonderful aesthetic), *bugggghead* (creator of this fantastic aesthetic), and *ibelieveinbughead* (who put together this inspired moodboard).

Please give them some love in tumblr!
“Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”

— Anton Chekhov

Every movement of her limbs gave her pain. When the muscles on her thighs fought against the barbs of the cilice belts that embraced them, the pain rippled through her entire body. When her biceps flexed, the dulled teeth of chain strapped to her arms gave her renewed agony.

But to her, pain was power, and power meant she can protect her own.

She needed power to fight the hoard that threatened the people who stood waiting behind her.

When she saw them—the Ghoulies, she closed her eyes and focused on the steady roar of footsteps and animalian sounds that filled the air. Their frightening faces blended into the terrible cacophony of their approach.

When she heard the first click of gunmetal, the deadly beat of its symphony overpowered the night, that’s when Betty opened her eyes to raise her palms towards them.

When the first bullet struck, it hung in the air, slowing in its trajectory, until it froze centimeters from embedding into her skull.

From there, thousands of rounds came at her from all sides, and every single one dragged against an invisible but incredibly thick pliable shield.

Every bullet slowed and stopped, hanging motionless in front of her. The wall of bullets formed in her outline, unable to get past her wall of magic.

It was probably out of sheer disbelief that they didn’t stop shooting, but after a minute of endless fire, it became clear to them that their bullets were being wasted, and the gunfire finally cascaded to a stop.

Betty took a deep breath.

Now she could begin.

***************

When the first hail of bullets came, most of the Serpents and their contingent ducked to take cover. Others, such as the vamps, weren’t as concerned. Jughead wasn’t thinking quite so clearly.

He surged forward, pushing Chic aside so he could run his bike through the spaces and make his way to Betty. He wasn’t quite sure about what he intended to do. All he knew was that Betty was
alone and gunfire was drowning out Chic’s cries.

It did occur to him a heartbeat later that in spite of the consistent firing of guns, Betty stood unmoved and uninjured before them.

He skidded to a stop, his mind slow to process that the logical and terrible outcome of discharged heavy artillery was not playing out.

Either every single Ghoulie was a bad shot or somehow, some way, the bullets weren’t reaching Betty.

When he realized exactly what was happening, he could still hardly believe it.

Every bullet fired in her direction was suspended in midair, a dreadful mimic of her shape in lead.

Amidst the enormity of the firepower, nothing within her twenty foot perimeter magical wall was getting through, and Jughead watched, fascinated by the ease with which she wielded this magic.

And even in his state of awe, he couldn’t help but wonder—how much pain was she in? Where was she getting it?

Someone grabbed a fist full of his jacket and Jughead wrenched himself away violently, but he stopped when he saw that it was just Toni.

“Chic said we have to hang back!” she cried, pulling his arm.

Numbly, he nodded, and even as he backed up, he couldn’t tear his eyes away.

The hail of bullets slowly came to a halt. Whether the Ghoulies were out of ammo or they finally realized they were wasting their firepower, it probably didn’t matter, because Betty raised a finger and twirled it lazily in the air.

“Fuck,” Toni whispered.

The lead wall shifted, and while they were far enough that the details weren’t clear, the motion of her finger, combined with the sudden panic of those in the front lines to run away provided enough clues to figure out what was about to happen.

Betty splayed her fingers outward and the wall of bullets exploded right back into the crowd of Ghoulies. Bullets, even silver ones, couldn’t exactly kill vampires, and a silver bullet needed to be shot into a werewolf’s brain or heart to kill them, but a bullet will hurt all creatures who aren’t vampires. They will incapacitate where they hit flesh. Screams and yelps of pain erupted, droplets of blood sprayed in the air, and bodies dropped to the ground by the dozen, clutching at at their knees.

“Holy shit!” Toni cried as Betty made a lifting motion with her hands.

Guns, blunt force weapons, and sharp-edged blades were ripped right out of the Ghoulies’ hands and hovered above their heads, then Betty swiped her arm left.

The collection of weapons flew into a heaping, disorganized pile in the library parking lot, out of reach.

The Ghoulie formation dissolved in the face of this sudden, overwhelming threat. How did one fight an enemy who could rip your weapons right out of your hands without even touching you?

They scattered, scurrying in different directions, jumping and hobbling over writhing bodies, even as
some of their members stood their ground, firmly poised to continue in their mission.

Their numbers, still distinctly more than the Serpents and pledges, were lessened by more than a third.

*This was exactly what Chic said Betty would do.*

*Scare the shit out of them.*

Malachai stood furious at the head, fangs elongated, his body bleeding but unbroken.

“Jughead! Toni! Stand back!” Chic cried, having come to them to fetch them himself.

She wasn’t done, and this time, Jughead listened, turning his bike sharply to get back in line, just in time to see Betty shoot forward, right into the crowd of Ghoulies.

She shot right past Malachai, bouncing atop bodies, kicking off shoulders, and with the agility of a cheerleader, launched into the air, her hands glowing with her magic, and landing in the center of the Ghoulie contingent.

Her distinct, signature light fanned out from the center and Ghoulies were thrown back in a magical shockwave, with Betty as the epicenter.

Jughead felt the pulse of power lick at his toes, exactly where he had them stepped over the line Betty had drawn on the ground. His toes tingle with needles and pins and he pulled his foot back, shocked by its power.

The bodies of their enemies were flung in the air, an outward force that sent them flying, rolling, and then skidding against the concrete, stunned and disoriented from the blast.

“Now!” Chic yelled above the din, charging towards the Ghoulies that remained.

There wasn’t time to gape. Jughead charged with the Serpents, the roar of motorcycles interspersed with the sound of creatures snarling and growling permeated his senses, driving the slayer instinct within him.

A werewolf jumped, its maw going for his throat. He ducked, skidding his bike beneath the wolf’s trajectory.

Jughead’s fingers wrapped around the hilt of his sword and the rasp of its silver alloy steel sung in his ear. He felt the bite of its blade on werewolf flesh and bone, and the beastly whimper of pain was followed by the gurgle of death.

He took no delight in killing, but if he didn’t get them first, his enemies wouldn’t hesitate to rip his throat out. He knew, in his gut, that he would be vomiting his meals all day the next day, if he was lucky enough to make it, but for a man who stress ate, that was saying a lot. Taking lives was an upsetting endeavor, even if it was in defense of himself.

He had to shut his brain from thinking too much on it now. At the moment, it was survival that mattered.

He barely had time to see the werewolf’s body drop.

A vampire barreled into him, knocking him off his bike. Jughead felt the heat of his own slayer strength radiate from his eyes as he rolled with the vamp, throwing his body aside to get the full
mount and gripping a wooden stake tucked into a holster on his side. He raised the stake and plunged it into the vampire’s chest.

There wasn’t time to think about the light leaving the vampire’s eyes. He turned for the next attack, and then the next.

Between creatures coming for his neck with sharp objects and fangs snapping at his throat, he couldn’t catch a moment to think or worry. Instinct had taken over. He was holding the front, so that the forces at the back could better protect the vault entrance. So far, the front was holding strong.

From the corner of his eye, he could see Malachai fighting head to head with another vamp decked in Royal regalia. He was preoccupied and unable to move forward, but it was Betty Jughead worried about, and when he caught a moment to survey the battleground, he saw Betty fighting off three opponents at a time with uncanny skill and grace, except a fourth was coming for her in full were and she hadn’t noticed.

Jughead pushed forward explosively.

I got you, Betty.

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Betty might not be able to punch anyone unconscious, but her magic could stun, deflect, slow someone down, and even make her lighter on her feet, all of which helped her fight her opponents more effectively.

What she lacked in strength, she made up for with sheer skill. She’d pick up weapons to suit her, and she used a lot of her enemy’s own strength and weight to throw them off, kick them down, and hit them where it hurts.

She knew pain. She knew where hits hurt the most, knew where the shock waves of pain could crumple a man, or where and how bone was easiest to shatter.

The things she did at the beginning of the fight required a volume of magic that was generally unsustainable. And while it did pack a punch, that kind of magic could bring first time casters to their knees. Betty’s had practice. She knew how to conserve her energy. Knew how to make the most impact with the least amount of magic.

She was Wicked and this was what she was made for—fighting in battlefields and scaring the hell out of large groups of enemies so that if they didn’t turn tail and run, they’d piss their pants and fight terrified.

Betty was proficient with or without a weapon, knowing how to use every part of her body to overcome her opponent. When anyone went up against her, they weren’t just deflecting her arms, they had to watch out for her elbows, her knees, her thighs, and all the things she could pick up and hurt them with.

Anyone who ever turned to run away from her met the impact of something following after them—a trash can, steel rods, a manhole, even. If Betty can pick it up with her hands or her magic, it was going to meet their face, the back of their head, or their knee cap.
Anyone who dared to get a hit in got it worse ten times back.

When Betty finally saw the werewolf coming, saw the power in its shoulders and the blood dripping from its maw, she wasn’t afraid, but she knew he wasn’t going to be easy.

She ran towards him, head on, digging into her store of liquid silver and tossing the vial in the air.

She exploded it with her magic, turning it into a silver mist that had the werewolf running into its cloud, face first. The werewolf roared in pain as it got into his eyes, mouth, and nose. Betty took full advantage, sliding onto her knees and barrelling towards him with her bo staff in her hand. She delivered a blow to his solar plexus that had him folding over. She came up behind him, whirling her staff and slamming it to the back of his neck. It landed and made his legs wobble.

But this werewolf was an experienced fighter and whatever pain he felt, he shook it off, soldiering on.

He swiped for her head, she ducked, but his back hand caught her on her shoulder, sending her sprawling and skidding on the ground on her hands and knees. The impact was amazing. These creatures were ten times stronger than the average male. Recovering from their hits slowed her down, and the split second it took for her to re-sharpen her focus could mean her life.

The gigantic creature bounded towards her, ready to mount her fully and rip into the back of her neck. She didn’t have time to throw a spell. He would be on her in a second, but a body knocked him fully off course, sending a mass of fur and black leather spilling into the ground.

It was Jughead, and he sprung up between her and the werewolf.

“I got this,” Jughead told her over his shoulder.

Betty wasn’t going to leave him with this hulking mass of muscle and fang. “We fight him together.”

She didn’t give Jughead time to argue.

The werewolf turned towards them to attack and as the werewolf came for them, Jughead crouched into a fighting stance. Betty took off, using Jughead’s back and shoulders to spring into the air, meeting the creature, who had launched into the air as well. She raised her bo staff, but only to distract him. He snapped the staff in his teeth, wrenching it from her grip, but as they passed one another in the air, she sank two silver daggers into his back. The wolf howled in pain as the silver boiled his flesh and blood. She landed into a roll and back on her feet, just in time to see Jughead pull out a blade from his lower back and sink it into the creature’s gut.

The werewolf slumped against Jughead, lifeless, and Jughead had to heave the massive body off him.

There wasn’t time to talk, but as they turned to fight the onslaught that came for them, Betty found herself back to back with Jughead. She was suddenly hyper aware of him, and she could tell by the way he moved his body that he was aware of her, too. They were covering each other, defending and fighting like partners.

It was the same trust she felt having Polly or Chic behind her, tossing spells and using the skills Chic taught her for most of her life. She broke bones, struck flesh with sharp steel, and sank daggers. It was a precise dance that her muscles knew by sheer instinct.

They were winning, thinning the Ghoulie crowd, and for a brief moment, Betty believed that they were going to get through this quicker than they thought.
Then everything changed.

She heard it, first. The growls and shrieks of an angry hoard.

The arrival of a second wave.

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Jughead couldn’t believe there were more of them.

He’d never fought so many creatures in his life, and just when he was feeling that they were gaining an edge, the second hoard appeared, fresh and motivated.

The sound of motorcycles echoed in the distance, appearing from the other side of the street. He was sure Joaquin had called for reinforcements and he knew this was it. For a moment, Jughead held hope that his father had arrived with hundreds of Serpents, but as FP came rolling in with his team, Jughead saw that there were little more than fifty in tow.

“We have to fall back,” Jughead told Betty. “We can’t fight them. There’s too much. We’re exhausted and there’s less of us.”

And there were less. Several in their contingent had already been driven off for treatment, some having sustained life threatening injuries. He knew they also lost a few to death already. If they stayed to fight this new wave, they would all meet the same fate.

Chic, Polly, and a group of Serpents came up behind them.

“We need to retreat and regroup at another time,” Chic said, decisively. “We can’t fight the second wave in our state.”

Jughead looked to Sweet Pea and Toni, both looking worse for wear. Fangs had already gotten carted off.

FP marched into their group, Joaquin behind him. “Boy, we headed over as soon as we heard, but this is suicide. We can’t hold them back. Not with the numbers we have left.”

“I can do it again,” Betty said through grit teeth. “I can—”

Chic stepped forward. “Betty, no! You only do it once. You can only do it once.”

“I’ve got some left in me. I can do it!”

Polly scowled. “This is crazy—”

“Betts,” Jughead interjected, his tone more determined than ever. “We are all exhausted. We have to fall back. We’ll fight them another day.”

“There might not be another day!” she cried. “That hoard gets through here, they will come after you and the other slayers—”

“They already got Tall Boy,” FP said, his tone tinged with a hint of grief. “He’s dead. They came for the Whyte Wyrm. We beat them back, but it cost us Tall Boy. They’re coming for us, Jug. Let Betty
do her job.”

Jughead felt his stomach roil in anger. “Dad!”

“I’m going for it,” Betty said.

Chic made a grab for her arm but the moment he touched her skin he was flung back, right into the group of Serpents.

“I’m sorry, Chic!” she cried, taking off.

“Betty!” Jughead cried in horror. Surging to go after her, but strong arms held him back. It was his father, and Jughead tried to force him off violently. “Let me go!”

“This is what she does,” FP growled in his ear. “This is what they were made for.”

Jughead threw his father off him, but Betty was already too far to catch up with.

Betty met the hoard before any of them could stop her, and Jughead knew he was the only one outside of Chic and Polly who didn’t want her to go in there again.

Everyone else were thinking the same thing: They had seen what she can do, how she obliterated more than a third of the enemy ranks with her powerful, seemingly unstoppable magic.

They were hoping she could do it again, but Jughead was afraid it would kill her. He was afraid that she would use up too much of herself.

He cried out her name, even as he watched her summon her magic with impressive power. Even as he saw her repeat her earlier spells, he could tell her magic was weaker. He could tell that the bullets were getting through her shield. He knew that she only managed to disarm half of them, knew that the explosion she generated didn’t shake their enemies as intensely as the first time.

Jughead charged headlong into battle, screaming with the adrenaline of fear, his gaze focused on getting to her before the enemy got to her first.

He watched, horrified, as a Ghoulie raised a gun towards her head.

A spell flew past him and it knocked the shooter off his feet. The gun went off, out of aim, and Jughead realized Polly ran backup behind him.

Betty clutched at her arm, blood pouring through her fingers, and Jughead felt his chest buzzing with terror.

She was hurt. She was bleeding, and he needed to get to her, but she was off again, fighting a vampire that had tried to go for her neck, and as she fought off one threat after another, Jughead could see that the glow from her hands were no longer waning. Unlike earlier, she wasn’t turning her magic off anymore.

Her eyes were beginning to take on a darkened sheen, interspersed with that golden aura that blinked on and off.

Betty’s focus was singular: fight the enemy and hold them back, and all Jughead can do was fight beside her, trying to hold off as many of them as he could.

“There’s still too many of them!” Toni cried. “They're getting through our defenses!”
Ghoulies started to get past them, their line moving closer and closer to the perimeter of the library. The attacks on him, Toni, Farmer McGinty, and FP were intensifying. They were getting swarmed and Jughead could see that the Slayers were losing their footing.

It was at that moment Jughead heard the dreadful sound of a third wave arrive that his hope cracked just the tiniest bit.

At the head of the small hoard was Penny Peabody, behind her Samuel Williams. The contingent that followed them held an obscene amount of firepower.

“Stand back!” Betty screamed. “Stand back!”

“Betty doesn’t have enough in her for this,” Polly rasped through heavy breathing.

Jughead fought his way to Betty, his mind gone of caution. Creatures were flying at him from all sides, and when Betty put up her shield, the bullets that came flying at them were blocked in some places and got through others.

When a bullet punched right through Betty’s magic and sank right into her shoulder, she collapsed, rolling over in agony.

Her scream of pain rang in Jughead’s ears. It felt deafening, like he could hear nothing else. He skidded to her side on his knees, pressing on the wound with his palms.

Her blood seeped between his fingers.

He didn’t bother to think about the tidal wave of enemies looming over them. He hardly felt the bullet that grazed his leg. He didn’t even realize that his own father had taken a hit to the back, or that Farmer McGinty stood over him to cut down the creatures that were coming at them at an overwhelming velocity.

Her eyes looked into his, liquid in its gaze.

“We’re taking you out,” he said in a panicked breath. “You’re going to be alright.”

Her eyes widened in despair. “I’m sorry…” was all she said before her eyes went dark as obsidian.

Betty saw Farmer McGinty miss, a werewolf slamming into his body, and suddenly no one was protecting Jughead.

Toni was caught in chains, FP was down, alive but struggling to get up and fight. All around them Serpents, Fae, vampires, and werewolves were falling under the sheer weight of their enemies.

Suddenly there was a vampire behind Jughead, sword poised to slice his neck.

Her eyes widened with terror and she knew that she had no other choice.

“I’m sorry…” she whispered, and with the magic she had left, she yanked, and the whole world was screaming in agony.
It felt like a punch to the gut, the pain spreading to the rest of his body and curling him into a ball.

The hoarse cry of suffering was ripped from his throat and he was helpless, utterly unable to do anything else.

On the fringes of his consciousness, he saw Betty rise to her feet, felt the sword strapped to his back slide out of its leather casing and singing a deadly tune. The blade sliced through the air with skill, cutting down the vampire he didn’t know had been poised to kill him.

He blinked from his vantage point on the ground, trying to make sense of Betty’s movements even as his face was pressed to the asphalt. Her entire body shimmered with her power and beyond his imaginings, it exploded, sending witch fyre outward.

Their enemies caught on fire as her power spread and she plowed through the Ghoulies that sought to destroy them with both her blade and her magic.

The members of their Slayer and council army were all writhing on the ground, and the witch fyre passed them all unharmed. Betty ran through the hoard, tossing bodies back, until he saw the shimmer of gold protecting them in a dome, and only then did Betty unleash her magic.

Their enemies fell in groups, their bodies cut with flying daggers, their limbs displaced with flying debris, their hair igniting with spontaneous combustion, and their wolverine flesh seared with thick clouds of silver.

Jughead watched as Betty single-handedly annihilated the Ghoulies with her magic, and when a truck came barreling towards her, intent on mowing her down, she faced it, hands splayed. The vehicle hit a barrier of her own conjuring, crushing the front of it as it collided with her wall, sending it flying overhead in a heap of twisted metal, motor oil, and rubber.

The Ghoulies began to flee, and Betty raised her hands, lifting the rubble of the battle over the ground and throwing it at those who weren’t fast enough to escape.

Jughead felt the grip of pain loosen and he found that he could stand. Others began to follow in his recovery, the pain waning, but they could only watch as Betty raged on. She came upon Malachai and raising him up high in the air before breaking his back.

The Ghoulies who weren’t writhing in agony at their feet had cleared out.

Betty was still pulsing with magic and it all had to go somewhere.

Jughead blew right past her magical shield, fighting through the current of magic emanating from her and coming up behind her.

He reached out to grab her arm, but she motioned to lash out at him.

“Betty!” he cried urgently, putting his hands up. “It’s me! It’s just me!”

Her eyes were a fathomless black and her magic still glowed from her body. For a moment, Jughead thought she was going to attack him, but she hesitated, and though her eyes remained black, she
spoke in the tone he knew so well. “J-Juggie?”

The black began to wane from her eyes, her green irises slowly reappearing.

“Betts,” he said with relief. “Betts…” He went to her, ready to take her into his embrace, but she gasped, her hand flying to her neck where a dart had pierced her tender flesh.

Her eyes rolled to the back of her head, fluttering close as she fell, boneless. The glow of her magic fading as she collapsed into his arms.

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“Betty!” he cried, catching her limp body. “Oh, my God, Betty!”

For a moment he thought she was dead. He couldn’t see her breathing. He couldn’t tell by looking at her if she would ever wake up again. He pulled the dart off her neck, looking up at Chic who held the weapon in his hand.

“What did you do to her?” Jughead demanded, thinking that this man had killed his father, so it wasn’t so much a leap that he had done the same to his sister. “What did you—“

“It’s propofol!” Chic interjected forcefully. “She’s fine—“

“Fine?” Jughead cried. “You didn’t need to do that! I got her back! She recognized who I was and she came back, you fucking—“

“Jughead, enough!” FP said, his voice hoarse with exhaustion. He was hunched over, supported by Sweet Pea who was limping himself. “That’s enough, boy. She might have recognized you, but the rest of us might not have been so lucky.”

Jughead scowled, pulling Betty closer in his protective embrace. “It’s Betty. She wouldn’t hurt any of you. Look around you, dad! We’re all alive and able. She protected us as she fought them. And those she fought aren’t even dead!”

The horrified faces surrounding him looked around. The groans of pain that filled the air belonged to the bodies of incapacitated Ghoulies, some limbless, some terribly burnt, some bleeding weak, but they were alive. There were dead bodies around them as well, but it was difficult to determine if they were killed by Betty’s magic or by the hand of the Serpents and council warriors.

And through all the blood and suffering, the one thing that was certain: The library was secured and most of the Slayers were still alive.

Jughead looked at Betty, smoothing the hair off her face. “She needs a doctor.”

Polly, filthy with the blood and grime of battle, knelt beside him, pressing her hand to his shoulder. “She doesn’t. She’ll heal without one. If you can help me bring her home, I can patch her up myself.”

Jughead observed the expression on Polly’s face. She was tired, of that he was sure, but her eyes conveyed certainty. She had done this before.

Nodding, Jughead lifted Betty into his arms, cradling her limp body against his.
The wound on his leg stung and blood seeped slick through his torn jeans, but he didn’t care. He would heal from it, too.

Farmer McGinty started barking orders, telling the injured to get treated and the able bodied to round up their enemies, dead or alive.

Polly had parked her car a few blocks away from the fight, and as Jughead limped after her, he asked if she was alright.

“Definitely banged up in places, yeah,” she replied. “But nothing’s broken, so I’m fine, considering.”

Jughead was quite banged up, too, but like Polly, he was relatively okay. His bullet graze might need looking after, but Zelda could probably do that for him once all the other injured had been attended to.

They reached Polly’s car and they secured Betty in the back seat, curled up on her side as Jughead cradled her.

Polly took the driver’s seat and drove them to the Cooper house.

The streets and houses of Riverdale were alive with agitated residents. People were milling about talking to neighbors, talking to cops, and some of them wielded blunt force objects like bats and tire irons. Jughead had no doubt that some of them were armed.

He was sure that Mayor McCoy had gone full fae, going on live television to put out a calming, probably hypnotising message about staying indoors, being safe out on the streets. The riot was being contained. The police were securing the perimeter.

Obviously, there was nothing about fanged creatures in the news. Alice had taken care of the local press. She was, it seemed, still hard at work keeping the news Lost Compliant, because the Cooper home was dark and silent when they arrived.

As he got out of the car, he spied Archie and Fred on the front porch of their house, and upon seeing him, Archie got up and hurried over.

He exchanged uneasy looks with Polly but gestured for her to let him handle it.

He stayed behind Polly’s car, hoping he could hide his bloodied clothing.

“Holy shit Jug!” Archie cried as he approached. “It’s not safe to be out tonight! Did you hear the news? It’s total chaos out there! Dad and I are freaked out!”

Archie rounded the car to his side, wide eyed and panicked, but as soon as he saw Jughead in his torn and bloodied clothing, his jaw dropped and he struggled to speak. “What the—are you—?”

“I’m fine,” Jughead said firmly. “Go back to your house, man. Lock your doors.”

Archie’s eyes wandered to the inside of Polly’s car, seeing Betty in the back seat, unconscious and filthy with blood.

He gasped. “Fuck, dude, is she—“

Jughead swallowed. “We’re taking care of it.”

“She looks like she needs a doctor!”
“She’s getting help, trust me. Just—let us handle it, okay? Please, Arch. I’ll tell you everything when I get the chance, just… don’t tell your dad. Try Kevin. He might be able to tell you a few things.” He was hoping Kevin would work his magic and talk Archie down.

Archie pursed his lips. “Is this one of those things that only you, Kevin, and V know about?”

For some reason, that struck Jughead with an enormous amount of guilt. He swallowed. “Yeah, Arch. It’s one of those things.”

“Look, I… I fucking get it, okay? But if you—if you need my help, you know where to find me.” Archie turned and left, heading back to his house. He did not sit back down with his father on the porch. He went right inside, slamming the door behind him.

Fred waved to Jughead and Jughead waved back before ducking to get Betty out and carry her out of the car.

As Polly keyed them into the house, she explained that her mother had likely prepared the bathroom upstairs. Jughead wasn’t sure what that meant until he saw it. There was a thick layer of fluffy towels on the floor, a rolling rack of medical implements and materials, and some more clean towels stacked on the stylish bathroom countertop.

There was also a huge clothes basket lined with a thick layer of paper.

Soaks the blood, he thought grimly.

“Lay her there,” Polly said, gesturing to the towels on the floor. “I can take it from here.”

Jughead frowned. “I can help.”

Polly shrugged, perhaps too exhausted to argue. “Suit yourself, but this isn’t for the faint of heart.”

He acknowledged her warning and laid Betty down, careful to position her head comfortably. Even if she couldn’t feel a thing, it was all he could do to start taking care of her. When she was settled, he and Polly stripped down to their jeans and undershirts, shedding their weapons, holsters, coats, and the outer layer of their tops. He barely managed to protest when Polly tossed his bloodied plaid in the clothes hamper along with her things.

“Shush. Be glad I didn’t toss your jacket in there.”

He supposed she was right.

And then they began.

It started off standard enough. They had to remove the holsters and straps that held Betty’s weapons. She was completely unconscious, but Jughead thought her so light, and Polly did say that this was so much easier to manage with someone to help, which made Jughead realize that she probably often had to do this alone.

Polly carefully removed Betty’s boots and socks, and Jughead watched Polly examine both Betty’s feet.

“Bear with me,” she explained. “Sometimes I have to check if she broke anything in here. She heals fast but if a broken bone is misplaced, it’ll heal awkwardly and Betty will be furious.” She chuckled and perhaps expected him to laugh, but he couldn’t bring himself to find the humor in that.
The thought of Betty fighting on a broken foot was harrowing.

But if he thought that disturbing, what he saw when Polly peeled off Betty’s pants made his stomach roil.

Underneath the pants, Betty’s thighs were cinched tight with belts, and where the belts were pulled tight, her flesh was broken, swollen, and bleeding. The belts, it seemed, had barbs on the underside of them, and the blood soaking her pants were not just from their enemies but from her own body.

“Jesus,” he gasped. “She wears--”

“Cilice belts, yes. How else is she going to inflict enormous pain on herself during battle efficiently? Taking hits from enemies can incapacitate her, and her body’s natural adrenaline keeps that pain quick--not lasting.” Polly cocked a bitter grin. “Religious self-mortification is the way to go, baby. Those priests and monks knew how to hurt themselves and prolong that suffering. Hilariously, Betty drew the line at wearing a sack cloth.”

Again, not funny, but Jughead was coming to realize that Polly managed her stress by making grotesque jokes that were purposely meant to be un-funny. It was, perhaps, the horrified reactions around her that actually soothed her.

They took off Betty’s top, next, and there were belts cinched around her arms, too. With the bullet wound on her shoulder, Jughead stifled the welling of emotions that threatened to overcome him.

This was what it took to do the magic she did. The entire time she had fought for them, pain was already permeating her body. He couldn’t bear the thought, and yet it had saved all their lives. There was nothing about this that was pretty, especially not when she needed to draw on the pain of everyone because she had nothing left otherwise, but it was the only thing she could have done to protect them all.

To protect him.

“Stay with me, Jughead,” Polly said, firmly. “For fuck’s sake, don’t start crying.”

“I’m not,” Jughead said, sniffing and blinking back his tears. “I’m good.”

“You sure?”

“Get on with it.”

Polly started taking the belts off, and that in itself looked harrowingly painful. Some of the barbs had caught on Betty’s flesh, so Polly worked meticulously not to rip Betty’s skin off. The punctures and tears in her skin bled, the area around the wounds swollen and mottled. There was bruising, as well, because the belts were cinched so tight.

Jughead could only be thankful that Betty was unconscious for all this, but he couldn’t imagine having to put them on…

“Who helps her put the belts on?” Jughead asked, quietly.

Polly scoffed, her soft breath drifting off into the echoes of the bathroom tiles. “Me, naturally. I’m the stone cold bitch in this family.”

Jughead thought that was the furthest thing from the truth.
When the belts were off, Polly fished the bullet out of Betty’s shoulder with a pair of surgical tongs which she just happened to have in her medical kit.

Jughead tried not to think about the fact that having a kit like this meant that this sort of thing happened frequently enough.

The towels beneath Betty were stained with blood, but so quickly after the bullet and the implements of pain had been removed, the bleeding of her wounds had slowed to a gentler ebb. Her underwear, however, was ruined with it, and Polly cocked a smile. “I suppose there’s nothing here you haven’t seen.”

Jughead sighed. “Polly--”

“Right. Sorry,” she muttered, shedding the last of Betty’s garments. “I get this way when I’m trying to keep it together. I know it’s repulsive, but I can’t help myself.”

“We gotta do what we gotta do,” he grumbled under his breath, lifting Betty off the towels and carefully lowering her in the empty tub. Another towel had been folded over to serve as a pillow for Betty’s head, and Jughead carefully positioned her there. She was so boneless that she was still in danger of sliding off.

“Hold her up for me, will you?” Polly asked.

“I got her,” he said in a quiet voice.

Polly ran the handheld shower and when it was warm enough, she started to wash Betty clean of her blood. The water in the tub ran red, then pink. Soon enough the water ran clear, and Betty’s wounds, though still raw and angry, had ceased to bleed.

“I’d like to wash her hair, Jug. Can you help me with that?”

“Of course, Pol.”

She gave him a tight-lipped smile.

He cradled Betty’s head in the hook of his arm as Polly gently ran the shower through her hair, washing off blood and grime. Jughead took some of the water from the spray and gently wiped Betty’s face with it. She didn’t flinch in the slightest; she was so deeply asleep.

He never could’ve imagined Betty this helpless. She was such a strong, determined person that holding her this way, unconscious and limp, gave him an urgent, painful need to shelter her. Every time this happened, which he could only assume was one-too many times, too often, she had to trust that someone would be there to take care of her.

He wasn’t going to leave her side. “How long does she stay this way?”

Polly shrugged a shoulder. “24 to 48 hours. It depends on how much healing she has to do, I think.”

“Okay.”

It was while Polly was rinsing off the last of the suds that her expression seemed to harden. “So Jones, now that you’ve seen her like that, what do you think?”

He was slightly taken aback by her question. “Seen her like what?”

“Like that. Full on Wicked. What do you think?”
What did he think? He paused, trying to wrap his head around the question. What was he supposed to think?

“She was scary, wasn’t she?” Polly asked, her tone clipped. “I’ve heard someone say that demons have eyes like hers. She’s terrifying, I know. Most people can’t handle it.”

Jughead frowned. That she can even insinuate that Betty can frighten him was insulting. “I’m not most people.”

“Right. You love her.”

“I do, and you need to stop with this thing you do. I know this is hard for you, but quit lashing out. We both care for Betty, okay?”

Polly sniffed and her gaze became liquid. She swiped the tears from her eyes with the back of her hand and she sniffed. “Sorry… it’s just—I always have to pick up the mess by myself. Mom and Chic fall to pieces doing this with me and it pisses me off. I mean, they’ve tried to help, but they’re crying and moaning and it’s all so fucking useless. I can’t help but think that it’s that drama that pushed dad over the edge and left us in this situation and I’m—God, Jones! It’s Betty! It’s Betty. Can’t they just pull their heads out of their asses for one minute and just get her through from start to finish? From one end of the pain to the other? I’m so sick of being the only one who can put those belts on her and take them off. I have to remember that shit when I close my eyes.” Her bottom lip trembled as she combed her fingers through Betty’s hair one last time.

She got up and shut the shower, grabbing one of the towels hanging off the rack.

Kneeling back down, she wrapped Betty’s wet hair. As she retrieved the second towel to wrap around Betty’s body, Jughead said, “You didn’t have to do it alone this time.”

Polly tugged the edges of the towel around her sister as Jughead lifted Betty’s body out of the tub. “Not this time.” She admitted, casting him a grateful look.

She led them to Betty’s room and he laid Betty on her bed where Polly slipped her into a sleep shirt and pulled the bed covers over her. Her wounds didn’t need to be wrapped because while they were raw, they weren’t bleeding, and he imagined that Betty wasn’t going to develop an infection.

Jughead thought Betty looked a little more peaceful now than dead, a thought which made him sink onto the dressing chair.

“I can take a look at that injury if you need me to,” Polly said, nodding pointedly to his leg.

Jughead let out a tired breath. His leg hurt, for sure. He was favoring it, but he probably needed even less treatment than Betty did. He would go to Zelda, like he first thought, and she’d be able to look it over.

“I’ll be fine,” he said.

Polly rolled her eyes. “Suit yourself. I know you Slayers are indestructible, but that bullet could’ve had a spell attached to it. I could at least check for that.”

He thought that at their core, all the Spellman ladies, perhaps even Alice, were the same kind of caring bunch he was glad to have around.

“Thanks. I’ll let you know if, you know, I start to get cold sweats or grow a second head.”
Her eyebrow arched but she didn’t comment on it. “I’m going to go clean up. We have another bathroom in the basement if you want to do the same. I’m sure Chic has something he can lend you.”

He supposed he should. Probably better if he did that at home.

“Maybe,” he said, tiredly. His shoulders felt heavy, and with the adrenaline leaving his body, he was feeling aches and pains more distinctly. A hot shower wasn’t a bad idea.

He stared at Betty’s sleeping form, and he had an urge to slip into bed beside her. Sleeping this entire thing off wasn’t a bad idea, but he knew that there were a million things to do in the aftermath. They weren’t even sure this was completely over. He needed to get back to the library or head to the Whyte Wyrm.

“As much as I’d like to keep Betty company, I can’t stay here;” Jughead said in a reluctant tone. “I need to get back with the Serpents and see what needs doing.”

Polly nodded. “Probably. Take my car.” She gave him her keys.

He wasn’t going to say no. It was a long jog to the library. Even longer if he had to go to the Whyte Wyrm. He took her keys and thanked her. “I’ll drive it back here as soon as I could. Please let me know if anything changes with Betty. You can text me--” he picked up a pen and Post It pad on Betty’s dresser and scribbled his phone number on it. He held the note out to Polly. “I would really appreciate it.”

Polly cocked a smile and took the note. “Nothing will change with her in the next 24 hours, that’s for sure, but who knows? Maybe Juliet will wake up for her Romeo.”

He sighed as he got up. “They died, you know.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Why do you smartasses all focus on that?”

Jughead mimicked thinking about it. “Uh, because it's important? It’s classified as a tragedy. I mean--”

“God, no wonder she loves you,” Polly grumbled, turning to leave. “Use the backdoor when you let yourself out. You can lock it from the inside then close it from outside. I’ll put the bolt in after I finish with my shower. Here’s your jacket and feel free to use one of these ghastly bloodied towels to clean it off a little. Oh, and take care of my car, Jones. You scratch it and I will make you suffer.”

That was a threat he was planning to take seriously.

When Polly left, he took a knee beside Betty’s bed. She was so still, but she looked comfortable. Worry lanced through his gut as he wondered what the Slayers would think about Betty, having seen what she could do.

They might not know she was Wicked, but that awesome power she displayed was hard to ignore. That moment she drew on everyone’s pain would be difficult to explain, and people would have questions. They might not connect that event to her, specifically. Many might believe that the Ghoulies had something to do with it, since Betty, perhaps in her wisdom or perhaps the experience she had hiding who she was, had drawn only from the members of their contingent. But some would suspect. The older ones would.

He was afraid that among the Serpents, demands for Betty to be “dealt” with would rise.

If that happened…. 
I’ll take her away from this place.

She and I will run away and never look back.

It astounded him that this was not a flight of fancy. He was serious. He would take her with him and run.

But after that, what then? She would be living the same life, afraid and in hiding, except that it would be with him.

He sighed, tenderly pushed some hair off her face. He pressed his lips to her forehead, holding it there for a couple of seconds before reluctantly hauling himself to his feet, taking his filthy jacket, and heading out.

*****************

Jughead headed for the library first, where Ghoulies and Serpents were being carted off either to the St. Brighid’s, the Riverdale General Hospital, or off to the Whyte Wyrm dungeons. The less injured Serpent and council warriors were being sent to volunteers, like the Spellmans and the McCoy’s.

FP was still at the scene of the fight, overseeing the dispatch, but as soon as he saw Jughead, he called his son over and gestured for Toni and Farmer McGinty to gather. The absence of Tall Boy was distinct and depressing.

“No sign of Penny Peabody in this heap of bodies,” FP said, turning to Toni. “Are you sure you saw her?”

Toni nodded. “I’m sure. I saw her leading the third wave.”

Jughead nodded. “I saw her, too. After that, we were preoccupied fighting for our lives.”

Farmer McGinty looked at the wreckage around them. “Still a lot to get through. We might find her, yet.”

“We’ll keep looking,” FP said. “In the meantime, we account for every Ghoulie we take out of here.”

“Where’s Malachai?” Jughead asked.

Farmer McGinty nodded in the direction of the group of Ghoulies in custody. “He be sent to the dungeons. His back’s broken in half, thanks to your witch, but he’s a vampire. He’ll live.”

“He’ll knit himself right in a few hours,” Toni said.

“If we give him blood,” Farmer McGinty responded. The arch of his eyebrow and the silky tone of his voice implied that they weren’t going to help him get better.

Jughead realized that with all the Ghoulies that were being stuffed in the dungeons, Trevor was going to have a pretty miserable night.

With the amount of Ghoulies out of commission, Jughead was fairly certain that they weren’t going to try again anytime soon. Not with Malachai in custody. “We still gotta find Penny Peabody. If she
stirred up this much trouble now, she can do it again. We need to catch her and put her away.”

“You going to kill her this time?” Farmer McGinty asked.

Jughead didn’t reply immediately. “I’m not going to wield that sword, Farmer McGinty, but with everything that’s happened tonight, you’re not the only one who wants her dead.”

Toni tilted her chin. “I’ve got a few sources who might be able to suss her out. Want me to get on that?”

“Do your thing, Toni,” FP said.

Toni nodded, heading to her motorcycle.

“And the House of the Dead?” Jughead asked, hoping the Serpents hadn’t gone and burned it down just yet.

“It’s secured,” FP said. “We’ve cleared it out, but it’s still standing. The Ulfric and the Royal have asked that we leave the structure standing. It’s a creature hive property, therefore they have first dibs on it. They might burn it down later, but that’s their decision.”

Even in this relatively modest battle, there are spoils of war, and Jughead could only roll his eyes at the absurdity.

Farmer McGinty gave a huff of discontent. “Since when did Slayers cater to the whims of the creature folk?”

“Since they sent their best warriors to help us win this fight,” FP replied.

Farmer McGinty snorted. “We did not win this fight. It be the witch who won the fight for us. She is powerful and dangerous, but she fights with us, so I have no issue with her yet, Young Jones.”

Jughead scowled but said nothing. He had expected as much from Farmer McGinty.

“I’ll confer with the Greendale Otherworlders,” Farmer McGinty said. “If urgency requires, I will contact you, otherwise, we will see one another at the appointed meeting time.”

Jughead turned to his father questioningly.

“8 AM sharp, tomorrow,” FP replied.

Farmer McGinty walked off with his scythe, an imposing figure all of the time.

“How’s Betty?” FP asked, and Jughead wanted to shoot back, bitingly, with, “What do you care?”

But no matter how crappily FP treated him, there was always that hope that FP gave a shit about him more than anything else. “She’s unconscious, but Polly thinks she’ll be okay.”

“You saw what she could do.”

Jughead couldn’t bring himself to shrug off the implications of FP’s words. “Yeah. Her power is incredible.”

FP nodded. “But like you said, she kept us alive and hit the Ghoulies where it mattered. She didn’t destroy them all even if she could’ve. She didn’t go completely berserk.”
Jughead was a little surprised that he and his father agreed on this point. It gave him hope. “Betty is an ally, dad.”

“She also incapacitated us all to wield the power she needed. She could’ve just taken pain from the Ghoulies and that would’ve won the fight.”

He frowned and stepped closer so that they wouldn’t be overheard. “She didn’t want to broadcast to the world that she was Wicked. Surely you understand that, and if she had taken from the Ghoulies, they would’ve known, too. The risk was too much for her.”

“You’ve been making excuses for her from the beginning, son.”

“She did it for us all,” Jughead insisted. “And now our enemies are defeated and we get to go home. She didn’t even need to be drugged, for fuck’s sake. I told you, I got her back. She didn’t lose control. You were just afraid to see her come back from it.”

“You should be afraid, too,” FP hissed, pointing a finger in his face. “You should be goddamn afraid, boy. Have you even really thought about what she did? She stopped bullets, and then she used those same bullets to hit back. Then she took their guns and forced them back through the sheer force of her will.” His father barked a laugh. “She could fight, too. She and her siblings make a hell of a trio. If I weren’t so scared of her, I’d be downright impressed, but there’s too much power there, kid. Way too much. One of these days, a tranquilizer isn’t going to be enough. When that day comes, will you be able to deal with her yourself?”

Jughead would die before he lay a hand on Betty. He wasn’t sure if he could live with himself if he became responsible for her demise. He’d rather go down with her, but that wasn’t the point. His father had, of course, conveniently left out the most important thing.

“Betty came back,” Jughead growled. “Without having to get tranquilized. No matter what you say, that is what matters. You’re just too stubborn or too afraid to accept that. I believe in Betty. She is a good person. That’s everything, because it is the reason people around us, enemies and allies, are alive.”

FP stared right back at him, trembling. In frustration or fury, Jughead couldn’t tell, but as they stood toe to toe, Jughead had never been more sure of anything in his life: His father was wrong.

Finally, FP scoffed. “We got better things to do than argue over your girlfriend. Come with me to the Whyte Wyrm. You wanna find out why this happened? I’ll give you first dibs on Malachai.”

Jughead took a moment to wait for his father to give him some kind of condition for this privilege of interrogating Malachai, but FP didn’t add anything. So nodding, he went with FP to the Whyte Wyrm.

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Malachai was in chains. He was cuffed at the wrists, ankles, and neck. Not that he needed to be at the moment. He was lying on a cot, groaning to cope with the pain of his broken back.

As promised by Farmer McGinty, he hadn’t been given any fresh blood. If he was going to heal at all, it was going to take a while.
Jughead could have sat at the edge of Malachai’s cot and he still wouldn’t be in much danger. Slayer blood, if ingested by a vampire in great quantities, did more harm to vampires than good. There was nothing about his blood that was desirable to Malachai, so Jughead did sit himself on Malachai’s bed and Jughead watched as scorn glazed Malachai’s eyes.

“Comfortable?” Jughead asked.

“Where’s your witch, Jones?” Malachai hissed. “She did this to me. When I’m better, I’m coming after her. I bet her blood tastes sweet like honey.”

Jughead scoffed softly. He wasn’t terribly worried, now that he’d seen exactly what Betty could do. “I bet she wipes the floor with your carcass, Malachai.”

He did not miss the flicker of fear that marred Malachai’s bravado.

“Did Penny Peabody send you to do all this?” he asked.

Malachai laughed. “Penny Peabody! What’s that bitch up to now?”

A ripple of irritation skittered down Jughead’s spine. “Don’t lie to me, Malachai. Cooperate and maybe I can convince someone to give you blood. Give me information that really packs a punch and I might convince my dad to give you Mercy at your trial. Unless you wanna die for Penny like Bates and your other flunkies, you better start talking. I doubt you even like her.”

Malachai said nothing, turning his gaze away from Jughead.

“What’d she promise you, Malachai?” Jughead continued. “She promise you sole distributorship of her drugs?”

Malachai laughed. “Oh, you wish it were that simple, don’t you? This here, is a tale about revenge and power. She wants to see you suffer. She will first kill everyone you love, then she will kill you. But however satisfying that is, it’s unprofitable, and you know how Penny operates. It’s always about money.”

“I could’ve told you all that, Malachai. Give me details. I want specifics. We start with the skull. What does the skull do?”

A chuckle escaped him. “I know nothing about this skull of yours. When you demanded it from me, that was the first I heard of it. I had a feeling Penny had something to do with it, so I asked her and she gave me the skull that I left at your doorstep.”

Jughead grit his teeth. It wasn’t the answer he expected but it wasn’t earth shattering news, either. “The Ghoulies you sent to kill Wyome—were they just pawns to motivate the Ghoulies to come together and riot?”

Malachai managed a pained grin. “One of Penny’s better ideas. You Serpents and your council fell for it big time. Executing them at dawn and whatnot. You’re a bunch of predictable jerks.”

It was a oddly funny that Malachai would describe the people who lopped off his gang members’ heads as “predictable jerks.” Jughead could think of worse ways to describe them. “Did you send their heads to yourself?”

Malachai laughed but said nothing.

“Penny paying for all this?”
“Far as I know.”

That wasn’t a helpful answer, either, and Malachai knew it. This was not new information to Jughead. “Where’s she getting it? The money?”

“I don’t care where she gets it, Jones. So long as I get paid.”

“And Betty Cooper? What do you want from her?”

Malachai chuckled. “You probably know what.”

“Her magic? How are you even going to take it? None of you are witches and Penny doesn’t have it in her… does she think she can get Betty’s magic?”

Malachai clamped his lips shut.

There was a knock at the door and Jughead paused, arching an eyebrow at the narrow, barred window of the thick metal door. The dark silhouette of a tall man and his scythe stood just outside the door. “You know what that means, don’t you, Malachai? Bad cop wants a turn.”

Malachai swallowed. “I’m just a pawn, Jones.”

“Nobody believes that.” He got up, heading for the door.

“I don’t have answers for you!” Malachai cried, his voice raising in mild panic. “Penny just tells me what to do! She doesn’t give the reasons why!”

“Bullshit.”

“I told you! This is about power! It isn’t just the drugs! She promised that if we got rid of you all, she would have the means to run Riverdale and give us the freedom to be ourselves!”

“You mean get rid of the slayers?”

“Yes!”

Jughead paused, thinking about a town where Otherworlders didn’t need to hide. It was a paradise of sorts, perhaps. An ideal worth killing for, especially when you’re a creature often relegated to the darkness of night.

“Who’s giving her the money, Malachai?”

“I don’t know if I want to know.”

Jughead scowled. “You’ve given me absolutely nothing and I can’t be wasting my time here. The moment I walk out of here, Farmer McGinty will take my place. He’ll inject garlic into your body to get answers and probably set fire to your hair.”


“Sure, Jon Snow.” He said, trying for levity but failing. He was never one for torture, but there was only so much he could do to stop the other slayers from doing what they thought was necessary. His own stomach churned at Farmer McGinty’s ruthlessness. “You need to tell me what you can or I can’t help you.”

“You leave me with this man,” Malachai said under his breath, “and you are just as complicit in
torture, Jones!”

Jughead nodded. “This, I know. There are a dozen scenarios where I prevent this from happening. The ones where you don’t cooperate will involve betrayal and murder—things I am not willing to do for you.”

The knock on the door sounded again and Malachai’s eyes darted to him feverishly. “I’ll tell you what I can but I swear, it’s everything I know, okay?”

“What do you have for me, Malachai?”

“It’s all about your witch, Jones. It all comes down to her. Penny wants her. For her magic, or something else, I’m not sure, but everything from that stupid amber skull to this riot is about Betty Cooper. Penny will try to take her. I don’t know how and I don’t know when, but if you ask my opinion? Penny will do it while nobody’s watching and when your witch can’t fight back. Do you get my drift?”

Dread filled Jughead and without saying anything further, he got up and stormed out of Malachai’s cell. At the other side of the door, Sweet Pea stood with a scythe. Behind him were FP and Joaquin.

They stared, wide-eyed at Jughead as he walked out of the cell.

“What does that mean, Jones?” Sweet Pea asked.

Jughead needed to call someone and he knew that the dungeons never allowed for a phone signal. He hurried to get out of the tunnels, but as soon as he emerged into the Whyte Wyrm, the missed calls came pouring in.

Archie’s was surprising. There were about three from him, then Polly’s—more than a dozen of them. And then Chic’s.

He knew then, in his gut, that it was too late. He stood, trembling, knowing the news he would get when he called.

The Whyte Wyrm door burst open with Chic and Polly calling for him in unison. When they saw him standing there, it was Polly who rushed towards him, her face streaked in tears.

“God, Jughead! I’ve been trying to call you the last ten minutes! Why weren’t you—”

“Tell me,” Jughead said, through the ragged breathing of his rage.

“She wasn’t in her room,” Chic said, his eyes heavy with unshed tears. “Her window was wide open and there were claw marks on her windowsill… they took her, Jughead. I don’t know who—maybe the Ghoulies. I don’t know. But there’s more…”

Jughead was trying to keep the noise that was raging in his head down to levels that would allow him to function. He was trying to even his breathing, trying to stave off the panic.

Swallowing, he responded. “How could there be more?”

“It’s Archie and Fred Andrews, Jug. Archie’s hurt bad. I think he tried to intervene—I don’t know, but he’s—”

“Is he dead?”

“He’s alive, but… it was a werewolf that got him. He’s been infected.”
“And Fred Andrews?”

Chic shook his head. “He didn’t make it.”

FP swore profusely in the background.

Jughead’s eyes closed, his hand coming up to rub at his lids out of sheer helpless frustration and unfathomable loss. He clamped his hand to his mouth as he tried to steady his thoughts. “Where is Archie now?”

“St. Brighid’s.”

There were so many emotions running through him at the moment: Sheer panic being the most intense, but the sadness and guilt were overwhelming as well, and Jughead could only turn to Joaquin to hand off one tragedy so that he could concentrate on what he needed to do. “Call Kevin and Veronica, and please tell them that Archie needs them at St. Brighid’s.”

Joaquin nodded, fishing out his phone.

Jughead turned back to Chic and Polly. “Did you see who it was that took Betty?”

Chic shook his head. “He was too fast, Jughead. We heard the commotion outside and Polly and I went to see what was going on. Archie and Fred were already on the ground. We didn’t even realize that a werewolf was climbing the side of our house... I just saw the shadow leaving Betty’s window. He was large. I couldn’t give you any details.”

Jughead’s thoughts were a jumble, but distinctly, some reasoning was seeping through the chaos. If Penny Peabody was ordering the Ghoulies around, she probably already knew that Malachai was ineffective. If he were Penny Peabody, he would rely on the smarter leader. The one who didn’t just lounge around throwing parties and holding court.

And it should’ve been obvious. Penny had walked with him into battle.

“Samuel,” Jughead said under his breath. “She was taken by Samuel.”

***************

Jughead could rage all night, going from one Ghoulie house to another. There were several of them, he knew, aside from the House of the Dead. There were pockets of Ghoulie hideouts all throughout the dales, and if he were to give in to every Slayer instinct he head, he would be going to each and every one and burning them all to the ground.

As it was, he had already kicked down the door of the House of the Dead, much to Ulfri Vihaan’s displeasure, and gone through Samuel’s living quarters, hoping to find clues on his and Penny Peabody’s whereabouts.

Of course there was nothing there. Samuel was intelligent enough not to keep any kind of evidence in this room.

According to Toni, who he had on the phone, Penny had been staying at some seedy motel in Greendale, which was a bit of a conundrum. If she had so much money, why would she stay in a
trashy motel?

But it was where Jughead went next, and he ransacked *that* place. The only indication that Penny lived in it at all was the Ghoulie jacket hanging off the hook. Penny didn’t even throw out any receipts in the trash bin.

Basically, after several hours of running through town, looking for clues, Jughead had turned up *nothing*.

As he sat on his motorcycle, watching the light of a new day emerge from the horizon, he tried to calm every impulse in his body to resort to unimaginable violence. He tried to tell himself that Betty was going to be okay, that there had to be a trail *somewhere*.

But his hope was tenuous and he knew that as the minutes ticked by, a part of him had started dying already.

************************************************

Betty was in a heavy haze, swimming in the waters of her unconsciousness, surfacing above and sinking below.

In the back of her mind, there was a distinct memory of how this was going to go. She would wake up with a fog in her brain, bits piecing together slowly as the hours ticked by.

As she lay there, first remembering her name, and then perhaps who she was and what she did, she realized that she was laying on the ground in the middle of a sigil inside a cell.

The lines and loops were beautiful.

Betty always thought it incredible, that witches could only be restrained with magic and art.

*Perhaps they had always been one and the same,* she thought, whimsically.

Her body was tingling, but it was an oddly soothing sensation, and as she shifted, she saw the red, angry welts outlined on her arms. She felt no pain, which was strange. The welts *looked* painful, and yet in spite of the hard ground beneath her, she felt relaxed.

How long had she been waking up? Hours, now?

There was a shuffling sound beyond the door and Betty pushed herself up, thinking that if she had guests, she shouldn’t be receiving them lying down. She at least had to smoothen out her mostly disheveled state.

She sat up, running her fingers through her hair. She must look a fright.

A loud bang sounded from the other side of the door, as if someone was trying to get in but failing. Someone swore.

*Such language!*

Betty giggled at her own thoughts. She realized that she had been mimicking her mother.
Alice thought profanity was unbecoming of a lady.

There was a gasp.

“Hello, there?” Betty croaked in a raspy voice. Her throat felt painfully dry.

“Oh, my God,” came the hushed voice of someone familiar. Someone she probably knew. “Cousin Betty? Is that you?”

tbc.

Chapter End Notes

As you can see, this is not the end of this story. Honestly, I cannot tell you what the last chapter is yet, but it's soon.
The Name of the Witch

Chapter Notes

There's a brand new POV introduced in this chapter that you may (or may not) like.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Truth is in the guidance of the Coven. Is it a curse or a blessing?”

— Amy Lunderman, Echo

24. 10. 6. 8. 1. 0.

Jughead hadn’t slept in a little over 24 hours but he had no desire to rest.

Betty had been missing for 10 hours.

He’d gone to half a dozen locations looking for her.

The meeting with the council was at 8 AM sharp.

There was 1 hour until then.

Zero progress.

The Council meeting was held in a conference room, the same one where the pledges were made by the councilmen and the Ghoulies were declared the enemy.

Most of the same entourage were there. Distinctly missing was Tall Boy, Frekki Terrence, and Lady Gendra’s handmaiden, Bellasiel. They all perished during the battle, and in spite of the victory, the mood was sober. The loss and suffering of their comrades was palpable in the room.

As Chic and Jughead met eyes across the table, their gazes mirrored one another in their discontent at being here, sitting around like self-important pricks, wading in a pool of inaction.

Jughead didn’t want to be here, but his father promised that he would keep it down to an hour. If it lasted longer than that, Jughead had permission to simply walk out and leave.

To a certain extent, Jughead needed this hour to reset. He needed a moment to hold still and organize his thoughts. Collate what he had found even if it had yielded him no real or apparent leads.

He had gone to the vault, looking at the amber skull once more and detecting nothing from it, but it had been so distinctly a part of this case that he brought it back with him to give to Chic, so he could
bring it to the Spellmans for further examination. At the very least, carrying it around like a totem to remind him that there was a reason Betty had been taken and not killed.

Earlier, he, along with Toni and her shady hacker contact, broke into the bank’s records. As Jughead looked over the shoulder of a fourteen-year-old genius vegetating in her parents’ basement, he watched spools of information fill up the screen, encrypted, until Boy Wonder (her hacker name), magically made the text legible, and they could trace Penny’s account. The account wasn’t in Penny’s name, naturally. It was set up as Geraldine Grundy. The only reason they figured it was Penny’s at all was because transactions continued on the account after Grundy had been banished to Abaddon.

The money that fed into it came from an unknown source and Boy Wonder tried to trace it. But she had given up, he was told. “Harder than I thought,” was what she said to Toni. “I’m doing it right but I swear, each time I get close, something happens, like my mom calling me up, or my cat making a mess, or my console catching fire. I don’t know if I want to keep going. It’s getting worse—the incidents, and I know that you guys have shit going on that I don’t even wanna understand, but... I’m out, Toni.”

“It’s hexed,” Toni had told him. “It has to be.”

He agreed, but the conclusion didn’t exactly help.

Further interrogation of other Ghoulies was useless, and Malachai insisted that he knew nothing more.

Jughead was letting all of these thoughts take him through the hour, barely paying attention. He knew vaguely that the Councilmen had decided that they would all be invoking First Judgment. They believed that each Ghoulie in captivity needed to be tried by their peers, for both fairness and expediency. The Council simply cannot hear all the cases together. There was a real necessity to divide and conquer each one.

As the discussion boiled down to property, Jughead spoke up.

“And what about Betty Cooper?”

FP sighed and Toni arched an eyebrow, waiting for everyone else’s reaction.

All eyes turned to him. Chic’s was the only ones that were sympathetic, but Jughead could tell by the defeated droop of Chic’s shoulders that he already knew Jughead’s plea wasn’t going to yield that much result.

He went on, anyway. “Betty Cooper was almost single-handedly responsible for the successful return of your pledges. She saved many lives last night. And now she’s missing. We owe it to her to find her.”

“And we do not wish to impede your search,” Mayor McCoy said.

Jughead leaned over his seat. “I’m going to need more than that. I need your resources. She needs to be found quickly. I can’t let twenty four hours go by without a lead. Whatever trail there may be will go cold real fast—”

“Have you interrogated the Ghoulies?” Lady Gendra asked.

“I have. The Ghoulies know nothing. I need your help.”
“We are a little preoccupied, young one,” the Royal said.

God, he hated these ancients. They considered everyone children, and the worse thing about it was, they simply couldn’t help it. They’d just lived long enough to know that things blew over. The world never really ended. That things moved on and they would still be alive.

“I second the Slayer’s plea,” Chic said, his tired eyes gaining a bit of fire, perhaps as he summoned the conviction in his voice. “My sister put everything on the line to make sure what remained of our ranks went home to their families. One would think that earned her the time and resources of the Council to find her.”

“She was kidnapped by a werewolf, in case you were wondering,” Penelope added, eyeing the Ulfric pointedly.

Ulfric Vihaan snarled. “Like a witch had never wronged a creature in the past.”

“What are you seeking, Slayer?” asked Ying Yue, head witch of Midvale. “Do you wish a contribution in funds?”

Jughead calmed his taught nerves. “With all due respect, Head Witch, I’m not passing a hat around. What I need are your connections and informants. I need to find Penny Peabody and I need to find her fast. She is the only one who might know where Betty Cooper is.”

Chic nodded. “My aunt is willing to shoulder a large portion of the funds needed to expedite this investigation, but the Slayer is right. Your informants would be of great help to us.”

“The Greendale coven will consider,” said Head Witch Della.

Head Witch Ying Yue inclined her head in acknowledgement. “The Midvale conven will consider it, as well.”

Penelope Blossom gave her a grateful nod, which Jughead thought was pure bullshit. They would consider? That meant absolutely nothing except delaying what could be started right now.

Ulfric Vihaan sat impassive, but he must have had some quick communication with his Lupa, because Lupa Aditya spoke in his stead. “Our pack will assist. Do you know the name of the werewolf that took Betty Cooper?”

Jughead didn’t hesitate. “We don’t know for sure, but we have reason to believe it’s Samuel Williams.”

“Ah, Samuel,” rumbled the Ulfric, his golden gaze trained right at Jughead. “He is an intelligent man, Jones. He will be difficult to find.”

“I know. It’s why your help is so important.”

The others declined assistance, and Jughead was livid, but he said nothing. If he let loose in the slightest, he might flip the table over.

A few other minutiae were discussed, but as FP promised, he kept the meeting to an hour, and as soon as it was adjourned, Jughead rose from his seat and hurried out. If he stuck around, he was going to punch someone.

“Jughead!” Chic cried after him.
Jughead did not stop walking but as Chic caught up with him, he asked, “What?”

“Do you have the skull with you?”

Right, Jughead thought, digging into his jacket pocket and pulling out the skull. It rested in his palm, banal and uninteresting. He handed it to Chic.

Taking a deep breath, Jughead managed to string two words together that wasn’t full of rage. “Is it true? Is your aunt Penelope helping out? I didn’t know she cared.”

Chic scoffed softly, which was basically the equivalent of Jughead going on social media to trash the Blossom coven and exposing all their shit. Chic was the consummate professional, but one couldn’t blame him for cracking a little. His sister was missing and he probably had about as much sleep as Jughead.

“Aunt Penelope cares because Betty would be an asset to the coven,” he muttered. “As it is, she assigned me two agents. Two. It’s a fucking pittance, but I can’t really complain.”

Jughead knew their predicament. The Blossoms protected their family, and while Betty would be a great asset, the Blossoms have thrived without her. Chic didn’t have that much leverage to demand more.

“You heading to the Spellmans right now?” he asked, averting his eyes.

There was a pregnant pause before Chic replied. He rolled the skull around between his thumb and forefinger. “Yeah. You should come with me.”

Jughead shook his head. “Not right now. I can’t face them, Chic.”

“They’re not angry with you. They want to help you. They want to help us.”

“I know they do. So you go to them for help. I might try to follow a couple more leads. Let me know if there’s anything.”

Before Chic could say anything more, Jughead turned to go to his bike. He hastily mounted his motorcycle and kicked it to life, leaving everyone behind.

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Adrenaline kept him awake.

He hadn’t gone to see Archie. He hadn’t changed out of his filthy clothes. His bullet graze had dried to a crusty scab. He didn’t want to go back to the Spellmans just yet.

As much as he needed them right now, going to the Spellmans felt like resting and he couldn’t afford more than the hour he spent sitting in the council meeting, which wasn’t just a waste of time, but a devastatingly disappointing one at that.

Some of the councilmen had kind-of offered help. They were “considering” it, and the Ulfric had promised the barest minimum. It was perhaps more than he expected, if he were being honest, but it still angered him that Betty’s huge sacrifice wasn’t getting repaid.
He also didn’t have enough courage to explain to the Spellmans how he had let someone take Betty away. If he went by any of the texts Sabrina sent him, the furious way she demanded information and, in all caps, asking him, begging him to let them help, they were as frantic as he was.

But he felt, most especially, his inadequacy. Like, what was even the point of him if he couldn’t protect Betty?

He shouldn’t have left her side.

He should’ve stayed. He could have prevented this from happening, could have averted Fred’s pointless death, could have saved Archie from lycanthropy.

As he sat in Betty’s bedroom, staring at the claw marks on her windowsill, he wondered if he did need to rest. Perhaps his brain would work better if he got a little sleep.

“I don’t know how he got through the wards,” Polly said, startling him. “He shouldn’t have gotten through the wards. Unless Penny had a charm to get through it.”

He quirked an eyebrow, wondering how long she’d been standing there. After long hours of raging through town, he had come to the Cooper door asking for access to Betty’s bedroom. It was Polly who was there to receive him. Both Alice and Chic were at the Spellmans, distraught and exhausted from doing their own thing to find Betty. He wished he had better news for them.

Right before Polly spoke, he had been fading, but her words had awoken something in him.

“Charm? There are charms to get through wards?”

Polly sighed and sank onto the bed. “No… not really. It’s couldn’t have been a charm, per se. A charm breaks something, in essence: the laws of nature, a curse, a spell… wards can’t be broken by charms or else what is the point of wards, yeah? Like the wards around the Vault. You don’t exactly break the wards on it—even though you use that term. No, you—as the guardian slayer, undo it when you allow witches to cross them, or open it, or let it fade away. Wards are, in essence, a powerful force. You can leave a hole in the wards, either deliberately or by accident, but the point being, if you’re thorough, nothing will get through. So not a charm, but a key. If you have some kind of key, that’ll get you through an iron-tight ward.”

Jughead frowned. “So what do you think it was that happened here? Did the wards fade? Was he let in? Did he have a key?”

Polly shook her head. “None of that would’ve been possible. We renew the wards every other day. We take turns. Mom, Betty, me, and Chic. Like changing a password every two days. Chic and I were too busy being shocked by the state of Fred and Archie Andrews to let anyone into the wards, and no. None of us issued any keys to our enemies. Of that I’m certain.”

Jughead took up the metaphor. “Could someone pick the lock?”

Polly hesitated. “Possible. If there was a layer of an old ward that never got renewed, they could’ve made a back door that we never bothered or knew to seal with the new, but warding like that that would’ve required unlimited access to our home and we never let anyone else ward this house…” Her voice faded, her eyes taking on a thoughtful sheen.

Jughead’s heart beat faster. “Wha---”

Her fingers flew to his lips, her eyes widening urgently. He clamped his lips shut, his own eyes widening with question. What was going on?
She looked around her, saying nothing, as if afraid someone might hear them.

His phone rang and they jumped. He looked at his phone and it was Kevin. He raised a finger, as if to say he needed one second. He answered the phone.

“Jug, where are you?” Kevin asked.

“Kev. I’m at the Coopers’ house. What’s up?”

“Can you come over to the Spellmans, please? We’ve found a couple of things and—”

“You what?” Jughead interrupted. If they found something—

“Don’t get too excited. It’s just a couple of things that don’t add up, but it would be better if you came over. The Spellmans want to see you, too, you know.”

Jughead could feel his chest bursting with uncontrollable vibrations. The very thought that he had to go to the Spellmans gave him anxiety, but if they actually had something to talk about, then that would serve as a diversion. But most of all, Polly seemed to have hit on something and he needed to find out what it was, so he needed to end this conversation, quickly, so he and Polly could talk.

“Right. Polly and I will be right over.”

“Great,” Kevin grumbled. “See you in a bit.”

Jughead cut the call and he implored Polly to explain with a wild gesture of his hands.

She looked around the room suspiciously and leaned over to whisper in his ear. “Not here.”

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Cousin Betty.

She blinked, the shadows cast by the softly swaying lamplight providing the only other movement in the cell.

It wasn’t dark, but the four lamps sconed at the four corners of the cell cast a soft light, making it feel a little like a library at night.

She thinks she liked libraries, which was perhaps why that came to mind.

A flash of inky black hair filled her memories, visceral and intense. The richness of it between her fingers and the burst of delight she felt each time a ringlet of it fell upon the brow of a face with stunning blue eyes and a fine, sculpted nose.

Then it was gone. A wisp far too delicate to grasp.

Cousin Betty.

She was back in the moment. And she realized that turn of phrase—that voice sounded familiar.

“How did you get here?” asked the disembodied voice. “And why are you in a Devil’s Trap?”
Betty tried to clear her mind. At least she was beginning to remember who she was. And as she
looked around the cell, the old stone along the walls and the cobbled floor, she realized vaguely that
someone didn’t want her to leave.

“Betty!”

“One… one moment,” she said, pressing the heel of her hands to her eyes.

_Betty. You’re Betty. Betty Cooper._

It was difficult. Memories came back slow, but they _did_ come back. They would come _rushing_ back
at some point, but now it wasn’t quite so easy.

“I’m going to get you out of here,” said the girl beyond the door. “I don’t know what’s going on but
I don’t like it. If I could just--” There was a scuffling noise, like someone was trying to put something
against the door, but minutes later, the girl cursed and said. “The iron’s making my charm useless. I
need help. Just wait a moment. I’ll be back!”

The calm that Betty woke up with was wrenched from her when she instantly realized she would be
left alone. “D-Don’t go!”

“I promise, I’ll be back in a few minutes!” The girl’s voice faded with her steps, and Betty found that
panic was besetting her.

Her hand fell upon the sigil, and as she wiggled her fingers against the lines, her flesh burned. She
jerked her hands back to herself, gasping, and she willed herself to wait, to look at the door, to perk
her ears for the sound of footsteps, but the girl never came back and Betty was left alone to put the
pieces of her memories back together.

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Jughead sat at the dining room table with the Spellmans, the Coopers, and Kevin. He looked up at
their faces, the question clear on his face.

Polly was there, practically bouncing on her seat with whatever it is she needed to tell them. She
refused to voice her thoughts on their way here for fear, it appeared, that the house _and_ her car were
bugged in some manner.

Now that they were at the Spellmans, she was fidgeting and Jughead was looking at the items laid
out before him: The amber skull, a luggage tag, and a boarding pass.

When they first arrived at the Spellmans, several people started talking at once, and Jughead in his
state of sleepless delirium asked, forcefully, if they could do this one at a time, which prompted Zelda
to have them all sit calmly around the dining room table like a teacher calming a classroom full of
kindergarteners.

_One at a time_, Jughead thought. He looked at Polly. “You go first.”

“The wards at the house,” Polly burst forth. “I got to wondering how they broke through and I just
assumed for a few hours that we forgot to renew them because we were all so distracted about this
riot, but before I came into the room with you, Jug, I remembered that mom did renew the wards,
which what got me thinking about it. If she renewed the wards, the house _should’ve_ been sealed tight. When you and I talked about the wards, it came to me… we, our family, were not the first people to ward our house.”

“The Coven,” Alice said. “It was the Coven spellcasters who warded the house first.”

“And,” Polly continued pointedly. “The spellcasters warded _Betty_. They haven’t warded her since, but they could have implanted _anything_ on her. She could’ve been the key, or the spellcaster, whoever it was, could have left a backdoor in the wards of the house. _That_ could’ve been Samuel’s point of entry.”

_Spellcaster._

Jughead turned to Chic. “Can you--”

“I can find out who it was,” Chic said. “I can go over to the offices and find out who got assigned to ward the house. There has to be a record in the Coven files somewhere.”

Alice made a tutting sound. “Can’t you just call someone, Chic?”

Chic shook his head. “How can I trust anyone in that office? I can’t even trust the guys Aunt Penelope gave me to help. _They_ could be in on it. They can be--”

Jughead frowned. “They can be answering to Penelope.”

Polly’s eyes widened, but Chic frowned. “What are you saying, Jones?”

“I’m saying that Penelope is the only other person who knows Betty is _Wicked._”

The Spellmans gasped, with Sabrina cursing loudly.

“Alice!” Hilda cried, throwing her hands up. “Betty is _Wicked_? I can’t believe you never told us!”

Zelda’s lips pursed, her face conveying both anger and hurt. “I’m sure Alice had her reasons, Hilda. It’s not about you.”

“Bullshit!” Sabrina cried. “We’re family! I bet Aunt Alice _told_ Betty not to tell anyone! She would’ve told me. She would’ve _told_ me! And you, you asshole!” She pointed to Jughead. “You could’ve let me in on the secret!”

Jughead shot her a glare. “It wasn’t my secret to tell, Sab.”

“We didn’t tell any of you because the less people knew, the better!” Chic cried. “Now can we please--”

“This asshole told Kevin,” Sabrina pointed out, looking between Kevin and Jughead. “I mean just look at Kevin’s face. He isn’t surprised and--”

“Hey, leave him alone,” Jughead said.

“Oh, I’m not mad at him,” Sabrina hissed. “I’m mad at all of you! How can you all think we wouldn’t help protect Betty? How can you think that going to that _Blood Witch_ coven, the Blossoms, can protect her any better than we can?”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Sabrina, of course they can protect Betty better!” Polly cried. “The Blossoms have a reputation for being ruthless to their enemies! No one would dare hurt Betty if everyone knew
she was under the Blossoms’ protection! You’re the Spellmans. You all have a reputation for being kind, helpful, and loving.” She exaggerated a Glinda-like tone as she said the last sentence, which made Sabrina gasp in outrage.

“Polly!” Alice hissed.

This did not soften Polly’s tone in the least. “You’re wood witches, for fuck’s sake!”

“She has a point,” Kevin said, silkily.

“Shut up! No one asked you!” Sabrina spat back. “We can be fierce. We can be deadly fierce!”

Zelda put a hand on Sabrina’s shoulder to quiet her. “Yes, my love, but that is not the reputation we have. In Betty’s situation, she didn’t need a secret weapon. She needed a dragon to keep her in its wings. The Blossoms were that dragon.”

“And now what?” Sabrina said. “Now the dragon has eaten Betty.”

Jughead was not a fan of that metaphor. It was too visceral.

Chic frowned. “We don’t know that for sure. We’re speculating. It hardly makes sense that Aunt Penelope would jeopardize her chances to get Betty to join the coven. She offered money and people to help me find Betty. And if any of that is true, then why would the succubus the Ghoulies hired go after Jason in his sleep? Wouldn’t the demon, you know, leave her boss’s child out of this?”

“The demon could’ve been a diversion,” Jughead said. “We know that the demon was hired to find information about the Coopers, presumably about Betty, but Penelope already knows she’s Wicked. She didn’t need the demon’s information. It could’ve been a way to distract.”

“From what?” Chic cried.

“From everything. It got you, too, which was perfect, wasn’t it?”

Chic shook his head. “It just seemed sloppy.”

Jughead scoffed. “We’re talking about Penny, here. She isn’t subtle.”

“We’ll start with the spellcaster,” Chic said resolutely. “And we go from there.”

Jughead had no choice but to relent. He can’t spend all day insisting that Penelope was responsible for all this. He was impatient to start on that investigation, but there were a couple more items on the table. “Anything on this skull?”

Hilda shook her head. “Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

Jughead frowned. “That’s what everyone said about the other skull, and yet--”

Hilda shook a finger at her. “We never got to examine that skull without Betty. The thing about amber is that one of its properties include channeling magic. Amber absorbs a witch’s magic and focuses it. Ordinarily, this is a harmless tool, but if you’re talking about multiple amber stones, spelled to link, we have a situation where someone can siphon magic from one skull to another. In Betty’s case, the skull, I’m told, imprinted into her palm…”

A weight thunked heavily in Jughead’s belly. “Jesus… but we have the other skull, right?”

Hilda shook her head. “We don’t, Jug. If this were the other skull, we could actually trace it back to
where Betty is. There is nothing on this skull. Absolutely nothing.”

Jughead’s fists tightened on his lap. “But--could the vault have broken--”

“No. The vault couldn’t have done it spontaneously. This is not the skull that’s connected to the one imprinted in Betty’s palm. This skull is a decoy.’’

“How sure are we--”

“Remember what I told you?” Kevin interjected, gently. “Remember when I said that there were six skulls at the store. Three were bought by credit card, three by cash. Someone who buys an item by credit card has nothing to hide. We focused on the cash purchase, which led us to the Ghoulies, which we now know was probably Penny, who likely purchased all three, Jug. The two they used for the spell, the third probably a spare. Clearly, the third came in handy when you threatened to torch the House of the Dead.”

Jughead swallowed, remembering how he had been so sure that the case of the amber skull was a closed. How he had arrogantly thought that he had been successful at protecting Betty. All this time the spell wasn’t even broken. And now they had a situation where her kidnapper got through all the protections around her.

His hands were trembling when he touched the luggage tag and boarding pass. “And these?” He looked at them closely. The names on both said COOPER, HAROLD. “Where did these come from?”

“It was on the dresser in the guest room,” Sabrina said. “I don’t know where she got them, but they were on the dresser and I just thought it might be important. I’ll take anything I can find.”

“They’re dad’s,” Chic said.

Jughead thought on the times he or anyone else got on a plane, checking in baggage and watching, in mesmerized silence, as the labels were printed out, how they were put around the baggage handles and never removed afterwards, until the luggage had to be used again for another trip.

This luggage tag was the last trip Hal ever took before he died. The tag and boarding pass indicated that he had gone to New York, JFK airport.

“Why would Betty suddenly have these?” Jughead asked. He was exhausted. All this sitting around was catching up on him and his lack of sleep.

Chic looked at the tags more closely. “The day I came over to apologize for what happened… I told Betty I wanted to find out what happened with dad. That I didn’t believe he faked loving her. Maybe she went to the attic to try to find something to help me out.”

Jughead remembered that day--when he woke up in bed and she wasn’t there. How he had panicked and called her. She could’ve gone to the Cooper attic then. “Did you know he went to New York?”

Alice nodded. “Yes. Hal traveled occasionally for work.”

“These dates, mom…” Chic said. “When did dad start acting weird?”

Alice looked around the table, clearly trying to remember. “I--”

“Before my internship,” Polly pointed out. “It was before I left for it.”
“Summer,” Chic said. “The dates coincide. He went to New York, then he came back to Seattle and he started acting weird. And then…”

“It all went to hell,” Polly finished for him.

Alice started to cry, sobbing into her fingers. “If what you say about the Blossoms is true, then I brought Betty right to them. They have her…”

Zelda put her arm over her sister’s shoulders. “Oh, Alice. We don’t know that yet. This could all still be Penny Peabody.”

Jughead stood from his seat. “I have to call someone.”

He felt all eyes following him, but he didn’t look back as he stepped out on the porch. He was already dialing Toni’s number.

She picked up immediately. “Got nothing for you yet, Jug.”

“I need you to tell me something,” he started, running his hands through his disheveled hair. “I need you to tell me about Cheryl. I need to hear you say that you would trust her with your life.”

“What the—“

“Tell me, Toni.”

“I would trust her with my life,” she said, an edge to her tone. “Cheryl is a good person. She may come off as some ice queen to you, but that’s just a wall she puts up for everyone else.”

Jughead closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “Has she—has she talked to you about Betty at all?”

Toni scoffed. “What are you asking me, Jones? Are you asking me if it’s possible Cheryl kidnapped her? Because if you are, I’m hanging up!”

“Just listen to me!” He said in a desperate tone. “That’s not—“ It was. He sighed. “I’m tired. I’m desperate. And every moment I don’t have Betty back is a minute closer to her untimely death. Have you talked to Cheryl lately?”

“Last night, yeah. After the battle. I called her on her burner—”

“She talks to you on a burner phone?”

“Her mother monitors her calls, okay? Don’t judge.”

Jughead sighed. “I’m not. Can you call her now? Ask her if we could meet?”

“So what? You can accuse her of kidnapping her cousin?”

“No, Toni. To ask her if she thinks her mother would do such a thing.”

She fell silent for a few heartbeats, perhaps considering if what he said had any basis in ever being true. Finally, she said, “I’ll call her. And I’ll let you know.”

“Thank you.”

The line went dead and Jughead stood on the porch, paralyzed by his inability to march into Thornhill and tear the whole mansion down.
Even if Penelope had something to do with Betty’s disappearance, he couldn’t shout accusations at such a powerful woman like Penelope Blossom without proof.

He had absolutely nothing but speculation at this point, so he was at an impasse. Did he just ride in there and raid every nook and cranny? Surely he couldn’t just storm Thornhill, right?

They needed a plan. They needed a means to get past those wards, and if he found Betty, he swore that there would be hell to pay.

Cheryl Blossom was on a mission.

For as long as she can remember, she had to fight her way, claw some eyes out, and tear through the souls of people just so she can keep her place at the top. This was true in any aspect of her life, from living in the Blossom mansion to surviving high school.

Her parents had, for the first few years of her life, sent her and Jason to Pembrooke Academy, where they finished elementary and middle school. As high school approached, Penelope told them that they would be attending Riverdale High, a public school, which was mystifying to Cheryl at first, but Penelope’s mother explained that if they wanted to cement their place in the most magical town in America, they had to be part of its most common citizenry.

Cheryl generally abhorred Riverdale High to this day, but she’d made her way through its social nuances, created a little kingdom of her own, and made her presence known among the “common citizenry,” as her mother put it.

What irked her, perhaps, was in spite of being the best in what she did, and in spite of being the more powerful witch between her and Jason, Penelope Blossom still insisted on making it a competition between them.

She loved Jason, but he was not cut out to lead the Blossom Coven. He was often too soft. Too compassionate. He had his moments, especially when he excelled in sports, but for the most part, he could hardly get a word in edgewise between her, Penelope, and the powerful men and women who ran this town.

Cheryl wasn’t afraid. Generally.

Her mother was a force to be reckoned with, and it still knotted Cheryl’s stomach that she had to hide her relationship with Toni because her mother may very well snatch everything away from her if first, she discovered that her daughter dated women, and second, if Penelope then figured out that the woman her daughter happened to be dating and falling in love with was a Slayer.

Penelope would, probably, lock her in a tower and throw away the key.

But that was all beside the point.

If Cheryl wanted to become a leader of witches, she had to be a Take Action kind of person. She had to know every single thing that was going on in this house and this coven. She had to be absolutely
aware of the things her seniors and their minions were doing.

There was a hierarchy and Cheryl knew that the way to cement her place at the top was through knowledge. So when there were rumors from the help of a prisoner being in the dungeons—dungeons that haven’t been used in years, she had to get to the bottom of it.

Now, to find Betty Cooper in the dungeons of Thornhill was simply unacceptable. This was the kind of thing that shouldn’t be happening in their coven, because witches should be protecting witches, not detaining them.

This probably had something to do with what Toni told her over the phone—about how Betty had lost control of herself. That had to be it, but to put her in a cage? Sleeping on the floor?

That was just barbaric.

Betty may infuriate her and drive her crazy, but she was powerful and fearless, therefore a good ally to have. If Cheryl wanted to take over the coven, she needed to get the muscle and good image that Betty exuded on her side.

Most importantly, Betty had no ambitions for power—a trait Cheryl admired, because it meant Betty was one powerful witch less that Cheryl had to push out of her way. Cheryl would magnanimously take the share of power Betty didn’t care for.

Cheryl tossed her hair over her shoulder and knocked on Jason’s bedroom door.

Jason’s door opened a crack and her twin brother peered out looking slightly annoyed at the sight of her.

She pretended she didn’t notice. Jason could never stay annoyed with her for long. “Did you know that Cousin Betty’s in our dungeons?”

He paused, blinked, and said, “I’m sorry, what?”

Cheryl sighed impatiently and gave Jason a daggered look. “Cousin Betty is in our dungeons and I want to get her out. I need you to help me get her out.”

Jason scowled and pulled his dark mahogany door wide open, which Cheryl considered as permission to walk in. “Well, who’s guarding her? Do they have a key?”

She made a face, outraged. “Guarding her? Nobody’s guarding her, Jason. She could barely remember her name right now. She doesn’t need to be guarded. She needs to be let out! I don’t know who has a key, but my charms won’t work on the door. Come with me and help me let her out. I need our geminae magicae, our Twin Magic.”

Jason scratched his head. “Don’t you think there’s a reason she’s in there? I don’t think we should meddle, Cher.”

Cheryl’s jaw dropped. She never remembered her brother to be so dense. “Meddle? This is our house, Jason. Our coven. We have every right to meddle, and I think it’s criminal to leave Betty in the dungeon. In fact, I’m calling Jughead right now to let him know—”

Jason took her phone right from her hands and Cheryl was shocked speechless by how rude that was. “Don’t call Jughead.”

“Jay-jay!” she gasped, reaching for her phone, which Jason jerked away from her reach. “That is so
rude. Give me my phone.”

“Forgive me if I don’t want Slayers coming down upon Thornhill.”

“It’s not--,” Cheryl made a sound of frustration and planted hands on her hips. “Fine. If you don’t want to help me, I’m going to mother. I never want to go to her for help, but if she’s the only choice I have--” She turned, heading for the door.

The door slammed in her face, preventing her retreat. She whirled to face him, outraged. “Jay-jay, this is really disrespectful!”

“Cher,” Jason began, casting her a regretful look. “I need you to listen.”

She blinked, the weight of her gaze bearing down on him. “Listen to what?”

His eyes, the very ones she’d probably stared into since she’d shared a womb with him in their mother’s body, were rife with intent and perhaps mischief.

Something darker than mischief.

She frowned. “Jason, what did you do?”

“Cher,” he said, as he held her firmly by the shoulders. “I’ll explain everything later, but for now… it sounds like Betty needs to be moved.”

A surge of magic went through her and she felt her body seize. The scream that clawed its way out of her throat did not leave her lips.

Then a dark curtain descended over her consciousness as she faded.

***************

Betty could hear the sound of footfalls coming from outside.

Maybe the girl was coming back.

The lamps that were blazing along the walls earlier had dimmed to smaller flames and it was darker now than it was hours ago.

Her memories were returning in bits and pieces, and as isolated as she felt in captivity, she had to admit that remembering was filling the the hours, especially when they were about that boy.

She could picture his entire face now, and it was exquisite. That smile and that scowl, opposite ends of human emotion, were distinctly him, but her favorite feature of his were his eyes, because when they looked at her, she felt seen.

Where at the moment, she felt forgotten, the memory of his eyes seeing her was a great comfort.

She remembered faces with golden hair and stark green eyes, as well. They moved around her busily, looking to her every so often with their grins, sometimes with frowns of disapproval, sometimes with worry and fear. It was still impossible to tell who they were, but she at least knew they were her people.
She was coming back. When the faces began to make sense, bigger pieces of herself would come together, until she was just whole again.

The heavy iron door swung open and in walked a boy with bright auburn hair and pale face. Again, he was familiar, but not as familiar as the others.

“I remember you a little,” Betty said, pushing herself up to a sitting position.

The boy’s eyebrow arched. “Do you?”

She nodded.

The boy stood at the edge of the markings on the floor, his toes just barely skimming the large circle. Cautiously, he stepped over it.

Betty didn’t know if he expected anything to happen, but whatever it was, he seemed to release a small breath. He began to walk forward with more confidence until he reached the second rung.

He paused again, this time longer.

Betty tilted her head, curious by this seeming ritual hesitation. “What are you afraid of?”

He took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. “Nothing.” He walked through the second circle, stepping on the runes and swirls drawn on the floor.

He reached her and as she looked up at him from the floor, she gazed into his gray eyes and saw nothing. They were bereft of emotion and life, almost like a corpse floating in water with their eyes open.

“Cousin Betty,” he said.

She took a trembling breath. Unlike the girl’s, whose voice radiated concern and perhaps even outrage on her behalf, his voice was cold.

He grabbed her wrist and instinctively she resisted, fighting to wrest her arm away. As she moved, her body remembered faster than her mind did. She swung a fist, her knuckle connecting with his jaw. She was weak, and a little crippled by sleeping on the floor. Her joints felt stiff and her muscles ached, but his grip loosened, and she found that she could go through the sigils now.

She ran across the floor, heading for the door. She knew instinctively that there was freedom there, but just when she thought she could get away, she slammed right into the chest of a very large man.

The snarl he gave her took her aback, fangs elongating as he bore down on her. He took her by the wrist as well, but unlike Jason, this man lifted her off the ground. She gasped as she hung there, surprised by his strength.

“Going somewhere, witch?” His other hand held a length of chains with cuffs at the end of them.

It was meant to intimidate, but instead her mind flashed to violent inspiration. She swung her body, hooking her leg over his shoulders and wrapping her thighs around his neck, using her body weight and his, she twisted her hips to flip him off balance and slam his body to the floor.

She grabbed the chains from his hand and wrapped it around his neck, then she pulled as she stood on his spine.

He thrashed, struggling to get the chain loose. He growled with his waning breath.
And on any other day, she might have succeeded. On any other day, she might have been better than them both, but she was waking from a deep sleep and her memories weren’t fully there. There were parts of her she didn’t remember, and there were skill sets that were slow to return, so when the boy came at her with something, It felt like an invisible force, knocking her off the large man and sent her sprawling on her chest and dizzy on the ground.

She felt a hand press on her head, claws digging lightly into the edges of her face from behind.

“Don’t kill her!” the boy cried, urgently.

She was too dazed to take the opportunity of this unexpected reprieve. The hand pulled her head back and she felt the man’s breath on her ear. “Can I make her suffer?”

“You do that, you’ll get yourself killed,” said the boy.

Jason.

The name returned to her like a whisper.

He came into her line of vision, helpless in the man’s beastly grip.

“I want you to know that I take no delight in hurting you,” Jason said to her, his tone quiet and bizarrely sincere. “Everything I ever did to you was for the greater good.”

*Everything I ever did to you…*

That was probably supposed to mean something to her, but all she could do was stare in horror as his eyes became even deader.

“Put her on the gurney,” Jason told the man.

She was wrenched from the ground, and this time, she could barely muster a struggle as the man’s strength overcame her. He placed her on a platform and wrapped leather cuffs around her wrists and ankles. The sherpa lining the underside of the leather was soft against her skin, like they were meant to keep her from harming herself. When the man pulled the restraints tight, she was stretched out like an X on the gurney, like a medieval rack. She couldn’t move, and when the man inexplicably put gloves on her hands, she wondered what they were going to do to her.

“I might as well tell you now,” Jason said as he helped push her gurney along the hall. “If you try to draw pain from me or try to hurt me with your magic, it won’t work. Your magic thinks I’m part of you now. The amber connects us and your magic has acclimated to me. You can’t cast spells against yourself.”

His words were not making sense to her, but her eyes roved to the man on the other side of the gurney. There was *something* she could do to him, niggling at her memories but she couldn’t quite grasp what.

Jason pressed a hand to her arm. “It will all be over soon.”

***************

When Cheryl opened her eyes, Jason was sitting on the edge of her bed, as if he’d been waiting for
her to wake up.

“Jay-jay, what’s going on?” she groaned. “Did you stun me?”

Jason sighed and took her hand in his. “I had to. You were… agitated. And I needed to gather my thoughts to explain.”

“Explain?” she rubbed the grit from her eyes, forcing her brain to wake up faster. Something was very wrong here and she felt like she needed her full faculties. “Why Betty Cooper is in our dungeons?”

He nodded. “It’s much, much more complicated than you think.”

“Did mother put you up to this?” she demanded. This had to be Penelope. He would never do anything without their mother’s permission.

He frowned. “I don’t have to run everything by mother, especially not lately when all she does is scramble to prove that our coven remains strong and powerful.”

“It is still strong and powerful!”

“That fact is tenuous, at best. Our rivals smell blood and they pounce at each instance. It’s those Slayers. Mother has given them far too much leeway and the other covens believe she is losing her edge. They aren’t wrong. She began to lose her way when she put father in a cage.”

Cheryl pushed herself up to a sitting position. “He was abusing us, Jay-jay. And when mother found out, she was furious with him, then he tried to kill her. He’s lucky she didn’t kill him.”

“Father wanted to give the coven to me and she didn’t want to, so she put him away.”

Her heart wrenched, knowing that in all the years their father pressed them down with his emotional and mental mind games, using their magic to get his way and perhaps even going so far as to pit them against one another, Jason got it worse. He got it so much worse because he never fought back. Clifford Blossom bent Jason to his will more easily than he ever managed to bend Cheryl.

She always wondered just how much their father had disfigured Jason inside, because she could stare at the mess of her own mind and see things that needed fixing. She always thought Jason did the same.

She wondered now if he never did.

She shook her head. “He was using you so he can wrench power from mother.”

“The Blossom coven is his heritage! She is an interloper!”

“He was unfit!” Cheryl shot back. “And everybody saw it. Mother was good at it and everybody saw that. Father was using you because he didn’t have the level of magic to be even considered eligible for the seat.”

Jason motioned to argue right back, but he took a deep breath and shrugged. “Ultimately, does that even matter? I figured somewhere down the line that father was a means to an end. Everyone is a mean to an end. I learned that when mother put father away. Do you even think she cares about us that much? I believe she only defended us because she saw that father was using us to overthrow her. She only cares when whatever’s happening to us interferes with her power.”
Cheryl didn’t argue that point. Her mother was not the nurturing type. She was all business and agenda. She was ruthless and single-minded, but Cheryl knew that Penelope understood kinship. They had the same blood flowing in their veins. It was she who birthed them. And if there was anything Penelope respected, it was that, and that you took care of your own.

Her children were her own.

The corner of Jason’s lips lifted slightly. “You and I always had dreams of a Riverdale where we don’t have to hide who we are. Where Otherworlders can run free and do what we want. Perhaps even get rid of the Slayers? Party poopers, you call them.”

Cheryl swallowed. “That part was a joke, Jason. I don’t want to get rid of the slayers. We need them to keep order… but speaking of joke, is this an elaborate prank? Because—”

“I’m quite serious, Cheryl.” He was scowling. “I have been working on this dream since Hal Cooper came knocking on our door.”

Cheryl’s eyes widened, but only for a moment. She realized that there was more to be gained by listening than resisting. “Intriguing. Continue.”

Perhaps seeing her interest, Jason’s eyes took on a sheen of eagerness. “He came to see mother and when she sent us out of her office, I knew it was important, so I pretended to leave, but I listened in through our secret peephole.”

The secret peephole. The hole in Penelope’s office, hidden behind a row of tax books that Clifford had fashioned so they can spy on their mother undetected.

“What did they talk about?” Cheryl asked, pretending to make herself comfortable.

Jason shifted, adjusting his own position so he could get comfortable himself. “Hal was asking for a spell to remove Cousin Betty’s powers without killing her. To remove her Wickedness.”

Cheryl’s jaw dropped, for real. Betty was Wicked?

“You refused, of course,” Jason continued. “You don’t let powers like that go to waste. Mother went on to try to convince Hal Cooper to move his family back to Riverdale, recruit the Coopers into the coven—you know, her usual spiel. She told him that since there was no such spell to remove powers without getting Betty killed, they should just join the coven—get the protection his family needed.”

Cheryl frowned. “She wasn’t lying. There isn’t such a spell.”

Jason shrugged. “Hal didn’t know that. So later on I contacted him and told him I was willing to share the spell with him. Told him that mother was just being selfish and proprietary. There was a way to remove the spell from Cousin Betty, particularly for someone like her who was Wicked.”

“You lied to Hal Cooper.”

He nodded. “You can tell the worse lie to a desperate man and he will believe you. I wrote the spell out for him, making a few adjustments here and there, then I bound him.”

Cheryl swallowed. “You bound him? What did you bind him with?”

“Obsession,” Jason replied. “I still have his poppet. I made it so that he got so obsessed with his quest to rid his daughter of her powers that he would slowly lose reason.”
Cheryl tried to wrap her head around what Jason was trying to tell her. Poppets for obsession didn’t require more than one. There was no need for decoys. It was at least the size of a hand, meant to be in the spellcaster’s possession for torment and control. It often required very dark materials to create—like infant body parts that Cheryl was too horrified to fathom.

She tried not to think about the lengths Jason had to go through to create such a poppet. She had a goal and she had to go through with it. “So you wanted to kill Cousin Betty?”

Jason snorted. “Of course not. I needed her to be alive. I altered the spell I gave to Uncle Hal, so that when he attempted to take her powers from her, it would kill him, not her. And when that tragedy happened, I could whisper to mother that the Coopers were vulnerable. That they could be convinced to move to Riverdale under the protection of the Coven.”

“Is that why they came to live here in Riverdale?”

A soft chuckle escaped Jason. “No. I didn’t have to say anything to mother. The Coopers decided to move here of their own volition. I didn’t think at all that my plans would turn out to be so successful. I admit, it was only at that moment I truly believed that I can do this. I can make our dreams come true.”

The inward cringe that Cheryl felt at calling it their dreams, as if she had been in on the deception the whole time, gave her anxiety, but she tamped down her worries and prompted him to continue. “So now that Betty’s here… then what?”

“Then I could begin to take her powers from her,” he said. “If I were Wicked, Cheryl, then you would be Wicked, and we can be powerful, you and I. We can take over the coven. We can rule the Dales, and then we can gain power over the east coast. We could go bigger, but I don’t want to get ahead of myself, honestly. One goal at a time.”

She took his hands. “Jason… Hal got killed doing what you wanted to do. What if you get killed.”

He shook his head. “I told you. I altered the spell I gave him. He didn’t do the most important thing, which was to acclimate her magic to his. Transplanting magic is just like transplanting organs. A body can reject a donor organ, but if there’s a match, the body is less likely to reject it. With magic, it’s the same principle. But because it’s magic, we don’t just sit around and hope there’s a match, we can make the match happen.”

Dread filled Cheryl’s heart. “A siphoning spell.”

Jason nodded. “More appropriately a siphoning charm. I used store-bought amber. It was so simple. I sent one end of it to Betty and I kept the other. It established a link between us and our magic has been intermingling, since. I can’t use her magic at this stage, obviously, and neither could she use mine, but it prepares my body for when I take her magic into me completely. I admit that at the beginning of the siphoning, it somewhat threw me off balance. Got me a little spell sick.”

Cheryl thought back on the days Jason had secluded himself from her. How he had grown sickly and weak. “I thought you said it was a succubus?”

Jason shrugged. “I had to tell everyone something, right? Anyway, I was hitting two birds with one stone. I was diverting attention from what was really happening and I was helping Penny Peabody exact her revenge on Jughead.”

“Penny Peabody?” Cheryl wracked her brain for who this person was.

“Her revenge plot failed, by the way,” he continued without acknowledging her question. “I couldn’t
have possibly predicted that Chic would get infected by the succubus and I suppose Betty prevented Jughead from taking on the succubus in his dreams, but Penny was never good at the small stuff. I already told her it wasn’t going to work, but whatever. I wanted her to do the job I sent her to do and me helping her get Jughead dragged into Abaddon made her happy. Ultimately, she did the job I asked her to do.”

She finally remembered who Penny Peabody was. She was the scorned Serpent, the magic-less lump of filth that tried to poison their Riverdale streets with opiates and gangs a few years back. She was driven out of town by Jughead and the Dales hadn’t heard from her, since. Now Jason was talking to her and perhaps even ordering her around, using her greed and resentment to forward his goals.

Cheryl put her fishing cap back on. “What job did you ask her to do?”

“I needed Betty kidnapped without me getting implicated. Penny stirred trouble with the Ghoulies and made it look like she was plotting everything with them. And I knew from the incident with Hal in Seattle that the only way Betty was going to get kidnapped was when she was out cold with tranquillizers. For that to happen, there had to be a huge event–something that would propel her to use the full force of her powers.”

“The riot,” Cheryl concluded. “The attack on the library… Jason, people were killed because of that! Betty could’ve been killed!”

Jason scoffed. “Betty was powerful enough not to get killed. Back in Seattle, I sent a troupe of creatures to kill Hal, just in case Hal did manage to get some kind of edge, but Betty thought they were the enemy. She obliterated them all. I knew she would survive a fight against the Ghoulies. I knew she would be tranquillized. I knew that I had a way to get through the wards of the Cooper house when they brought her there.” Jason splayed out his hands, as if he had just performed a magic trick. “And now she’s here, and I can take her magic while they’re all scrambling out there ransacking Ghoulie hideouts.”

She was still aghast at the level of violence Jason was willing to stir to meet his goals. “You staged an entire riot just so you can kidnap Betty?”

He shook his head vigorously. “Not me, Penny. I didn’t care how Penny did it. I just needed it done. That woman had her own agenda when she stirred the Ghoulies to rise up and riot. That was all her, Cher. I just helped her move that forward. It served my ends and it served hers.”

Cheryl was livid. She couldn’t believe Jason was doing all this for power. She couldn’t believe her father had destroyed him so. “Don’t you think someone will figure all this out anyway? They might think it’s the Ghoulies now, but it will eventually lead back to you!”

“Sooner or later, yes, but by that time, I’ll be Wicked and there is literally nothing that I wouldn’t be able to do. My only limit is my pain and others’, because that’s the beauty of Betty’s magic–she can take the pain of others. Did I tell you that already?”

“No,” Cheryl whispered, shocked. If Betty could take the pain of others for her magic, that meant unlimited power. That meant power beyond her wildest imagination.

And yet…

Betty never used it until the riot, when they were on the verge of a wipeout.

She never used that power even when she could. Only when she had to. In a way, Cheryl resented Betty her goodness. It made all of them look bad. Cheryl didn’t think she’d have been able to resist
doing *something* naughty with it. She would’ve abused that power in the pettiest ways.

How dare Betty *actually* be better than them all?

Still, it didn’t mean Cheryl wanted to steal Betty’s powers at the expense of her life. Cheryl didn’t steal, period. She was too proud for that. She was awesome enough on her own. She didn’t need someone else’s magic to make her better. She was Cheryl Fucking Blossom. She was amazing.

She understood the appeal, however, and she only wished Jason would stop this nonsense and see reason. “Jason, you don’t need Betty’s magic. You and I, we are powerful together. Our twin magic can do things no individual witch can do.”

He frowned, pulling away from her. “Aren’t you tired, Cheryl? Of being dependent on someone else for your magic? Oh, that’s right, between the two of us, you’re the more powerful twin.”

“Jay-jay…”

His gaze on her softened. “I don’t want to begrudge you that, Cher. And when I get Betty’s powers, I will always be willing to share them with you. You were never stingy about sharing your powers with me and I appreciate that. But you have to let me know… are you with me, or against me?”

Cheryl pursed her lips. Perhaps what hurt her the most wasn’t that there was a crazy look in his eyes—there wasn’t, it was that he looked utterly and completely sound of mind.

He wasn’t under a spell and he wasn’t losing his wits. This was all him. Damaged, perhaps, by Clifford Blossom, but all the planning it took could not have possibly been accomplished by someone insane.

Swallowing her gorge, she said, “I’m with you, Jay-jay. You can count on me.”

Jason smiled. “I knew you had it in you. Between us, you were always the one with the killer instinct.”

She nodded. “What do we do now?”

“It’s time for me to take Betty’s powers.”

A brick of dread weighed down her stomach. She had to call Toni. She had to tell her what was going on without Jason suspecting. She just hoped Toni can get help on time.

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“This is a bad idea, Jug,” Toni warned as she stood on the Spellman porch with Jughead and Kevin. “We have no proof Penelope kidnapped Betty. We don’t even have proof Penny had anything to do with it!”

Jughead sighed in frustration. “I told you everything we talked about. The wards, Penny’s funding, Hal Cooper’s flight to New York—”

“These are all circumstantial! The only thing we can be sure of right now is that a werewolf took Betty. We can’t even be sure it’s Samuel!”
He hated it when Toni got argumentative and--God forbid, the voice of reason.

“This is the only solid lead we have,” Jughead insisted. “Kev, help me out here.”

Kevin looked a little out of his depth, but he squared his shoulders and said, “Why don’t we go over
to Thornhill and, you know, say that we want to speak to Penelope. While Toni and I do that, Jug,
you snoop around and find--”

“We are not going to sleuth, Kev,” Jughead interrupted pointedly. “I am fucking past sleuthing at this
point. I want to go into that mansion and ransack the goddamn house.”

Toni rolled her eyes. “Because God forbid slayers do anything with subtlety.”

“You’ve been calling Cheryl the last couple of hours,” he growled. “She hasn’t picked up. Now I
told you--”

As if mentioning her name summoned her from the ether, Toni’s phone began to flash and she
smiled at him triumphantly. She picked it up. “Hiya, hon. I’ve been calling--”

The smile wilted from Toni’s face, her eyes widening. She hit a button on her phone and Cheryl’s
voice filtered through the speaker. She was whispering.

“... didn’t know when he started to go so bad, Toni, but... he scares me,” Cheryl’s voice said. “I
don’t have a lot of time, but you need to get over here to Thornhill. He’s going to kill her. I don’t
know what to do except to play along for now and try to stall him.”

Jughead’s heart beat fast with panic. “Who--are you talking about Betty, Cheryl? Is she there at
Thornhill?”

Cheryl paused and Toni hastily told her she was on speaker with Jughead and Kevin.

“Y-Yes,” Cheryl continued. “Betty’s in the dungeons when I last saw her, but I think Jason moved
her.”

“Jason?” Kevin cried. “Jason Blossom? He had Betty kidnapped?”

“It’s so much more than that, oh fabulous fae, but yes, Jason had her kidnapped, and you need to get
here soon, because Betty isn’t long for this world.”

***************

Jughead stood beyond the grounds of Thornhill, Toni on one side of him and Kevin in the other.
Behind him were his most trusted Serpents: Sweet Pea, Fangs, and Joaquin. Among them Chic,
Polly, and Sabrina.

He didn’t know if they needed this many people to go into Thornhill, retrieving Betty, but if Jason
had the Ghoulies on payroll, it was possible that a few of them where in there with him.

Zelda, Hilda, and Alice held back to gather backup, which was going to be challenging without
proof of Jason’s crimes, but if they were going into Thornhill, there had to be some means of
extracting them if they couldn’t get out on their own.
“I use this entrance to sneak in with Cheryl,” Toni said, sheepishly. “You know, with her mom and all. It’ll serve our needs now, so I don’t want to hear it from any of you.”

Jughead put his hands up, gone of any inclination to tease. “No judgements here. Once we’re inside, do you know where we’re going?”

“Cheryl said she thinks Jason brought Betty to the ritual hall. It’s private enough that he can do anything he wants without anyone being the wiser. If they’re not there, we can probably follow their trail from the dungeons, where they kept her first.”

He tried not to think about the way they kept Betty, as if she were someone to be caged, to be restrained. They needed to get in there fast, before Cheryl ran out of ways to delay the ritual.

Cheryl was also on the lookout for the missing half of the Siphoning Spell. The other amber skull. Should she find it, her instructions were to destroy it.

Jughead was hoping that would stall things, too.

“Let’s go,” he said, nodding in the direction of Thornhill.

“Keep up.” Toni said as she broke off in a run.

As one, they all followed her. Into the belly of the beast.

Chapter End Notes

I promise more ass kicking in the next chapter! Also more Bughead.
Belly of the Beast

Chapter Notes

So for this chapter, I was blessed with the wonderful beta skills of @Josh, my Discord friend (and an esteemed channel moderator in those parts). So I thank him for his insight as well as his grammar/spelling skills. Any typos you find here are my own, since I added a couple of things here and there per his recommendations after he betaed. His is, however, such a kind soul for taking this on.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“The real world is where the monsters are.”

— Rick Riordan, The Lightning Thief

Betty’s arms were going numb.

As it turns out, lying on a slab of marble with restraints keeping her firmly in place was not comfortable.

From her vantage point of the ceremonial hall, she mostly had to stare up at the intricate carvings on the ceiling, with its sigils and gorgeously disturbing images of sorrowful druids, angry puritans, and motherless children etched along into its wooden arches.

The place looked a bit like a circular chapel, with stained glass windows, marble floors, and a raised dais in the center. No saints or holy imagery decorated the walls, however. There were only panels, presumably for storage of ritual equipment and materials. There was also a pit for fire, water, earth, and judging by the empty glass ball, artfully dotted with holes, air.

Elements were often invoked in ritual spells.

Between the carved arches of the ceiling were clear glass panels where she could see the waning moon against the dark sky. Witches liked the lunar light.

Her memories were taking form. She knew of witches and creatures, angels and demons. She knew she was a witch and that the sigil drawn around her was both for the ritual and to protect those that surrounded her.

She was tied to a table and yet she was the dangerous one.

As she grew bored and increasingly stiff at the joints, she had taken the time to observe the faces that surrounded her along the perimeter of the sigil.

For the past hour, the large man, whom Jason had called Samuel, stood steadily at his post, unmoving and serious. His arms were crossed over his broad chest.

There were others in the room, the strength in their shoulders apparent in the way they held their stances, but they weren’t as tall, and they were more fidgety. They looked to him for reassurance.
and guidance.

He was the pack alpha here. There was, Betty knew, a hierarchy to werewolves.

There was a woman there who stood separate from the pack. The creatures knew her, but they only answered to her because Samuel acknowledged her existence. She had wavy blonde hair and she wore an old leather jacket, the back of which looked like there used to be a patch sewn on it. Betty could make out the repaired holes, the ghost of what used to be a patch that meant better days.

It seemed… fitting, that a woman like this, radiating anger, would wear the evidence of her disgrace on her body like a cloak, a reminder that reparations had to be made, because why else would you wear an old, tattered leather gang jacket?

The lady kept regarding her with a toothy grin, like a cat eager to toy with a mouse, and for the longest time, she stalked Betty along the sigil’s perimeter, as if contemplating what to do with her. In the lady’s hand was a switch blade that she kept opening and retracting.

“You are driving me crazy, Penny,” growled Samuel, his voice soft and yet echoing through the chamber.

“I’m sorry.” She sounded wry, like she wasn’t sorry in the least. “I’m just so thrilled to have this one, here. This is Jughead Jones’s witch! I’ve been told that he is going positively out of his mind right now. I can hardly wait to send him her head when Jason’s done with her.”

Samuel made a sound of disgust. “You and your heads. You going to leave it on his front yard on a pike, too? Set it on fire, maybe?”

Penny scoffed. “Naw. This one I’ll put in a pretty box, with a pink bow on top. Handwritten note and all.”

Betty’s stomach dropped. The thought that her body parts would be sent to Jughead Jones, the boy who looked at her with such soft eyes, was making her ill. It sounded grotesque and devastating. Inhuman.

Samuel chuckled, but no humor laced his tone. “You do that and Jones will hunt you down, kill you slowly, and scatter your limbs across town when he’s done. You do not toy with a man who showed you compassion. You are only inviting suffering and death upon yourself.”

“Compassion.” Penny snorted. “He should’ve killed me. He’s a fucking coward for letting me live. Can’t do the deed. Weak. Impotent.”

This time, Samuel did laugh in amusement. “Actually, getting to know you the last few weeks, I think Jones is actually pretty savage letting you live with this shame on your shoulders and your resentment eating you alive.”

Penny’s lip curled mirthlessly. “Shut up, dog. You watch your back speaking to me that way. If Jughead Jones really had it in him, he would’ve done away with me years ago.”

“You push the gentlest man far enough and they can summon that rage. I have lived long enough to have seen it.”

For a second, Penny blinked, and Betty noted the way Penny’s fingers ghosted over the scar carved on her arm, but that moment of fear fell away, replaced with determination and anger. “He pushed me, and I’ve spent countless nights dreaming of his torment. Of taking back that pound of flesh. I have rage, too, and I can destroy him with it.”
Samuel nodded. “You just might. But don’t think you can send him the body parts of this woman without consequence. You do that, you will unleash a monster, I promise you.”

“I do what the fuck I want.”

“I have no doubt of that.”

Betty closed her eyes, remembering what she could of Jughead Jones. She perhaps loved him, too? The memory of his face sent her heart beating. The phantom feel of his arms around her gave her warmth and comfort. The remembered pressure of his hand on her neck and shoulder stilled the worry thrumming in the pit of her belly. If this was what the memory of him did to her, the reality of him would be overwhelming and intense.

Whatever happened to her that night, she was grateful that he was one of the memories that have returned to her at possibly the last moments she had on this earth.

The chapel doors opened and through it walked Jason, hand-in-hand with a woman with the same auburn hair as his.

She had a beautiful face, her frame delicate and petite. Her fitted black top covered her neck and arms, her short red skirt, however, showed off her legs.

They crossed the lines of the sigil, their hands linked and Betty thought that a little creepy, like they needed to be connected at all times.

It was only when they got to the dais that they separated. They stood on each side, Betty lying between them.

Jason pressed his hand to Betty’s forehead. “It will be over soon.”

Betty did not think that boded well. Over sounded like she would be finished, permanently.

“Have you purged her, Jason?” asked the girl.

It was then Betty recognized the voice. It was the same girl who had spoken to her when she first woke in the dungeons, her voice slatting between the iron-barred windows of its metal doors.

Jason’s eyebrow arched. “Purged her?”

The girl’s eyebrows knotted. “Purified her. Rid her body of the toxins of everyday. She should’ve vomited the contents of her stomach. You should’ve bathed her in soap and water, put her in a fresh cotton gown. You do this ritual the way she is, wearing this… this unicorn sleep shirt and—and what is this? Her panties have strawberries printed on them. You didn’t even bother to take them off! This is sloppy and unlike you, Jay-jay. Who knows what might be incompatible with—“

Jason rolled his eyes. “There’s no time for that, Cheryl. I can’t do a 24 hour purge. The ritual would have to work as she is.”

Cheryl gave a soft huff but didn’t seem inclined to argue. She traced Betty’s cheek with her fingers. “She’s lovely, though, old shirt and printed cotton panties notwithstanding. What a waste, Jason. You know there is magic in beauty.” She flipped her rich red hair over her shoulder. “Half of my power comes from the way I look. The same will be true of her. Perhaps she could be persuaded to work with us?”

“She cannot be persuaded. You’ve been trying that tack for a while now, haven’t you? You can’t
even get her to join the Vixens, let alone the Coven.”

Cheryl’s face reddened for a heartbeat, then she sighed, looking down at Betty. “Perhaps she is more pliable to my more aggressive persuasions.” Her fingers traveled up Betty’s arm, sliding them along Betty’s skin as cheryl bent over her body.

Betty could feel the warmth of Cheryl’s breath on her lips, their eyes locked together with overwhelming intensity. Betty found herself holding her own breath.

Was Cheryl going to kiss her? Would she kiss her own cousin?

Betty was so distracted and confused that she barely noticed Cheryl’s fingers grazing the base of her palm. She hardly noticed the feel of a jagged object being slipped beneath the hem of her glove.

And before she could figure out what was happening, Jason gave an irritated growl.

“Oh, stop it!” Jason hissed, as if suddenly breaking out of hypnosis. “I know you like your girls, Cher, but she is our cousin for goodness sake!”

*So that’s where he drew the line.* Betty thought. *Incest. Sacrificing your cousin in a blood ritual, however, is totally acceptable.*

She blinked before her thoughts can get any snarkier. Her sense of self was coming back and that realization snapped her back to attention. What was it that Cheryl slipped into her gloves?

Cheryl then straightened and snarled. Betty heard the collective sigh of bated breath around the room. No doubt, everyone had been captivated by that interlude.

“But look at her, Jason. Maybe she can work with us!”

“No,” Jason said through grit teeth. “I want her magic. We talked about this.”

She gave a sigh of frustration. “Fine. We do this, but let me make sure that everything else is perfect. You flubbed the main ingredient already. Let me QA the rest.”

*QA* was such a corporate word in a setting like this and it was throwing Betty off. Jason looked terribly annoyed by it, and strangely, Betty thought that was the point.

She wiggled her hand around the object Cheryl had given her. It felt like it had spines coming out of its smooth, glassy body, eight sphincters and one misplaced pointy, needle-like extension that would definitely pierce through her skin…

If she were to guess the shape of the object, it was a spider.

What was she supposed to do with this thing?

As she wracked her brain for the meaning of the secret gift, Jason scowled and grumbled as Cheryl checked every material Jason needed for the ritual. She asked about where he got them, how he scooped them into bowls, what implement he used, which cupboard specifically did he get them.

If Betty didn’t feel so cotton-brained, she might have thought Cheryl was stalling.

Betty wasn’t complaining. She needed time. She needed moments. She needed to understand what it was Cheryl had given her and how it was supposed to help. Can she use it to pick the locks of her restraints?
Not likely.

They called her a witch, so could she summon a spell to unlock anything with her magic?

“Enough, Cher.” Jason’s threateningly low timbre cut through Betty’s thoughts.

Cheryl scowled at his demand. “You don’t want to screw this up.”

“I don’t want to delay,” he said, in a tone that strongly suggested this argument was over. “Now step out of the sigil. I need to close this circle.”

Cheryl took a deep, slow breath before she nodded. She stepped away, crossing the sigil and standing beyond the outermost circle.

Only then did Jason look down at Betty. “Now we can begin.”

*************************************************

Jughead thought it felt strange to be sneaking into Thornhill just because Red Tape was likely going to stop them at the gate.

The fact is, if Penelope Blossom proved resistant to the accusations they were going to throw Jason’s way, she could very well detain them with magic, paralysing their efforts at a rescue.

Jughead determined that with Betty’s life on the line, he figured apologizing for bypassing the niceties was far easier than the devastation of losing her.

Around him, his ragtag task force rattled about with their chains, weapons, and equipment. Like a supernatural black-ops, they wore the implements of their trade, armed with charms, goggles slung around their necks, and fingerless gloves—straight out of a comic. Like they were costumed, but they were ready for anything. If they were going to be outnumbered, they were prepared to take full advantage of their element of surprise.

Toni led them through the Blossom graveyard amidst the light of the moon. The yard was filled with raised monuments and mini-mausoleums. Countless stone cherubs, gargoyles, and the occasional whimsical fairy stared at them from their fathomless eyes, which made Jughead suspicious. Were they spelled to act as surveillance?

He pursed his lips and chastised himself for his paranoia. Clearly, he was suspicious of everything regarding the Blossoms.

One of the oldest and most decrepit structures on the yard had a locked iron gate that Toni had a key for. Ivy carpeted its walls, erasing it from the landscape. When Toni unlocked the entryway, there was hardly any space inside to fit more than 5 people.

At the center of the crypt was a raised tomb, the carvings along its side filthy with mildew and marred by moss. Unbothered by its grime, Toni planted her hands against the molding on top of it and pushed. A panel slid aside. It moved easily, rolling on well-used grooves.

When Jughead shone his flashlight into the gaping hole, he saw the stone stairwell.

“Go,” Toni said, urging him forward.
He hoisted himself into the hole and descended the steps.

One by one, the members of their party followed. Toni came through last, and when they were all at the earthen bottom of the steps, she led the way again through winding tunnels. It wasn’t just one passageway. It was a network, and Jughead wondered what the hell the Blossoms were smuggling in the past that these tunnels were even built.

They must have walked half a mile before Toni stopped at a door. “This is the door that Cheryl usually lets me through, but I don’t have a key. It can only be opened by a Blossom.”

All eyes turned to Polly and Chic.

Chic gestured towards the door and nodded at his sister. “After you.”

Polly grasped the handle and pushed.

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Betty watched with growing panic as Jason called the corners, not because she knew where this was going, exactly. Vaguely, she understood that she was in some kind of danger, and perhaps in the back of her mind, she had a feeling this would culminate in the spilling of her blood, perhaps even fatally, but all that seemed like faraway possibilities in light of the fact that the more Jason got further in his ritual, the darker the room became, like the reality around them was fading, or they were getting sucked in a different dimension.

It was difficult to make sense of it all.

Jason was completely focused now, and Betty could feel her limbs getting weighed down by something she couldn’t see.

She shut her eyes, willing her brain to make sense of all this.

There was something in this object in her hand. Something important. She could feel it in the gaze of the girl, Cher.

Cheryl.

She remembered Cheryl. Images of unkind words and giggling girls, of cascading silky red hair intertwining with vibrant pink locks, of deceit and demands, overlapping with the sharp bite of her perplexing kindness. If there was ever a thing to love and hate about her, it was her ferocity.

Jason finished calling the corners, and when he whispered the incantation, the light of magic began to swirl from the lines of the sigil, curling up in blue, silver, and black tendrils. It snaked around her limbs, tightening into coils around her body.

Her heart began to beat rapidly in her chest.

She gasped, feeling the ribbons of magic slip around her throat, tightening. Her breath got cut off and she choked.

Panic suffused Betty. Was this how she was going to die? Strangled by magic? She struggled but realized that it was only getting worse.
“J-Jason!” Cheryl cried, cutting through Jason’s incantation.

The magic loosened its hold and Betty gasped for air.

Jason hissed in annoyance. “What is it, Cheryl?”

“I think—” Cheryl cried, a desperate note in her voice. “I think you’re doing it wrong! You’re choking her! She needs to be alive to the end! You must tell her to calm down!”

Jason’s fist clenched. “I was doing it perfectly, until you interrupted.”

“I wasn’t—”

“Be quiet, Cher. And let me finish.” Jason turned back to Betty, continuing from where he left off. This was a long ritual, but it had to culminate at some point and Betty was afraid he was on the cusp of it.

The magic tightened around her again but Betty had heard what Cheryl had been saying. Even as the noose tightened, she forced herself to breathe calmly. She found that calming down kept the ribbons loose, and when she was able to take small breaths, she was able to think again, to work on remembering.

She gathered what memories have returned—the faces that gave such joy.

The blonde hair and green eyes of women who smiled with deep, enduring affection… Aunts Zelda and Hilda. Cousin Sabrina.

Jason’s hands began to glow that same shade of blue, silver, and black.

Betty closed her eyes and willed the other memories in her mind to awaken. She focused on those complicated emotions of family, embedded deeper—beyond her aunts and cousins. She had a sister, and her name was Dorothy Cooper, but they called her Polly. Her brother, Charles, was called Chic. Her father and mother, Hal and Alice Cooper, were picture perfect…

Her heart clenched, knowing that there were dark caverns and turns that she had to remember later, but she needed the basics at the moment. Just enough to survive.

Her mind’s eye turned, landing upon the boy with the dark hair and blazing blue eyes. The handsome boy that made her heart flutter and her stomach do summersaults. The young man who made her laugh and feel safe, whether in the quiet of a room or the roaring noise of a battlefield. He wiped away her tears, covered her wounds with his fingers, kissed her scars.

Jughead Jones.

She loved this boy. Cognitively, she knew that. She felt it in her bones, too. Felt it in her heart. Only now it felt new. It felt like bursting from her chest. Like an explosion.

The memory of him opened a floodgate. Memories rushed through her mind. It was as intense as a tidal wave, overwhelming her and bringing her back at the same time.

She flexed her fingers and knew what the object in her hand was for. She squeezed, tight, until the tiny barbs pierced her flesh, until the pain spread from her palms to the rest of her arm and shoulders.

The pain gathered, stirring power in her belly, stoking magic behind her eyes, and that’s when she
saw it—Jason’s athame descending upon her chest.

The ritual chamber was a separate building, apart from the house. They had to leave Thornhill proper and make their way through a copse of overgrown trees.

Why this wasn’t the manicured lawn that Jughead would’ve expected, he didn’t know.

“A bit too natural, isn’t it?” Sweet Pea grumbled as he frantically pushed back bramble before it hit his face.

“That’s the point,” Sabrina replied. “Too much landscaping can disturb the magic surrounding the hall. You want nature to be as undisturbed as possible around where you perform rituals. I bet when this hall was first built, it was unusable for at least a decade. Nature needed to grow around it for the ley lines to accept it.”

Jughead pushed through it without complaint. Though he would’ve liked a more open space and some time to survey the perimeter of the hall before charging headlong, they couldn’t afford any delays.

It was dark enough that they could rustle about unnoticed. They were all in black clothing and the moon’s light was periodically obscured by clouds. So long as they stayed in the shadows and moved about quietly, their approach wouldn’t be so quickly detected.

Jughead was at least certain that Chic, Polly, and the other Serpents had experience fighting multiple opponents. He was counting on Kevin and Sabrina’s cleverness to get them through.

As they got closer to the hall entrance, the Ghoulies guarding the perimeter became more visible through the overgrown forest.

Jughead crouched low with the rest of the team and found Chic huddled beside him.

“I count fifteen, spread out along the walls,” Chic said in a whisper. “What do you think?”

Jughead huffed softly. “Probably a few more we can’t see. We can take them, but preferably without much of a ruckus. We don’t want to alert the ones inside the hall too early.”

Chic nodded. “Stealth, then. But we gotta do this fast. Polly, take the north-facing perimeter guards. I’ll take the south. Your group should push forward to the entrance.”

Jughead paused, trying to figure out how two people can manage that many opponents. Then again, they were Coopers. They were incredible fighters. “Go.”

Polly was off in a flash, disappearing into the foliage. Chic went in the opposite direction just as quickly.

 Barely a minute later, guards began disappearing one by one, quietly.

“The Coopers are fucking scary,” Toni remarked.

“No kidding,” Jughead muttered, moving forward as their opponents dwindled quietly.
He gripped his sword’s hilt in his hand, keeping low in the shadows. He wasn’t planning on using the sword just yet, but gripping it in his hand felt reassuring. He might have use for it later. As he came upon one of the lookouts, he took a deep breath and shot out of the tall bramble. Quietly, he took the lookout in a choke hold that rendered him unconscious, long enough for Sabrina to work her stunning spell.

They took down guards one at a time, with Sweet Pea using brute force to knock out Lost Ghoulies, while Kevin used smoothly applied enrapturing magic. The other Serpents and Toni used varying methods to subdue their enemies, until there were only two guards left standing at the doors.

Polly and Chic came from both sides at the same time, flitting along the walls silently. As if in a practiced dance, totally in sync, they took down both guards with hardly a sound.

Light began to filter out of domes above, which sent Jughead’s heart racing. He could feel the urgency of bursting through the doors and putting a stop to everything that might be happening.

They were moving swiftly forward, ready to take the doors down, when Ghoulies came running out of the shadows, weapons poised and raised. They had guns, too, and Jughead had to roll and find cover, snatching out his own weapon from the holster strapped to his body and dragging Kevin with him to find cover.

Kevin muttered curses as they crouched for safety. “So much for stealth!”

Jughead fired off a couple of shots as they took cover behind some trees. He was vibrating with agitation. He couldn’t afford to be held up by a gunfight. He had to get into the hall now.

As if reading his thoughts, Chic joined him in his bunker.

“Go!” Chic cried, throwing a deflection charm that covered them both from gunfire. “I’ve got this!” He threw a potion in the air that spread like thick, unrelenting smoke. Like a pyroclastic cloud it cloaked the grounds around them, Ghoulies and Serpents alike, in bleak darkness.

Jughead, with his Slayer eyes, could see through it all. His team immediately slipped their goggles on, prepared for this spell, and they began taking sightless Ghoulies down. Across the field, he exchanged looks with Toni. She nodded in acknowledgement and jerked her head in the direction of the hall entrance.

As Jughead made for the doors, he grabbed Kevin by the arm as he went.

“You’re coming with me, Kev!” he said, pulling Kevin along. He wasn’t going to leave his best friend in a hail of gunfire. Kevin could hold his own in close contact situations, but his fey powers were not ideal for long-range fighting. He would be a sitting duck.

Toni was struggling with the doors, kicking it with the brute force she had as a Slayer. It was giving, but not as quickly as she’d want.

Jughead stood with her, bracing his strength where he needed it, and together, they kicked it once, twice, and at the third kick, it burst open, the beam holding it closed splintering in half.

They stumbled into the hall, slamming the door close behind them to delay any enemies that may follow. Even a fraction of a second’s delay would help.

Ghoulies began coming out of the passageways along the hallway and Jughead jumped over the first one to get to the second, his feet planting into a vampire’s gut. Jughead turned with his silver-alloy sword, slicing through the knee of one opponent and turning to sink a stake through the heart of
another.

Toni was fighting off opponents of her own, two shorter swords swirling around her as she climbed pedestals, threw flying kicks, and took opportunities with deadly skill and incredible agility.

Kevin had his own opponent enthralled into submission, and when Toni had disposed of her opponents, she finished off Kevin’s with a swipe of her sword.

A werewolf came at Jughead and Jughead met him, full force. The wolf sank his shoulder into Jughead’s gut, slamming him against the wall. For a second, Jughead lost his breath, but he jammed his knee right into the werewolf’s side, loosening the werewolf’s arms and allowing Jughead to get the headlock he needed to bodyslam him to the ground.

Toni came with the silver chains, throwing it around the werewolf’s legs and heaving to knock him off balance.

“You two go ahead! I got this!” she growled, jumping over the werewolf’s body to tie the chains around him more securely.

More sounds were coming from further down the hall and Jughead was worried Toni would be overcome. He hesitated for a moment, but the entrance doors burst open again, and in spilled Sweet Pea, Joaquin, and Sabrina.

“The others said they can handle the Ghoulies outside!” Sabrina cried, coming up behind Toni to defend her against an attacking nymph. “Go get Betty, Jug! Hurry!”

Jughead nodded. He saw that Kevin was helping Joaquin, but Sweet Pea was already headed in his direction.

Together, they ran down the hallway to get to the main ritual chamber.

Jughead could hear Jason’s voice speaking the incantation, and as he looked at the doors, the flashing lights shining through the cracks and the thick smoke drifting out with it was absolutely alarming.

Staving off his terror, Jughead looked at Sweet Pea in a wordless exchange.

Sweet Pea nodded, and together, they kicked the doors down, swinging them wide open.

Betty felt the pain explode outward, her magic overflowing from her body with instinctual urgency.

She was certain she had cast a spell, but she wasn’t quite sure what it was. When she opened her eyes, she saw the point of Jason’s knife frozen just where it touched her skin, the rise and fall of her chest digging it in at each breath. It was as much of a surprise to her as it was to Jason.

A drop of her blood swelled from her chest where the point of the knife pierced her flesh, but try as Jason did to push the blade into her heart, the athame refused to go any further.

Jason gave a loud, frustrated growl, and Betty could feel him trying to resist her magic.
Betty caught his gaze and her own effort to keep him from plunging that knife any further was drawn in the tension on her face.

“Give it up, you bitch,” Jason whispered, his anger and desperation clear in the rasp of his voice. “Your magic is my magic. You are only delaying it!”

Betty was too focused on fighting him to reply. If she were unhampered by leather cuffs, if she had more time to recover, if she were separated from the influence of his circle and whatever magic bound her to him, she might be stronger, but at the moment, they were equal, and this shielding spell was all she could manage under the circumstances.

The doors of the ritual hall burst open, and through it spilled Jughead Jones and a very tall young man clad in even more leather than Jughead ever wore.

Jughead immediately tried to shoulder his way through the sigil but Jason’s magic prevented him from advancing.

“I have it, Jones!” Cheryl cried, cutting through the tension. “I’ve got it!” She held out her hand. Something was nestled between her fingers. Something small—round and the color of amber.

Jason looked up, distracted, and Betty saw Jughead clash with Samuel, spilling onto the floor in a blur of snarls and grunts.

Jughead pushed Samuel off him, sending Samuel stumbling back. And as Jughead stayed low, he yelled above the chaos. “Do it, Cheryl! Now!”

“Cheryl, no!” Jason cried, finally distracted.

Cheryl made a dive for the firepit, throwing the amber object into the hot coals and bringing out her athame.

“Sweet Pea, hit the floor!” Jughead cried.

His leather-clad companion dove to the ground, confusing the Ghoulies who were coming at him.

Jason screamed Cheryl’s name again, just as she cried, “I’m sorry, Jay-jay!”

Cheryl plunged her knife into the fire.

There was a deafening silence, and then the fire pit exploded, sending Cheryl screaming for cover.

Pain consumed Betty and her scream mingled with Cheryl’s.

Samuel got caught in the blast, pushing him back several feet away from Jughead who huddled on the floor to protect himself from the explosion. Several other Ghoulies, including Penny, felt the force of it, sending them careening outward, the wind knocked out of them.

Jason had crouched behind the altar, taking deep breaths, eyes wide and wild with rage and pain. His fingers were curled into fists and as he looked up to meet Betty’s gaze while her vision swam and swayed. She felt displaced. Like someone had knocked her over the head.

“Y-You…” Jason growled. “You and Cher…”

Betty groaned, her vision blurring and clearing at intervals. Whatever Cheryl had done, Betty felt a tendril of magic snap free between her and Jason. It was like whatever tethered her to him had been torn asunder, and that should be a good thing, but the snap back had given her pain. The severing
had felt like a limb being torn from her body.

She struggled to regain her focus. Fought back the haziness. She told herself that this pain was what she needed. This pain was her deliverance.

Jason raised his athame again. The ritual had been disrupted. The magic had fallen apart, but she supposed if Jason couldn’t take her magic, no one else would be allowed to.

Her consciousness snapped back to attention and she gathered the pain to release her magic within, but she already knew she had been too slow to recover.

She was going to die.

Jason grabbed her hair, yanked her head back, and poised the athame to her exposed throat. But before he could run the blade across her neck, a mass of leather and steel sailed over her body on the dias, knocking Jason back violently and away from her.

Before Betty could process the fact that her life had been spared, she found herself staring up into the face that had captivated her memories the last few hours. His blue eyes stared into hers, his fingers pushing back the hair from her eyes.

“J-Jughead?” she asked. More memories of him rushed into her mind, and it was much more than she could’ve imagined.

His expression showed a hint of confusion, but the urgency of everything was thick, so he passed his thumb lightly against her brow and said, “I’ve got you.” His switchblade came out, cutting the leather bindings around her wrists, and then her ankles.

She was free, and he helped her sit up, cupping her face in his hand. Around them, Ghoulies were struggling to get back on their feet, some crawling towards the door. There was only one way out, and Sweet Pea was blocking it.

Jughead was searching her face, worry clear into his gaze.

She traced the curve of his cheek with her fingers lightly. “You came for me…”

He looked really worried now. “Betty, baby, of course I--”

His words were cut off by a heavy groan and the worry from his face morphed into a hardened rage as he turned at the sound. His shoulders bunched with tension and his hands balled into fists. He stared at Jason who was struggling to get up from the floor.

Jughead took off and Jason threw his spell, but whatever spell it was, it didn’t affect Jughead and he barrelled right through, his shoulder slamming into Jason’s gut and sending them both to the floor.

Betty gasped, fascinated by Jughead’s intensity and the way his fist jammed into Jason’s face over and over again. Cognitively, Betty felt that she needed to put a stop to it, but she was oddly
captivated by the scene, of knowing that his rage came from a primal, emotional place.

Only when Cheryl screamed did her thoughts get interrupted.

“Please Jones, don’t kill him!” Cheryl cried, throwing her arms over Jughead’s shoulders. She was pulling him away, and she was in no way strong enough to stop Jughead, but he did, even as he clutched Jason roughly by the collar of his shirt, even as Jason hung limp and bloody in his grip.

Jughead’s grimace was etched deep in his face. “Give me one good reason, Cheryl! Just one!”

Cheryl balled her hands into fists, searching desperately for the words. Finally, she said, “You’re not like that!”

Jughead’s breathing was rapid and filled with rage, and he stared at Cheryl with frightening intensity.

She folded her hands together imploringly. “I’ll make sure he doesn’t cause anymore trouble. I swear!”

Jughead looked at Jason, then at Cheryl. Finally, his eyes met Betty’s, and she looked at him with open curiosity. She was genuinely interested in what he would do.

When he let Jason go and stepped away, Betty felt neither relief nor disappointment. Instead, she felt trust. She realized that whatever he would’ve chosen, she would’ve trusted him.

Cheryl ran to Jason’s half-unconscious body, dragging him away to the side and perhaps attending to him, but Jughead had ceased to pay attention to them and Betty was drawn to the magnetic pull of his eyes.

In a second, he was swinging her off the dias cradled in his arms. His face was so close that she could’ve kissed him, but the dark shadow of Samuel suddenly loomed behind him, and Betty’s panic was like a punch to her gut. She found herself digging deep into her store of freshly renewed memories and she summoned the training her brother had subjected her to for most of her life.

Using Jughead’s shoulders as leverage, she swung her hips around his waist, rounding him to plant her feet against Samuel’s side with the force of her momentum.

Caught completely off guard, Samuel lost his balance and lurched sideways, slipping on the shiny marble flooring.

She landed into a crouch, and Jughead swung around to face Samuel as the werewolf scrambled to regain his footing.

Betty felt a burst of adrenaline awakening her limbs. She scanned the room quickly. Sweet Pea was preoccupied at the entrance, fighting off opponents with three others by his side. They were too busy to help Jughead. As chaotic as her memories were, she felt ready to fight by Jughead’s side.

“Don’t tell me to get behind you, Jones.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Jughead tilt a grin. “I wasn’t planning on it, Cooper.”

The whisper of steel was followed by his hand fitting the hilt of his sword into hers. She looked at it in mild surprise, just before she met his gaze.

He cracked his knuckles, his fingers armed in silver. “We fight him together.”
And she knew for sure, at that moment, that he loved her, too.

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Betty Cooper was his other half.

In the last 20 hours that he had spent trying to find her, the void that her absence had created in his soul had left him crushed in places and lost in others. He had gone from fear to rage to helpless frustration. He had slid back on the dreadful memories of her fighting a horde of enemies, which had caused her unconsciousness and him leaving her so vulnerable and alone. His guilt had been overwhelming and he had to fight to get out of its pit. He had envisioned, with every fiber of forced optimism he had, finding her alive and safe, because it was the only thing that could’ve kept him going. He had refused, at every turn, to imagine her limp in his arms, blood tainting the flowing waters beneath her.

The dichotomy of her incredible strength and her helplessness had plagued his mind, back and forth.

So when he saw that athame, poised to pierce her heart, her will to live preventing its descent, he felt that he had been born for this very moment--to be there for his other half.

He punched through the weakened barrier of the sigils, weakened by Cheryl’s disposal of the amber skull that had tied Betty to Jason.

As he broke through the magic, destroying the sigil beneath him at every step, he leaped over the dias, hands planted against the marble platform for leverage, and swung his full-weight, feet first, into Jason’s chest.

Jason toppled back, stumbling down the steps and colliding painfully with the stone font that held the water element. Jason curled into a ball, clutching his middle in pain. His rage for Jason, however, seemed far less important than Betty being strapped to the dias. He had to free her. He couldn’t let her be restrained for another minute.

He helped her out of her bindings and gloves, wondering momentarily at the spider brooch resting in her palms in small pool of blood. He helped sit her up on the altar, taking in her face, examining her body for injuries, touching her skin to convince himself she was there, that she was alright. So when she said his name like a question, like she was seeing him for the first time, and then speaking words of surprise that he had come for her, his peace was instantly shattered.

What had Jason done to her?

His rage returned, and there was no better person to turn it against than Jason Blossom.

He was surprised at his own violence. He couldn’t believe how satisfying it felt, feeling Jason’s bones crunch under his fist. How every time his punch landed, he kept thinking: this is what you deserve you sonofabitch.

But then Cheryl was there, pleading for Jason’s life, and when he looked at Jason’s face, now a ghastly pulp of flesh and plasma, he saw what he had done, and while he wasn’t exactly sorry, he did wonder what he would feel about beating Jason to death in the morning.
When he looked at Betty’s face, there was no judgment. No expectation that he would decide one way or another, and he felt humbled by her trust. He let Jason go. What was important was that Betty was safe. That he had her back. That he could hold her in his arms.

Some blood has blossomed from where the point of the athame had pierced her chest, but it wasn’t extensive, and the life in her eyes was vibrant. Beautiful.

He scooped her into his arms, and he wondered if he could just turn around and run, carrying her to safety.

But of course that was a fantasy, and before he knew it, she had swung into action to save his life, free of the trappings that had held her down.

He had set her free, his avenging angel, and now they could fight together.

“Don’t tell me to get behind you, Jones,” she had said, like a warning, and he couldn’t help but be overly pleased at how incredible she was, how beautiful she looked, so alive and fierce.

“I wasn’t planning on it, Cooper.” He gave her his sword, and her surprise was only momentary, before she accepted it, and something more—it was in her eyes, a quick realization of something that made her grin in spite of the danger that surrounded them.

Sadly, there was hardly time to think about it.

The entire room was suddenly alive with activity. Serpents burst through the doors and Samuel charged at them both, claws and fangs glistening in the fiery torch light. His thick fur made him look even bigger than he already was.

Samuel was not going to go down without a fight.

Jughead braced himself and swung.

***************

Betty watched as Jughead’s silver knuckles crunched against the bone of Samuel’s jaw. She saw her opportunity when the werewolf wavered, and she went at him, sword poised to slash at his neck. Samuel’s arm came up to block her steel, and the grate of his wrist guard against her sword sprayed sparks, but shifting her blade, she turned and slashed it across Samuel’s back, which sent him roaring with anger and pain.

Samuel turned to her and she hadn’t anticipated his quick recovery. He swung his arm and his fist connected with her wrist, painfully knocking the sword out of her hand. His clawed paw was about to descend upon her face, but a chain wrapped around his neck and his hand immediately went to the chain to pull it free from his throat.

Jughead held the ends of the chain and he yanked with a loud yell, slamming his knee into Samuel’s back with spine-breaking force. Jughead swung his body and planted it between her and Samuel, his elbow swinging skillfully to strike on the side of Samuel’s face, with a quick follow up with his other, but the werewolf was undoubtedly strong, grabbing the chain that Jughead held in his large hands and using it to slam Jughead against the opposite wall.
Betty swung into action, grabbing the daggers holstered around Jughead’s leg and sinking one blade right into Samuel’s thigh. Now she was between Samuel and Jughead, and her memories were coming back in full force. With the other blade in her hand, she dragged it across her palm and let the pain fill her magic.

She threw her spell, pushing Samuel back several feet to put distance between him and Jughead, then she planted both of Samuel’s feet on the ground beneath him in a paralysis spell, rooting him to his spot.

But instead of attacking him, she spoke. “Samuel, listen to me! You’re better than all these hoodlums. You know you are!”

“What do you know of me, little girl?” The rumble of his growl was low and menacing, but he was asking, for real. She heard it in his tone.

“When I heard you talking to Penny earlier, you understood passion. You understood what it meant to love someone. I wonder what it took for you know what it’s like—”

“One doesn’t need to be immortal to have experienced life and love, witch. It’s not as extraordinary as you’d like to think—”

“It is,” Betty interrupted, conviction clear in her tone. How could he not think it was extraordinary? For her it was everything. It was big enough to be her whole life. “For me, it is. Why would you take orders from Jason, who thinks no better of you than a familiar? Why would you take orders from Penny? She has no moral compass. You know honor. I heard it. You are better than them.”

Samuel was expressionless when he said, “There is nothing left. The cause is dead. No pack will take me now. I am nothing without a pack. I would rather choose death.”

She shook her head. “Samuel, no…”

Her magic wavered at the deep regret she felt at failing to convince him, and Samuel broke free, bounding towards her.

She ran towards him, dropping at the last minute to slide between his legs and slashing the dagger through the tender skin of his inner thighs. He roared as she leapt to wrap her legs around his neck, using her body’s momentum to drag him face first towards the ground and grabbing his arm to twist it behind him. She planted her knee on his back and sank the dagger into his shoulder blade, jamming it between his bones.

His maw let out a frightening sound, but in spite of his incapacitation, he heaved Betty off his back, sending her flying off him to spill onto hard marble floor, which took her breath away and dimmed her eyesight for a heartbeat.

Jughead was there in a second, slamming his foot on the side of Samuel’s knee. The werewolf’s leg buckled, and Jughead landed a strike to Samuel’s throat that sent his tongue lolling out. Jughead swung again, but this time Samuel was able to block, and for a few seconds, there was a volley of strikes between them.

Betty pushed herself off the ground, building magic from the pain blossoming from her body. She saw Jughead’s sword, just out of reach, and she willed herself to stumble to it, taking it in her hand and gripping it firmly.

She could kill Samuel now. She knew she could, but did she really want to?
The answer was clear in her mind. *No.*

She knew what she had to do, and perhaps it would mean that she would finally be outed, but it was a price she was willing to pay to save her own soul.

She gathered her magic within her chest and *yanked.*

It was Samuel who went down, first. Crumpling to the ground in pain. All the other Ghoulies followed thereafter, writhing and rolling on the ground, helpless against the pain that Betty was taking from all of them. She took that pain, held it inside and knew, that if she let all of it out, she would kill *everyone,* but if she held some of it back, only using some of it, she would have to keep that leftover pain and feel it. She would feel it all.

But it was a choice: shoulder the pain now or shoulder the weight of the lives she would take the rest of her days.

She chose pain. It was temporary, anyway.

And she *released.*

****************

The screaming stopped.

Every Ghoulie in the room slumped soundlessly on the ground, their suffering over. And while Jughead knew in the back of his mind that they weren’t dead, he still took a moment to wait for the rise and fall of Samuel’s chest.

It came, and Jughead was certain that Betty had just stunned an entire room of Ghoulies.

He looked over his shoulder at her, her eyes darkened black with magic. She held still, breathing deeply and slowly.

Carefully, he went to her. He hesitated to touch her, not because he was afraid, but because he didn’t know if such contact would do her harm. “Betts?”

Her eyes remained dark and unfathomable, but she began to tremble. Her knees buckled beneath her and Jughead rushed to catch her in his arms. “Betts!”

“It hurts.” The tone of her voice was her own, even if it was slightly deeper. Like she was speaking from a darker place. “It hurts everywhere.”

His heart wrenched. He wasn’t sure what he could do to help her, but he wasn’t going to let her suffer. “I’m getting Polly--”

“No,” she rasped. “No. I don’t--I don’t want them to dose me again.”

As he held her, his eyes taking in her pain, he suddenly realized why her family found it much easier to put her out of her misery. But she didn’t want the relief. He supposed the price was too high. So all he could do was press his lips to her forehead and whisper, “Breathe. Just breathe.”

She did. Breathe. Long, drawn out and painful.
“It’s going to be alright,” Jughead said, soothingly. He pressed his hand to her shoulder, and when she didn’t resist, he squeezed.

Her eyes closed, her hands curling into fists, and several minutes later, her trembling eased, and when she opened her eyes again, her green irises were back. She stared back at him with gratitude.

He wrapped her in his arms, proud of her. Relieved.

It was over. It was finally over.

*****************************************************************************

By the time Penelope Blossom finally got around to listening to the Spellmans, Alice, FP, Farmer McGinty, and more than two dozen Serpents were riding through her gates and across the Blossom estate.

They pushed through the grounds and up the Blossom front steps, with FP demanding that she lead them to the ritual hall.

Though enraged by the invasion, Penelope led them out of the mansion and into the vast grounds outside, towards the ritual hall that was nestled deep into Blossom grounds.

Penelope had been livid, perhaps eager to prove that her son would never associate with riff raff like the Ghoulies. So it was a complete shock to her when they found Serpents, and Coopers trying to fight off more Ghoulies than they could probably handle.

Slayers and Serpents descended upon the scene explosively, cutting down the Ghoulies before they could overwhelm the determined task force that Jughead had no doubt cobbled together.

Before anyone realized it, they were swarming the ritual hall, Jason unconsciously splayed on the ground, Samuel and the Ghoulies incapacitated, and Penny, hiding in an alcove, knocked out cold.

Ghoulies were hauled out in restraints, as were Jason and Penny, and as FP watched Alice, Polly, and Chic descend upon Betty, the tears of joy washing away the horrors of blood, exhaustion, and pain, he also saw his son, Jughead, utterly and completely enraptured.

For a little over 24 hours, the world had been crumbling around them, but Jughead Jones had looked to the light that was Betty Cooper, letting her guide him through the dark despair. She was what kept him going, what fueled his drive to find the answers, to find her alive, and finally arrive at this devastating, world-altering conclusion.

First, Betty was a powerful Wicked Witch—there was no way that secret could be kept anymore. There would, perhaps, be a reckoning, and FP wasn’t sure if he should prepare his son for that fight. Then again, Betty had already surprised him more times that he could count, so perhaps the witch would come through better than FP could predict.

Second, Jason Blossom had sought Betty Cooper’s powers, willing to mow down an entire town, his mother, and perhaps his own sister to gain it. It was incredible, the extent to which he was willing to go, the people he was willing to work with—Penny and the Ghoulies! It was true, what they said: it’s the quiet ones you have to look out for.
Third, Penelope Blossom had just discovered how deeply wretched her position was—her own son had wanted to take over all the Dales, plotting the unthinkable. Was she really the most powerful coven along the east coast if she didn’t even know that her son was plotting to rule over them all? The coven leads in Midvale and Greendale were certainly going to have something to say about this.

Finally, there was the story of Hal. Loving father, willing to do what he could to make his daughter happy and free, but in his desperation, had set off all the events that led to this moment in time, shaking the lives of many, including that of his own family. He paid dearly for his mistake.

Then again, perhaps the jury was still out in that respect, on whether it had been a “mistake.” The absolute final outcome hadn’t been decided yet. Not until sentences had been handed out. Not until justice was meted.

***************

It had been hours since the rescue.

Hours since they all washed off the blood of their enemies and stepped into starched borrowed clothing.

Hours since the questions began and minutes since they ended.

Hours since the flood of memories came rushing through Betty’s mind.

The memories were all there now, in place for her to reach back, awaken emotions, and relive her life.

It was overwhelming whenever that happened, reliving—seeing faces she already knew and cognitively recognizing that she was re-experiencing something that no one but her had forgotten.

It was strange to have her sister, brother, and mother enveloping her in their relief and love, to at first recognize that yes, this was her family, and indeed, she felt that rush of emotions that came with it because she was bonded to them for real. She clung to them like she had found water in a sweltering desert. And while they were experiencing that rush of emotion too, theirs was a small wave—hers was a tsunami.

And when their emotions were spent, hers were still coming at her, so she felt alone and empty when they were done and she was still in the thick of it.

There had been many questions, most of which Betty didn’t know the answers to, but no one pressed. She wasn’t a prisoner, and this wasn’t a police precinct. This was the Whyte Wyrm, and instead of desks for detectives and officers, there were drinking tables and bar stools, booths upholstered in leather and metal grills reflecting the light thrown by the full-service bar.

She had been offered the comfort of the shower room upstairs, wearing clothes that were two sizes too big for her—better these than the bloodied shirt she had been found in.

Alice, Chic, and Polly had taken turns sitting with her, alternating between the organized chaos, communicating with the covens, and sitting with her in quiet repose.
The silences were surprisingly calming, even if Betty itched to ask them what was happening. They didn’t feel ready to tell her about anything, so she hesitated to inquire.

Instead, she observed. Everyone. But what caught most of her attention was Cheryl, two tables down.

Her cousin was fielding questions. Cheryl had answers for most of them and each revelation seemed to prompt some search and seizure at Thornhill or corroborating testimony from someone else.

Toni sat with Cheryl, scowling each time someone approached. Betty has already heard Toni ask, “Can she go home now? Can’t this wait?” three times.

When FP finally told them to go, they left without a backward glance, wrapped around one another in defiance and relief.

Only then did Jughead reappear. He was clean and showered, as well. The clothes fit him better, and she wondered if the ones she had on were his.

The relief on his face was clear, even as he nodded at Chic who, reaching across the table to squeeze her arm, said, “Jug’s got you now, Bug. I gotta bring mom and Polly home before I get back to Thornhill. Get some rest, okay? I love you.”

Her wordless nod sent him off and Jughead slid into the booth beside her. Whatever it was he had been doing, it appeared to be finished—completed, and now he could rest and attend to her.

His tired eyes looked at her, quiet for several seconds. He took her hands in his and asked, quietly, if she was okay.

Her instinct to say, “I’m fine,” was forestalled by the sheer weight of love in his eyes.

She remembered how the memory of his gaze had gotten her through her ordeal, how she had known that she loved him and had wondered if he felt the same for her.

She remembered, too, how the realization of his feelings for her had lifted her up and carried her through when they fought Samuel together.

Now that it was all over, she had a bit more time to process all of the moments she had shared with Jughead Jones, the kisses and deep intimacies, the intensity of their relationship, and the comfort of his proximity to hers. There had been moments of pure joy, as well, flowers in their hair and dancing around fires.

To know that his was the kind of love that went beyond her imaginings sent her heart pounding and her mind spinning.

She wasn’t okay. She wasn’t fine. She was a mess.

Or perhaps, it was more like she was unprepared for all of these realities coming at her at once.

She burst into tears, sobbing into his chest with fistsful of his shirt in her hands. What he said didn’t matter, perhaps. His arms were strong around her, his voice soothing when he said her name. And when she was done spilling herself with her tears, she sought his touch, a kiss, one that lingered, enough that she could place all of it and seal it in a moment.

When the rushing tide settled and her hiccups died down, he looked down at her face and asked her if she would like to go back to her house.
She did and said, “I don’t want to be alone.”

The small smile he gave in response, punctuating it with a delicate pinch to her chin, felt more reassuring to her than anything he could’ve said.

It was such an affectionate gesture, one so certain of being understood without explanation. She cherished it, because she loved that they were that close.

So when he drove her to her house, she held his hand as she led them to her room, where they settled in her bed comfortably.

“Just until you sleep,” he said in her ear. “I’d imagine that Alice will stab me dead if she finds me here.”

She traced a finger along his jaw. “You just rescued her daughter from certain death, Jug. I think she’ll give you a pass this time.”

He gave a quiet laugh. “I’m sure I don’t have to tell you that there were ten of us in that operation, Cheryl included, who made that work. And then you kicked ass to help us.”

“You know what I mean.” She tugged at his shirt, pulling him closer.

He tucked her tighter against his side in response. “Maybe.” He sighed and kissed the top of her head. “Bets, I was scared. I didn’t know what they were going to do to you, and I was willing to rip this town and the next apart to find you.”

Her brow crinkled with worry. “Jug…”

“Did they hurt you?”

She rubbed his chest reassuringly. “They didn’t. They couldn’t. Hurting me was a risk. It could’ve reminded me of my magic.”

He closed his eyes and sighed. “So when you woke up…”

“I could hardly remember my name…”

The knot on his brow looked suspiciously like he was holding back tears. He pressed his lips together and took a deep breath before going on. “And how long before…?”

“Hours. It takes me hours and hours to start to get things back.” She touched his hair, and then the delicate skin of his eyelid. “I remembered your hair and eyes, first, but I didn’t know who you were. Just that I felt good remembering it.”

The rapid blinking of his eyes was a sure sign that it was harder to staunch his tears. “I hate that propofol. You don’t even need it, Betts. I called you back. Twice.”

She nodded. “Even when I couldn’t remember your name, I remembered that I loved you. It helped me get through it, Jug. I would’ve been crushingly alone, otherwise.”

He cupped her cheek. “I’m not ever going to let anyone dose you with that stuff again. They never would’ve been able to take you if it weren’t for that. They never would’ve been able to keep you if you woke up with all your memories intact. You would’ve raised hell all your own. That stuff took things away from you.”

She quieted him with a gentle kiss, first on the corner of his mouth, then his lips. Tentatively, slowly,
she opened her mouth to coax more, and their quiet breathing slowly deepened to an awakening desire for affirmation.

“Did you forget that I loved you?” he asked between kisses, draping her leg around his waist as his hips pressed hard against hers.

She gasped, relishing the feeling of his body flush into her own. “I did.”

“And now?” He looked at her, his eyes intense, dark with desire but clear in his intent. He would stop if she wasn’t all there.

That thought made her miserable. She needed him badly right now. She wanted him. All of him. “I know you do. I know everything, Jug, but there are bits and pieces. You have to help me. Gaps that I still need you to fill…” A small smile made its way to her lips, and she was aware of the mild double entendre. She wanted him to understand that her consent wasn’t compromised, because if he stopped now, she would self combust.

He shifted so he was on top of her, smiling as their lips met. His tongue thrust into her mouth moments later as her thighs wrapped around him. His deep, drawn out groan assured her that he wasn’t stopping, and her relief that she would get what she wanted was almost embarrassing.

His mouth trailed along her throat, sucking lightly before he laved each spot with his tongue. The thrust of his hips sent sensual memories rushing through her mind, images and feelings that made her wet and wanting.

“I’m going to help you remember,” he promised in her ear. His teeth rasping along the shell of her ear made her whine with desire, and the feel of him, rock hard against her softness, was almost enough to remind her of how good he could make her feel. “Everything. Every little thing.”

His words sent shivers of excitement through her body.

This was what she needed. What they needed.

She reached up and ran her fingers through his luscious locks, each strand sending shockwaves of pure desire through her.

Remembering everything would absolutely and surely complete her.

*****************

Jughead awoke to an incredible sense of gratitude.

He was thankful, mostly, that the woman beside him in bed was alive and well, perhaps a little frayed, as all people who had experienced what she did would be, but she was strong enough that it didn’t defeat her.

He was thankful for her strength. Everyone was so sure she would come apart and she proved them all wrong. They were afraid she would lose control and her powers would destroy them, but she never lost her sense of self. Not then and not now. That they had nothing to fear from her, all along.

He was also thankful that he had this time with her, to decompress, to make love, to affirm his
feelings, because the last couple of days had been rife with violence—pain and death permeating the air like the smell of metal and gunsmoke. He wasn’t so sure he had managed to wash the blood from the creases of his knuckles and the spaces beneath the nails of his fingers, but being with Betty this way pulled him back from the darkness. Her light had guided him back.

Compassion was a virtue he did not expect to see the last few days, but even in the throes of battle, Betty showed a value for life that they should all hope to emulate. He said it once and he’ll say it again. The world didn’t deserve Betty Cooper.

She stirred and he watched her eyes slowly crack open, her lashes fluttering against her cheeks. He kissed her bare shoulder and she sighed, pressing her back against his chest.

“Good morning, Sunshine.”

She smiled, sleepily. “Why do you call me that? Sunshine.”

He chuckled, rubbing the curve of her hips affectionately. He wasn’t expecting questions this early in the morning. “You don’t like it?”

“No. I mean--I don’t mind it. It’s just--why?”

“I already told you before... it’s how I saw you the first time I laid eyes on you.”

She shifted, turning to face him, her green eyes meeting his gaze. “And I already said, I wasn’t quite so ebullient that first day of school. I can’t imagine anyone looking at me that day and thinking sunshine.”

He pushed back some of the hair that had fallen on her cheek. “I saw you and you were all gold and black. Like sunlight and dark.”

Her eyebrow arched. “Gold and black?”

“Your aura.”

Her sleepy eyes widened in surprise. “My aura? Can you see auras?”

“Not all the time. Only the first time I lay eyes on a witch. I see someone’s aura and I know it’s because they’re a witch. After that, I won’t see their aura ever again…”

She stared at him, taking in this new revelation. “Juggie… you can tell a witch by sight?”

He nodded.

“Does anyone else know you can--”

“Only Kevin.”

“Jug.” She reached up and cupped his cheek. “You—you don’t want the other Slayers to know…”

He squeezed her shoulder, not at all surprised that she had figured that out. She knew him by now. Knew what he really wanted. “Yeah. I don’t want to be trapped in this world, Betts. I want to get out and do things. I don’t want to live the rest of my life here in Riverdale because I’m good at being a Slayer. I want to be more than that. I want to be--I don’t know what I want to be, but maybe I can be a rocket scientist. Or a writer. Or anything, really. I don’t want to just be a Slayer.”
She gave him a fond smile. “And I don’t want to just be Wicked. What are we going to do?”

“I guess we’re just going to have to go to college.”

She laughed, and it was a beautiful sound. She slid on top of him, straddling his body, and he felt her softness against him. “I guess we’re going to have to. Perhaps we’ll live together in New York City.”

He placed his hands over her thighs and grinned, his eyes roving over her nakedness. “Share a shitty apartment. Go to school and have part time jobs.”

She nodded. “I would love that.”

“Me too, baby.”

Smiling, she placed her hands on his chest and slowly rolled her hips, which put him in an instant state of readiness.

_God, this woman._

She didn’t have to do much, clearly.

He trailed his hand up her arm, tracing the curve of her breast with his fingers. “Honestly, I shouldn’t be pushing my luck. Any minute now, your mother’s going to bang on that door and I shouldn’t be here...”

She hushed him, taking his hand to put it more firmly on her breast.

He sighed, thrusting his hips up against her. “You’re making this very... hard.”

She giggled. “That’s... the point?”

Stifling his laugh, he flipped them over and she gave a soft squeal, which he muffled with a kiss. The soft flicking of their tongues as their lips moved in tandem mellowed the playful mood.

“Stay,” she whispered against his lips.

He shouldn’t. There were things to do. People to see. He hadn’t gone to see Archie yet, for one. That was item-one on his list, and there were others, friends and foes, that needed attending to, as well.

But this.

Being with Betty felt like healing. He didn’t even know he needed it until last night, when the need for connection ignited a fire they burned through for hours, until they were spent.

He could spare a few more moments with her now. With love. The rest of the world can wait. Nothing was more important than being with Betty.

His phone dinged.

He ignored it, getting lost in the intensity of their kiss and the warm embrace of her body.
Chapter End Notes

You might have noticed that I finally put a chapter count on this one.
Almost at the end, guys.

And again, I would like to thank Josh for a wonderful beta experience.

For those of you who might not know, the voting for the 3rd Bughead Fanfiction Awards is underway. I urge you not only to read these great works but to comment if you like them. And then you can vote. Just think, however—a HUGE list of the most beloved fics in our fandom, all in the palm of your hand! We owe a debt to the organizers of these awards and to @theheavycrown for spending 5 hours putting this list together.

Now on to the story!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I'm the one that's got to die when it's time for me to die, so let me live my life the way I want to.”

— Jimi Hendrix, Jimi Hendrix - Axis: Bold as Love

The starkest difference, Jughead thought, between Lost hospitals and Otherworlder ones were the smells.

The smell of one and the other defined how both promoted healing.

Lost hospitals were necessarily sterilized, so the smell of bleach, washed hands, and disinfected surfaces permeated the air. One scent. One purpose—to eliminate infection, to stop bacterial contamination. It was part of the treatment of the Lost when they were ill or hurt.

Otherworlder hospitals healed differently. The smells were of the earth and elements. Fire and candle smoke, incense and herbs, dried animal body parts and ghastly potions. Surfaces were scoured with lavender, eucalyptus, cloves, and oregano, equipment were made of the purest metals and materials. Porcelain, not glass or plastic, was the vessel of choice.

As Jughead sat in Archie’s room, waiting for him to wake up, the soft pop and burble of the small cauldron at the center of the room, sitting atop magical flames reminded Jughead of the overwhelming task of helping Archie through this harrowingly difficult time.

It was hard enough that Fred was dead. Jughead knew Archie was close with his father, and his loss—the way he died, was going to haunt Archie for the rest of his life, but now Archie was a werewolf, and the challenging task of explaining it first to him, and his mother, Mary, was just the tip of the iceberg. Along with all this tragedy, Jughead had to introduce Archie to an entirely new existence.
The veil had been lifted and what was beyond it would surely be a frightening, overwhelming place.

Jughead knew that at least some of it had already been explained to them. Archie wouldn’t still be here if Mary didn’t believe her son belonged in this facility. Someone had convinced her of the most important truth: her son was a werewolf. He needed to stay here if she didn’t want him to transform and kill everyone in sight.

Right now, Mary had taken a break, going back to the Andrews’ house to shower and change. She had flown quickly from Chicago as soon as she heard of Fred’s death and her son’s hospitalization. It was possible that she had barely left Archie’s side since she landed.

When Jughead arrived at the hospital, he had offered Mary his condolences, and then told her to take a moment, that he would stay with Archie in the meantime.

Mary was grateful for the reprieve. She left shortly after she made him promise to tell her everything.

He had been sitting in the chair Mary left for almost an hour now, and when Archie began to stir from sleep, Jughead waited quietly until Archie was fully awake.

Archie was surprised to see him. “Jug.” He flinched right after, no doubt having strained his shoulder.

The wolf bites would be fresh, still, and it wasn’t going to heal quickly, not unless Archie transformed, which was something the healers would delay for the time being. They’d keep him on partial transformations for the meantime until the next full moon, where he would have to do the full transformation to keep his sanity.

“Just relax,” Jughead said, gently. He moved his seat closer to Archie’s bed so that Archie wouldn’t have to exert effort to talk to him.

“Where’s mom?”

Archie’s face looked half beat up and his arm was in a sling. There were potions that they could give him to help him with all that, but the wolf bite could only heal on its own.

“Probably at your house,” Jughead replied. “She said she needed a shower and fresh clothing. She won’t be long. I’m here for the meantime, if you don’t mind.”

Archie gave a grunt and said nothing.

“I’m sorry about your dad,” Jughead continued. “I’m sorry I wasn’t there for you when—“

“You know, if you had told me about all this, dad might still be alive right now.”

Jughead looked at his hands, unable to look Archie in the eyes. He didn’t know what to say. He could hear Archie’s voice, nasal with his tears.

“I couldn’t, Arch,” was all he said. “The lie was supposed to keep you safe. Most of the time it does, but I guess not this time. I’m sorry.”

The soft scoff that Archie blew out lacked conviction. “It’s not your fault.” Archie’s eyes started to water and he took a deep, trembling breath. “When we saw that thing climbing up Betty’s window, Dad told me we should just call the police, but I—I didn’t listen. I wanted to be some hero, I guess. I shot out of the house and tried to—and then dad...” He sighed, closing his eyes. “He died protecting me.”
“You were his whole life and the choice for him was simple. Him or you. He wasn’t going to let you die.”

Archie was silent for a minute and Jughead didn’t press. Whatever inner conflict Archie was dealing with, he could only resolve it on his own.

When he spoke again, it was on a slightly different track. “So what are you? Are you a werewolf too?”

Jughead shook his head. “I’m a slayer. I make sure everyone in the Otherworld is playing nice and if they aren’t, I put a stop to it and bring them in. I can because their curses don’t work on me.”

“So… supernatural cop.”

Well, when Archie put it that way.

Archie managed to move his good arm up so he could use the back of his hands to wipe at his eyes. “And Ronnie? Kev? Betty?”

“Seer, fey, and witch, respectively.”

Archie chuckled. “Wow.” He was quiet for a while, taking it all in. “Anyone else I should know about?”

“There are plenty, Arch,” said Jughead in a somewhat sorrowful tone. “Cheryl Blossom, her brother, Ethel, Josie, Trev…”

“Holy shit… holy fuck…”

“It’s a lot. I’m sorry.”

Archie ruffled his hands through his messy red hair. “Where were you, man? I’ve been here the last couple of days, and Kevin and Ronnie refused to tell me anything. Then Kevin left and it was just Ronnie. I mean, couldn’t you have dropped in for five minutes?”

Jughead took a deep breath, guilt suffusing him. He nodded and pulled off his beanie. “I know. I should’ve. But I was—I was trying to find Betty and I couldn’t think of doing anything else. I know that’s not an excuse but I was so desperate to find her that nothing else mattered.”

Archie didn’t need an explanation about what happened to Betty. He saw how that happened and suffered the consequences of it the most. “Have you? Found her yet?”

“Yeah. I did.”

“And? Is she okay?”

“She’s okay. She’s safe.”

Archie looked relieved. “That’s good to hear.”

With all the tragedy surrounding Archie, he sounded sincere about his concern for Betty, and Jughead thought they had always been unfairly dismissive of the guy who was supposedly innocent of all things Otherworld. He was a genuinely good person—Jughead always forgot that, because Archie was Lost. Never exactly one of them.

Now he was, and Jughead felt hugely responsible for him. He supposed Kevin wouldn’t mind if he
dragged Archie along for their Saturday rounds.

After a brief silence, Jughead asked him quietly if the healers told him everything about his condition.

Archie looked like their history teacher had asked him to recite the Declaration of Independence, verbatim. He looked that unsure. “They called it lycan--something--”

“Lycanthropy.”

Archie gave a relieved sigh. “That. I guess that’s just a fancy, medical word for being a werewolf, right?”

“Yeah. It’s a disease, really. You have an extreme, allergic reaction to silver, your metabolism is through the roof, your hemoglobin reacts at the slightest injury so you heal really fast and--and your cells transform. Nobody’s born a werewolf or vampire. You all have to be made.”

“They said--they said they’re keeping me here while the full moon’s out, and they’re giving me this medicine--”

“Potion, Arch. They’re giving you a potion.”

Archie’s lips tightened to a line, and Jughead felt a little bad for correcting him, but things were different now. Archie had to understand that he was an Otherworlder now. If he ever got injured or needed healing, he wasn’t going anywhere but here, to St. Brighid, and he would be treated by witches, fey, and even fellow werewolves.

“Potion,” Archie repeated, quietly. “They said there was wolfsbane in it, but that it was a mixture of things, to suppress my complete transformation until the next full moon. They said that it was better to start off gradual, and that I’ll probably feel pretty miserable for about a month until the next full moon happens. They weren’t specific about what I’d do then, I mean, they told me to contact the local creature hive, whatever the fuck that means--”

“You can stay at the Whyte Wyrm for the next full moon,” Jughead told him. “And every full moon thereafter.”

“The Whyte Wyrm? Your dad’s bar?”

“It’s Slayer central. We have facilities. The ground level is a bar, but the basement is a huge network of dungeons. It’s where Trev stays every month, too.”

Archie sighed. It was a miserable sound. “Great.”

“It’s also where he can safely practice gaining control of his mind while transformed. The reigning pack, the Upadrashtas, sends a Transitioner every couple of months--like a werewolf therapist, to help Trev. They will send one for you, too.”

Jughead could see Archie’s fists curling, and it pained Jughead, watching Archie realize that his life was changing before his very eyes. It certainly wasn’t the end of everything, but it was going to be a difficult change that could still lead him to a path of destruction.

“So what does this mean?” Archie asked, quietly. “That I can’t go to college? That I can’t play football? Do I live and die here in Riverdale?”

Jughead knew all too well that feeling--of being trapped in your own skin, in what appears to be
your destiny. “It just means you’ll have to do things as a werewolf now. Many werewolves live successful lives among the Lost, just that they have to… disappear every 4 days of the month.”

“Nobody who does that can keep a job, dude.”

“Werewolves have kept jobs,” Jughead was quick to add. “Many Otherworlders hold positions of power. They own companies. They give jobs to the likes of you. You can even play professional football—rugby, too, if you like. If there’s an Otherworlde in the organization, you can probably make it work. It’s not the end of the world, Arch.”

“Feels like it.”

Jughead couldn’t fault Archie for thinking so. This was an extraordinary adjustment. “You may have to defer college for a year, though. I recommend it, at least. You need to adjust to your new life. Need to figure out how you’re going to navigate it. The Upadrashtas will help you with that—they will help you with anything.”

Uncertainty blanketed Archie’s expression. “So this… pack you’re talking about. They’re going to help me out. Does that mean I have to join them?”

Jughead shook his head. “No. You don’t have to, Arch, but as a werewolf, you will need a pack. It’ll be an instinct for you, anyway. You’ll want to be in one. It doesn’t need to be the Upadrashtas.”

“If you were a werewolf, would you join them?”

Jughead wasn’t going to lie. “I would. They’re powerful and organized. They’re the best pack you can join in these parts and they have smaller chapters throughout the east coast.”

“In exchange for what?”

“You contribute to the funds, monthly, and when they call you to arms, you answer.”

Archie gave a soft scoff. Jughead understood the implications. It was like being in the army forever. 

*Forever…*

Archie was immortal now. Jughead didn’t know if someone had told him that, but if they didn’t, Jughead was pretty sure that revelation could be saved for another day.

“So,” Archie said. “This… *this* is the world you and the others have been living in.”

Jughead nodded.

“Magic, potions, vampires, witches, and ghosts.”

“Eh… ghosts are rarer than you think. Occasionally, there’s a haunting somewhere. Spirits aren’t meant for this plane. They get corrupted if they stay here for too long, so they have to be sent away…”

“And what? They call you? Like a ghostbuster?”

Jughead grinned. “It’d be cool if I had a proton pack. Get in my Ecto 1 and have a pet ghost following me around.”

Archie mustered a smile. “And whatever you do…”
“Never cross the streams!” they finished together, laughing.

Archie sighed and shook his head. “God, this is overwhelming.”

Jughead couldn’t imagine. He grew up in this world. Archie was plopped right in the middle of it without warning.

“I’m here for you for whatever you need,” Jughead said. “If you encounter any kind of Otherworldly problem, you call me and I’ll help you.”

Archie’s eyes widened slowly. “So when you say you’re working Friday nights for the family business…”

“I am doing Slayer things, yes.”

“Shit. And here I thought you were bartending and making a ton in tips.”

It was hilarious, Jughead thought, that his father wouldn’t let him bartend at the appropriate age of 18 or drink alcohol but he would let his son take charge of Slaying for Riverdale for months on end.

“Do I look like I make a ton in tips?” He wondered why he zeroed in on this. He made enough for himself to take Betty out for burgers and coffee, but he wasn’t lavish by any means. Where’d Archie get that?

“I don’t mean you’re giving money away, but you never shirked your responsibilities, not even for Betty, dude. I had to figure out why you were so committed. I guess… I guess, I can’t think of a better reason to skip being with your girl.”

Jughead sighed. Why was it always the young ones who boiled everything down to its essence? He supposed it really was that simple. He knew he had a responsibility. He knew that he had to do his rounds and make sure things were going as expected. But at what point did he start becoming his dad?

“It’s called a job, Arch,” was all Jughead said. “We all gotta grow up sometimes.”

Archie cocked a smile. “I know, man, but we’re only really just 18. Life’s short.”

Jughead resisted the urge to tell him that as a Slayer, he lived a pretty damn long life and that Archie would probably outlive all of them, but he got the gist—had this similar conversation with Kevin. And his conversation with Betty this morning? He wanted that life with her in New York City. He wanted them both to live for something other than what the Otherworld demanded of them.

“So… I have a question,” Archie said, cutting through Jughead’s thoughts. “I’m a werewolf, I have this thing inside me and it’s like… do I have to tell my sexual partners that I have this? Can I infect them?”

Jughead chuckled. Count on Archie Andrews to ask the real important questions.

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Archie’s still asleep, came Jughead’s text. Told his mom I’ll keep him company. This may take a
Betty smiled at his message, appreciating how he’d been extremely attentive to her thoughts and needs the last few hours, even knowing that she had to tell him to take it easy at some point.

He had been reluctant that morning to do the things he had to do, and she understood it, the need to be close, to stay together, to hold hands—to be physically there.

After their tumble in the sheets, it was Polly who texted him and said, *You’d best get out of there, Tiger. Mom’s not going to be happy when she wakes up and sees your motorcycle parked on our curb.*

Betty was quite surprised and delighted that Polly had felt comfortable enough to text Jughead directly, even if it was because her own phone was nowhere in sight at the moment.

As it turned out, Polly had her things, and the moment she got her phone, she found out that Cheryl had texted her, asking if they could meet up for late brunch a little out of town.

Betty thought it the most Cheryl thing that, right after a night fighting for their lives, the first thing Cheryl would do was have brunch with her cousin.

*I bet she’ll look great, too.*

So here she was now, at a brunch place 45 minutes away from where she lived, sitting *al fresco.* She was a little more dressed up herself because she fully expected that Cheryl would be glammed the hell up.

The venue was a practical choice. Riverdale was still recovering from the riots and many businesses were still closed. If they wanted to have a decent sit down, they had to drive a little further out.

She texted Jughead back. *Take your time. I don’t expect brunch with Cheryl will be quick.*

Just as Betty finished typing, she saw them, Cheryl and Toni, heading up the sidewalk, two gorgeous ladies holding hands, who, while distinct in their styles, clearly liked to exchange clothing with each other.

Mesh stockings on Cheryl were cute but definitely more a Toni thing, and Toni, with the applique roses on the breast of her dark t-shirt, looked great, but it was a piece she definitely loaned from Cheryl.

Nevertheless, they both looked stunning, turning heads as they walked, hand-in-hand, towards Betty and her outside seating.

“Hello, Cousin Betty. Prompt, as expected.”

Betty cocked a smile. “And you, fashionably late, as expected.”

Cheryl raised an eyebrow and Toni laughed.

“I tried to get her out of bed earlier,” Toni said, casting an affectionate glance at Cheryl.

Betty shrugged. “We all needed the rest.” God knows, being with Jughead all night had done wonders to her psyche. “Are you joining us for brunch, Toni?”

“Not today, B. Cousins only, I’m told.”
Cheryl nodded. “That’s right. However lovelorn I shall get without my ravishingly tenacious Toni, I thought it for the best that it just be the two of us for now. I hope you recognize the sacrifice I’m making on your account, Cousin Betty.”

Betty could answer what Cheryl said with sarcasm, but she couldn’t even joke about that now. This woman had saved her life without a moment’s hesitation. She deserved better.

She took Cheryl’s hands and said, “I do. Thank you.”

She could tell Cheryl was surprised, perhaps unprepared by the sincerity of it.

“Y-yes, well. Don’t you forget it.”

“I won’t.”

Cheryl pulled her hands away from Betty’s with a huff, turning to Toni, upon which her demeanor changed entirely. Her eyes softened, cupping Toni’s face in her hands, then she leaned over to give her a tender kiss goodbye.

For several seconds, it was like they both retreated into a world all their own, then they separated and smiled at each other.

“I’ll see you later, ma cher,” Cheryl said.

Toni kissed Cheryl again before waving goodbye to Betty and walking off.

Cheryl watched Toni go for several seconds before joining Betty at the table. “Well now, have you ordered?”

“I haven’t. I wanted to wait for you. See if you wanted to split anything.”

“I don’t.”

Betty pursed her lips, resisted a snarky response, and nodded. “Okay.”

Cheryl scowled, slapping a hand on the table. “Stop that. Stop talking to me like I deserve your good will.”

Betty frowned right back. “But you do. You saved my life.”

“Yes, I did! And don’t think I won’t make you pay me back for it!”

A stone dropped in Betty’s stomach. If Cheryl was thinking of making her join the coven, Betty was afraid she had to say yes. The peace that Jughead had managed to build up in her that morning was slowly crumbling. “Ch-Cheryl, I--”

“The payment I demand is that you join the Vixens.”

The world paused. “Excuse me?”

“In light of me saving your life, I’d like you to join the Vixens and promise me your vote to assure my captainship.”

“But--”

“No buts. That’s what I’m asking for and you’re going to give it because I saved your fucking life.”
To be fair, joining the Vixens as payment was not nearly the equivalent of something as heroic as going up against one’s twin brother to prevent a tragedy, so really, Betty shouldn’t be looking a gift horse in the mouth.

“Okay,” she said, teeth grit. “I’m joining the Vixens. When next I go back to school, I’ll have the uniform on.”

The snarl on Cheryl’s face disappeared. “Excellent! Now we can order.” She picked up one of the two menus that had been left at their table and began to read it.

Warily, Betty did the same. “Cher… school’s almost over and we’re--we’re leaving high school. What is the possible benefit of me joining and you becoming captain? I mean--”

“Veronica wants the captainship because it means she wins. I want the captainship because of legacy.” Cheryl kept her eyes on the menu as she spoke in a lofty tone. “If you graduate as captain of the squad, your name goes down in school history--it gets engraved on the Captain’s plaque hanging along the hallway, and Vixens years down the line with refer to the squad you left behind by your name, and for a couple of years after you graduate, the squad is obligated to invite you back to judge the tryouts.”

“You want to be invited back to high school tryouts?” Betty asked, mystified.

“I do. Like I said, it’s a matter of legacy. You may not care about that sort of thing, but I do. It’s important to me. I may not be immortal, but my legacy could be.” She sniffed. “Besides, with Jason going to trial, I want to be remembered as something other than the psycho’s sister.”

Betty refused to believe that she was that flippant about it. Cheryl was, as Betty had come to learn, a master at hiding her emotions under a thick veneer of Mean Girl. She did believe, however, that legacy was more important to her than ever, that she wanted to overcome the taint her brother was going to leave on her.

If anyone deserved to have her name up on the Captain’s plaque, it was Cheryl.

Veronica was going to kill her for voting Cheryl into the captainship, but Betty was half certain Veronica would understand.

They ordered and as they waited for their food, Cheryl told her that calling in her favor wasn’t the only thing she wanted to meet with Betty for.

Betty waited for her to go on, nervous. What else could Cheryl possibly want from her.

“I wanted to tell you everything,” Cheryl continued. “About your father, and what Jason did, and maybe why he did it.”

Betty swallowed. She was not expecting this--to have this emotional baggage unloaded on her this morning, but again, Cheryl was doing her a favor, because instead of her going around demanding answers, Cheryl was offering to lay it all out at her feet.

She wasn’t sure if she was ready for it, but she would have to be.

Nodding, Betty braced herself.

Cheryl began by telling her about Hal Cooper and his desperate plea to Penelope Blossom. He needed help removing Betty’s magic without killing her, and where Penelope told him no, Jason offered a false solution.
It was a long tale, with intricate weavings and turns. Cheryl told her about Hal’s poppet, and how Jason had used it to push Hal to madness. It had been confiscated into evidence, no doubt for Jason’s trial.

As Cheryl spoke, Betty listened, struggling to keep it together. Wiping away tears as fast as they came, she was glad that Cheryl didn’t feel the need to get a response from her. She couldn’t possibly say anything without breaking down completely.

She knew it. She knew it.

Her father couldn’t have pretended all this time. Hal Cooper had loved her, as a father would a daughter, for real, until obsession driven by a binding spell overcame him and drove him to murder. It was his love of his daughter that made him fly all the way across the United States to seek help, only to get it from the one who would betray them all so badly.

She hated that Jason had caused so much tragedy and destruction. The lives that had to be taken and the lies that had to be told, which all helped to further his goals, had ruined so many.

And yet in spite of the devastation, she knew that coming to Riverdale had been life-changing in the best and worse ways. Riverdale—a land of intersecting ley lines and incredible magic, was exactly what its reputation said it would be: the town with pep. It is vivacious and spirited, all fire and energy, enthusiastic and explosive. When it’s good, it’s a nirvana. When it’s bad, it’s complete chaos. If you wanted the between, you might be disappointed.

Riverdale is where she met Jughead, sharing with him a love so deep that she was certain in her belief that she would stay with him forever, for as long as he would have her. He believed in her. He made her better.

It was also Riverdale that delivered her from the shadow of her Wickedness. It brought to light the fact that hiding her powers, keeping it wrapped in a dark cloak, only served to make their enemies that much more emboldened to take her. She didn’t know yet what everyone thought of her magic. It may be that the elders and Serpents were on the verge of lynching her, but she had a case to argue in her defense, and Jughead, the love of her life, had called her back without the need to drug her. She didn’t go berserk, she didn’t kill people indiscriminately. She wouldn’t have known that for sure if Jughead hadn’t been there to show her.

Riverdale brought her to the Spellmans. Her family. They wove a cocoon of pure love, the antidote to the dysfunction of her family. They healed the Coopers. They were a much needed balm, and they took care of the man she loved because they thought of him as family. They were everything and her life was better for knowing them.

Jason had thrown a wrench in her life when he killed her father, but he had inadvertently brought her to the one place in the world where she was able to rebuild it, stronger and better than ever.

Sometime in the middle of Cheryl’s storytelling, their food came, and Betty blindly picked at her mandarin salad, lost in the flow of Cheryl’s words.

In the end, when Cheryl had finished her tale, Betty looked her cousin in the eyes and said, “I’m sorry your brother turned out the way he did. I’m sorry your father did what he did to you both.”

Cheryl sniffed, vigorously slicing her signature sandwich of arugula, parmesan cheese, and delicately concocted chicken salad spread. “Yes, well, it’s that crazy Blossom blood. The men have it in spades. I’m sure there’s a psycho gene lurking in my mother’s side, as well. You’re lucky the Spellman line is all sunshine and flowers—probably counter-acted whatever Blossom crazy Chic
could’ve succumbed to.”

Betty pressed her hand on Cheryl’s wrist, which made Cheryl freeze. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in Riverdale, is that you don’t have to do things by yourself. The people around you will be there to catch you. You have Toni and Veronica. That is an amazing support team, but you have family you can rely on too, Cher. You can trust in the Coopers. If you’ll let us in, we can be there for you, too.”

Cheryl’s hardened eyes began to water and she blinked rapidly, her lips snarling for a second before they slackened and she sighed, putting her hand over Betty’s.

“You are such a sickening goody two shoes, Betty. I should really hate you.”

Betty cocked a smile. “Hate is such a strong word.”

Cheryl made a sound of disgust, shaking her head and swiping at her tears with her napkin. She took a zucchini fry from her plate and dipped it in a generous helping of ranch dressing. She shoved three in her mouth and she sighed contentedly. “God, that’s good. Mother will kill me for consuming this many carbs, but she will only know if you tell her.”

Betty chuckled. Was it any wonder that they had parallel mommy issues? She should text Cheryl for family gatherings at the Spellmans. She was certain that Sabrina and Jughead would strangle her for it, but they were going to have to deal with it. She was going to bring Cheryl in now, whether they liked it or not.

“Cher, what’s going to happen to Jason?”

Cher continued eating, that haughty look returning on her face. “Don’t know. Don’t care.”

Betty’s lips pursed. If she was going to let Cheryl in, Cheryl had to make the same effort for her. “Cher, of course you care. You cared enough when Jughead was poised to beat him to death.”

Cheryl stopped shoving zucchini in her mouth and sighed, lowering her gaze. “That was then. He has said a lot since.”

“Like what things?”

“Just—dark, soulless things. He’s going to trial, naturally. That’s what mother said. And mother has to abstain from judgement. You will have a say in his fate, as his victim, but there are so many of you that he hurt and killed. He may have hired Penny to do the dirty work, but it was his power and money that enabled her.” She shifted in her seat, looking pleadingly at Betty. “I told him last night that I could help him. That I might be able to plead for his life—give him a life sentence instead of death.”

“What did he say?”

Cheryl shook her head. “He told me that he wanted to live, but when I looked into his eyes, they were stone cold. I asked him if he regretted everything, and he just—he just looked at me, Cousin Betty. He says, ‘Why should I?’ I felt his evil, then. We’re connected, Jason and I, and I’m afraid he’ll infect me.”

“He won’t,” Betty whispered.

Fear deepened the otherwise nonexistent lines on Cheryl’s face. “You don’t know that. He connected you both with an amber skull, but that connection is broken. He and I are connected by
birth. He and I are each other’s half. I can’t break my connection to him even if I wanted to.”

Betty squeezed her shoulder. “The trial will decide his fate for you. Will you accept its judgement?”

Cheryl nodded. “I will.”

“You can take his powers. As his twin, you are allowed. The innocent shouldn’t have to suffer the fate of the guilty.”

The sigh that escaped Cheryl was long and burdened.

“Do you want me to vote mercy, Cheryl?” Betty asked, her voice soft, her heart open. “I will do that if you ask me to.”

Cheryl shook her head. “I don’t think that’s fair to you, Betty. I want to save Jason from himself, but I’m his sister. Of course I want to, but then this is also the part of me that wants to believe that reforming him means I can be saved from the danger of turning into him.”

Betty felt a wave of compassion for Cheryl. She understood so fully to be afraid of one’s self, but it worked out for her. It will work out for Cheryl, too. “You are not your brother, Cheryl.”

“We shared a womb. That counts for a lot. Whatever he has in him, I have in me.”

Betty shook her head vigorously. “What matters is the choices you make. Your path and Jason’s diverged the moment you both broke free from your father’s influence. You chose to be better. Jason chose to continue the dark path your father was leading you both on. If saving your brother helps you understand this, I’ll help you.”

Cheryl caught Betty’s hands in hers and squeezed. Her eyes were shining. “Vote your conscience. Whatever that may be. Because in my heart of hearts, I know… only the Mother Goddess can save his soul now.”

The bar was closed, and while the Whyte Wyrm doors were opened, only Serpents and associates were allowed.

While the Serpents transported prisoners to their respective First Judgement facilities, the Whyte Wyrm was not a place of recreation.

They had not yet even begun to mourn their fallen, or maybe they did. The bar, which had been Tall Boy’s post, was shuttered.

Jughead held Betty’s hand as he led her to the billiard section. Veronica was there with the others—Joaquin, Sweet Pea, and Fangs—and she ran towards Betty, throwing her arms around her.

“Oh, my God,” Veronica cried, tears in her eyes as she kept Betty in her embrace. “Oh, my God, Betty. I was so worried about you. So scared! And Jughead was a raging mess.”

Jughead frowned. He thought he handled himself pretty well. He may have kicked down a few doors and used threats and intimidation to get answers, but he was hardly a “mess”.
“He would’ve made a deal with the Devil himself,” Sweet Pea added.

Fangs made the sign of the cross, pressing his hands together in prayer.

Veronica pulled away, pretending to kiss a crucifix and pointing it to the heavens. “Ay, _dios mío, niña. Él era como el diablo._”

Though Betty was smiling, confusion was clear on her face. “I don’t—“

“He _was_ the Devil,” Fangs said, his voice lowering forebodingly.

Sweet Pea laughed while Jughead scowled. “Haha, very funny, guys.”

“Aw, Juggie,” Veronica crooned, throwing her arms around his waist. “We’re just trying to lighten your very serious mood. And also, there is a distinct lack of alcohol. These moochers have been drinking off my stash.” She pulled a large flask from her purse. “I might as well offer you some.”

Jughead rolled his eyes. It was hard to stay annoyed with Veronica, whose ability to see auras probably gave her the distinct advantage of sweet talking everyone.

Then again, Sweet Pea had the same abilities and he _never_ used diplomacy to get what he wanted.

“If you want alcohol, you can go to the storage room in the back.” Jughead tossed her his keys.

Veronica caught it. “You rock, Jughead! C’mon, B! Let’s maraud the booze closet!”

Betty began to follow after Veronica but paused to give Jughead a soft, reassuring kiss. “I’ll be here when you’re done.”

Jughead nodded, glancing briefly up at his father’s office.

She left and Jughead turned to the Serpents. “I have to talk to my dad.”

Joaquin, who was closest to FP next to Jughead, gestured to the stairs leading up to the second floor. “He’s been in a mood. Don’t know if it’s good or bad, but if anyone can handle him, it’s you, brother.”

Jughead patted Joaquin’s back appreciatively as he went.

FP was writing something down when Jughead walked in on him. It looked like a leather-bound journal, and Jughead had to remind himself that his father, as a Slayer, wrote about his experiences, too.

FP closed the journal and set it aside. “Thanks for coming, kid. Have a seat.”

Casting his father a wary glance, he sat, waiting for FP to speak.

“How’s Betty doing? All her memories back yet?”

Jughead nodded. “Most of it, yeah. Polly said she might still mix a few things up, but we all just have to help her through it.”

FP sighed and nodded. “And Archie? You talked to him yet?”

“I did. Offered him the help he needs. Mary might stick around for a while until his transition’s complete, then they’ll reevaluate his living situation. I’ll help him when I can, but I haven’t thought
about what we’ll do when… if I go off to college.” He said that last part carefully. He and FP never really discussed his college plans. FP knew he wanted to go, but it wasn’t real until acceptance letters arrived.

FP paused. “I hope you do. It was never my thing, but you’re way smarter than I ever was.”

Jughead’s eyebrow arched in surprise. “You mean that? That you hope I go to college?”

“Yes. I do, kid.” He waved a his hand in a small circle. “All this, the magic and the fighting and the politics, it ain’t gonna make you happy. I’m not gonna lie and tell you that you’ll be able to leave the life of a Slayer behind. You’ll always be a Slayer, wherever you go. It’s in your blood, and when you see Otherworlders causing trouble, you’d want to step in and fix the situation, but outside of Riverdale, you don’t have to do it 24-7. The local Slayer will take care of that stuff for you.”

“And who’ll watch out for Riverdale?”

“I will,” FP said. “It was my job in the first place.”

Jughead didn’t know what to say. His fists were digging into his lap. He wasn’t feeling any of the relief and happiness he was supposed to feel at this news. He was worried—worried that his father was telling him all this because bad news was imminent.

“What’s the bad news, dad? Tell me. Is it Betty? Are they asking you to ‘take care’ of her?”

FP looked taken aback. “Who’s they?”

Jughead shrugged. “I don’t know. The Serpents? The other Slayers? The Council of the Dales?”

FP was already shaking his head. “Nobody’s telling me to ‘take care’ of Betty. She’s good, Jug. She saved many lives. She didn’t kill anyone indiscriminately. She’s scary powerful, yeah, but everyone reckons you have her under control.”

Anger bristled beneath Jughead’s skin. “I do not control Betty. Betty has complete and total control of herself. She doesn’t need me to call her back. She doesn’t need anyone to reign her in or dose her with drugs. She’s Wicked and that’s it.”

FP put up his hand in a placating gesture. “I believe you. I swear I do, but for now, this is what people think, and we ought to be okay with that. The big play right now is for the Blossom coven’s political power, and it’s probably what’s distracting everyone from thinking too hard about Betty.”

Jughead was not okay with it, but he had to have faith that Betty’s strength and kindness would be noticed and appreciated by those who may still have doubts about her. She’ll win everyone over, just like she convinced him so easily that she couldn’t possibly be like any of the Wicked witches his father told him of.

“The Midvale and Greendale covens think this situation with Jason is a vulnerability,” FP continued.

“It is.” Jughead couldn’t imagine that Jason wanting to undercut his own mother wouldn’t cause the Blossoms problems.

FP nodded. “They’re ready to pounce and it’s giving me anxiety. As difficult as the Blossom coven is, at least we’ve established a robust understanding of each other. They know how we work and we know how they work. It’s probably in the best interest of the Slayers and Serpents to throw our support behind the Blossoms.”
Jughead couldn’t believe they were at this point—where they were aligning themselves with covens. Then again, the Jones vs. Blossom feud of yore hadn’t exactly been a feud in years. They were uneasy bedfellows, more like, and the time had come to acknowledge that they needed one another in the grand scheme of things.

Certainly, he owed Cheryl a life-debt for helping save Betty’s life. “I can’t imagine that this will bring the house down. Cheryl helped defeat her brother, which can be construed as the Blossoms fixing their own problems expediently. Besides, they’re too big to fail.”

“It helps, too, that Betty is a Blossom,” FP added. “Of course, nobody’s bothered to ask her if she’s aligned with them, but everyone’s taking it for granted that she is.”

Again, Jughead could barely contain his irritation on Betty’s behalf. She had explicitly told him, over and over, that she wasn’t going to be a Blossom coven stooge. She wasn’t going to answer to the coven, ever. She helped in efforts to preserve the peace, which just happened to be an outcome that the reigning Blossom coven preferred, but she didn’t fight for the Blossoms. She fought for the people she loved.

But this went back to what FP said. This will work for now.

If all this meant Jughead didn’t have to take Betty and run away with her, then he can live with it.

“What are we expected to do?” Jughead asked.

FP cocked a smile, and for the first time, Jughead noticed how tired-looking he was. Perhaps Jughead hadn’t been the only one who lost sleep over all this. “It’s all very subtle at this point. Just a constant alignment with the Blossoms, keeping an eye on the Greendale and Midvale covens. I already have my feelers out. And it looks like Toni and Cheryl Blossom are already hitting it off.”

“That the talk of the town now?”

FP seemed amused by it. “People are intrigued by the match. It works for the time being. Your relationship with Betty isn’t without its political implication, either.”

“My relationship with Betty is not anyone else’s business.”

FP put his hands up in mild surrender. “Eh, it is what it is. Most powerful witch in Riverdale and Riverdale’s Slayer Prince, together? People will think twice before crossing either of you.”

Jughead scowled. “Don’t call me a prince. This isn’t a monarchy.”

“We ain’t got the titles, but Riverdale is a kingdom, son. It’s all this magic. It’s too primal and ancient to be governed by modern laws.” FP shrugged. “Maybe it is best that you got away from all this. It’s a bubble. We ain’t like the rest of the world.”

Jughead would be happy to take it at that. “So are you okay with me and Betty now? Are you okay with Betty, period? Because if you still think she’s a danger to me--”

“I wouldn’t say I’m okay with all of it, Jug. Obviously, she means everything to you. People might exploit that and get to you through her, but the lass is strong. She’ll protect you as well as you’d protect her.” He wagged a finger at Jughead. “She’s Alice’s kid, though. You step out of line and you’re not the only one whose balls are gonna shrivel up and die. Somehow, Alice will blame me if you break her daughter’s heart--”

“That’s not going to happen. Unlike you, I take care of my witch.”
FP’s lips pursed and for a moment, Jughead thought his dad was going to lose it, but perhaps FP had grown over the years more than Jughead gave him credit for. Perhaps he’d accepted his faults on the matter of his wife leaving with his daughter, because all FP said next was, “Come home, kid. I’ve said what I need to say, but the rest of it, we’re just going to have to hash out as we go along, and we can’t do that if you’re staying at the Spellmans. Zelda has explicitly told me that I’m not welcome at her house until I make nice with you, so here we are.”

Jughead swallowed, thinking about it.

FP chuckled. “I might ask you to leave your door open when Betty’s around, though. So—”

Jughead appreciated the joke even if he didn’t think it was that funny. He deferred from saying that out of all the times he and Betty had fooled around, they’d only ever gotten handsy once in the Jones house.

“Okay, dad,” Jughead finally said. “I’ll come home.”

“Thank you. I’ll fix something up later for dinner. To celebrate. Bring Betty over if you like.”

Jughead wasn’t that keen on trusting his father around Betty yet. That was to be determined, but he didn’t say anything. His father was making a real effort. That was more than what FP had ever done for him in the past.

At that point, FP shooed him out, telling him he had documentation to complete. “I’m just glad they’re mostly online and not on parchment paper. Honestly, the aesthetics of all this magic and ancientness drives me up the wall sometimes. Those vamps are #1 offenders.”

Jughead left his father’s office, and when he rejoined his friends at the pool table, they had a bottle of tequila out with shot glasses, and a half-dozen bottles of Belgian beer in a crate.

Betty slipped her arms around his waist beneath his jacket, looking up at him with concern.

“Everything okay?”

He enfolded her in his embrace as he looked down at her upturned face, swaying slightly as he pulled her even closer. “Yeah. Everything’s fine. Are you okay?”

She smiled. “We’re good. We’re doing shots, apparently. What’s the legal drinking age again?”

He chuckled. “This is the Otherworld, baby. Some of us started drinking at twelve.”

She pressed her chest to his, their noses touching as she whispered, “Well, don’t drink too much. I’d like your faculties to be fully intact later.”

He couldn’t help the grin that spread his lips at that. Promises of sexy times was bound to put anyone in a good mood. “I’m a Slayer. I’ll show you what I can do with half-a-dozen shots of tequila in me.”

He kissed her, tongues tangling heatedly, without a single care about who was watching them.

“Whoa, whoa!” Sweet Pea cried, cutting through their haze. “Take it easy, chief! Some of us can see auras and it’s obscene. Obscene!”

“It’s not obscene,” Veronica said, pouring the tequila and grabbing the salt from another table. “It’s hot and I like it.”

“That’s because you’re a freak and you like watching porn,” Joaquin said.
Veronica glared at him. “Did Kevin tell you that?”

“Naturally.”

“Can’t argue.”

Jughead had to laugh. “Alright, alright. Betty, try to keep your hands to yourself for a couple of hours, yes?”

She gasped, laughing even as she took the shot glass that Veronica offered her. “I’ll get you for that later.”

Everyone hooted in delight. The mood was buoyant and Jughead was happy to go with it.

They took their shots, and Jughead felt the alcohol’s heat spread from his belly to the rest of his body. It was nice, and in spite of the group’s ribbing, he and Betty remained attached at the hip all night.

They were of one mind. Nothing was going to keep them apart.

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Penny’s trial was scheduled for the next couple of days. While other trials had been occurring over the last week, hers was the first to be held with the entire Council in judgement.

The trials had, until then, been First Judgement hearings.

Penny would be judged by the whole assembly, because her crimes spanned the Dales. There were a long list of offenses, but the heaviest charges were the murders.

Every single death that occurred during the Battle at the Vault (as it was now called), had been charged to her as the instigator of the riot. There was hardly any doubt that she would get a death sentence. This was almost just a formality.

As Jughead sat in the front row seats with Betty, their fingers intertwined, he couldn’t help but remember the conversation he had with Penny that first night they put her in the dungeons. The same night they retrieved Betty from Thornhill.

It was Jughead who fed her the potion that would wake her from the stunning spell Betty had visited on all their enemies.

When Penny opened her eyes, Jughead was the first face she saw.

She looked startled, but almost immediately, her expression soured and she spat in his direction. Her spit landed on his shoe.

Penny’s face had conveyed so much hate and resentment, that Jughead had to fight the urge to remind her that if it weren’t for him, she would’ve been dead years ago.

But clearly, that wasn’t how she remembered it. She had assigned to him her fall from grace. He represented her failures and her exile. He was the reason her ambitions had been stalled. He was the one who ripped the patch from off her jacket and the man who had carved the tattoo off her arm.
He hadn’t wanted to mutilate her flesh, but he needed something visceral to show the others, to
convince them that driving her away was enough.

And it worked for a while. It would’ve worked forever if Jason hadn’t sniffed her out and used her
for his gains.

“I ought to strangle you,” Penny hissed, pacing back and forth, the bars of the cell behind her.

Jughead stood to full height. Her words were of no consequence to him. There was nothing she
could do that could harm him. She had been stripped of her clothes and checked head to foot for
weapons. She was wearing a flannel shirt and drawstring pants. Even her underwear wasn’t hers,
he’d been told. He could only be surprised that they gave her any.

“Should’ve killed you when I had the chance,” Jughead shot back, his gaze unwavering. His anger
for Penny was still very raw. She had conspired to destroy Riverdale to pursue her own ambitions.
She had threatened Betty’s life. She was a total menace who caused the loss of lives and changed
others irreparably. He wasn’t bluffing. If Jason, Samuel, and the dozens of other creatures hadn’t
distracted him, he wouldn’t have hesitated to go after Penny and slit her throat in the heat of battle.

As it is, he had been stripped of his own weapons before he could be in this cell with her. Not that he
needed a weapon to kill her. He could snap her neck, easily, but even he had to admit, fighting an
army was a scenario different than him being in a cell with her, where she absolutely could not
defend herself.

“I’m not going to ask you how you did it, Penny,” Jughead said. “I know how. I still remember how
you ordered Serpents around when you were with us. For some reason, people listen to you. It’s
your gift and you used it to further your greed. So this resentment you have? It’s misdirected. All
this?” Jughead waved his hand to encompass her cell. “This is your doing? Not mine. Not Jason’s.
Yours.”

Penny looked mildly surprised. “Do you think that self-examination shit works on me? I’ve always
looked out for me and that is never going to change.” She gestured casually between him and herself.
“You have your kink, helping people and keeping Riverdale peaceful… my kink is getting what I
want. Moving people around to do what I want them to do.”

Jughead scoffed. “You’re something else, Penny. You’re not the only witch who couldn’t cast a
decent spell. You don’t see the rest of us destroying the world.”

Penny rolled her eyes. “Please don’t tell me you’re talking about yourself. There’s no comparison
between us, Jones. Even if you suck as a witch, you’ve got Slayer powers, which more than makes
up for your inability to cast spells. At any rate, you can send a demon back to hell.”

“Yeah, about that… that’s another plan of yours that failed.”

She shrugged. “It was still worth a shot. You see, I don’t sit around feeling sorry for myself because
I’m a piss-poor witch. If you think that’s why I’m like this, that’s not the reason. I just want power
and money.”

Jughead crossed his arms over his chest. “The reason you’re like this is because you’re morally
corrupt.”

Her lips tightened to a grim line. “You and your father got in the way of my plans. Then and now.
You are the cause of my failures. It’s why I wanted you to suffer. I’m not sorry for doing what I did.
I’m not sorry for taking your girl. I wanted her killed, and I wanted to send her head to you in a box.
I swear it, Jones. I wanted to see the look on your face when you opened that box and saw her. I wanted it so badly.”

Jughead tried not to let her conjure that image in his head. It was not something he ever wanted to haunt his thoughts, or worse his nightmares.

“What did you want from the vault, Penny?” Jughead asked to divert the discussion. “I know Jason didn’t care. He wanted Betty and her magic. That’s it. What did you want from that vault?”

Penny chuckled. “Nothing. Everything. The vault was a means to get all the Slayers out in the open so we can expose the lot of you to my army. It would’ve gotten all of you killed. If it weren’t for that demon girlfriend of yours, we would have succeeded. If I had known she could do that shit, I would’ve drugged her before she set foot on that battlefield, but Jason didn’t see it fit to share that fact with me.”

Jughead tried not to laugh. “And you don’t blame him for your troubles?”

“I do, but at the time, he promised me power—told me that once his plan was complete, he could get rid of you all with a flick of his fingers. I think he might have succeeded in that, too. If it weren’t—“

“Are you going to say, ‘if it weren’t for you pesky teenagers?’” This time, Jughead grinned. “Because me and my Scooby Gang would love that.”

Penny sneered, huffing discontentedly. “His sister betrayed him. It’s why you never trust anyone.”

Jughead nodded. “That was a boon. If Cheryl never told us, Betty would be long gone before we figured it out and Jason would’ve been unstoppable.”

“And now here we all are.” She threw her hands up and sat on the cot. “You live hard, you die harder.”

“You’re going to,” Jughead said. “Die. Everyone’s going to vote your death.”

“I ain’t afraid to die.” She said this unwaveringly.

After that, Jughead left without a single doubt that Penny’s execution wouldn’t cause him any sleepless nights.

Now in the courtroom, with Penny’s case heard, the Council of the Dales, along with some of her victims’ families, all voted death.

She would be executed after Jason Blossom’s trial.

When the day of her execution came, the last thing she would see would be the sharp end of FP’s sword. And because she was a witch, they would close the execution with an athame to her heart.

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Samuel was tried by a court of his peers, which worked somewhat to his advantage.

Werewolves had slightly different laws. They went by the rule of the pack, and Samuel’s advocate argued that he had done what he thought was best for his pack. He was, effectively, the Ulfric
among the werewolves in the Ghoulies.

Betty listened to the intricacies of Werewolf code, how Samuel, while conforming to the rules of Ghoulie law, laws that were laid down by the Vampire Malachi, he was acting on instinct. Werewolves were historically servants of vampire overlords.

While werewolves have long since been emancipated from vampire rule, this historical fact could be used as a means of preservation, and ultimately an argument admissible in the werewolf court of law.

As Betty watched Samuel’s expression, his sullen face indicated that his case was purely advocate built. He did not want this. He would rather die that argue that he was but a pawn in all this.

But when asked if he acted in the interest of the werewolves that looked to his leadership, he didn’t hesitate in his reply.

“Of course. Why else would I have done what I did? I had to ensure my pack’s future. Malachi was incompetent and poised to ruin us all. He would’ve gotten all of us killed.”

He was sincere in his beliefs. He was looking out for his pack.

“But I’ve failed them,” Samuel said, his voice filled with anger. “The pack is no more. Disbanded, many of them dead. I have nothing.”

“Your failure,” said one of the seven judges in court, “was in aligning with the wrong people. Your failure was putting your faith in other creatures to further the goals of your pack.”

The rest of the court agreed. Murmurs rippled through the crowd, but it was low enough that the prefect judge did not feel the need to bang his gavel.

Betty looked at Jughead, who was just as rapt with the proceedings. While she’d been watching court proceedings the last week and a half, this was all still incredible to her.

“Have all the arguments been heard?” asked the prefect judge.

The advocate stood. “Yes, Your Honors.”

“The Inquisitor rests, Your Honors.”

With all arguments submitted, the judges called a recess and said they’d deliberate for an hour.

Betty and Jughead stepped out in the late morning sun, all the way in Greendale. She spied Farmer McGinty and Astanphaeus in the distance, discussing something quietly. They, too, have been attending the trials. She had been meaning to approach Astanphaeus for a while now, but for some reason she couldn’t get up the nerve.

She was a little afraid. Everything he had said had come to pass. What if he told her this wasn’t over? She wanted to keep her peace of mind for a while. If it was going to be shattered, she didn’t want to know.

“This is some date,” Jughead said, slipping an arm over her shoulder.

She laughed softly, putting her hand over the one resting on her shoulder. “It’s part of our normal, I guess.”

He pulled her closer, throwing his head back and closing his eyes. “I like our normal to be hanging out at the diner, watching movies, and going to Sabbat parties every weekend.” He lowered his gaze
from the sky to her face. “Or we can even just hang out in my room and fool around all day.”

The suggestion of spending hours naked with him was always her favorite one. She tiptoed to kiss him. “I think I have time tonight to be with you. Mom’s staying over at Aunt Zelda’s. She’s helping them make a thousand cupcakes for one of Aunt Hilda’s benefits.”

“Thank God for the Spellmans,” he murmured into the kiss. “Yes, I would love to sneak in and out of your house later.”

She giggled, gathering the collar of his jacket in her hands. “Or I can sneak into yours.”

“Ugh, no. Dad will lurk for hours before he passes out.”

She thought FP a curiosity, now that Jughead had moved back into his house and she’d seen more of his father whenever she dropped by.

For a parent who tended to disappear and leave his son by himself for months on end, FP was surprisingly attentive being back home.

He wasn’t Father of the Year, but he seemed to text Jughead a lot asking him where he was and whether he was coming home for dinner.

To a certain degree, FP had perhaps expected that his kid spent most of his time at home, forgetting that months of FP not being there had created the habit, in Jughead, of always being out.

He would also text Jughead extremely embarrassing things, apparently, like the time FP asked whether the condoms in the foyer drawer were new or should be thrown out.

The man, it seemed, was cleaning, and Jughead, red-faced, told his dad they were still good for use and to please leave them where they were until he could get back home to gather them.

“I gotta get my own place,” was a sentiment Jughead had voiced often in the last week.

Court wasn’t due to resume for another hour, so she and Jughead left to get lunch.

It was while Betty was slicing into her open-faced sandwich that Jughead told her his acceptance letter from NYU arrived in the mail.

She looked at him in mild surprise. “Acceptance let—“ She dropped her fork and knife and threw her arms over his shoulders. “Juggie, this is wonderful! I am so proud of you!”

He was smiling, and she caught his face in her hands so she could kiss him. She hadn’t broached the subject all week, afraid to speak of acceptance letters lest she jinxed his chances. She’d gotten her own acceptance letter from CUNY and its journalism program, and while she was certain about going to school in New York, she was waiting for Columbia’s acceptance.

She would be extremely happy to got to CUNY, but Columbia had been a lifelong goal. The culmination of Normal Betty (whatever that meant).

Regardless of what school she got into, she was hoping his acceptance into NYU meant they would both be living in New York.

He ran his hands up and down her sides, a look of adoration gleaming from his eyes. “Maybe this means we can have that crappy apartment in the city. Share the rent… like, be together?”

She wondered why he even phrased that as a question. As if she might say no. “Oh, my God, yes. A
thousand times, yes! It’s everything I want!”

He laughed, kissing her, and she thrilled at how it felt so much like a proposal. Like this meant they were forever, and why shouldn’t it? She was sure he was her soulmate. She would go to hell and back for him.

“I love you,” she whispered in his ear. “I love you so much. You’re brilliant and amazing. And living together in the city would be perfect.”

He kissed her neck. “I love you, too, baby. I haven’t been this excited about life since Christmas in the 3rd grade.”

She pulled away from him, finding what he said incredibly heart-wrenching. “Juggie…”

He laughed softly. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean that to be a Debbie Downer. I just meant… you’re everything and more. You know?”

“Jug.” She kissed him again. They could delve into the heart-breaking depths of his words some other time. This was a time to be happy for him, to be thankful that she could give him something to look forward to.

They were happy, and it was almost as if going back into that very serious courthouse was going to ruin it.

When court resumed, Samuel’s verdict was handed down. He was guilty, but he was not being sentenced to death. He would serve forty years in a werewolf prison colony, on an island obscured by magic in one of the great lakes in New York state. When his sentence was served, the Upadrashta pack pledged to take him, where he would work to earn his place back into the werewolf hierarchy.

Betty understood the difficulty of that—to come out of prison then find that the world hadn’t stood still while he was gone. It was like her waking up from propofol, everything forgotten.

But Samuel seemed to accept his fate with quiet grace. This was perhaps the best outcome that could be had for him. 40 was a lifetime to most, but for a creature who lived forever, it was a fraction.

40 was much better than death.

“Rumor has it that it’s in Lake George,” Jughead surmised after Samuel was led out. “Hard to tell. There’s talk that the location magically changes. It’s old magic. Avalon magic.”

Betty shuddered, even being fascinated by it all it was slightly frightening, the reach magic had over this world. To have entire islands traveling between the spaces of reality was unnerving.

It was the only court case she and Jughead would be attending for the day, possibly the last one before the big Jason Blossom trial the following week.

It gave Betty a sick feeling whenever she thought about it. She would be witnessing, and she would be voting. Neither were tasks she wanted on her shoulders, so she resolved to set aside her anxieties for it until the day was closer at hand.

At the moment, she wanted to celebrate Jughead’s triumph. She wanted to spend all day and night with him, talking about their dreams and plans.
Betty had not expected the emotional tidal wave that would overcome her during Jason Blossom’s trial.

While Cheryl had told her many of the details about what Jason had done with regard to her father and everything else, she hadn’t expected that hearing it broken down in a trial, by various witnesses and experts, would be harrowing. She had thought it would be clinical and factual, and it was—Jason had that privilege as the child of Penelope Blossom, to be examined for judgement, but it only served to paint a dark picture of how objectively gone of conscience Jason was.

He wasn’t expected to testify much on his behalf, but the facts were incriminating and clear conclusions were being drawn with expert efficiency.

Betty started tearing up at mention of Hal Cooper’s visit to the Blossoms, about her father’s erratic behavior—testimony from Alice and Chic. She was quietly sobbing by the time physical evidence of the poppet was presented, about how it was created, and how it was used to drive Hal Cooper to madness.

The poppet by itself was a horrifying charm, condemned among witches themselves. A poppet used to control other people required the murder of an infant. There was no other way to create it.

It was symbolic of Jason’s plunge into darkness. The moment he was willing to take the life of such an innocent, it was his own severance from the light. This was his commitment to the dark path he was taking.

Cheryl was right. His soul was utterly beyond saving.

Betty squeezed Polly’s hands the whole time. Behind her, she felt Jughead’s hand rest on her shoulder, and she put her own hand over it, drawing comfort from its warmth and weight.

The Inquisitor was thorough in his questioning, bringing in even Penny and Samuel. The entire session, Jason’s gaze was defiant. Perhaps even prideful. He didn’t at all appear sorry for what he did.

He supplied the money. He was the mastermind. And yes, he had done this right under his mother’s nose.

Perhaps this was his last shot at ruining what his mother had built. He might be beyond saving, but he was going down swinging.

When the line of questioning began to move towards Betty’s kidnapping, Betty sucked in her breath at the terrible truths.

Coven employees were forced by precise questioning to incriminate Jason in the warding of the Cooper home, how a small, undetectable window was left open so that the spelled amber skull, left at the Cooper doorstep, could get through without raising alarms.

And when Betty inadvertently fused it to herself by burning it into her hand, it gave Jason the key to have unhampered access to her, enabling the entry of Samuel so he could take her.

She saw Chic close his eyes. No doubt he was blaming himself for the miss in the wards. She would have to tell him later that they all missed it. That he shouldn’t blame himself.
It was a small detail, but it sealed the case for Jason’s premeditation.

Jason was called to the stand by his advocate, where he tried separating Jason from the Ghoulie uprising. Jason’s only testimony was to say that Penny’s methods were her own. That she was pursuing an agenda, but nothing Jason said seemed to convince anyone that he had nothing to do with the riots, which was only exacerbated by his repeated “I do not wish to incriminate myself,” to the inquisitor’s questions.

When Betty was called to testify, she answered the questions posed to her by the Inquisitor succinctly, just as the Inquisitor and her practiced. When the advocate cross-examined her, she was asked about her memory loss, insinuating that her testimony was unreliable.

Betty was unfazed, replying, “When someone tries to kill you with an athame to the heart while you’re tied to a stone slab, you remember every single expression that crosses their face, even when you want to forget. I still have nightmares about it. I can still feel the point of that athame digging into my chest. So I might forget everything else, but I will never forget that.”

The advocate backed off, cutting off the cross-examination there.

The trial lasted all day, and the entire time, Cheryl and Penelope sat in the front row. With Cheryl barely containing her horror and Penelope as coldly expressionless as her son.

The Council took all but ten minutes after the Inquisitor closed his case. The verdict was handed down: Jason Blossom was guilty of all charges.

When the court asked her what her desired outcome was, she paused long enough that she was asked again.

She did not want to be party to his death, but the emptiness in his eyes, his lack of regret, his willingness to destroy lives and take the people she loved, and his total disregard for his sister’s welfare was not lost on her.

She walked towards Jason, surprising everyone as she stood close to him, enough that her lowered voice can be heard only by him. “If you can go back to that moment you saw my father at Thornhill, would you have done things differently?”

Jason’s eyebrow arched in surprise, but only for a moment. He leaned over and whispered in her ear. “I would’ve killed Cheryl the moment she told me she found you. That’s what I would’ve done differently.”

The feel of his breath on her skin chilled her entire body, and she realized she wasn’t shocked in the least. She stared at his face, noting the complete lack of emotion.

Turning away from him, she walked back to the center of the room, hoping only that Cheryl would forgive her.

She looked to the Council and said, “I vote death.”

Amidst the votes that were handed down by every council member, calling for his execution, Betty fled the courtroom.

There was a crowd outside and she shouldered her way out of the clamor, pushing her way out of the halls, through the doors, up the steps, out of the building, and onto the sidewalk where she walked briskly away, hating what she did but knowing it was the only way to ensure that no one would be hurt by that monster ever again.
She walked without a destination in mind, thinking only that she needed to get away, outrun the person who had sealed someone’s mortal fate with her words.

Mercy would have been cowardice. Mercy would have been a dishonor to all the lives that were taken and destroyed. Mercy would have caused even more suffering. And yet to speak someone’s death.. she would carry that on her soul forever.

“Betty!” cried a familiar voice behind her, and she stopped, turning to face Jughead as he came after her.

“Betty, are you—?” He stopped, perhaps upon seeing her expression.

She was clearly not alright, but she couldn’t quite regret what she had done. She felt like she had broken off a piece of her soul--a piece that was she was very much willing to part with, but it didn’t change the fact that she was chipped and she felt imbalanced.

“He needs to be dead,” she said, the barest of tremble in her voice. It was as much to convince her as anyone else.

Jughead nodded, his brows crinkled in worry. “It was the only choice.”

It was. She would have to accept that she did what she did, but right now she was exhausted and perhaps even ill. “I want to go home.”

He enfolded her in an embrace and she sank into the warmth of his body. “I’ll take you home.”

Fred’s funeral was deeply tragic.

He had died saving his son, and Archie would live the life of a werewolf forever. Most of the people who had attended the funeral didn’t know that, but the few that did felt this tragedy keenly.

All their Otherworlder classmates attended. Even Cheryl, who clung to Betty’s arm.

Betty wasn’t sure who needed the support more—her or Cheryl.

They weren’t suddenly best friends by any stretch of the imagination, and Betty still felt that one of these days, Cheryl would lash out at her for voting for Jason’s death, but at the moment, Cheryl affirmed that she thought Betty had done the right thing.

“The Jason I knew and respected died years ago,” she told Betty in a bitter tone. “That thing that had stood in court, remorseless at murdering babies, does not belong in this world.”

Betty was certain she would always watch her back when it came to Cheryl, but there was no need to tell her cousin that, right now.

As Fred’s casket was lowered into the ground, Jughead stood by Archie, while Mary kept her arm around her son.

Archie was looking a little hairier these days. His hair kept growing out in spite of the fact that he kept shaving his head almost bald every morning. He shaved his arms and legs, too. He cut his nails
everyday and if someone were to look at his teeth, they may notice that his canines were more prominent. Pointier.

He was still in transition. His body was fighting the wolfsbane potion that he had to take on a daily basis. Once he was allowed to fully transform, his hair and nails would stabilize. Until then, he was a bit of a furball.

It was like the whole town came for Fred Andrews. He was a good man with a likeable son, and by all accounts, he and his ex-wife had separated amicably. He had been an everyday guy with simple needs, and he built so much good will that Archie and his mother hadn’t had to cook a meal since he got back from the hospital, as townspeople sent along homemade dishes by the tray.

When the funeral was over, Jughead took a moment to tell Archie that the werewolf who killed Fred got 40 years in prison for what he did.

Archie had nodded, and that hint of gold in his gaze made him look wolfier than ever. “I’ll be waiting for him when he gets out.”

As townspeople came up to Archie and his mother, Jughead, Kevin, and Veronica seemed to hover, protecting them from having to deal with too many people.

Betty and Cheryl hung back, watching the quiet chaos that surrounded them.

It was while Hiram and Hermione Lodge, Veronica’s parents, were talking to Archie that Betty felt the presence of Astanphaeus beside her.

“It is always difficult to watch the funerals of the Lost,” he said, sighing. He lowered his gaze to the ground, his brows knotted in quiet despair. “Surrendering one’s loved ones into the earth… feels incomplete, don’t you think?”

Betty felt Cheryl’s grip on her arm tighten slightly.

“The Lost cling to remains,” Astanphaeus continued. “They think Death can be negotiated with, when truly, she will barely notice your grief. It is best to surrender to her. It makes it easier for her to take your loved ones to the afterlife when their remains are fully purged.”

Betty swallowed. She didn’t have a particular belief when it came to the afterlife. She didn’t know if she believed it existed, or whether there was even a personification of Death that went around collecting souls. She did believe in releasing one’s soul by burning, however. That was the way of the Otherworld.

It was true for Hal’s funeral, back then. It was true for Tall Boy’s the other day. Otherworlders burned their dead.

“Wood witches have been known to scatter the remains of their loved ones back into the ground,” Cheryl pointed out, a slight tremble in her tone.

It seemed the subject of death made Lost and Otherworlders alike uneasy.

Astanphaeus looked at them with his open, ethereal expression, his eyes alight with the wisdom of a long life lived in the service of kindness and goodwill. “By then it’s just ash.”

“Do you see souls, Astanphaeus?” Betty asked. “You seem… acquainted with Death.”

He chuckled softly. “When you live like I do, doing the things I do, you cross paths with Death
frequently. She never introduces herself, but I know. I’ve seen her in chaos and tragedy, calamity and destruction. She roams about in plagues and death camps. I know her when I see her. She is certainly not an Earth Angel. I know them all. Death isn’t one of us. Death is an Incarnation—a Lost being plucked from a mundane existence into the meta-real by an unknown force or entity. I can’t imagine the learning curve.”

“Was she here during the Battle of the Vault?”

Astanphaeus nodded. “I spied her briefly at the healing facilities. I am sure she was at the battle.”

“Would I—would I see her if—“

“No, child,” Astanphaeus interrupted gently. “You never will until you have to. I see her because I’ve lived centuries as an Earth Angel. Everyone else will see her the way she was meant to be seen.”

Betty exchanged looks with Cheryl.

“What other things do you see as an Earth Angel?” Betty asked.

“Too much. I see man make the same mistakes they committed centuries past. I see life played over and over again in the same, unyielding pattern. People think I can see the future, but I don’t. I see and remember the past and just know that it will repeat itself.”

“Will things be okay?” Betty asked. “Will we be okay?”

Astanphaeus took a deep breath of the damp air and closed his eyes. “Your lives are not predestined, Betty. There are a million iterations of it, and ‘okay’ is the most uninteresting one. I can probably tell you where your path will lead if you take one way or another, but no one has been served well by knowing what’s beyond the horizon. Futures are too prone to misinterpretation—you lead yourself astray, you do the wrong thing, you hurt other people… have faith in what you can see. Your mind’s eyes can see far enough, anyway. What do you think is next for you?”


Astanphaeus nodded. “All good things. And you, Cheryl? What is next for you?”

“World domination. Or at least the east coast.”

Betty’s eyebrow arched, but Astanphaeus only chuckled. “I like your horizons, both.”

Jughead looked up from the huddle of the Lodges and Andrews and met eyes with her. He nodded, prompting her to excuse them from their conversation with Astanphaeus.

“We have to go, Astanphaeus. It was nice speaking to you again,” she said.

“Likewise. Tell your sister hello for me.”

Betty nodded and urged Cheryl forward.

“He is so strange,” Cheryl remarked, looking over her shoulder as the Earth Angel walked away from Fred’s grave. “And he makes me uncomfortable.”

Betty chuckled. She supposed Earth Angels weren’t the easiest of company to have around. They carried the burden of the centuries with them. No mortal can imagine the weight of it.
Cheryl pulled away from her to go to Veronica, and both of them went to Archie, offering him comfort and company.

Betty looped her arms around Jughead’s and Kevin’s, standing between them. “Are we heading back to the Andrews’ soon?”

Jughead nodded, hooking his arm so he can put his hand over hers. “Yeah. I’ll drive them back.”

“I’ll go with Kev, then.”

“I’ve got you,” Kevin confirmed. “I meant to tell you that I actually like this all-black ensemble on you, girl.”

She managed not to laugh out loud at the fact that even in grief, Kevin could appreciate the finer things in life.


“I’m just saying. Ya girl can rock the goth, too. Just because you like her in pink and pastels, it doesn’t mean she can’t wear anything else.”

“I don’t tell Betty what to wear,” Jughead said in a clipped tone. She recognized that voice. It was a sensitive subject to him—that people thought he controlled her. She couldn’t blame him and of course a part of her felt annoyed by the assumption, but ultimately, what mattered was that he didn’t, and that it helped Otherworlders feel comfortable about her existence.

It was better than being driven out of town with pitchforks.

She squeezed Jughead’s arm. Her fashion sense was not in the constellation of things that Jughead worried about, even if he liked what she wore, from the pastel sweaters and bubblegum cardigans, to the Vixen uniform that he had, on several occasions, taken off her body in perhaps the most inopportune times and places.

Clothes were, so to speak, superficial. What she was made up inside, her history and her magic, was where she cared about Jughead’s opinion, and she knew that in spite of seeing her in all her shades—light, dark, fathomless, here he was, still, unafraid and loving her.

Right now, she and Jughead were looking at the same horizon and it was filled with many possibilities.

Chapter End Notes

I am writing the last chapter as we speak and I’m already feeling nostalgic.
The Slayer and the Witch

Chapter Notes

There are all of you who I have yet to thank in Comments and I cannot tell you how much. I will visit you all one at a time and give you the time you deserve. I don't deserve your kindness, all of you, but I will try.

Also, thanks to Josh, who took on betaing for this last chapter. He's been invaluable in cleaning the last few chapters up and bringing up some excellent points. You are a champ, Josh!

Finally, I have some notes at the bottom. Just keeping house, really. Apropos in light of all that's been happening in fandom. There might also be a couple of fun things in there.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“She wears strength and darkness equally well, the girl has always been half goddess, half hell.”

-Nikita Gill, Poet

She kept the uniform.

The irony of it all was that when she told him Cheryl had made her join the Vixens, he had been horrified. Horrified. She was going to subject herself to Cheryl’s gaggle of minions. She might even be sucked into becoming one of them, all because Betty’s sense of honor was frighteningly strong. She may as well have handed her soul to the devil.

And Veronica. Oh, Veronica. She was furious. Hopping furious. Teeth-gnashing furious. How did this happen? How could she have let this happen? Couldn’t Betty have repaid Cheryl in some other way? To vote Cheryl into the captainship instead of her?

But Jughead realized quickly how his self-righteous (probably faux) outrage could be bought the moment she descended those front steps wearing her Vixen couture. It had never looked so good.

Time slowed.

He found himself laser focused on every flounce of that miniskirt that barely hid the slope of her thighs and the way her top was trying to hide the shape of her breasts, to no avail. Even the way her ponytail was precisely placed, the curly tip of her blonde hair brushing against her turtleneck covered nape, made him think the unholiest of thoughts.

Wearing that cheerleading uniform, Betty could get him to say yes to absolutely anything.

Not that she would ever lead him astray, but after she started wearing that uniform, she got him to attend two football games, marathoned all seasons of the Gilmore Girls, attend two yoga classes with
Polly (who mocked his general lack of flexibility), and made him finish all 8 miles of an obstacle course race called Tough Mud X with her and Chic.

Like Jesus Christ, that uniform had dark powers.

So he shouldn’t have been surprised if three years after they graduated from high school that it was in her closet, that it was wrapped in dry-cleaning plastic, and that she was probably saving it for when she really needed a favor from him.

He wasn’t as special as he thought. He was still just a dude that got massively turned on whenever his girlfriend put on that cheerleading uniform.

Sure, he slayed vampires and broke curses, he fought werewolves and defied the hypnotic fey, but tell Betty no while wearing that uniform? He wasn’t that strong.

These were, incredibly, his thoughts while he and Betty were breaking and entering into a supposedly abandoned warehouse where a bunch of kids were holding coven rituals without adult supervision, which was resulting in supernatural chaos in the lower east side, like summoning murderous ghosts, disturbing otherwise reticent demons, and cursing innocent people for one small slight or other.

“So,” he whispered as Betty carefully picked the lock—something she was surprisingly, disturbingly good at. “When were you going to tell me you still had the uniform, babe?”

Betty was laser focused on her task, so she was a little absent-minded when she said, “What uniform?”

He gave their surroundings a cursory glance, just to make sure no one was watching them. “You know, your Vixen uniform. I thought you got rid of it when we left Riverdale, but then I saw it hanging in your closet the other day.”

She did not remove her eyes from the lock, but he could see that she was frowning. “Sweetie, are you seriously bringing this up now?”

Yes, was he, seriously…? “It’s as good a time as any. I mean, you know I love that uniform.”

“I know.”

“So you’ve been holding out on me--”

“Jug, I can’t bust it out every time we have sex. Drycleaning is at least $7 a pop and--”

“I’m not saying you wear it all the time. Just… you know. It would’ve been nice for our first anniversary… second even… last year’s Hallowmas…. Yulemas… the Sabbats, basically…”

She turned the lock and the door clicked open. She looked over her shoulder at him, finally. “Wouldn’t you get tired of it--”

“I will never get tired of it.”

She did finally begin to look annoyed. “Can we talk about this later? We have a teenage coven to break up and I need to get my scoop for the Other Daily.”

When Betty was following a story, she was all business. To be fair, he never brought up their playtime when they were working. This was a first, for sure, but that uniform…
“Fine, fine. Of course. We’re on a case. This is serious.”

She huffed but failed to prevent an amused smile from cracking her no nonsense veneer. “What, my roller derby outfit doesn’t do it for you anymore?”

“Let’s not jump to conclusions,” he said, quickly. The last thing he wanted is for Betty to think that he was losing interest in what they were doing in bed, currently. “This isn’t a zero-sum game, but if I have to rank your outfits, all of which turn me on in two seconds flat, anyway…”

The red glow of a dancing fire caught his attention, and for a moment he was captivated by the bobbing shadows around. They twitched and stretched like a macabre reflection on a dark mirror, and coupled with the low murmur of ritual chanting, was jarringly triggering.

It’s been years, to say the least, since he pushed open the doors of the Thornhill ritual hall and found Betty bound to a stone slab, an Athame poised over her chest. There was fire and shadows, just like this. There had been chanting, too. He couldn’t recall another time he had been so goddamn terrified. And he’d had to rid himself of the nightmares. It took months, if not longer.

How this felt so much like reliving those awful memories was revolting. He reached out to place a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

She was there. With him. And he wondered, even in his own turmoil, if she was okay, because he couldn’t imagine her being any less scared at the time. She had been on the receiving end of that Athame. The point of it had been digging shallowly into her skin.

But at the moment she looked calm, and he needed that calm.

His dread waned, and he was immediately better. She is, and always will be, his savior.

As Jughead peeked over the pile of old warehouse crates, he saw the teen witches, two boys and two girls, between the ages of fourteen and fifteen, holding hands around a small circle, a terrified little girl in the center.

Two of them were trust fund kids from one of New York City’s most exclusive private schools. The other two kids went to public school, but it was their shared Otherworldness and perhaps boredom that brought them all together. It was the addictive taste of power that was making them push their magic to the limit.

He groaned and rolled his eyes. “Great. They’ve escalated.”

Betty sighed, her lip curling into a disappointed grimace. “Ugh. And here I thought we’d make it to tonight’s finale of Game of Thrones.”

He couldn’t help but smile at that, comforted by the fact that she was so confident that they would be able to handle this case with swift efficiency. She had little reason to think otherwise.

They had been a great tandem, him and her. The Slayer and the Witch.

She dug into her backpack, fishing out the small cilice belt that fit around her arm.

Jughead rubbed her shoulder and that familiar ache in his heart each time she had to turn on her Wicked powers made itself known in his gut. “You don’t have to do that. We can take four teenagers between us.”

She shrugged off her cardigan, exposing her arms in her tank top. “There’s a little girl, Juggie. We
can’t risk it.”

He knew this to be true. Her magic minimized the risk of innocent bystanders getting killed. Her pain ensured that the little girl in the center of the circle wouldn’t suffer.

Jughead took the belt. He always hated this part, but if he was going to let Betty do this, he was going to shoulder some of the burden of her magic. He wasn’t going to let her tie that belt on her arm alone.

He looped the belt around her arm and poised his hands to tighten it. “Deep breath, baby.”

She nodded and took that breath. He pulled the belt tight and she exhaled at the pain. He didn’t break skin. He wasn’t supposed to, but those barbs will bite in a few minutes. It’s what made her magic effective in situations like this.

He secured the belt and it held. He ran his fingers gently along the already reddening skin. “Okay for now?”

She nodded, giving him that plaintive smile that said, “thank you for doing this.” He tightened his lips but returned her pained smile. He was hardly glad he could do this for her, but at least she didn’t have to do it alone if he could help it.

“Here we go.” She splayed her fingers towards the group of witches and the child.

A blue dome began to materialize around the little girl, making her squeal in terror. The witches gave a start of surprise. Whatever they were doing, they hadn’t expected anything like this at all.

One of the girls in the circle touched it and scowled upon finding that it was impenetrable. “What did you do, Hunter?”

One of the boys, Hunter, frowned. “I didn’t do anything! Why are you accusing me?”

“You’re the one who went all soft on us last night, trying to talk us out of doing this!”

Jughead shook his head as they watched the coven bicker and point fingers.

“Let’s get this over with,” Betty muttered, flexing her fingers.

The bubble exploded outward, sending all four witches flying back and skidding against the dust and grime on the surrounding floor.

Betty and Jughead jumped out of their hiding place, standing protectively around the little girl as they faced two witches each.

Jughead eyed the two terrified fourteen year olds at his feet. He needed no introduction. They knew what he was just by the look of him, and they might even know exactly who he was, because out of all the Slayers in New York City, only one of them wore the black leather jacket with the snake patch on its back, and only one of them had a badass Wicked witch who rode with him.

One of the girls threw a spell at him and he batted it away with his arm, unharmed by her magic.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” hissed the trust fund boy. “We are going to be so grounded!”

Jughead frowned. Did he think that was the worst that could happen to them?

“Trust me, kid,” he said. “‘Grounded’ is the least of your worries now.”
So was it really about the Vixen uniform? Or was it just that they were going into their 3rd year anniversary and that it felt huge to him, somehow.

They were Otherworlders. Arguably, they were both witches. The number 3 was always a big deal. It was a number that held significance in so many big and small ways: the rule of three, 3 poppets and no more, three witches make a coven, three, three, three…

It was a magical number.

Three years since Jughead first saw her walk into Riverdale and three years since he first spoke to her in class. Three years since that compulsion in his chest tugged at his lips to say that clever thing that popped into his head at lab, at lunch, at the library. Oh, that library.

Three years since he first brought her home, gave her his number (as he ignored the screaming in his head that said, “you’re crossing a line, idiot!”), texted her for a ride at school, and broke her trust.

Three years since that nagging feeling in his gut, coupled with the good-natured teasing from his friends, compelled him to do the right thing and apologize.

Three years since they first went sleuthing together and three years since they first kissed in her bedroom…

That probably should’ve been their anniversary, the moment that changed it for them, the moment he actually started to think that Betty Cooper fired his mind and his body, and that he wanted that fire to keep burning.

Had it only been three years since he watched her walk into the Wyrm, only to realize that she was on some surprise blind date with some guy and that the fire in him had turned into white hot jealousy?

It had to have only been three years because the details were as clear to him as if it had happened yesterday. He remembered being surrounded by the noise of his friends and the bar, remembered hitting those acrylic balls with his cue stick as he aimed for pockets, but also that all of it was just background for the cyclone of thoughts permeating his brain: who the fuck does Shinji Yagami think he is? Walking into his bar and trying to impress Betty Cooper, on HIS turf? Was she laughing at his jokes? Did she think him clever? Was she enjoying his company? What the fuck? What the fuck? What the—

“They’re going to the ladies room,” Sweet Pea had said, determined. “Hold my stick.”

He had shoved the stick at Toni, and they all watched him go after Sabrina Spellman.

Jughead may have had opinions about the way Sabrina and Sweet Pea conducted themselves, but Jughead knew that he and Sweet Pea had been hammering at the same nail all night: some guy’s with my girl and this is bullshit.

It has been three years since he asked Betty Cooper if she wanted to get out of there so that he could bring her to the restricted section of the Riverdale Public Library. Three years since they made out in the shelves and he stopped denying that he wanted to be the only guy she was kissing.
There have been a lot since, and through the years, they’d followed both their dreams together, sharing every moment of happiness and disappointment, clinging to each other in times of contentment and need.

He has never loved anyone so deeply and so desperately in his entire life. He has never been more sure that there would never be anyone like her again if fate would ever be so cruel as to take her away from him some way or other.

He couldn’t imagine living a functional life without her, because if that were ever to happen, there would be a constant void, like a shadow demon in her shape, following him around, reminding him that there would a permanent rift in his life where she had vacated it.

He didn’t want to imagine it. Instead he indulged himself with thoughts of her being present in the future, of being with him all the days of their lives. He also imagined more, and it hurt, sometimes, because he needed it to be true so intensely.

He liked to watch her with kids, for instance, because they looked at her and saw what he saw. He could tell. They were often little strangers, these new humans, sometimes Lost, sometimes Otherworlder, but they went to her like they knew her—like how he knew her.

In the city, young children were vulnerable to the worst kind of Otherworlders. The darkest, most powerful spells required their blood. He and Betty had dedicated many nights retrieving these children and he could only be grateful that they’d been successful each time.

Every kid they’d rescued had the same reaction. They saw her and trusted her, stretching their arms up for her to pick them up. They sought safety in her arms when they were in danger, and they clung to her until their parents came to retrieve them.

He’d pointed it out. It was a real phenomenon, and she’d said, “Maybe it’s the Wicked. Or maybe Polly’s rubbing off on me.”

Maybe.

But whatever it was, he liked to watch her with kids. It gave him a feeling inside that made him want things he never thought of before.

So clearly, it wasn’t just about the uniform. The uniform was probably his anniversary present.

It was their third. And three, after all, was a magical number.

Their apartment wasn’t as shitty as they thought it would be.

At least, not anymore.

The first year they lived in New York City, their apartment was pretty awful. The space was passably livable, the one bedroom big enough to fit a queen if you were willing to sacrifice space for anything else. The kitchen and dining room were one shared area and the living room could accommodate no more than four people standing. Their bathroom had been the size of a coat closet. It had a sink and toilet almost on top of each other and the shower was sectioned off by a curtain.
That was it. The walls to the hallway had been thin and their roof leaked for God knows what reason. The bottom floor had a hair salon that blared music at certain hours of the day, which made studying kind of impossible.

It wasn’t ideal, but Betty remembered being so happy, that none of these things really got her down. She had been blissfully upbeat, making that shitty apartment their home, cuddling with Jughead on their tiny couch as they watched movies, running off to the library Jughead (naturally) worked in to study, helping him complete Slayer missions here or there when duty called, and cooking Zelda’s recipes in between bouts of takeout.

Jughead had barely complained about it, too. He had hardly ever expressed any ill-feelings for where they lived. He seemed happy living with her, bringing home fresh flowers for her when he can, eagerly telling her about street fairs and farmers markets that popped up around them so they can go to them on the weekends, joining her twice a week for her daily morning runs, and generally, constantly, having incredible sex with her.

That first year they lived in the city had been no less enjoyable as their second and third, except that the next two years they saw an improvement in their living facilities. Their latest apartment included a rooftop communal garden—shared by all the building’s residents, which was perfect for the herbs she needed for potion-making.

They’d had arguments, of course. Maybe even a serious one or three, usually pertaining to one or the other’s careless disregard for safety, but any fight they had was always quickly resolved by a little groveling, a lot of cuddling, and substantial conversation.

As they now sat in their much more spacious bathroom—big enough to accommodate a small tub, even, Betty was more than grateful that they had gotten this far, that they had navigated their independence and their relationship together in ways that they were both proud of.

The covered toilet and the bathtub’s wide rim were the perfect height for her and Jughead whenever one or the other needed some form of first aid.

With a towel on her lap and her arm between them, he gently removed the cilice belt from her arm. Her blood dripped on the towel, but the lightness of his fingers and the focus that radiated from his expression always made her weak in love. He took such good care of her.

When the belt was completely off, he turned on the handheld showerhead, running the water until it was the perfect temperature, and helped her wash her wounds over the tub. When the blood and grime had been washed away, he dried her arm as carefully as he could and put some antiseptic on her punctures. She didn’t exactly need the antiseptic, but the better brands had topical painkillers on them, which he knew she appreciated.

He wrapped her wounds with padding and medical tape, his hands careful not to pinch or pull her skin. The wound would stop bleeding soon and she would probably be healed by morning. He didn’t need to do any of this, but he did, because it gave her comfort. She did the same thing for him and he healed even faster than she did.

“Thank you,” she told him, pressing a kiss on his lips.

“You’re welcome, baby.”

As they walked barefoot through their living room towards the kitchen, Betty was reminded even further of their domesticity, how they always kicked off their shoes at the door because it was easier to clean their floors that way, how they frantically ate their fruits because they’d bought too much
and that it would be a shame to let them spoil, and how their collection of IKEA Furniture shopping bags had piled up in the closet because they never remembered to bring the last reusable one they paid for—they used those bags for everything now: laundry, grocery shopping, and trips to the beach.

It was the kind of bliss she would have never imagined happening when she and her family were constantly running and hiding. She had, in fact, thought she would never be happy again when they buried her father.

Now she couldn’t believe how incredibly happy her life with Jughead was, simple as it had been—well, as simple as a witch and slayer’s life could be fighting errant Otherworlders.

She opened the refrigerator, looking for something to eat. “I may have to whip something up... I honestly cannot abide by takeout tonight.”

He maneuvered around her to reach for the bottle of chilled wine. “Sit. I’ll do the cooking.”

She smiled at him gratefully, taking a stool and settling herself as he grabbed two wine glasses from their shelves and set them in front of her. He poured the wine into them.

She loved this man who so unhesitantly cared for her in all the ways a lover and best friend would. 


He cocked a smile as he put the wine away and slid one glass closer to her. “What are you staring at? Something on my face?”

She hummed with ease, unembarrassed to be caught staring. “I love your face. I love you. Are you sure you like living with me?”

He seemed amused, rolling his eyes as he wrapped his arms around her and kissed the top of her head. “Stop. I love living with you. You’re clean, you put the toothpaste cap back on all the time, you get naked for me every once in a while…”

She buried her face on his shoulder, grinning. “Every once in awhile? How about all the time?”

“I’m just saying I’ve gone hours without.”

She pretended to scowl but only for a second, cupping his face so she could press a tender kiss on his lips. “That’s because we actually have to be in school and go to our jobs.”

“Oh, right. Those things.”

He paused another second to kiss her forehead before he slipped out of her arms to gather the materials that he needed for cooking.

She watched him go from cupboard to refrigerator to assemble everything and pile them haphazardly on the counter.

She loved the relative chaos of how he cooked. She liked to watch him turn disorder into beauty. The way he cooked was never the same, chopping one thing first and then doing the other thing next, which could have been the order last week, or maybe not. His cooking always coalesced into something delicious and often nicely plated, but how he got there was as unorthodox as how he did everything else.

With her being so organized and him thriving in the unpredictable, they probably should’ve been a
match made in hell, but she liked that he was so overtly unconcerned by the status quo. She needed that outlook in her life. He was her ticket to stepping out of the boxes that she had been conditioned, for safety, to stay in. And perhaps she helped him temper the wildness in him that sometimes came to the fore.

It was how he drew things, too. The nonsensical strokes of his lines hardly seem to make sense at the beginning, but an image will eventually take shape and his illustrations become what they’re meant to be: inspiring, frightening, or informative.

A nice collection of leather-bound journals lined their shelves, filled with his knowledge and experience in words and art.

Perhaps all this was just proof that he was on the right track. He was an art history major in NYU, minoring in studio art at the Steinhardt School.

Their little apartment was decorated with his work, his deft hands creating beautiful drawings and the occasional sculpture, which Betty thought were excellent pieces, but Jughead thought were shitty and pretentious.

It gave her a pleasant tingle, thinking that one day he could be a curator at a museum. As it is, he works at the library (of course) and guards the biggest vault in the city.

Fortunately, there were more Slayers in the city than there were in Riverdale, so he took his turn at the Sabbats less frequently than he had to in Riverdale.

He still got cases sent to him by the city’s lead Slayer, but he didn’t need to patrol the streets anymore on weekends, he didn’t need to check omens regularly like he used to, and in this town, he could actually say he couldn’t because there would be at least two other Slayers who probably could.

The Blossoms still reigned over New York—that was inescapable, and their deep connections in the coven put them both in a very unique position in New York City’s Slayer hierarchy, not to mention the fact that Betty was kind of a Blossom herself who regularly brunched and shopped at SoHo with the coven heiress, but that was a given.

The Blossoms held the east coast with corporate consistency. Even Jason’s trial and execution didn’t bring the house down, though their stock did plunge for what Cheryl termed “a hot minute.”

Sipping her wine, she caught sight of their wall calendar and saw the scribbled image of a deck of cards beside a long, rectangular box drawn over the weekend. “Oh, my God. Is it Game Night at Kevin’s already?”

Jughead started cracking eggs into a bowl. “Yep.”

“And it’s Cards Against Humanity Weekend.” She pursed her lips and clenched her fist. “Yessss…”

He chuckled as he tossed the eggshells and started whisking them.

She felt singularly determined. “I am going to kick everyone’s ass this weekend. Revenge for last game night’s Avalon debacle.”

“I don’t know, babe. Cheryl confirmed this time and we haven’t had her for Cards Against Humanity weekend. I think you might have a tough opponent there.”

Betty scoffed. Cheryl talked a big game, and it was easy enough to have twisted thoughts when
there was nothing to hamper you, but the limitation of the cards presented a challenge that Betty had a knack for.

“We’ll see. Should I bake a cherry pie? Or a strawberry cheesecake?”

He made a humming sound. “Cheesecake. It’s your best cake so far.”

She grinned, encouraged by his praise.

He tossed together some finely chopped bell peppers, spinach, and ham before he assembled the omelette on a skillet, cooking the egg with some butter and then grating fresh gruyere over the pile of filling. He seasoned it, folded the egg over it, then plated it, sprinkling some chopped chives to top it off.

She sighed happily when he slid the plate in front of her, loving how the cheese was melting lazily from the edges of the egg. Full-fat. “You should’ve been a culinary arts major.”

She took two forks out of their drawer and gave him one.

He smirked and leaned over the counter on his elbows, cutting himself a piece of omelette. “I bet Sabrina becomes a food critic just to drag my restaurant to the ground. She already called me derivative in my last Instagram post. Sweetpea threw me under the bus when he tagged her to it in the first place.”

Betty couldn’t help but giggle. Sabrina never passed up the chance to roast Jughead on social media. “I think she inadvertently gave you a compliment when she compared your work to Adonna Khare.”

“Her exact words were ‘Adonna Khare called, she wants her sketchbook back.’”

Her cousin never failed at taking that shot, and she knew the perfect mix, knowing how far she can take it with Jughead. “That just means she’s impressed. You know Sab.”

He cocked a smile as he cut himself a piece of omelette. “Oh, I do, and I’m going to divert this conversation before I get myself in trouble. This omelette is so good, if I do say so myself.”

She laughed, and they ate and drank in companionable chatter until there was nothing left of the dish or their glasses of wine.

As he was putting the dishes away, he said, “So, about that Vixen uniform—”

She rolled her eyes. Count on Jughead to ruin his own surprise.

Their anniversary was coming up and she had asked Aunt Hilda to find it in her closet and send it over. “What were you even doing in my closet?”

He put up his hands in a gesture of innocence. “I was looking for your silver tipped arrows! I asked you about them, remember?”

She eyed him askance. “I told you they were in the closet—the coat closet.”

“Sorry? Not sorry.”

She wagged a finger at him. “You saw that package from upstate arrive and when I didn’t tell you about it, you got curious! You’re like a kid at Yulemas trying to peek at your presents!”
There wasn’t a whisper of shame in his wide grin. “So it was the uniform that came in the mail!”

She gave a huff and put her fork down. “I don’t even know if it still fits me. I haven’t had non-fat anything in years—"

She was suddenly accosted at the waist, his hands hoisting her up on the kitchen counter and setting her down on the edge of it. She giggled as he fitted himself between her thighs and draped her arms over his shoulders.

“You’re breaking the rules, baby,” he whispered, nosing her neck and feathering her throat with his kiss. “No fat shaming, remember?”

She closed her eyes and smiled, tilting her head to give him more access. “I remember. But really—"

She felt the pressure of his fingers on her thighs, sliding to the back of her knees so he can pull her even more securely around him. His tongue was already making gentle circles on the crook of her shoulder.

“I love your body,” he murmured, his hands skimming her sides and slipping beneath her shirt. “I love your curves. I never ever want to hear you say non-fat in this house.”

Betty could already feel the ache between her legs, where his hardness was pressing against her. She sighed, cupping his jaws and pushing his chin up with both her thumbs so she could kiss him.

Their lips met, open-mouthed, while their tongue circled eagerly against each other. They sucked in each other’s breaths, her fist clutching at his hair so she could kiss him deeper.

His wayward hands had found their way to her breasts, cupping and squeezing eagerly before retreating and finding the edge of her shirt again to tug it up her body.

She tore her lips away from his to peel her shirt off and toss it unceremoniously on the kitchen floor.

Distracted, momentarily, by her state of undress, he traced his finger along the lace on her bra, feeling the delicate patterns, then his lips were clamping over her and sucking the soft skin of her breasts.

He always loved undressing her first, like the careful unwrapping of a gift, and it always felt like worship, the way he appreciated her bare skin as he unraveled her bit by bit.

Her bra loosened and the garment fell away. His mouth and hands took instant liberties with her nipples, and as he sucked on one breast, his hand gently squeezed the other. She gave a quiet whine of approval.

She could feel his tongue circling that spot beneath her breast, right on her ribcage where her tattoo of a crown, his crown, was inked into her skin. It had been Anniversary Present #1. Their lovemaking was particularly intense that night, and she knew she had hit on a primal need that night, marking herself for him.

He still worships that tattoo, touching it with the pads of his fingers whenever they were cuddled on the couch, staring at it when they were naked and sated, kissing it when they made love.

She liked how it connected them without limiting her, liked that she can do things and go places knowing that his thoughts were never too far from her. It felt like a psychic beacon. When she caressed her own skin in the rare times of physical separation they’d had to endure, he had called her to tell her he missed her, as if he had heard her thoughts of him adrift in the wind.
She was sure there was no strange magic at work, just two people desperately in love with one another. When she missed him, he was sure to miss her back.

When he had given her tattoo enough attention, he pulled back to undo her jeans, pushing them off her hips a bit before he hooked his thumbs into her panties and pulled them down with her pants. He let her clothes drop and for a moment, all he did was stare at her.

Completely naked on the kitchen counter, she leaned back on the heels of her palms and lifted her knee along the side of his body. “What’ll you do now, Slayer?”

His darkened eyes took her in, his hand rising to cup her face and caress her cheek with his thumb. She leaned into his touch, closing her eyes to feel his calloused palm against her cheek then turning her face to kiss it.

He was shrugging off his hoodie and peeling off his shirt, undressing for her. She loved watching him undress, seeing the lines of his lithe body stark in shadow and light.

His body ink fascinated her still.

She still loved tracing the images on his chest and arms after they made love, still liked to stare at the art on his skin when she woke up in the morning and his back happened to be turned to her. She knew each and every mark he had and why he had them. She felt a softness inside her whenever she remembered that he had tattooed B • WICKED on the inside of his wrist so that he had a mark of her on him that he could look at and enjoy. He told her he liked that it made people think it was some reminder for him to live life to the fullest--rules be damned.

It fit his aesthetic.

She liked that whenever he got naked and she admired the beautiful shape of his lithe body, she greedily thought of him as hers.

He undid the buttons of his jeans, shedding them, and when he had nothing but his boxers left, he stepped back into the embrace of her legs, planting her hands over the waist of his last piece of clothing so she could remove the garment, herself.

He tangled his fingers through her hair, angling her face up so he could clamp his lips over hers with unabated hunger.

She could feel his hardness against the softness of her center, and the only thing between them was the boxers’ thin fabric.

She gave it a soft tug, her fingers wrapping around his length, as the garment fell away and her hand moved to stroke him.

His deep moan vibrated between their locked lips and she continued to move her hand around him, wanting him to want her impatiently, but he held her wrist, stilling her movements and setting her hand to her side.

“You in some kind of hurry, Cooper?” he asked against the shell of her ear. “Keep doing that and I’ll come quick.”

She mewled in complaint. “I want you inside me.”

“We’ll get to that,” he whispered back, this time against her mouth, and as he said this, his fingers dipped between her legs and slid into her folds.
She moaned into his kiss as pleasurable sensations spread through her body, the slow thrust of his hand coaxing gasps from her lips.

The same fingers that beautifully sketched life on paper and squeezed tubes of color onto textured palettes was making art of her desire.

She thought about how he skillfully transferred fevered dreams to paper with graphite and expressed emotions on canvass with tinted oils and water, so it was little wonder that he was so adept with his hands, coaxing her to come with the ease of an artist mastering his medium.

_Oh, my God._

She might have screamed out his name, throwing her head back as she came, riding the wave that was rolling through her. His lips sucked on her throat as he worked her through her orgasm, and as her cries died down, his hand slowed, easing her gently down from her high.

She bit her lip, gasping for breath.

That had felt amazing, and yet still she wanted his cock inside her. She buried her fingers into his hair, pulling his face to hers so she could kiss him while she wrapped her legs around his body. She tightened her thighs around him, her hips thrusting to press her pussy against his dick.

He cocked a smile, which made her stomach do somersaults. “So impatient…”

Gritting her teeth, she tried rolling her hips to tempt him. “Jug, I need you to fuck me.”

He hushed her, rubbing the pad of his thumb at the bottom of her lip. She rasped her teeth against his skin just before his hand fell away from her face and slid to cup one breast, teasing her nipple with that same thumb.

He liked this control. She liked it, too. Sometimes they switched, usually when she was in some kind of costume, but mostly he took over. He set the pace, and she begged, because begging made it better.

He broke free of her legs, burying his face between the valley of her breasts then capturing each taut peak in his mouth.

His hands clamped around her thighs, draping them one after another over his shoulders so she had no choice but to lie on her back on the kitchen counter.

The counter wasn’t very big and the top of her head hung over the edge, but it was difficult to care when he had his face nestled between her thighs and his tongue was licking a slow path along her pussy.

Burying her fingers in his hair, she moaned at the waves of pleasure his tongue elicited. The deliberate way he ran his tongue against her was robbing her of reason, wanting more of this but also loving how he was drawing this out. He groaned softly into her, and she felt the vibration of him against her core.

When his tongue circled her clit, followed by the gentle suction of his lips, she flitted on the edge of an orgasm, moaning and arching her back.

“Jug, please do that again,” she whined, panting.

She could feel him smiling, and for a brief moment, she wanted to punish him for being so smug, but
tonight he was dominant, and instead of retaliation, she heaped praises, coaxing him to give her what she needed. She told him he was the only one who could ever make her scream this way.

That did it. He sucked her clit as he dipped his fingers into her and she came apart, cresting the wave of pleasure that swallowed her and crying out profanities as she let the orgasm take her.

When the waves began to still, Jughead scooped her into his arms, her thighs wrapped around his body, and carried her to their bedroom.

She purred as he laid her on their bed without a hint of effort. She loved how he often used his strength to easily move her about when they made love, fucked, fooled around, and just did things together.

He settled on top of her, never relinquishing his place between her legs, even as he reached above her at their overhead shelves to dig into a wooden cubby where they kept the condoms.

He kissed her slowly, swirling his tongue inside her mouth. She tilted her chin up to deepen the kiss even more, holding his face in her hands to prolong it. When they separated, he gave her the condom and without need of further prompting, she tore the packet open and pinched the tip of it before rolling it down his dick.

Her core ached harder than ever. The anticipation of having him inside her probably meant he didn’t have to work that hard. When he lowered himself onto her, he kissed her again and she moved her hips, canting them impatiently.

“I can do this with you forever,” he murmured in her ear as he slid into her. “God, Betts…”

Their moans mingled and Betty squeezed her eyes shut at the incredible sensations of feeling him stretch her, his cock sliding along her clit with perfect friction, and his body resting flush against hers for a blessed second, before he pulled back to rock into her again.

“Oh, my God, yes, Jug. Yes.”

Her mind was losing coherence as he moved into her over and over. She could feel the pressure of his fingers, digging painfully into her thigh as he pulled her harder against him.

Their slow and steady joining began to gain speed and force, and they moved so torridly that the top of her head was hitting their padded headboard.

“Betts,” he gasped, turning them over so she was riding him. She rolled her hips to continue the cadence, his hips bucking up to meets hers. His body hit her clit with perfect pounding pressure, and within a few thrusts, he was shattering her completely. She was coming so loudly she hardly realized that Jughead was groaning and cursing, grinding hard into her as he joined her in her oblivion.

He was still bucking slightly as she began to come down from her high, and she saw the pleasure on his face settling like a blanket on his features.

They were both catching their breaths. And she’d told him a million times how amazing he was, but she never tired of saying it again.

“Juggie, that was incredible,” she gasped, dropping to his side, exhausted but utterly sated.

They crashed their lips together into a clumsy but hungry kiss. It was always so intense that there was always a remnant of that heat. Trembling and tired, they always seemed to share that last kiss
in the end. Like they wouldn’t dare waste an ounce of passion.

She tucked herself into the crook of his arm and as was her habit, began to trace the tattoos on his body. He stilled her hands and she looked up at him in surprise. He was staring at her, his love for her evident in the adoration in his gaze.

She smiled. “What--”

“I meant what I said,” he whispered. “I can do this with you forever.”

She arched an eyebrow questioningly, not anxious, but curious. Then she giggled. “Oh, Jug, is that a proposal?”

She was joking, of course. She never doubted that he was it for her, but to a certain, practical degree, even if she knew Jughead loved her enough to burn the universe down for her, she never presumed that anything more than being together was a thing. They were pagan Otherworlders. Their parents may have needed papers and documentations to commit to one another, but how necessary was that, really?

He turned to reach for something in his bed stand. He pulled something out of his drawer and held it out for her. It was a little black box and Betty’s eyes widened in shock.

“Jug!” she gasped. “Is that--?”

He swallowed, pushing himself up on his elbow to look her in the eyes. “I’ve had it for three weeks. Saw it at a jewelry store and bought it on impulse and our anniversary--I wasn’t--” He seemed mildly frazzled, but whatever he was trying to say, it sounded like he had been thinking about it for just as long as he’s claimed to have had this box. “Look, I know we have another year of college to get through and I clearly don’t know what I’m doing, but I just want to be completely clear about how much I love you, and how I want us to be together, and how I--” His lips pursed, and he looked like he wanted to get swallowed by the earth.

Her non-reaction probably wasn’t helping, either.

It took her a second, but joy began to wrap around her heart and she understood everything that he was saying. She wanted all that. She wanted this. He was right. It was impulsive, but she had never been more sure of anything in her life.

She sat up in bed and faced him. “Ask me.”

He blinked, probably shocked that this hadn’t exploded in his face yet, but he caught up. He was always quick to react, anyway. It was that Slayer instinct he had in spades. He sat up, too, holding the box out and opening the lid.

It was a beautiful ring with what looked like a half-karat round diamond with trinity knots centering it. She did not have an eye for knowing silver from white gold, but that didn’t matter. Either way, it must have cost him some and she was touched that he had looked at this ring and saw her in his mind’s eye.

“Betty Cooper,” he began, his voice only slightly trembling. “Will you marry me?”

She smiled, reveling in the love that spread from her chest through the rest of her body. She threw her arms around him and kissed him. “Yes,” she whispered between breaths. “Yes, I’ll marry you.”

He smiled into the kiss, his hands running up and down her bare back.
They were laughing when they separated and he put the ring on her finger and she never thought it possible she was even happier than she’d been the last three years.

“Baby,” he said, pecking more kisses on her lips. “How about we take a day off tomorrow? I mean, I don’t even know if this is a proposal you can tell your friends about but at least you can tell them I took you out to celebrate--we can go anywhere: spend an entire day at a museum, go to the beach, find a county fair or food fest in Jersey....”

“You know who my friends are, Jug. They’re all of them heathens and would think it incredibly romantic if I told them you proposed to me after you made me come three times.”

He paused and gave it some thought. His upside down smile couple with the mild wag of his head was comical and she laughed.

“Also,” she slid her arms over his shoulders. “Tomorrow’s celebrations aren’t exactly going to be PG-13 either. Not if I and the Vixen uniform have anything to say about it.”

It was like he melted in her arms, his shoulders going boneless and his head lolling to one side. “Oh, baby. Oh, sweetheart… I love you so much. You have no idea.”

She giggled, dragging him back down on top of her as she lay down. “I have some idea--oh, wow, Jesus, Jug. Already? That has to be some record...”

He kissed her, his hardness pressing against her thigh. “You don’t understand what that uniform does to me. I just think about my fiancée in it and I’m done…”

She grinned. Fiancée. Not a moment too soon.

This was going to be the best week, ever.

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It was.

The best week ever.

And it only got better in the weeks that followed.

Nevermind that telling their parents had given them a fair bit of stress.

Betty and Jughead had talked about it and thought it best that they tell FP and Alice at the same time in a relatively public setting, like Pop’s.

Betty could at least be sure that her mother wasn’t going to cause a scene. While Alice was always outwardly calling Jughead her “Slayer Boyfriend”, his generally steady and responsible lifestyle, his attendance in a good university, the wonderful way he treated her daughter, and the constant good opinion her sisters had about him did win Alice over. While she was never going to call Jughead “sweetie” (or forgive him for being FP’s son), she had taken to baking things for him and asking after him like she actually cared.

“How’s your Slayer Boyfriend doing? Keeping his scholarship, I’d imagine?” she would ask.
For the most part, Betty knew that her mother just didn’t want anyone suspecting she was losing her edge, so the flint and steel were never going to soften, but she did more than tolerate Jughead dating Betty. One can even go so far as to say that Alice liked him, just that she would never admit it.

FP was the one they were really worried about. He never softened to the idea of Jughead dating Betty. FP was never rude to her, for sure, but Betty always got the feeling that he never really let go of his suspicions and prejudices about her kind.

Over the last three years, she had noticed how Jughead never left her with his father by herself, and Jughead tended to be jumpy when they were in the same room with him.

Zelda and Hilda, who surely noticed it, were clearly trying to stay out of it in their own, aggressively cheerful way. FP never let on that he had these prejudices, and Betty was pretty sure that he was trying his best to get over them, but she sometimes understood where he was coming from.

FP had very little reason to trust his heart to any witch again, let alone watch his son do it with what he probably considered reckless abandon. Alice had left FP, Gladys had left them, and FP Jones the First had raised FP to believe that Wicked witches were the worse.

Perhaps it didn’t help that Zelda and Hilda constantly threatened him with bodily boils if he screwed Jughead all over again. The fact is, FP hadn’t left Riverdale in three years since the riots, and Betty suspected it was his fear of all three of the Spellman sisters that was keeping his butt firmly planted in the Town with PEP.

Betty and Jughead decided to tell their parents together so that Alice can put a leash on FP, if necessary. That was the truth.

So over burgers and milkshakes, Jughead unceremoniously dropped the bomb and said, “I asked Betty to marry me and she said yes.” He then un-hid their clasped hands from beneath the table so that both Alice and FP could see the ring on Betty’s finger.

Betty bit her lip and felt Jughead’s grip on her hand tighten.

Alice’s eyebrow arched high enough that it could get stuck in her hairline, and FP looked so wide-eyed, like he couldn’t believe his son had done something so stupid.

It was Alice who broke the silence when she said, “You’ve got good taste in jewelry, I’ll give you that, Jug.”

Betty stifled a grin, but FP’s “Boy!” made Betty’s stomach roil in panic.

“Dad,” Jughead replied, his tone of voice a warning.

Alice groaned and rolled her eyes. “Oh, get the fuck over yourself, FP.”

Now everyone was shocked quiet. Probably even FP had never heard Alice curse like that.

Betty gulped.

“If you and I are going to be in-laws, I have some rules to lay down,” Alice said, turning in her seat to face FP. “So get comfortable, because I’ve got a lot to say.” She said that last part with such deadly venom that FP didn’t dare interrupt.

Alice launched into a tirade, unloading on FP about how he treated Betty and how completely unfounded his prejudices were. She unloaded on FP on how he treated his son, about how shameful
his actions had been as a parent, and finally she unloaded on him about why their relationship of yore had fallen apart, and at this point, Alice turned to Betty and said, “Honey, I loved your father, don’t get me wrong, but he wasn’t exactly the most exciting and passionate guy in bed—”

“**Oh... My... God...**”

Jughead opened his mouth to say something but Alice shot him a glare. He clamped his mouth shut.

Alice wasn’t done with FP. She ripped into him as only an old lover could, and then when she was done pounding his ego to dust, she moved into prattling about the future, about being let into the Spellman fold, telling him that if he ever wanted to be invited to their family gatherings, possibly enjoying the company of his **grandkids**—

“**Grandkids?**” FP cried. “Is this what this is about?”

“No,” Jughead said in an intensely firm tone. “Not at all. Betty is **not** pregnant. But if she **were** —“

“As I was saying,” Alice cried above both their voices. “If you want to be part of our family, FP—”

And she put her hand atop Betty and Jughead’s joined ones, which Jughead stared at in complete shock. “You have to check your Slayer at the door. Do you hear me, FP? You need to pick that outdated brain of yours from the cauldron of prejudices that it’s been stewing in the last few decades and wash it off, air it out, and recognize that the world isn’t standing still for an old geezer like you.”

“Old geezer!” he cried, incredulous. “I’m only a year older than you, ya ol—” The words died on his lips, catching himself before he made the mistake of calling Alice an Old Hag. Everyone knew he was going to say it. Betty could tell by the terror in Jughead’s eyes. If FP had made that mistake, that would’ve turned this situation nuclear.

For Betty’s part, this was becoming intensely, and incredibly, funny. All she could really do to keep from bursting into laughter was bolt out of the booth and run outside in the parking lot, collapsing behind FP’s truck as she took deep, steadying breaths. When Jughead followed after her, he was worried. *So worried,* but when she started laughing, and she started repeating the things that were said in the diner between bursts of uncontrollable laughter, he started laughing with her, and instantly, everything felt better again. And they knew that if this was the worse thing they had to deal with, they were going to absolutely fine.

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The Spellmans and Polly were predictably thrilled, and Sabrina was in fine form roasting Jughead for it.

Chic was more reserved, but he seemed sincerely glad for his baby sister.

Chic and Jughead’s relationship had improved significantly through the years. When it became clear to Chic that his initial fears were unfounded and that Jughead was nothing like his father, Chic became more at ease, certainly less wary.

It helped, immensely, that Betty was happier being with Jughead than she’d ever been in her life.

With FP taking over the duties of Riverdale’s peacekeeping since Jughead left for college, most of Chic’s dealings with Otherworlder rule enforcement had been with FP. And while the two men
didn’t appear to be at odds, Chic clearly thought FP much less flexible than his son.

While Jughead had been open and willing to hear both sides before bringing down any kind of hammer, FP often took a harder line from the very start, and the burden of proof seemed to fall on the suspects. Ultimately, FP was a fair man, but his compassion did not come as easily as Jughead’s.

Now FP was going to become an in-law, which made Chic groan at the prospect of interacting with FP on a social setting, especially knowing that FP and Alice used to date. Passionately.

“Gonna be an interesting Yulemas,” Chic had grumbled.

If anything, Betty was surprised Chic hadn’t questioned the wisdom of this leap they were taking, but he always did have a softer spot for Betty than anyone else.

It was clear that both Chic and Jughead had been making an effort to get along, and with the engagement making it clear that Jughead would be sticking around, Chic was bound to keep that progress going at a steady pace.

Betty felt that she and Jughead were finally living the life they always wanted.

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“Shut the front door!” Kevin cried, tears instantly springing into his eyes. “I’m dead, do you hear me? I’m so dead! Come here, brother!”

Jughead felt his breath get knocked out of him as Kevin threw his arms around his best friend.

“Oh, my God!” Kevin said, still holding him in a bear hug. “And I thought you such a fool, Jughead. Waiting so long. Like an absolute moron. Like, dude, why you being so stupid? What are you waiting for? Just stop being an idiot—”

“Alright, already,” Jughead grumbled into his shoulder. “How many more synonyms do you have for my low IQ?”

“Many, many more…”

“To be fair,” Joaquin cried above the din of the lounge music. “Most people would be mired by practical concerns, like college… youth… babies— jeez, how old are you guys, 22?”

“21,” Betty told him, laughing. “When you know, you know, I guess.”

“Oh, shush, Joaquin,” Kevin said, pulling away and cupping Jughead’s face in his hands affectionately. “Don’t act like you’re the practical one in the relationship. My baby brother’s getting married! To a hot chick who is smart enough to go to Columbia, who will probably financially support his starving artist ass for several years… way out of his league.”

“Hey.”

“Leave some for me, dude!” Archie said, taking his turn throwing his arms around Jughead. The back slapping was breathtaking, particularly because after only three years living as a werewolf, Archie sometimes forgot his strength, which was mostly why people got out of his way on the football field.
He was in his second year of college now in Rutgers University, and while he would have preferred to live closer to his best friends in the city, the Upadrashtas had advised him that the city was not easy for a young werewolf. The quieter, less congested surroundings of New Brunswick allowed, not only for a more meditative environment, but more woodland, and more werewolf sanctuaries hiding in plain sight.

“Oh, Kev,” Betty crooned. “Jughead is amazing. And just look at how gorgeous and interesting he is to look at.”

Archie grinned, giving Jughead’s face an affectionate slap. “Isn’t he so handsome and irresistible?”

“You are spending way too much time with Kevin,” Jughead grumbled.

Archie draped an arm around Betty’s shoulders and gave her a gentle squeeze. “Congratulations, Betty. You’re, like, glowing!”

“Stop, Arch. You’re making me blush.”

“I am so happy for you both, truly.” Kevin said, “C’mere, girl. Let me hug you for taking one for the team.”

Rolling her eyes, she stepped into Kevin’s embrace.

“You’re total soulmates,” Kevin said in her ear, his voice tender and sincere. “And he’ll take real good care of you, sweetie. I swear.”

“I know, Kev.”

“I love you, hon.”

“I love you, too.”

Kevin kissed the top of her head and looked her in the eyes. “We’re all going home completely wasted, okay? My treat.”

“With what money?” Jughead asked.

“Ha, money!” Kevin cracked his knuckles. “Watch me, bitch.” He went to the bar and immediately began using his fey to extract free drinks from the bartender.

Jughead rolled his eyes and sighed.

“You’re not going to arrest him, are you?” Joaquin asked.

Pursing his lips, he shook his head. “Not my city, not my problem.”

Archie laughed. “Right.”

Well, of course that wasn’t exactly true. It was his obligation to put a stop to Otherworlders who basically abused their powers, and it didn’t matter where he was--if it was happening in front of him, he had to stop it, but honestly, he can let Kevin slide.

What good was it being life long best friends with a Slayer if he didn’t let Kevin get away with an enchantment or two?

Jughead figured he could get Kevin back for calling him an idiot and awkwardly asking him and
Joaquin when they were going to tie the knot, but Jughead was too stupidly happy to let thoughts of petty revenge consume him.

He’ll get Kevin next time.

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They were not the squealing type, these women.

When Betty arrived for brunch, Cheryl, Toni, and Veronica were in the middle of a heated discussion on whether the Force Awakens wanted viewers to ship Rey and Kylo. They all took surprisingly different positions.

Not wanting to join the debate, Betty pretended she didn’t know what they were talking about and took her seat at the table.

“Sorry I’m late, ladies,” Betty said, hanging her purse off the back of her chair and picking up the menu set atop her plate. “Did you order yet?”

She lifted the menu at eye level, waiting for their reaction while she scanned the appetizers section.

The silence was broken by Toni’s, “Sonofabitch, is that an engagement ring?”

“Oh, my God,” Veronica gasped, grabbing Betty’s hand to look at the ring. “It is! Tastefully lowkey. Symbolic--I love the trinity knots. Classic white gold and solitaire.” She pulled a loupe out of her purse, of all things, and began to examine the diamond with it. “Brilliant cut faceting, very good to excellent quality stone--”

“Do you just keep a loupe in your bag all the time?” Betty asked, incredulous.

Cheryl shrugged. “You never know when you have to shop for jewelry, Cousin Betty. I hope Jones understands how much of a catch you are. Honestly.”

Betty frowned. “Cheryl.”

“This cost him a pretty penny, luv,” Veronica said, still eyeing the ring. “I approve!”

Betty snatched her hand back and planted her fists on her hips, scowling at them all. “Are you bitches even going to congratulate me?”

Toni made a face. “Oh, yeah, that. Congratulations! Jones had better buy you a new helmet because the last thing he wants is for you to knock some sense into yourself.”

“Toni!” Betty gasped in a scolding tone.

She put her hands up and shrugged, grinning. “I kid! I’m happy for you and Jug. When’s the handfasting?”

“Lammas?” Veronica gasped. “That’s barely five months from now! There’s not enough time!”
Betty laughed. “For what? If it weren’t for my aunts and mother who would be devastated if we didn’t celebrate this thing with tons of music and flowers, Jug and I would be married today.”

Cheryl made a tutting sound. “Nonsense. There needs to be a proper handfasting and you will celebrate it with all the pomp and grandeur befitting a Blossom. The grounds of your ancestors are at your disposal for the ceremony and the reception, Cousin.”

“No offense, Cher, but I think Jughead would have a coronary if I told him we’d be having our handfasting at Thornhill.”

Cheryl huffed and tossed her luscious red hair over her shoulder. “Tell Jughead he’s a fucking diva.”

“I tell him all the time, babe,” Toni said, rubbing Cheryl’s arm and kissing her shoulder.

Veronica whipped out her phone and started scrolling. “Do you have a wedding coordinator? Nevermind, of course you don’t. I expect that this is going to take some intense favor pulling and precise coordination with your inner circle. I’m calling Josie.”

Betty slapped the phone from Veronica’s hand, sending the phone bouncing to the floor. “Stop! V, Jug and I want this to be really low key. Friends and family only. No Mayor McCoy and police escorts. No Council of the Dales or the Pussycats. It will be a simple and beautiful ceremony outdoors with possibly Astanphaeus presiding. We might have it catered and we might have some live music from a local band, but that’s as ostentatious as it’s going to get.”

“I’ve planned keggers for longer than five months,” Veronica grumbled, picking her phone off the floor.

“Honestly,” Cheryl hissed under her breath. “Will you at least have a proper wedding dress? Maid of Honor and Best Man?”

Betty nodded. “Polly and Kevin, respectively.”

“Polly!” Cheryl cried.

Toni patted Chery’s hand. “Yeah, honey, I love you but there was no way in hell it was going to be you.”

Cheryl motioned to speak and Toni interrupted her by adding, “Even with bribery.”

Cheryl pressed her lips together with barely repressed outrage.

Veronica took Betty’s hand in hers. “Please, please let me help you shop for your dress. And please tell me Jughead will wear his kilt. He must.”

Betty stifled a sigh. This wasn’t supposed to be any kind of overblown affair. She wasn’t planning on trying on one hundred dresses or sit for hours at tasting tables to write a menu. She wasn’t even going to tell Jughead to wear his kilt, though he probably will. She did, however, love the idea of having all her family and friends there to witness it—friends she only really gained moving to Riverdale. And with a celebration like that came the decent expectation of a properly planned party.

She smiled and cupped Veronica’s hands. “I’d love to have you shop with me, V. And I do hope that Jughead wears his kilt.”
Betty was thinking.

She had sage, sweetgrass, and cedar on one side and lavender, white sage, and roses on another. She had bundled the two sets, each into attractive looking smudge sticks, but it felt impossible to decide which would work best as party favors for their wedding.

She had been thinking about this a lot.

Their budget was tight. They couldn’t afford to give little wine bottles, pouches of signature chocolate, or even those tiny homemade soaps. Like, what, really would their guests do with herb-scented soap, anyway? It was good in theory but the soap at the local grocery worked just as well, if not mundanely better.

Their party favors definitely had to be something that she could make, but she wanted it to mean something. She wanted it to be symbolic. Something all their guests would be happy to use and enjoy for longer than a minute in front of a bathroom sink. Therefore: smudge sticks.

Witch households loved smudge sticks, for sure. It was something they kept handy at all times, but every witchy household had their own special bundle. Every sprig had meaning, so every smudge stick was different. Witches loved to try out other witches’ smudge sticks, and the rest of the Otherworlders would appreciate the sticks simply because they didn’t keep a supply of it like witches did.

The more she thought of this idea, the more she loved it, and she had set two bundles side by side, determining which of the two would serve their guests best.

One was practical and effective for warding. Green and lovely, herbal scented and earthy. The other was romantic and floral. It looked attractive and smelled great, but it was more therapeutic—hypnotic, perhaps. Still, there was a lot to be said about resting one’s mind.

She used both periodically, for her and Jughead’s apartment. She grew the plants herself from their communal rooftop garden—their neighbors were constantly awed by how their plot of garden flourished so incredibly.

She heard their apartment door open and shut. The rattle of keys being hung on hooks crinkled from the entryway and the soft thump of shoes hitting the floor followed.

Jughead was home. That thought briefly registered as she stared at her smudge sticks, but she looked up at his approach, smiling as he sauntered across the small living room and tiredly came up behind her.

He wrapped his arms around her from behind, pecked a kiss on her lips, and buried his face in the crook of her shoulder, sighing. He’d have come from the library and he was probably hungry.

“Tired?” she asked.

“Exhausted. What are you doing?”

“Deciding on our wedding favors.”

She could feel him smiling against her skin. He pulled her closer against him, nipping at her ear and
feeling a bit of tongue. He was possibly the only guy she ever heard of getting turned on by wedding preparations.

She giggled, gently pulling away. “Stop. You have to help me decide on this. If I’m going to grow these plants, I need to know now what they should be. Sit. Heel. Or you can eat. There’s spaghetti and meatballs. Have some to keep your hands and mouth busy for the meantime. I need your full attention.”

He grinned, rubbing her arms, still. “I thought that’s what I was doing. Giving you my full attention.”

She craned her neck to kiss him again, but immediately shooed him towards the stove, where the pot of pasta sat.

Chuckling, he did relent to the spaghetti and meatballs. He circled the kitchen, pulling out a bowl and uncapping the pot. The food was still hot—the puff of steam rising towards the ceiling.

As Jughead served himself, he observed the items on the counter. “Smudge sticks? Clever. I like it.”

She nodded enthusiastically. “It’ll hardly cost us anything to make and everyone on our guest list would appreciate it.”

He licked his thumb where some of the marinara had dripped and rounded the counter to sit beside her. “Oh, but is this better than the individual signature cupcakes with gold leaf and caviar on top?”

She cocked a smile even as she looked at him pointedly. “She wouldn’t be V if she didn’t suggest it, hon.”

“Like, where does she even think we’d get the money to pay $75 a piece for it? Was she expecting me to trade in my first born for cupcakes?” He stuffed pasta and meatball in his mouth and he groaned appreciatively.

Her smile waned ever so slightly, hit with an unexpected wave of both trepidation and joy. It was fleeting, but intense. The mix of fear and longing a confusing swirl.

She told herself that his off-hand comment meant absolutely nothing in the context of their conversation. The discussion of wedding souvenirs was so far removed from having kids that really, she ought to be ashamed of herself, but it came and went like a drive-by.

So she shook it off. She was Betty Cooper. She was good at carrying on.

She took both smudge sticks and held them up for him to see. “So are we practical and earthy or romantic and introspective?”

His chewing had slowed and his brows knotted in concern. His hand was on her shoulder in a second, squeezing gently. “You okay?”

Clearly, with Alice so far away, Betty had lost some of her Cooper edge. She couldn’t say she was fine. That’s another rule they had in their home. They were never to use “I’m fine”. Use another word. Use precise words: “I’m feeling better,” or “I’m alright, but give me a few hours,” or “No, I feel like shit about this.”

She had to admit, however, that she wanted to say she was fine so that she didn’t have to air that fleeting feeling. It was so fast, so unexpected, and probably unnecessary, because there was no real conflict there. Not really. Not actually.
They both wanted kids. They both said that they would wait to have them until after they graduate and get steady jobs. They were in agreement that they would raise kids in the suburbs, not the city.

But it did nag. Has been nagging. And now that he’d spotted the fissure, he would be worried, and she didn’t think she could shake this off alone.

Apparently, she had a trigger and this was it.

Her eyes watered and his shoulders dropped, setting aside his food to put an arm around her, “Betty. Sweetheart, was it something I said? I’m sorry. I didn’t—”

“Oh, God, no,” she interrupted, blinking her tears away. Barely. “This isn’t your fault. I’m fine—“

He gave her a pointed stare.

She sighed. “Sorry, I didn’t mean that. I’m just—it came and went. And—maybe we don’t need to talk about this yet.”

He waited, his eyebrow quirking only the slightest bit, as if he were deciding whether to press her or let her slide this time.

She tried another tactic. “You’re tired, and we can talk about this some other time.”

The softness in his expression finally won out. He squeezed her shoulder. “Only if you really want to put it off.”

She closed her eyes, pausing to consider what she really felt. Did she want to put this off? Why would she? Jughead was her lifemate. He was going to find out one way or another and she didn’t have to carry the burden alone.

“What if he or she is Wicked, Jug?” she finally said, brows knitted with worry. “What if we have a baby girl and we find out she needs pain to make magic? I would be so devastated.”

She let out a breath, looking at her hands. She traced the faint scars in her palms—the latest wounds still healing. It would be gone in another day or so, but she was so used to having them that she could probably say exactly when, to the hour, these wounds would heal over.

He took her hands in his, smoothing his thumb over her scars. The soft contact of his fingertips against her skin immediately began to soothe. “Not gonna lie. That’ll be tough. Every time I watch you hurt yourself it still feels like a punch to the gut, and pulling that belt, Betts… I do it because I can’t bear you enduring that by yourself.”

She knew this, because he’d told her this once before, and she understood how much love it took to pretend, the way he did, that cinching that belt for her was just one of those things they had to do, instead of a bloodletting that probably pained him more than it did her.

He cupped the side of her neck, rubbing the side of her jaw. “But you and I know better. We won’t live in fear and we’re going to make sure she loves herself and her magic. She never has to endure pain alone—not while she has us. She’ll have everything and more and her parents are so badass that nobody will dare to hurt her. I’ll make sure everyone knows her dad’s a leather-wearing, bike-riding gangster, who wears a stupid beanie because he can.”

She found that even through her watery gaze, she could laugh. His smile of triumph, mixed with all the empathy of a shared future, soothed the burn of anxiety.
“And who knows?” she added, softly. “Maybe she’ll be a Slayer, instead. She’ll need a dirk to hang up in the Riverdale Library wall.”

His eyes twinkled, like he had a private joke to himself. “We’ll get her a different weapon.”

She thought his dirk was impressive and sexy, but she could see in his eyes that he had an opinion about the entire thing that he wasn’t inclined to share, which was perfectly alright. They were entitled to their own private thoughts.

“We’ll be alright, Betts,” he said, softly. “We’ve been through hell and back. I can’t imagine loving and living for each other and our kids could be harder than that.”

_Kids._

She liked that they wanted more than one.

“And if we get tired of the rugrats, we can ship ’em all off to Zelda and Hilda, who will probably want to adopt them. Everybody wins,” he added, flippantly, which made her laugh some more and feel so much lighter.

She bit her lip, thinking that she couldn’t wait to be married to this man. Five months wasn’t soon enough.

**********************************

They got married in three.

It was a magical number, after all.

And that aside, they were still in college with a very limited pool of disposable income. The only thing that kept them from running to City Hall to be married by a judge was Alice and the Spellman sisters warning of a cursed honeymoon, with noisy tour buses, dirty motel bathrooms, and pickpockets. Lots of them.

Not that anyone had to be a witch to put anyone in _that_ situation, but given that Hilda did work in a Travel Agency…

They had their wedding, _not_ at Thornhill, which in spite of Cheryl telling Betty was completely open for her use was definitely not, if Penelope had any say in it.

Betty was only too glad she shot down that idea before it went any further than Cheryl’s lips.

Instead, Zelda found them a catering company that had a lovely, sprawling veranda out back, overlooking Sweetwater River. It was big enough to accommodate their reasonable guest list and they staff were nimble enough to transition from ceremony to reception in 30-40 minutes. They were also Otherworlders, which was a plus, because then the Spellmans didn’t need to explain why they needed a bonfire.

Betty’s dress was a beautiful ivory toned gown with a lace top of flowery applique. It’s deep V neckline and back showed just enough skin to give it a sexy flair, cinched at the waist with a satin belt. It flowed to a skirt made of layers of sweeping, soft tulle. Small flowers twined through her golden locks and dotted the lush curls that swept her back.
Her bridal bouquet was a splash of lovely summer flowers.

She didn’t need a veil or a train, and because her mother wouldn’t let her go barefoot, the compromise was a pair of kitten heel silver sandals.

She looked like the fairies of myth, and in spite of living her life as a witch, she had never felt more magical.

Chic walked her down the aisle, and the whole time she never tore her eyes from her handsome fiancé.

Jughead did wear the kilt, in full regalia. His jacket and vest made him look stunning, and he did leave out the beanie this time, though she wouldn’t have objected if he decided to wear it.

She honestly did not remember who sat where. All she could think about was being with Jughead in front of the officiant, and clasping his hands.

When she intertwined her hands with his, she looked into his gorgeous blue eyes and knew that the promises they would speak would hold strong and true.

“You look beautiful, Betts,” he murmured, softly, as this thumb rubbed her knuckles. “Are you ready?”

She nodded. “I am so ready, Juggie.”

They smiled at one another, and for a moment, she forgot the rest of the world. It was only with vague concern that she heard the officiant begin to speak.

Astanphaeus began with the wisdom of an age. “I’ve lived for over half a millenium—“

It was at that point that both her and Jughead tore their eyes from each other in wonder of what Astanphaeus had said. They had no idea he had been living that long. They thought it was over 300. Half a millenium sounded impossibly long.

“—and I’ve seen the world go round a million times. I mean that quite literally, for those of you who can’t do the math.”

Soft chuckles rose from the crowd, and he continued after an appropriate pause.

“I’ve watched human beings do the things they do and I’ve catalogued their outcomes in my mind. I can say for certain that history does repeat itself, for better or worse. On days that I can’t be bothered to wax philosophical, I tend to think that people don’t quite change, but that is me being lazy. If I look at the human race as a quantifiable whole, I see waves of repeating patterns, and that’s quite alright if you’re an Earth Angel. Let me digress a moment and explain to you what Earth Angels are here for. We are here to generate happiness, or to foster it. We are here to alleviate pain and suffering. But lest you think we do it for you, I am here to tell you that we do it for our kind. We need your happiness to power our existence and our magic. It’s not unselfish, but I do admit to being glad this is how my species survives. It could be worse. I could be a demon and thrive off chaos and destruction. That is what they do. They are the opposite of my kind. And the only reason at all that we haven’t eradicated demonkind is that balance is important for the human psyche to survive. When people are endlessly happy, they forget what it means. When there is nothing but suffering, they die. Both pain and longing have to exist so that people understand what it is to attain bliss and contentment.”

Betty found herself enraptured by all this. She didn’t think anyone had known about any of this at
“All that said, I have never been stuck on the greater patterns. Fostering happiness, for the most part, is my job, but the truth is I love my job. I love people, and the reason I do is that when I know people individually—not as part of a greater picture, but a detail—I see the weavings and the colors and the things that make them who they are. I see the stories, the complex nuances of what drives the larger patterns, and how the impact of the wave is the result of certain extraordinary individuals. Shifts in the rock that cause the earth beneath to shake.”

A small smile followed the look of sincere wonder on Astanphaeus’s face. “As we gather here today to witness the union of Betty and Jughead, we are watching our world shift, for theirs is a story of light and dark, of night blue skies and shimmering gold sunrises, of changed philosophies and norms defied. We are witnessing two people who have, in their young lives, been tested alone and together, and have come out of it better for themselves and for each other. They know exactly what happiness is, because they know the opposite of it. They come before you to profess their commitment to one another before all their friends and family, with clear intent and with eyes wide open. No secret can tear them asunder. No pain too great to bear. No burden too heavy to carry. Some of you might think they are too young, but five hundred years living this life and I can tell you for certain that Jughead and Betty have created a strong bedrock, and should the earth shake again, it would be happening only because they want to come even closer together.”

Astanphaeus finally looked to Betty. “Betty, did you come to this ceremony of your own free will?”

She nodded, feeling the impact of Astanphaeus’s opening words. “Yes.”

He turned to Jughead and asked the same question.

“Yes,” said Jughead with the same conviction.

The handfasting began. Polly came first. Kevin next. One by one, their loved ones came forward with chords as each vow was asked and confirmed, binding their hands, her left clasping his.

*Will you share in each other’s pain and sorrow?*

Yes.

*And so the chord binds thee.*

*Will you share in each other’s joy and triumphs?*

Yes.

*And so the chord binds thee.*

Question after question was met by an affirmation and chord. They were asked, loudly, about carrying burdens and sharing dreams, fostering growth and encouraging rest, of channeling anger towards betterment and remaining worthy of one another’s trust, of being truthful, as well as kind, to each other.

The bindings were made and the knots thickened around their combined hands, and as the rope grew heavier, she felt Jughead lightening the burden, shifting beneath the chords to shelter her hand in his. She felt her eyes prickle. As Astanphaeus said, the beauty is in the details. The small things. Even in this, Jughead cared for her. Looked out for her. She feels incredibly lucky and in love.

At the end of the handfasting, Astanphaeus looked up. “There is nothing quite as fulfilling as
binding two people together, who for all their beauty, imperfections, brilliance, or weaknesses, have
decided, on this day, that they want to be together to promise to share everything from this day
forward. This is why I marvel at the human race. The capacity to love transcends magic.” He held
out his hands towards them both. “You may now exchange your rings.”

Kevin held out the rings for Jughead and with a quite smile, he slipped one ring around Betty’s
finger.

“With this ring, I thee wed,” he said, smiling through glassy eyes.

She felt her own eyes fill as she took the ring from Kevin and put it on Jughead’s finger. “With this
ring, I thee wed.”

Astanphaeus smiled and nodded. “Jughead and Betty, on behalf of all who are privileged to witness
this wondrous occasion and the strength of your love, I pronounce you husband and wife. You may
now—“

They didn’t let him finish. They kissed, with her hand in his hair and his arm around her waist.

His lips were soft against his, the slight touch of his tongue against hers promising more, and when
they smiled into the kiss together, they held on a bit longer.

When they separated, they weren’t quite ready to part, their noses and forehead touching against the
backdrop of whoops and cheering.

“I love you, ” he whispered.

She pressed another kiss on his lips. “I love you, too.”

Better together than they are apart.

If there was anything more powerful than the magic she wielded and the strength he possessed, it
would be this.

Them.

Jughead and Betty Jones, Slayer and Wicked Witch.

Chapter End Notes

I did some research on handfasting ceremonies, which are definitely alive and done to
this day, but I heavily relied on this post for the formatting of the words and vows:
APracticalWedding.com. The article was written by Genevieve Dreizen, who is a
wedding officiant herself--a minister who is a great supporter of all faiths, new and old.

For those of you who might be interested in Betty's gown, this is what it looks like.

Finally, here are some Fun Facts about this story.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!